Lessons Learned From a 5-Year Project Within the Department of Veterans Affairs

Applying Theories of Interpersonal Aggression and Organizational Justice to the Development and Maintenance of Collaborative Social Space

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Although much has been written about the importance of generative learning to organizational effectiveness, less is known about the creation and maintenance of the "social space" necessary to foster such learning. This article describes how, as an exercise in sensemaking the authors conceptualized their experience in the establishment and preservation of such space within a 5-year action research project at the United States Department of Veteran Affairs and how theories of interpersonal aggression and organizational justice inform development of this kind of space. To this end, the authors discuss each stage of this process, which was experienced as (a) enrollment (identification of focal issues/needs, enabling conditions, social networks), (b) negotiations leading to peripheral understanding among participants (confronting tensions about methods, data, norms, roles, power, control), (c) the threshold (a "fuzzy boundary" separating collaborative from conventional social space), and (d) the emergence of collaborative social space.

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Rapid technological innovation, shifting national and global political-economic contexts, increasing competitive pressures, and a need for cost-effectiveness are a few of the many forces affecting today's organizations. In this chaotic context, how can organizations identify problems and develop practical solutions for the many challenges that they face? Both theory and practice suggest that the answer in part involves the systematic application of organizational learning and knowledge creation to enhance an organization's social and intellectual capital. However, using this key effectively is difficult as organizations are systems of vested interests, habits of mind and practice, and existing cultures that sustain the power relationships, social norms, and taken-for-granted assumptions that are the foundation on which past effectiveness rests.

This article describes the experience of members of an action research project team in creating and sustaining the kind of collaborative social space that many theorists contend is needed for the generation of organizational learning and change. Whereas existing literature argues that this space's creation is an important feature of generative organizational learning and knowledge creation (cf. Fisher & Torbert, 1995; Friedman, Lipshitz, & Overmeer, 2001; Nonaka, Toyama, & Byosiere, 2001; Popper & Friedman, 2002; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Yorks & Marsick, 2000) and advocates various learning practices that facilitate organizational learning (cf. Argyris & Schön, 1974; Isaacs, 1993; Pavlovsky, Forslin, & Reinhardt, 2001; Schein, 1993; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994), we found little in the literature that describes the journey involved in experiencing the emergence of this kind of space. In engaging in what we are characterizing as a phenomenological reflection on our experience, we were trying to understand the how and why of our experience. Such a description provides useful "markers" of the process for organizational actors seeking to facilitate the creation of collaborative social space for purposes of generative organizational learning. In addition, we believe our experience demonstrates the value of applying extant literature on interpersonal

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aggression and organizational justice as important theoretical frames for understanding the foundations supporting this kind of space.

Our experience of this space emerged over time as we participated in the Workplace Stress and Aggression (WSA) Project, a 5-year action research initiative within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This project brought together a socially and professionally diverse group of academic and organization-based inquirers. The project is a robust example of collaborative management research (Shani, David, & Willson, 2004) that creates new knowledge on which the organization can take action focusing on critical themes and issues that affect organizational performance. The project is grounded in application, embraces the intimate collaboration of academics and practitioners as coinquirers, involves the fusing of rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods, and is intentional about the participants' engaging in deep reflective inquiry about their methodology. The participants include management and union members from the VA and academics from four universities representing three different disciplines. Collectively, we have found the experience to be intense and have learned that forging and sustaining collaborative social space for knowledge creation—and in so doing confronting as we worked together issues involving interpersonal aggression and justice—are critical to the project's success.

On the pages that follow, we begin with a descriptive framework of our experience of the emergence of collaborative social space and include a brief literature review that provides a theoretical context for our experience. We conclude with a discussion of the literature on interpersonal aggression and organizational justice that offers a more systematic, theoretically derived approach to creating this kind of space. First however, we provide a brief description of the WSA project as a contextual frame for what follows.

THE VA WORKPLACE STRESS AND AGGRESSION PROJECT

As one of largest governmental bureaucracies in the U.S. federal government, we do not believe that the VA is administered any better or more poorly than any other bureaucracy, including other large governmental organizations, universities, or many large, mature corporations for that matter. We simply have no empirical basis for making any claims one way or the other. The origin of our project was the dissatisfaction of a midlevel human resources professional in the VA headquarters who began ruminating about how some recurring disciplinary problems seemed to be symptomatic consequences incurred from the pressures of workplace stress and aggression. Disciplinary actions did little to address underlying causes. "I was repeating what I had done for 16 years . . . [without] addressing the real underlying causes" of employee behavior requiring disciplinary actions. He subsequently initiated internal conversations among midlevel VA managers about the problem of workplace aggression (that is, negative workplace behavior). These conversations were the genesis of a process that over time led to the creation of a network of academic members and additional VA stakeholders.

The early conversations among VA practitioners first led to the identification of two researchers prominent in the literature on aggression in organizations and agreement

to gather data while creating an instrument for measuring stress and aggression. Subsequent conversation within the practitioners' professional networks brought the project to the attention of academics associated with a university-based center for human resource management study that added two additional foci to the project. The first was the development of quantitative models that we could use to explore the nature, prevalence, causes, and consequences of stress and aggression within the organization and using these data, develop a business case for dealing with these variables (Harmon et al., 2003). Our second focus was the adoption of a practice-grounded action-research (AR) model in which we could test data and assumptions and could formulate, implement, and evaluate interventions. An important aspect of this focus was a link to the literature on organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Senge, 1990) and new forms of knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). We formalized these goals within a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant (see authors' note). Obtaining the NSF grant marked the beginning of a formalized yet very emergent and fluid collaborative action inquiry project.

