CHAPTER 2

COLLABORATION AT BORDERS: THE TWO FACES OF PERSONALISM

In Mexico... you may spend an hour and a half with a client just establishing the personal relationship and then you move on to business. In the U.S., if you get 10-15 minutes worth of personal conversation, it's been a waste of time... but if your client doesn't like you in the U.S., you are going to have a hard time retaining them.

—“Ricardo,” informant

Personalism is alive and well in the business, public, and nonprofit worlds of Mexico and the United States. The timing and cues in both places may be different, and people who are open and sensitive to these alternatives do communicate successfully. The graduate-trained cross-border accountant who shared his insights with us is the quintessential borderlander. His family is from central Mexico, but he was born in El Paso, the family returned to Mexico for a few years, and then returned to El Paso. He describes himself as Americanized, and his peers Anglicized his first name, but he is a fluent speaker of both Spanish and English. Now his business cards list his Spanish first name. His perceptions of personal relationships and their timing in Mexico are widely shared at the border, although many “Americans” seem to mute attention to personal issues in the United States. Personal relationships are relevant to collaboration in the civic, business and public worlds of both countries and especially at the border, as framed and detailed further in this chapter.

Our attention to personal issues, however, is not limited to the business world or to those with resources and talents who may be able to finesse the best of binational work opportunities, sensitivity, and lifestyles. For the majority, there is a caste-like quality to finessing these opportunities, based on class and income, over which a veneer of technological sophistication exists. Mexico assembles advanced technology, automobiles, and medical equipment, yet people working the maquiladora assembly line putting together the equipment or computer keyboards may not
know how to use them or even be able to afford to buy the technology that is being assembled.

Our key chapter argument is this: If cross-border and transnational movements are to mobilize for a social justice that expands opportunity for far more people in ways that result in a fairer distribution of resources, we must attend to the ways in which relationships are built, fostered, and sustained to lead toward change. Relationships draw on personal factors to develop and sustain themselves. Personal factors like openness, trust and credibility, and cross-cultural sensitivity (including language acquisition) grease the grids of the seemingly mechanistic opportunity structure about which we wrote in chapter one. Ultimately, though, personal relationships ("strong ties") must grow and expand into weaker ties that connect to larger networks and organizations if the border is to develop into a region with equal opportunity and social justice.

By now, global movements and global NGOs are as visible as global corporations and markets. From environmental to feminist activism, global social movements counter, collaborate with, and/or influence industries and nation-states. This activism, at its heart, is about distributional politics in Harold Lasswell’s classic sense: Who gets what (including what values), where, when and how? However, the answers are not just national, as Lasswell conceived them, but transnational. By definition, global NGOs transcend national borders.

In this chapter, we move global issues to the local common ground of borderlands. We first consider cross-border, transnational activism as a peculiar variant of local politics. Then we move to theoretical considerations surrounding collaboration within and across borders, focusing especially on personalism with all its blessings and curses. If borders are the “hybrid” places about which border theorists write—the zones of difference between nations—then we must grapple with the cultural hybridity that might make personal issues important and thereby infuse politics with-personalism, including both its limitations and its possibilities.

Global Movements at Local Binational Borders

“Transnational advocacy networks,” say Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, are activists “distinguished largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values in motivating their formation.” Such networks emerge under certain conditions; they continue when national civil society–government channels are blocked, with political entrepreneurial promoters, and through spaces in which networks can flourish, such as conferences. Advocates seek the openings of political opportunity structures, as discussed in the introductory chapter. We wonder about the personal elements among activists, even the ideological and religious among them.

Many people have written about mobilization against export-processing manufacturing (maquiladoras), free trade, and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The European Union also provides a supranational institution around which “transnationals” organize. We see a dearth of analysis about the transnational, or cross-border organizing in the common ground of the U.S.–Mexico border, where people share an integrated (if asymmetrical) economy, the same water basins, air, and pollution.

Little ink has been spilled over the organizing challenges posed in the borderlands. However successful global movements might seem to be, measured in terms of United Nations resolutions or virtual communication through electronic mail, if people cannot collaborate across national borders in a fifty-mile radius like El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, how well do transnational and global movements really fare? Global movements must learn from the challenges of transnational organizing within borderlands. Global business and consumption are well organized, even facilitated and subsidized by governments and international organizations, as we discuss in chapter five. Will global movements and nongovernmental organizations ever obtain parity with global business and consumption? Official government subsidies to business do not extend to nongovernmental organizations and global movements.