A detailed report on the project and its results are available elsewhere (Kowalski, Harmon, Yorks, & Kowalski, 2003; Neuman, 2004). Our focus here is on a specific characteristic of the "social system" that emerged as part of the project process, what we have come to refer to as collaborative social space. This space was socially created through the patterns of relationships that were emergent as project team members internalized various learning practices (described below). Through an intensive process of collaborative reflexive meaning making of our experience (also described in the following), we have come to define collaborative social space as an interpersonal environment that group members cocreate through the repeated, intentional use of learning practices, systematic personal and group reflection, and the application of principles of organizational justice. Collaborative social space embodies a social and emotional atmosphere in which group members experience a sense of engagement, safety, energy, flow, and synergy resulting in generative learning and cooperative action that they perceive as resulting from a unique collective experience. This is a collectively experienced phenomenon.

We experienced this space as opening and closing, depending on how project members interacted with one another. Retrospectively, we have come to understand the project as having transitioned from an emergent network to a project team whose boundaries became more clarified as a function of the design embedded in the NSF proposal, internal VA funding sources, and design of the data gathering and analysis process. We conceptualize this design as the scaffolding that held the process, a scaffolding that was both bounded and porous, providing support and functional context for the project. This scaffolding has many of the characteristics of what Pava (1983) describes as a sociotechnical systems approach for designing work, specifically, a forum or arena consisting of discretionary coalitions in which a topic can be deliberated.

Collaborative social space, as we experienced it and give meaning to the experience, is the emergence of generative learning relationships that is a source of a particular energy within the scaffolding infusing it with vitality. Consistent with the dynamics described by Pava (1983), team members negotiate and design the scaffolding while in action. Collaborative social space emerges within the context of this scaffolding. Thus, the design of the scaffolding with the intentional use of using learning practices to facil-

itate organizational learning (Friedman et al., 2001; Pavlovsky et al., 2001) was a structural holding environment providing for the possibility of emergence of what we are referring to as the experience of collaborative social space. This collaborative social space is mutually enacted through the ways of being in relationship with one another (both are critical aspects of such a forum or arena—two parts of the same system). A number of authors discuss the nature of collaborative space and describe the insider/outsider role tensions of participants in business/university collaborations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2000; Dixon, 1997; G. Roth & Kleiner, 2000; J. Roth, Sandberg, & Svensson, 2004). Although these discussions have done much to inform us as to the nature of collaborative space, they only hint at the struggles over issues and roles that we faced as we experienced the fluidity and fragileness of these kinds of spaces.
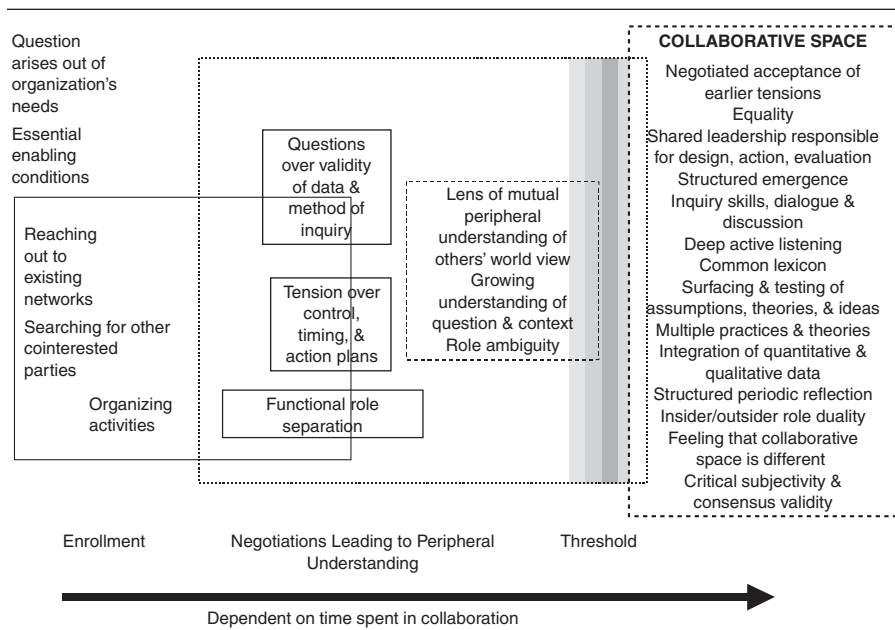
We believe this space was critical to our ability to bridge the divergent frames of reference that various members of the project team held, different academic disciplines and fields of practitioner expertise necessary for implementing the projects. We acknowledge that the creation of this kind of space does not guarantee success, but we would argue that its absence stymies opportunities for generative organizational learning. We also acknowledge that the framework described below is one way of constructing meaning from our experience—tracking how our experience of the relationship among us changed over time and how to explain the qualitative differences of the nature of the experience.

Making Sense of Our Experience of Collaborative Social Space

For some time we had commented among ourselves on how periodically some of us experienced our conversations within the project team as qualitatively different from other times. We noticed that these periods were particularly rich in terms of producing new insights. Stimulated by these comments, one of the practitioners on the project team generated a descriptive framework that he circulated among other project team members for comment. This framework subsequently became the basis for a discussion at a "greenhouse" workshop sponsored by the Society for Organizational Learning held in 2003, during which those in attendance raised additional questions about our experience.

Further enthused by these discussions, we began a series of deeper conversations about how we had experienced the project's evolution, especially critical meetings at various junctures throughout the process. Paul Ricoeur (1971) argues that the lived experience of the participants can be treated as a text to be interpreted. For Ricoeur, this text is found in the dialogues that take place and in the actions that constitute the group's history. Delving more deeply into our experience, sharing different lens on our shared experiences in the project and how we experienced changes in our practice, we were able to make explicit connections between the reflective dialogues and use of various learning practices following critical events and what we had variously experienced as qualitative changes in the project team as an emerging social system. In our discussions, we cycled between describable events and our different reactions to them and which interpretations best fit our experience of the project as it unfolded.

We were making sense or meaning out of our experience, albeit not in a "Weickian" (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) sense. Our process was also not one of developing grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss &

			COLLABORATIVE SPACE

Question arises out of organization's needs

Essential enabling conditions

Reaching out to existing networks

Searching for other cointerested parties

Organizing activities

Questions over validity of data & method of inquiry

Tension over control, timing, & action plans

Functional role separation

Lens of mutual peripheral understanding of others' world view
Growing understanding of question & context
Role ambiguity

COLLABORATIVE SPACE
Negotiated acceptance of earlier tensions
Equality
Shared leadership responsible for design, action, evaluation
Structured emergence
Inquiry skills, dialogue & discussion
Deep active listening
Common lexicon
Surfacing & testing of assumptions, theories, & ideas
Multiple practices & theories
Integration of quantitative & qualitative data
Structured periodic reflection
Insider/outsider role duality
Feeling that collaborative space is different
Critical subjectivity & consensus validity

Enrollment   Negotiations Leading to Peripheral Understanding   Threshold

Dependent on time spent in collaboration

FIGURE 1:   Reflective Map of Our Experience Development of Collaborative Social Space

Corbin, 1991). We understood this to be a process of collaborative meaning making of our experience through retrospective reflection on our experience of the shifts in our conversations and interactions in the project team, with reference to specific events and contexts that had become embedded markers of the project. We were construing our experience through descriptive and evaluative reflection (Heron, 1988) with the intention of giving it coherence (Mezirow, 1991). We then turned to the literature on interpersonal aggression and social justice as a way of further situating this experience because the very nature of the presenting problem in the WSA project made us sensitive to the issues of interpersonal aggression and social justice we were experiencing within the project team. This was a process of meaning making in the sense of schematizing, appropriating, and seeking to validate our experience (Mezirow, 1991).

Through this process of inquiry we conceptualized our experience of the collaborative space-creating process as four distinct yet overlapping phases: (a) enrollment, (b) crafting peripheral understanding, (c) crossing the threshold into collaborative space, and (d) working within the collaborative space. We also made connections between our experience and how tenets of the literature on interpersonal aggression and organizational justice can inform practices of organizational learning. Although we describe the phases as having distinct characteristics, we experienced the process as nonlinear and constantly ebbing and flowing. Our experience has been that we spent considerable time in the first two phases. Figure 1 summarizes the phases of the framework and the most salient issues we experienced in each phase. We use the framework to describe our experience.

Enrollment. Although the details of the events that unfolded are specific to the WSA project, the knowledge creation and learning process that followed in many ways provides an example of the challenges involved in establishing complex, practice-driven organizational learning mechanisms (Friedman et al., 2001; Popper & Friedman, 2002; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998). Such mechanisms are typically emergent networks of alliances among cooperating stakeholders, each of which bring the network resources and/or needed expertise. This was certainly characteristic of the VA WSA project team, which was initially constructed as a discretionary network of diverse participants engaging in deliberations that often required trade-offs to be made among various disciplinary-based viewpoints and approaches (Pava, 1983).

As previously mentioned, the midlevel HR professional who was frustrated by his inability to address the causes and consequences of disciplinary actions started identifying researchers working in this area. He also initiated conversations with colleagues who shared his frustration, particularly having seen many large system change efforts fail because the rhetoric that accompanied these initiatives was disconnected from the actual values evident in how the organization implemented new programs. This began the process of recruiting potential participants for a project team through networking with a diverse group of practitioners and researchers from VA and academia.

This process of networking led to an initial meeting of potential participants in the project. During this initial meeting, Dan Twomey, director of the Center for Human Resource Studies at Fairleigh Dickinson University (who was hosting the event), encouraged participants to embrace (as opposed to hiding or suppressing) their differences and make them "public." In response to this suggestion, we went around the table and everyone talked about their interests and concerns, surfacing different "agendas." This meeting subsequently led to a self-selection process, with some participants opting out of further participation, others opting in.