The focus on global and regional movements provides a welcome antidote to political analysis that stops at a borderline (comparative politics, American politics, Mexican politics, name-the-country politics). Politics stops at the border rather than transcends it. The focus also is a relief from attention to high-level foreign policy elites that people study in the field of International Relations. Yet all of these analytical strategies mute attention to the important cross-border organizing strategies that occur within borderlands as regions. In these spaces, networks can flourish especially well, through kinship, personal friendships, and official coordination bodies (the latter of which often blossom just after elections).

Officially there are several venues that promote binational cooperation. The Border Liaison Mechanisms (BLMs) are coordinated through the American and Mexican consulates as we discuss in the next chapter. Numerous commissions and conferences put binational coordination on the agenda of health service and environmental stewardship.
both sides of the border, public and appointed officials pay lip service to binational cooperation. At the bottom line, however, nations exercise sovereignty over their territory; binational actions complicate sovereignty. The idea of “sister cities,” warm and fuzzy sounding, resonates well with audiences outside the region. At the border itself, however, concrete results that put these lofty pronouncements and recommendations into practice are few and far between.

Cross-border collaborations respond both to so-called free trade regimes and to regional spaces that share not only common ground, but also common issues that transcend national territorial boundary lines and people who share a common language and Mexican heritage. We are particularly interested in local nongovernmental organizations that respond to the regional and the global; community-based organizations (CBOs), nonprofit organizations/associciones civiles, unions/indicadores and social justice networks. We wonder about the extent to which they are connected to regional, national, and global movements.

Taking cues from the usual issue focus in transnational organizing, we develop issues in subsequent chapters but focus here on transnational organizing in a bordered space or place. Cross-border organizing strategies, we argue, are a variant of local politics. Strategists face obstacles and must grapple with the multiple political institutions that shroud them and the resulting accountability complications of contrasting political institutions (that we address in the following chapter). While transnational issue organizing emphasizes the spread of awareness, (as Keck and Sikkink indicate), successful organizing at and around borders generally must move beyond consciousness-raising toward problem-solving. Here at the border, awareness is often quite commonplace, even mundane, with transnational kinship, friendship, and work patterns. Transnational organizing toward problem-solving in a global economy is difficult enough to sustain, but it is particularly challenging in the context of separate, multiple political institutions, of economic scarcity and minimal wages, and of nationalism and mindless jingoism. This complicated context is the border.

Collaboration: A Challenge Anywhere

At the most fundamental level, the analysis of cross-border networks and organizations is about collaboration across any lines of difference. The differences range from identities—like ethnicity, gender, and class—to organizations, like unions and lobby groups. The much-vaulted public–private partnerships, between government and business or nonprofit organizations, are also about collaboration. Collaboration occurs within legal jurisdictional lines, as in alliances within a city, county, or municipality. Collaboration also occurs across jurisdictional lines, as in community-based organizations in different cities that form alliances to strengthen their power in relation to powers they seek to influence. Thus collaboration in a wide generic sense is about crossing “borderlines.”

Government downsizing makes collaboration the mantra of turn-of-the century North America. Funders promote collaboration to stretch resources. Funding supplicants seek collaborators to amass real money and in-kind contributions to “make things happen.” Collaboration, once a dirty word in war for its suggested complicity with an occupying power, is now the indicator of civic health and effectiveness. A series of organizational-help books, the collective equivalent of individual self-help books, offer recipes for collaboration with little regard for their political complexity. A virtual cottage industry has grown around nonprofit organizational growth, fund raising, and “technical assistance” (TA), a sanitized phrase for actions themselves that generate revenue for nonprofit TA firms.

Collaboration involves people, and the key to strong and effective movements relies on numbers of people generally, strategically placed people, and people with passionate, intense commitments to issues. The heart of collaboration involves building relationships among people. Relationships are inherently personal. To form relationships, some degree of trust is necessary for the time and work to be invested in forming alliances and solving problems together. Personal reputations launch and multiply relationships into networks.

Studies at the U.S.–Mexico border, as well as those of urban neighborhood movements in Mexico, have noted the capacity of people to organize together to demand public utilities such as water and sewer services. Social capital, defined as networks and trust relationships for problem-solving, is reflected in such collective organizations. Using the border in a laboratory-like comparison, however, studies identify greater social capital on the Mexico, compared to the U.S. side in low-income neighborhoods and colonias.