Crafting peripheral understanding. Even following such frank and open discussion and people having opted into the project, significant differences in experiences and orientations toward knowledge creation and research were present in the team. In the WSA project the fault lines of negotiations manifested themselves as tensions related to (a) control, (b) timing and taking action, (c) role boundaries, (d) research methodology, (e) the validity and utility of quantitative and qualitative data and knowledge, and (f) interpersonal behavior. Underlying these tensions were more fundamental issues of purpose and visions of what would constitute a successful project and the diverse motivations for project participation. Compounding these tensions was a confrontation between deeply held worldviews about what constitutes meaningful knowledge, how it can be generated, and the requirements for having it taken seriously by various audiences both within and beyond the organization. Debate over the timing of interventions, the pace of action, and the focus on mutual benefit to the university- and organization-based researchers can be heard in comments such as the following: "The university researchers did not want to contaminate the experimental portion of the project by suggesting interventions while the VA researchers were conscious of the need to move forward."

It was the introduction of learning practices drawn from models of action science (Argyris & Schön, 1974), reflective practice (Schön, 1983), and organizational behavior

and learning (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge et al., 1994) that began the process of "peripheral understanding"—going beyond negotiation and creating a lens of mutual, peripheral, understanding of others and their worldviews, along with a growing understanding of the rich complexity and context of the inquiry question and project objectives and the emerging role ambiguity among participants. These learning practices included such methods as (a) stop-and-reflect, (b) left-hand column, (c) end-of-meeting reflection, (d) the learning window, and (e) harvesting the learning. They were initially introduced on a "pilot" basis with one of the academic members of the project team advocating that an academic versed in these practices attend a meeting and use some methods that would assist the group in reflecting and making explicit their learning. Based on this initial experience, the group invited this person to join the team as a learning facilitator.

Over time, the practices surfaced concerns and behaviors that were inhibiting the group from moving forward. Used to temporarily create space in the conversation, they allowed members to listen more carefully, surface unquestioned assumptions, and come to recognize how these assumptions might reflect preheld worldviews that are being imposed on the problem and perhaps are driving decisions and actions based on uncertain knowledge and facts.

It is important to note that the project team used these practices sparingly, only when the team needed space for getting "outside of itself" to move forward or engage in particularly difficult meaning making. Many project team members only accepted these practices through the experience of having a particular practice move the group's learning forward or provide a personal (and powerful) insight. For example, one group member commented, "Prior to the introduction of the learning practices, participants often talked past each other," and another individual noted that "Until I was able to have an out of body experience, to watch myself and the group in action, I was not open to differences and possibilities." Finally, in the words of one academic member of the project team, "My focus shifted to considering the antithetical nature of collaboration and aggression. Furthermore, I began to reflect on the dynamics of the project team and how they evolved over time. This led to sensitivity toward process over product."

At first, the learning practices seemed artificial, but as their use became naturalized, their importance grew as they created a safe space for diverse views and opinions. As members experienced the benefits of using these practices to change conversations in productive ways, the practices became group competencies as opposed to techniques. Over time their use shifted from being basic process interventions to spaces for engaging in reflexive conversation on our methods and actions. This shift was important scaffolding for crossing the threshold.

Crossing the threshold. We have labeled the point where a qualitative change in the experience of participating in the project team occurred as the *threshold*, transforming the project team from a more conventional workgroup to functioning as a collaborative social space. In reflecting on our experience, this transformation did not occur simultaneously for each participant. One member reflecting on the most productive meetings said, "Some participants regularly crossed the threshold, some

did less frequently, some hovered on the threshold but quickly retreated. When most were in the space, the interactions were respectful, playful, enlightening and quickly productive." These transitions seemed to parallel the learning of individuals on the team as they developed greater awareness of their own behavior and learning, their interaction with others, and the team as a system. This learning is deeper in some members than others. In the words of two members, "The learning practices helped me 'quiet' the mad rush of daily activities" and "When I found this space internally, I found this space with others."

Movement back and forth across the threshold from collaborative social space to peripheral understanding and back again continued, but over time and when regression occurred corrections came more quickly.

Working within the collaborative space. Use of the learning practices in an intuitive and nonformulaic way had a number of important implications for the establishment of collaborative social space. Use of inquiry methods and structured periodic reflection fostered deeper listening, allowed the group to recognize behavior that was impeding the group's progress, and provided the interpersonal support for collaborative space. Participants were able to expand their view of diversity beyond race and gender and recognize the different worldviews based on their education, training, and work experience. In the words of one project team member,

> I became aware of tempering my advocacy. I would frame my comments as "this is what the literature says," but be open to possible alternative explanations. I was not as confrontational as in the past. I would qualify my comments.

The diversity of opinions and the willingness to test assumptions and explore those differences created the psychological safety to raise undiscussables. As one of VA members of the team commented, "We talked about sensitive issues in the project meetings that we would not talk about in other meetings." For example, during a meeting in the first year of the project two female members of the project team raised the issue of gender, specifically identifying what they experienced as problematic behavior on the part of one of the male members of the project team. This problem had previously flared up at a meeting, but this time a constructive conversation ensued.

Although difficult to define in absolute terms, through reflecting on our experience a consensus has emerged within our group about some of the most important attributes associated with our participation in this kind of collaborative social space. Specifically, we experienced the space as nonhierarchical in nature and characterized by a high degree of interpersonal openness, honesty, and information sharing. It was this space that allowed us to focus on learning, engaging in deep reflection, testing, and challenging tacit assumptions underlying our individual and group behavior.