In the United States, government relationships with low-income communities range from malignant to benign neglect, or even a helping, service orientation. But in communities with sizeable numbers of immigrants, at least one part of government (the Border Patrol and the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS]) operates with surveillance for occasional removal and deportation. Community residents often avoid and fear government. People are less likely to use the democratic
process to press for services or for the kind of autonomy and subsidies that other pressure groups use. Some nonprofit organizations sustain that service orientation, plus sustain their livelihoods with grant-writing and fund-raising activities. We periodically hear organizers with an economic, self-sufficiency orientation describe these helper nonprofits as "poverty pimps"—a phrase we abhor, but which we share to draw distinctions among nongovernment organizations.

People could themselves press for services, self-sufficiency, or for autonomy and subsidies like those sought by business lobbies. Some border studies imply, perhaps with more longing than empirical reality, that a transcendent Mexicidad ties people together across the border. In great contrast, the xenophobes are enormously threatened about Mexican identity or loyalty. Radical rhetoricians egg them on with polemics about the new "Mexican Invasion" that counters U.S. invasion of northern Mexico in the nineteenth century, taking half its land. The Mexican invasion supposedly infiltrates quietly, with the steady northward movement of people, languages, food preferences, and customs. In border contrasts, no quiet or strident invasion occurred in El Paso, but it is the largest border city with not merely a majority, but eight of ten residents with Mexican heritage. Spanish is spoken as widely as English. Many jobs require bilingual capability, for public necessity. Yet to reiterate an important point in chapter one, not all borderlanders are alike in their language use, cultural identity, and ideas among other factors.

Personalism: A Social Analytical View

Anthropology and political ethnography address conflict and cooperation, especially at the local level (village, in "anthropology-speak"). The concepts used to analyze politics include attention to clientelism, political machines, and patron-client relationships, which we take up below. Much analysis of Mexico draws on these insights, such as attention to caciques as leaders or political bosses, or comadrazgo (godparenthood), as mechanisms to grow extended families with fictive kin. These are the bases for many political relationships, networks, and loyalty groups called camarillas. Of even, in solidarity groups, like some unions, people use fictive kin terms, calling one another "brother" or "sister." Whole unions have the word "brotherhood" in their names (Teamsters, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), though we know of no unions, only feminist or religious organizations, with the word "sisterhood." Insights about personalism are relevant in limited democracies, like the borderlands, as we analyze in the next chapter.

Few political scientists have examined friendships, personalism, loyalty, and betrayal. Indeed, the keyword loyalty on Internet search engines in 2001 hints at what happens to these concepts in advanced capitalism: consumer loyalty brings up the most "hits." Yet James Q. Wilson, in his classic study of political organization, compared the different kinds of incentives that attracted those who joined organizations: personal (what he called "solidary" incentives, based on both the status and the pleasure of social interaction); material, like money or concrete goods, and purposive, from single-issue to multi-issue purposes. The many who are attracted to material incentives, like unions, bring a thin commitment to the organization, often satisfied with individual gain. Personal motivations, like faith-based organizing that draws from a congregational base, are potentially unstable until purposive incentives overtake the ever-changing pleasure or status of social relations. Purposive organizing is the ideal of the three, toward which material and personal motivations lead.

To analyze networks and organizations in the U.S.-Mexico metropolitan area of the border, we draw on anthropological and ethnographic concepts, rarely used in U.S. urban studies. And with few exceptions, most political ethnography in Mexico focuses on villages and towns, even though Mexico is a majority-urban nation.

In Who Rules America? now in its third edition, William Domhoff argues that a corporate-conservative coalition dominates American politics, challenged by a liberal-labor coalition. He does not merely allege or theorize conspiracy, but examines data on corporate board memberships. For Domhoff, overlapping board memberships—what others sometimes call interlocking directorates—are key to understanding domination. Connected board members work together; they share stake, ownership, and profit in common financial stock. They also play together, on golf courses, in country clubs, and the like. There is a personal quality to these ties—face-to-face relationships—that are deepened with monetary self-interest. In popular parlance, these are what people called "good old boy" networks, but nowadays they are also new and sometimes female but still good for those who benefit.

Elite theorists like Domhoff play little heed to cracks, division, and competition in the monolithic structure they have constructed. A virulent critic of elites, Karl Marx once said one capitalist kills another. Both academics and activists would do well to avoid overstating monolithic controls. In the most authoritarian of settings, people resist, avoid, ignore, or act strategically to pursue their interests. The borderlands potentially offers cracks in the monolith with language nuances and institutional complexities.
Elite approaches, however critical, undermine people's hope and will
to collective action and challenges to domination that would change the
distribution of power and rewards. We suggest that it is worthwhile to
turn this network analysis upside down to examine various organiza-
tions, like those in this book, from community-based and grassroots
to nonprofit and official, that also have leaders, boards, and members.
Some of these people are bound together through personal ties; they
also work and play together. Elites are invited to serve on some of these
boards, even as their self-interests are not entirely served in organizations
with majority non-elites who challenge the status quo. Community-
based organizations (CBOs), networks, social movements, crosses-border
cooperation, and nonprofit agencies challenge corporate-conservatism
within and across borders.