Having painted this rosy picture, we must point out that our individual mind-sets were always present, silent and lurking under the conversation. Within each participant, there was a constant tendency to revert to individually formed certainty based on long years of training and socialization within an academic or organization profession. The presenting problem itself informed the awareness of behaviors among participants

and made behavior within the collaborative social space an open topic of discussion. In short, we learned that collaborative social space is fragile, subject to disruption by strong personalities and situational forces. Consequently, it was important to remain vigilant to the presence of these rather substantial forces.

THEORETICAL FRAMING OF THE EXPERIENCE

We were of course aware of the literature on organizational learning throughout the process. We were intentional in applying the learning practices advocated by this literature. Yet, we found little guidance that prepared us for both how powerful and as noted earlier, how fragile such spaces are.

We experienced the space we created in the VA WSA project as sharing many of the characteristics that Fisher and Torbert (1995) describe as a "liberating structure," an environment conducive for "turn[ing] tensions, dilemmas, and gaps . . . into occasions for learning and improved competence . . . that is productive and . . . educates its members towards self-correcting awareness" (p. 7). The creation of a safe space or "container" for engaging in open inquiry is a recurring theme in the literature on the kind of learning that occurs in knowledge creation processes. Mezirow (1991) emphasizes the importance of trust and security as a precondition for the kind of discourse necessary for fostering transformative learning. Nonaka and his associates (2001) describe this as *ba*, a context in which knowledge is shared, created, and used: "The most important aspect of '*ba*' is interaction" (p. 499).

The conversations within the collaborative social space had the qualities that produce what Kasl, Marsick, and Dechant (1997) describe as synergistic team learning. Mind-sets began to merge as certainty diminished. Participants suspended judgments as they listened and reassessed original positions and underlying beliefs. They adopted a critical self-view of their long-held beliefs and assumptions, joined in a playful repartee of ideas in nonjudgmental openness, and listened intensely without feeling the need to speak in opposition. The tension between distinct views and fragmented knowledge played against synergistic sense making and contributed to the richness of the conversations and data analysis.

An interesting phenomenon that we encountered while operating within collaborative social space was our experience with "flow," characterized in part by a sense of playfulness, concentration of effort and highly focused attention, a good match between the challenge at hand and one's skills and abilities, a mental enjoyment of the activity for its own sake, and a distorted sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). We often found (and continue to find) ourselves "lost in our activities" and surprised by the quick passage of time.

Again however, this sense of flow was juxtaposed with the underlying stresses that accompanied the project team's diverse composition. When a socially diverse team of inquirers forms such an alliance, effectively addressing these challenges requires that the members transcend the focus of their various disciplines and practice areas while bringing their disciplinary expertise to the process (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2001). The principle involved here is a variation of what has been

called the paradox of diversity (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). The more complex the issue and diverse the group of people involved in the process of trying to resolve it, the greater the potential for transformative learning. At the same time, the less likely it is that participants in the group will be able to create the social space necessary for understanding each other's point of view, thus blocking their capacity for generating new learning and transformation. The need for creating collaborative social space is directly related to the degree of the question's complexity, the diversity of thought required for addressing it, and the group members' diversity. In describing our experience, we came to realize the particular relevance of the interpersonal aggression and organizational justice literature for understanding the conditions necessary for establishing and maintaining collaborative social space in such settings—and by extension the importance of this literature for understanding organizational learning.

Collaborative Social Space and Theories of
Interpersonal Aggression and Organizational Justice

Proponents of organizational learning, "though providing compelling models and illustrations of learning organizations, provide little guidance on how to get there from here" (Friedman et al., 2001, p. 757). Also noted by these authors, "Collective defenses make organizational double-loop learning unlikely, particularly under conditions of potential embarrassment or threat" (p. 757). In reflecting on our experiences in the WSA project, we came to recognize the relevance of interpersonal aggression and organizational justice theories in addressing both of these issues. In the following sections, we suggest the benefits of incorporating these theories in the study of organizational learning in general and the creation and maintenance of collaborative social space in particular. We follow this discussion with concrete suggestions for translating this research into practice through the application of organizational justice principles.

Aggression, Cooperation, Collaboration, and Justice

As noted earlier, the WSA project originally focused on obtaining a better understanding of the causes and consequences of aggression and stress in the workplace and developing interventions to address these issues. Originally, our collaborative action inquiry approach served two purposes. First, it was a process that we employed to improve interpersonal dynamics within our project and action teams. Second, it served as a means of learning about our interpersonal dynamics and the dynamics of the larger organization. In short, the use of collaborative action inquiry and the creation of collaborative social space were originally viewed as a means to an end—the creation, implementation, and evaluation of useful workplace aggression interventions. Along the way, we came to realize that the process was the product. That is, we came to see that the creation and maintenance of collaborative social space improved our interpersonal behavior. In particular, it changed the very nature and quality of the conversations that we were having within and between the teams. We suddenly (if belatedly) realized that aggression and collaboration are antithetical concepts. Whereas aggression involves efforts to harm others (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993; Geen, 1991), collaboration involves efforts to help (or cooperate with) others, as highlighted in the term

co-operative inquiry (Coghlan & Brannick, 2000; Reason, 1999). Shani et al. (2004) refer to a true partnership in collaborative research as "the dynamics of equality and integration—based on values, actions, processes, and consequences—around a shared goal or vision for the purpose of creating something (scientific and actionable knowledge) by two or more entities" (pp. 83-84). Although this seems obvious on its face, closer examination suggests that many of the theoretical variables that reduce the likelihood of aggression and conflict are the same variables that encourage trust, cooperation, and collaboration.

The most critical of these variables involves perceptions of interpersonal fair treatment. When asked to describe situations that make them angry, most individuals refer to something another person said or did—something that caused them to become upset and view aggression against this person as justified (Harris, 1993; Torestad, 1990). In describing these "provocative" words or deeds, individuals often characterize them as unfair and suggest that they plan to "get even" or "exact justice" (Bies & Tripp, 1996, 1998). The relationship between perceptions of unfair treatment and the restoration of equity is the motivation underlying a significant portion of the research on social justice. As suggested by Homans (1974), "We should be much less interested in injustice if it did not lead so often to anger and aggression" (p. 257).

With respect to the concept of justice, Lerner (1981) suggests that this involves "an appropriate correspondence between a person's fate and that to which he or she is entitled—what is deserved" (p. 12). Rule and Ferguson (1984) discuss norm violations as an instance of "is-ought discrepancy" and suggest that anger, blaming, and retaliation might ensue when people see their partly idiosyncratic norms of proper conduct (oughts) violated. In a similar vein, referent cognitions theory (Folger, 1986, 1987) suggests that with respect to outcome allocation, "resentment is maximized when people believe they *would* have obtained better outcomes if the decision maker had used other procedures that *should* have been implemented" (Cropanzano & Folger, 1989, pp. 293-294). Finally, Tedeschi and Felson (1994) suggest that any factor that increases the likelihood that norm violations will be committed should lead to grievances and coercive interactions.

Conversely, perceptions of fair treatment are associated with the establishment of trust and cooperation. For example, Folger and Konovsky (1989) find that employees who felt that their supervisors had conducted "fair" performance appraisals tended to exhibit greater levels of trust and liking toward these individuals and significantly lower levels of negative affect than those perceiving "unfair" evaluations. Related research has demonstrated a consistent and positive association between all forms of organizational justice (distributive, procedural, interactional/interpersonal—discussed in more detail in the following) and the development of trust, positive affect, and an assortment of organizational citizenship behaviors (Brockner & Siegel, 1996; Mishra, 1996; Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999; Pillai, Williams, & Tan, 2001; Saunders & Thornhill, 2003). These findings are consistent with the seminal work of Gouldner (1960) on negative and positive reciprocity and Blau's (1964) work on social exchange theory, the bases for subsequent justice research.

Building in part on the research previously described, aggression researchers have developed complex integrative theories and models describing the factors that

lead to—or diminish the likelihood of—aggression. Consistent with these contemporary theories of interpersonal aggression (C. A. Anderson, Anderson, & Deuser, 1996; C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002; K. B. Anderson, Anderson, Dill, & Deuser, 1998; Bushman & Anderson, 2001) and more recent research on workplace aggression (Baron, Neuman, & Geddes, 1999; Neuman, 2004; Neuman & Baron, 1998, 2005), any variables that increase negative affect or hostile cognitions may begin a process that leads to an aggressive response. In essence, from either a cognitive neoassociationistic (Berkowitz, 1989, 1990, 1993) or a general aggression theory perspective (C. A. Anderson & Bushman, 2002), internal affective and cognitive states (elicited by external or internal stimuli) trigger related (i.e., associated) knowledge structures. Specifically, when a concept is primed or activated in memory, the activation spreads to related concepts and increases their activation as well. According to C. A. Anderson and Bushman (2002), three particularly relevant structures include:

> (a) *perceptual schemata*, which are used to identify phenomena as simple as everyday physical objects (chair, person) or as complex as social events (personal insult); (b) *person schemata*, which include beliefs about a particular person or groups of people; and (c) *behavioral scripts*, which contain information about how people behave under varying circumstances. (p. 33)

As an example, exposure to emotional or physiological pain will trigger related knowledge structures along with previously associated thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses. Conversely, exposure to variables associated with well-being, security, confidence, or trust will be more likely to activate more positive knowledge structures.

Within this framework, it is possible to consider the potential impact of a wide variety of variables, but as noted earlier, we focus our attention on justice perceptions because of their demonstrated impact on aggression and cooperation. Within the context of the general aggression framework, justice perceptions clearly impact affective and cognitive responses. Of most interest in the creation of collaborative social space we focus on positively toned emotional reactions (e.g., joy and optimism as compared with anger, irritation, or rage) and associated cognitions regarding trust, cooperation, and collaboration as compared with mistrust, opposition, and hostility.

Contemporary theories of aggression suggest (and empirical research clearly demonstrates) that thoughts (cognitions) can activate related emotional (affective) reactions; conversely, emotional reactions can activate related thoughts. This same relationship was discussed in the seminal literature in the justice area. For example, "If a state of injustice exists and it is to a man's disadvantage—that is, the man experiences deprivation—he will display the emotional behavior we call anger" (Homans, 1961, p. 75). The connection between justice perceptions and the elicitation of emotions is also discussed in more recent research (see e.g., Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005; Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999).