**Horizontal and Vertical Ties**

Modern and post-modern societies are bureaucratic, with rules and
procedures blanketing relationships of authority. Max Weber would have
us think that modern bureaucratic machinery is rid of personal and
patrimonial relations, yet such relationships exist at the base of bureau-
cratic, public, and private action, relationships that are both horizontally
and vertically tied.  

**Horizontal Ties**

Let us first look at horizontal relationships among people of relatively
equal stature. Among those tied through horizontal relationships, one
might expect merit, rationality, and procedures to govern decision-making
processes. Still, reputation and personality have bearing on decisions.
Take, for example, the boards that govern nonprofit organizations. Board
members sign "conflict of interest" statements, which are properly filed
away, but personal knowledge, credibility, friendship, and enmity have a
bearing on decisions made and actions taken. Take also the example of
university decision-making. Great care is taken to avoid the appearance of
conflict among married couples and family members. Making decisions
about one another, yet friendship and reputation might be just as personal-
ly slanted in decision-making processes. People know, discuss, and even
gossip about other people. Anthropologists recognize and write about this
in seemingly exotic societies to the south, but analysts hardly deal with
it in the north (or if they do, they attribute it to women). As James Scott
has said about the "arts of resistance" that include mockery, "gossip is
perhaps the most familiar and elementary form of disguised popular
aggression... [with] something of a disguised democratic voice."  

Gossip opens a voice for the mass, although it is a voice without accountability.
At the border, sharing **chisme** (gossip) is a pastime in which many partici-
pants. In limited democracies like the border region, gossip is the escape
valve, but one with potentially damaging consequences.

Can or should people eliminate such personal ties? Hardly! The hori-
zontal, personal ties among people are what make relationships human
rather than mechanical. Pity the day that the (in Weber's words) "iron
cage" of bureaucratic machinery prevails.

Personal bonds have ripple effects. Friends of friends can bond
loosely into networks, short-circuiting the time that it takes to build
original trust relationships. These ripple effects have both positive and
negative ramifications. When personal factors reign, the enemies of my
friends also become my enemies. What seems like a wonderful organiz-
ing prospect—friendship networks—also becomes an organizing night-
mare, as enemy networks spiral to prevent or damage ties.

**Vertical Ties**

In hierarchical societies, personal ties are bound to have vertical dimen-
sions as well. All societies are hierarchical, but some are more unequal
than others and the inequality is ritualized in language use and everyday
behavior. Yet one must heed the smile and bow of subordinate to master
that is preceded by or followed with mockery and gossip.

Anthropologists have long studied the "patron-client" relationships
that bind the less powerful to the more powerful. In exchange for favors
from patrons, the client is expected to provide labor, loyalty, and other
resources to patrons. Together, many clients' contributions help sustain
the patron and the unequal relations. Patron-client ties, as usually concep-
tualized, are built around people, rather than issues or ideologies.

We use the words "bind" and "bonds" quite deliberately for they aptly
paint the double meaning of strong personal ties. In a positive sense,
bonds create solidarity and loyalty; surely these are sorely needed charac-
teristics in the strident individualism of post-modern society. In a nega-
tive sense, bonds can be like chains. Lots of ties bind people together at
the U.S.-Mexico border, from Mexican heritage to Spanish language. At
some borders, these ties have been called **Mexicanidad**, suggesting some
sort of "bonding social capital" that might form the foundation for the
more difficult "bridging social capital" that collaborators seek to build
and sustain. The veneer of **Mexicanidad** is belied, we observe, with
differences over which bridges must be built: immigration/emigration,
with a gulf between those who left and those who stayed in Mexico;
knowledge of Spanish and its pronunciation, to name just a few. Gender also structures differences, gulfs and potential bridges. We often see exaggerated gender differences in public presentation, from dress and body language to speaking style. The Mexican comic books, *Supermachos*, one can still perhaps purchase *semi-nuevo* (semi-new, as it is optimistically called) in public markets, characterize some of the excessive male posturing we observe in organizational and neighborhood turfs, a posturing with its mirror image of gracious chivalry. We have already hinted at and illustrated the extensive personalism we observe at the border. Consider some explanations.