Finally, we draw on a completely different line of research that provides independent evidence showing that activation spreads to related structures of cognition and affect. We refer to extensive work by Alice Isen and her colleagues exploring the relationship between positive and negative affect, cognition, and behavior. In this rather large body of work, compelling evidence is presented demonstrating a relationship between

positive affect and creative problem solving, helping behaviors, being receptive to persuasion, and risk-taking behavior (Isen, 1970; Isen, Clark, & Schwartz, 1976; Isen & Daubman, 1984; Isen & Means, 1983; Isen, Nygren, & Ashby, 1988; Isen & Patrick, 1983; Isen, Salker, Clark, & Karp, 1978; Isen & Shalker, 1982).

To summarize, a substantial amount of theoretical and empirical work demonstrates that a common set of variables serves as antecedents to and correlates of aggression and cooperation—to the extent that they activate negative or positive emotions and cognitions, respectively. Furthermore, justice and injustice perceptions are among the most powerful antecedents to aggression and cooperation within this theoretical base—one that has not been considered or applied to organizational learning in general or the development and maintenance of collaborative social space in particular. Beyond their ability to elicit powerful thoughts, feelings, and ultimately behaviors, perceptions of justice and injustice also serve as important antecedents to and consequences of trust (and distrust), an important element in the development of effective collaboration (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

Moving From Research to Practice: Organizational Justice Theories and the Establishment of Collaborative Social Space

Whereas the literature on interpersonal aggression cited previously serves as a strong theoretical base, the related theories of organizational justice provide insights about translating theory into practice; or in the words of Friedman et al. (2001), the justice literature tells us "how to get there from here" (p. 757).

The importance of fair treatment and the establishment of trust. Mishra (1996) suggests that "trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, and (d) reliable" (p. 256). At a minimum, trust means that one party believes that it will not be taken unfair advantage of by another party. As noted previously, the notion that fair treatment is related to the development of trust has received strong support in the organizational behavior literature. However, although perceptions of fair treatment are so central to the development and maintenance of trust, and by extension collaborative space, there is little evidence that the substantial literature on organizational justice (Greenberg, 1987) and theories of interpersonal aggression have been considered (or applied) to collaborative action inquiry in general or the development of collaborative space in particular. It is our contention that justice theories can make a substantial contribution to an understanding of collaborative social space as described earlier and provide practical applications that may be employed in the creation and maintenance of collaborative space across a broad array of work settings. The literature identifies three forms of organizational justice: (a) distributive, (b) procedural, and (c) interactional. Each is important in the establishment of trust and the development of collaborative space.

Distributive justice. Distributive justice relates to perceptions of fair treatment associated with the outcomes or allocations that a person receives in a given situation or an interpersonal exchange or transaction. Specifically, people judge the ratio of their

inputs (their investments, both in financial and nonfinancial terms) to their outcomes (the financial and nonfinancial benefits that they derive from these investments) and are sensitive to any disparity in this ratio (Adams, 1965). This phenomenon also serves as the basis for the psychological contract, an individual's beliefs about the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the person and another party (Rousseau, 1989). As relates to the development of trust and the establishment of collaborative space, our process makes the terms of social exchange more explicit.

We previously highlighted the initial orientation meeting at Fairleigh Dickinson University as important in establishing a foundation for the group. We made each other aware of our interests and expectations and discussed how we would function as a team. This laid the basis for subsequent conversations in which we covered such issues as how to handle leadership responsibilities, logistics, individual and group roles and accountability, and the domain of our action. Our discussions provided the foundation for the development of mutual understanding and openness and consequently establishing and "codifying" our social contract. From an aggression research perspective, this reduces the likelihood of misattribution (or more important, hostile attributions) and provides more reasonable expectations regarding potential outcomes.

In retrospect, these open conversations were the beginning of the establishment of trust and a shared sense that the group could hold together through difficult interpersonal exchanges. In their extensive study of 27 work groups of diverse types and contexts, Hackman (1990) and his colleagues conclude that groups that somehow got onto a good track tended to perform better as time passed, whereas those that got into difficulty found that their problems compounded over time. For this and other reasons, a well-managed enrollment process is critical.

These open enrollment conversations sowed the early seeds of procedural justice in which bias is suppressed (or least exposed) by surfacing individual differences and personal agendas in an attempt to integrate the interests of all parties. Through this process of honest (minimally censored) interaction, accurate information is made available for decision making, resulting in access to a transparent mechanism to negotiate a consistent (equitable) allocation of resources. In those instances when individuals felt aggrieved, our process encouraged the expression of such feelings and provided an opportunity to address perceived wrongs. From the beginning, this led to feelings—among team members—that the group was "special." This created a willingness to experiment with learning practices that would permit the eventual emergence of the collaborative social space.

Procedural and interactional/interpersonal justice. Just as individuals are concerned with the fairness of the outcomes that they receive, they also are sensitive to the process used to determine those outcomes (procedural justice; Thibaut & Walker, 1975) and the nature of the interactions that characterize those transactions (interactional justice, Bies & Moag, 1986; interpersonal justice, Greenberg, 1993). These forms of justice provide practical tools for establishing trust and for developing and maintaining collaborative space.