**Personalism at the U.S.–Mexico Border**

Personalism is alive and well at the U.S.–Mexico border. It has consequences for collaboration within and across borders and for the cross-border networking, organizing, and cooperation in the issue areas on which we focus in this book. Personalism forges ties that could grow into issue networks, but it can also constrain growth, dissemination, and sustained challenge to historical patterns of asymmetry and dominance at the U.S.–Mexico border.

Are the borderlands politics more personalistic than elsewhere? Below, we outline reasons that might explain extensive personalism at the U.S.–Mexico border. Our analyses in subsequent chapters also sustain that view. However, if personalism got greater attention in American political analyses, we suspect that it would become more visible as well.

From the U.S.–Mexico border perspective, the explanations about rampant personalism are sometimes lacking and incomplete. First, we consider the hybridity explanation, drawing on the Mexico connection and communication patterns from so-called “high-context” cultures (refer to cultural distinctions outlined in Table 2.1). Second, we address small-town politics wherein “everyone knows each other,” especially the business and governing elite. Perhaps fast-growing El Paso and Ciudad Juarez have not grown and spread their civic capacity in more professional and distant, less personal directions. Of course, personal ties and networks are endemic among members of what class theorists once called a “power elite,” as we pointed out in the *Who Rules America* discussion of the book, again, with its personalistic decision-making behind closed doors. The border has no monopoly on patterns like these.

While the above two explanations add insight to dynamics at the border, we believe personalism to be a relic of limited democracy. Border cities are small towns grown huge in a mere generation. They are populated with majorities who exercise little political power. Personalism, coupled with highly asymmetrical power relations, has been commonplace historically in the El Paso–Ciudad Juarez region as the next chapter develops. Let us look in great detail at the alternative explanations.

**Personalism as Mexican or “Cultural”**

The border has long been called a place of “hybridity.” People cross frequently; bilinguals mix languages; cultural patterns blend and mutate. In border popular culture, we celebrate twice as many holidays, from both nations. One of Ciudad Juarez’s main thoroughfares contains a statue of the liberator Abraham Lincoln, and many El Paso walls contain murals of the Virgin of Guadalupe, much revered in Mexico. El Paso has its own Porfirio Diaz street, perhaps the only one dedicated to Mexico’s nineteenth-century dictator in all of North America, even in all of Mexico.

At the border, people express pride in “family values” and exhibit—for better or worse—lower levels of marital dissolution and female-headed households, at least compared to the mainstream United States. Extended families are valued. Could hybridity extend into the public or civic sphere? Each side of the border takes on characteristics of el otro lado, or the other side. El Paso occupies ex-northern Mexico. Many of its earliest residents, people joke, changed nationality when the border changed. Could personalism be a product of Mexican heritage and Mexico’s proximity?

Mexican politics has long been characterized as “clientelist,” that is, based on vertical networks of ties among unequal people in hierarchical societies. Mexico is the land of many clients and few patrons, an organizing framework for much analysis from anthropology to political science, as earlier noted. In a key classic of political science, comparing five countries, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba characterize Mexico as a parochial political culture. Their definition of parochial is not merely private and insular. For Almond and Verba, it is a “lack of” many things present in a civic culture: people are not oriented to the larger political system; people are both ignorant of and pessimistic about both the upward and downward flows of policy making; people lack the sense of self-capacity to participate. 14

Of course, Mexico since 1980 is in the much-lauded transition to democracy with multi-party electoral competition. It is not the same Mexico as that in Almond and Verba’s 1960s-era study. We cannot help but notice the higher electoral participation rates in Ciudad Juarez and the blanket of political campaigning shrouding the city prior to
elections compared with the ho-hum attitude of El Pasoans during its many political campaigns. Juarenses wait in line for hours to vote on election day. Of the 350,000 registered El Paso voters eligible to vote absentee a full three weeks prior to election day, it is an unusual achievement if more than 100,000 vote. Just five miles to the south, Ciudad Juárez voter turnout rate triples that of El Paso. Yet civic capacity, measured in terms of organizational strength, continues to be relatively undeveloped in both cities.

In another take on hierarchical inequality, Mexico exhibits extreme "power distance" between people in the workplace. Geert Hofstede's methodological study of 40 countries and over 100,000 interviews identifies Mexico as the country with the highest power distance between dominant and subordinate. This certainly meshes with the patron-client, clientelist tie found in political studies and in both languages and linguistic rituals. In everyday life at the border, people are sensitive to the show of respeto (respect). Politicians want proper respect shown (all too often, respect born of fear), but so do ordinary people, individuals who want acknowledgement and greeting. Improper respect is humiliating and uncivilized; it is remembered. Failure to return phone calls is disrespectful enough to undermine organizing strategies.

Spanish and English

The Spanish language embeds within it a range of characteristics alternatively interpreted as graciousness and extreme politeness to institutionalized inequality and excessive respect. Examples include para servirle (in order to serve you), or a sus ordenes (at your orders) y ustede (familiar and formal forms of "you" that also distinguish the dominant and subordinate), and Licenciado o Licenciada (titles that precede the names of those with higher education degrees). Coupled with this is elaborate attention to greeting, handshaking, and hugs (abrazos). Interaction con cariño, with affection and care, is valued in some public settings.

English, in contrast, is more direct and abrupt. Could Spanish language, as a reflection of culture, deepen personalism? Perhaps. But is this parochial, as Almond and Verba understood it? Probably not. Almond and Verba demonized parochial culture and idealized civic culture without recognizing how the latter buys discretion and space for the politically powerful, if and when the powerless are deluded into thinking they have a voice.

For much of history, ordinary people's perception of their powerlessness matches the reality of who rules. A power-distant political culture creates no illusions about who rules; moreover, rational recognition of power dominance might augment solidarity among the powerless and ultimately strengthen civic capacity. One of the Spanish organizing cries among Latinos, from farmworkers to Alinsky-type organizations (see chapter three) is Si se puede! (yes we can!), as people together shout and convince themselves about hope and possibilities through volume. We do not hear the phrase in Mexico (but in all the Americas we hear and read y su raza [enough already]). Disgust seems to transcend national boundaries more than national democratic delusions.

Mexico has no monopoly on clientelist politics. Under conditions of elite rule, the democratic organizational trappings extend to envelop through party and machine-style political incorporation. Patrons selectively distribute benefits to their supplicants in patronage politics based on personal loyalties rather than ideas, issues, and ideologies.

In many U.S. cities, patronage-style, machine politics have long been part of the political landscape in historic and even contemporary times. Sometimes the insider politicians develop purposive issue orientations. Outsiders, like labor union members and women, speak favorably about seeking a "friend in office": he's a friend to women; she's a friend of labor. From Chicago to New York, clientelist politics are thorough Americana. They flourish in high-immigration eras and locales. Machine-style politics are relics of limited democracies.

Personalism as Small-Town Politics

El Paso is a town that grew up fast to big-city stature. From a population of 130,000 in 1950, El Paso has quadrupled in size over a half century. Migrants made up a critical mass of this population, and a fearful part of the population. Since the creation of the Border Patrol and periodic deportations, whether in the 1930s or the 1990s, immigrants' vulnerability and immigration profiling have undermined people's ability to organize and assert their rights. Many people prefer to maintain a low public profile to avoid surveillance and scrutiny. People generate income through informal means, without regulatory protection. Some families contain people in varying stages of arreglando, living and working with partial legality. These differences occur even within one family. Distance from the preying eyes of government protects potentially vulnerable people.

In historical perspective, Anglo male elites have long dominated El Paso's politics. Mexicans and Mexican Americans operated outside networks of influence and officialdom until relatively recently: the first
Activists know each other; they sometimes know and like (or know and despise) one another. These personal, strong-tie relationships could generate ideological and issue-based ties that spin off into looser ties of people who know one another through others or through ideas and commitments. Together, these wider but looser ties provide the resources to mount greater challenges to existing power relations at the border.

For insights like these, we draw on inspiration from Mark Granovetter in the classic sociological article, "The Strength of Weak Ties." Granovetter challenges the seemingly intuitive idea regarding the importance of strong ties to diffuse information and build organizations. Activists with strong ties enjoy assets in networking and organizing: time investments, emotional intensity, mutual confidence, and reciprocity. Yet based on sociometric research, Granovetter argues that "those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own" to extend relationships. No one has applied these ideas to cross-border organizing, although Keck and Sikkink make reference to the importance of network strength and density for transnational movements. Density, we agree, is at the core, but strength requires loose ties, especially for those relying on people rather than money to extend their power and ultimately alter power relations. Wealthy people have the money to buy loose ties.

Cultural Context in Communication Styles

Collaborative strategies constitute real strengths compared to the competitive strategies that emerge out of individualistic, marketplace capitalism. Collaboration also meshes well with the culturally sensitive communication strategies in "high-context" settings once attributed to other cultures outside the United States. The United States is often characterized as a low-context culture, but we disagree with this characterization except for its caricature and for its "minority" culture such as privileged white males. Even in the United States, high context communication cultures are quite common among women and at the border. Consider the dichotomies below, adapted from communication studies.