With respect to procedural justice, research suggests that individuals are likely to perceive procedures as fair to the extent that they (a) suppress bias, (b) create consistent allocations, (c) rely on accurate information, (d) are correctable, (e) represent the

concerns of all recipients, and (f) are based on prevailing moral and ethical standards (Leventhal, 1976, 1980). Some practical examples of this include procedures in which all parties have some voice in the decision-making process, believe that their voice is being heard, and believe that they have some choice in determining the outcomes (Folger, 1977). As regards interactional elements, fair processes are those in which individuals are treated with sensitivity, consideration, and politeness (Bies & Moag, 1986; Greenberg, 1993; Mikula, Petri, & Tanzer, 1990).

The learning practices were the mechanism for moving toward establishing the collaborative social space. They enabled an initial set of actions that became habits that created spaces that were both part of yet separate from the meeting—defined safe containers in which people would pay attention and listen. Within these containers of collaborative social space, participants knew that they would get an equal chance to speak. As a result, the group as a whole had access to seeing things through different lenses and had open access to information. Although labeled *learning practices*, they also provided a method for establishing the conditions of distributive, procedural, and interpersonal justice and the ensuing development of trust. This was particularly evident in the creation of a process for surfacing the concerns of all participants, addressing each others' wants and needs, continually examining (and when necessary adjusting) individual and group behavior, providing for reliable information and correctable action. In short, the learning practices helped to promote and ensure a "safe" and supportive social space. As project team members experienced the power of the practices for systematically surfacing agendas through providing all parties with a voice (Folger, 1977; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), the practices were increasingly used with authenticity (as opposed to a technique to be followed). As one participant put it,

> Most people don't have conversations where they're really listening, being very honest or genuine about what's going on, and aware of the parts they're not saying. It's darn hard to work with people to resolve complicated issues unless you're listening and being honest and having that kind of trust.

To summarize, we believe that perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional justice contribute to the development and maintenance of collaborative space. In particular, when people perceive that justice exists, this perception helps establish trust and feelings of fairness leading to interpersonal openness, honesty, and information sharing. People are able to engage in a process of coinquiry in which they feel free to surface, test, and (when necessary) challenge tacit assumptions underlying individual and group behavior. For the WSA project, perceptions of justice informed our practice with each other and set behavioral standards for interpersonal interactions.

SUMMARY REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS OF CREATING COLLABORATIVE SOCIAL SPACE

Conversations consist of the words and message spoken (the content dimension) and a pattern of interaction among the participants (the relationship dimension; Baker, 2002). During the enrollment phase, content predominates as the individuals speak from their own perspective to the group, speaking from the common ground established by the

project's initiators through information sharing. During the phase of crafting peripheral understanding, the participants begin to seek negotiated common ground establishing a communicative relationship. These first two phases give shape to the scaffolding of the forum, or arena, for learning, with intentional use of learning practices. But as trust develops and the participants begin to understand each other's worldview, the conversation begins to change in an important way. The parties listen more than speak and struggle to understand rather than oppose the ideas of others. The trusting relationship that develops leads to the threshold of collaborative social space. In the space, ideas emerge and merge as the individuals allow themselves to become more vulnerable, express less certainty, experiment with new ideas, and create new tools. The ideas that emerge cannot be attributed to any single individual as a playful morphing process makes individual attribution difficult to reconstitute. In fact, the ideas that emerge from the collaborative space probably could not have been generated outside of the space. Those who remain in the space not only begin to make explicit their tacit understanding of ideas and concepts but also absorb and internalize the tacit knowledge of others. Participants remain bound to their experience and professional responsibilities while bringing their views to the service of a merged collective effort. Their personal experience contributes to the whole as the learning of the whole reshapes how they understand their individual roles. The interpenetration of roles is visible to an outsider as well. A union leader who was attending his first project meeting reflected, "I cannot tell the difference between the academics and the VA people."

The assumptions, ideas, beliefs, skills, and abilities that we individually brought into the collaborative space became intermingled and distributed as we learned from each other. After 6 years together, it is almost impossible to identify individual authorship of an idea or contribution and most impressively, little evidence of resentment over this fact.

Nothing in our prior experience prepared us for what we encountered in the past 6 years. Perhaps the most telling source of the process's validation is the extent to which the individual learning from the process has been transferred to other settings. One university-based participant said,

> I used to teach as if things were either true or false. I don't do that anymore. Now I talk to people like here's my relationship to what I think this means. What does it mean to you? If it meant this or that, what would show up for us? What could we do with that idea? How could we be more effective? I'm looking to provoke more communicating. In fact, a lot of the stuff I used to know as the "truth," at best I'll recognize I only think I know and there's even more that I thought I know that I don't know. So it's been profoundly changing for me personally and professionally.

A union official commented,

> A take away for me is that I'm more aware of how I present myself to employees, that I listen to them when they have issues, that I'm more cognizant how they feel when they're talking to me, what gives them concern and that we address those concerns.

Another source of validation for the process we described, and its potential payoff for participants, comes from our patron. When asked whether this undertaking was worth the effort, he replied,

Do I think it's worth the squeeze? Unequivocally! I think it's worth the squeeze in terms of developing this process as a way of doing business, and in terms of developing evidence around what we do as managers.

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