This table is replete with insights for the two faces of personalism. Like any set of dichotomous characteristics, it oversimplifies. Like any set of dual categories, it may over-generalize. However, it is a conceptual tool that advances our analysis. Individualism is prized in mainstream U.S. culture, and individual competition is stressed through many years of education and in workplaces. Yet feminist theorists have often
Table 2.1  Contrasts: high- and low-context communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-context cultures</th>
<th>Low-context cultures</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interdependent</td>
<td>Individualist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External: shame</td>
<td>Internally: guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich language: courtesy</td>
<td>Sparse: to the point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language lubricates relationships</td>
<td>Language conveys information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentive to non-verbal cues</td>
<td>Oblivious to non-verbal cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prize subtext, nuance</td>
<td>Prize debate, confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History remembered</td>
<td>History a sideline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal agenda important</td>
<td>Schedules important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple agendas</td>
<td>Singular agendas</td>
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emphasized the relationality that tempers female individualism, from communication to decision-making.25

External and internal drivers differ in high- and low-context cultures: in the shame culture, people seek to preserve "face," honor, and harmony. Past humiliations are remembered. In the guilt culture, people prize direct, even blunt messages. The guilt culture focuses on what's ahead, rather than dwells on the past. At the border, people "remember" how and when the United States took northern Mexico; many Anglos, if they know this, wonder what difference it makes for decision-making now and in the future. We offer an example of the Chamizal in Ciudad Juárez, commemorating the redrawing of the international boundary in the 1960s. The Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez sits on the Chamizal. One of the auditoriums was formerly the blandero deportation processing center. In a tour Inasema took, guides said "esto era de los gringos y ahora le estamos dando buen uso nosotros!" (this used to belong to the gringos and we are now putting it to good use).

"Taking on" the Opponent: Confrontation at the Border

Thus far, we have illustrated the importance of personal ties, communication sensitive to context, and language skills. We assumed that interactive style was cooperative, reasonable, and civil. Political struggle often uses other styles, including challenge and confrontation. Some organizing strategies rely on a process that "takes on" those in authority, or targets the enemy relentlessly until concessions are obtained.25 How effective is this style in the high-context communication of the borderlands?

Spanish, English, or Both?

On language, our discussion of Spanish and English above affirms the dichotomies. Language is power. In cross-border organizing a lot of effort is devoted to translating materials and meetings. The well-to-do privileged Mexicans tend to either understand English or speak English. In some meetings that Inasema attends in Mexico, one English speaker who does not understand or speak Spanish can influence how the meeting is conducted. The rich Mexicans show off their linguistic skills impressing the Anglos and alienating the poor Mexicans who are made to feel less than the rich because they do not speak English. (Respect is not shown toward the poor.) Every effort is made to accommodate the guest regardless of what the majority speaks in the room.

Female–male communication styles cut across the language line itself; greetings and goodbyes occur with care. Also cutting across language lines is the importance of non-verbal cues in everyday interaction between subordinate and dominate groups; women and other subordinates, historically, watch for facial and body cues.

A U.S. foundation-sponsored study with 42 interviews of 28 Mexican NGOs identified capacity-building needs, including English language expertise. Proposal writing and international conference attendance required English language skills.24 Not surprisingly, these "capacities" in a Spanish-speaking country work to the detriment of many fledgling NGOs in Mexico.

Confrontational strategies emerge under conditions under which dominant groups provide no opening to negotiate, relinquish, or change power relations. Much of El Paso's history reflects stuck power relations, but confrontation has been relatively rare, perhaps too rare. We attribute this not only to the fear issue, in places with large numbers of immigrants, but also to the prevalence of personalism. In clientelist politics, clients do not upset existing power relations, however unfair or unequal, for fear of losing minor favors.

Clients may be quiescent, but this does not eliminate anger. Anger, channeled into issue-based organizing or confrontation, can produce a healthy common identity and solidarity. Unchanneled, anger can result in passive-aggressive strategies such as gossip. Gossip is personalism at its worst. Unchanneled anger can also take the form of insulting and rude personal attacks that chill prospects for further organizing, especially in communities that value graciousness and avoid public
humiliation—the “high-context” communication cultures at the border. See ethnographic moment 2.1 for its confrontation and collaboration within and among activists in the social justice community.

Ethnographic Moment 2.1: The Voices of Confrontation, Competition, and Consensus: Workforce Training Resources for What and for Whom?

Displaced Workers in El Paso, most of them middle-aged, Spanish speaking women without high school diplomas, have been through the economic wringer. They lost jobs and have little money to no money to spend, a loss to both their households and to the region. Multiplier effects, in this case, had negative spiral effects in all the markets women spent money in: housing, consumption, and food.

Under trade adjustments assistance, many El Pasoans applied and qualified for workforce training and stipends that lasted a year and a half. The overall sum was in no way near the total wage and consumption loss, but it provided short-term compensation and occasional placements, particularly in agencies supplying “temps.” Many training programs tried to teach workers English, although they wanted jobs. Few programs placed unemployed workers in new jobs, except those that selectively chose participants with high school diplomas (“cream” them, said critics).

In dialogue and negotiation over workforce training, workers themselves had little voice. Nor did those at the frontlines of training; the literacy educators. Many programs appeared to be warmed-over versions of longstanding programs whose leaders had chased and competed among themselves for grant monies.

A conference was held in late 2000 to bring together the stakeholders for a two-day conference on displaced workers. Workers themselves participated on panels and in the closing hours focused on action recommendations. Workers cried; a Washington, D.C. staff member was visibly moved; frontline workers heard it before.

Community leaders and activists postured some, reminiscent of the confrontational approaches to organizing. Critics of creaming “took on” other community activists (who themselves “take on” their opponents). They stood with an “in-your-face” posture; they spoke loudly and rudely to one another; they forged no consensus. Meanwhile, the displaced workers wondered about their own desperate situation and what would change from this conference.

Conference organizers had repeatedly invited business and chamber representatives to participate and to present at panels. They did not attend.

They later told other people no one had invited them and they were not welcome anyway.

A year later, another two-day conference was held with a national and local program audience. Speakers lauded the strategic assets of a bilingual workforce. They emphasized the utility of simultaneous job AND language training. Chamber and business representatives sponsored a half-morning panel. Displaced workers’ voices, captured on video, could be heard and seen from the TV screen during lunch.

In the face of Anglo dominance, we offer another example. Someone from the school board meeting audience shouts “white bitch” at a trustee. A man achieves momentary victory. More happens than the scar of humiliation in the trustee’s soul. Sexism, parallel to racism, rears its ugly head. Onlookers are likely to be of different minds; some are likely to be disgusted with the language with the uncivilized show of disrespect. Others vow to never run for trustee. More important, the issue content is lost in the communication.

The challenge to cross-border organizing is one of channeling anger into political strategies that create conditions for civil engagement and eventual collaboration to make alliances, form coalitions, and stretch resources for problem-solving activities. Confrontation has a place at some stages of this process.

Concluding Reflections

This chapter offers conceptual language for understanding factors that facilitate and undermine cross-border cooperation, networks, and organizations. Our framing continues in the next chapter to address the opportunity structures between both El Paso and Ciudad Juárez and within each city—on each side of the border—that facilitate and undermine civic activism.

In this chapter, we began with the limitations of traditional studies that stop at, rather than cross national borders. We also questioned the high-level, abstract way in which global movement studies occur—a way not grounded like it must be in the peculiar politics of the local, such as at borderlands.

We dedicated this chapter to the consideration of the two faces of personalism, so essential for building relations to collaborate, to build alliances and coalitions, and to achieve outcomes that address the
common problems and issues of the borderlands. One side of personalism illustrates the possibilities of friends and kin members utilizing their relationships of trust to work on issues and extend their power in ways to change established power relations. The other side of personalism illustrates the shortcomings of containing issues within strongly tied networks as opposed to loosely tied networks. Strong ties may serve the elite for they can use their economic resources to buy or contract networks or to disseminate information.

In this chapter, we also considered the reasons for why personalism is strong at the border. Border theorists allege “hybridity” but do so largely in literary, linguistic, and cultural terms. We believe there are political and civic dimensions to this hybridity. We outline explanations that draw on the physical location and heritage of borderlands inhabitants, on the language and high-context communication styles of residents, and on the civic demography of small-town politics in high-population areas. In all of these, we find some value, but overarching all this is the limited democracy that has existed for some time in the borderlands region. Economic and government elites have long dominated residents in ways that perpetuated power relations that benefited the few rather than the many. These patterns have begun to change from the 1980s onward, and our book highlights the ways that change has occurred among community-based organizations that collaborate within and across borderlines. Effective change towards social justice requires sensitivity to the high-context communication styles in the borderlands, styles with greater nuance and complexity in the English–Spanish linguistic mix.