

“The partnership role demands a personal willingness to work on one’s own issues and dedicating oneself to continued personal growth in diversity and social justice. It is based on an agreement to courageously work the social justice issues within the consultant partnership, in the work and with the clients.”

Reflections on a Cross-Cultural Partnership in Multicultural Organizational Development Efforts

By Maria C. Ramos and
Mark A. Chesler

Introduction

There is certain neatness to theories and models that seek to explain human interaction and organizational behavior. The practice of organizational development (OD) and multicultural organizational development (MCOD) is, however, not very neat. We address these issues in the context of our long-term partnership as activist practitioners and generators of scholarship in OD and MCO. In so doing we discuss: (1) the development and dynamics of our own cross-cultural partnership, particularly our race, gender, and professional orientation as scholar-practitioners, (2) how we used our partnership as an intervention and clients’ reactions to it, and (3) the implications for cross-cultural partnerships in MCO work in general. As we illustrate these issues in MCO, we draw from three extended consultations with two corporations in different industries and a major university.

Many organizations have engaged over the past two decades in large systems OD or MCO change efforts. While some of the challenges confronted in MCO work are similar to those in the practice of OD, others are quite different. The reality is that most organizations have diverse work forces, but most do not behave as or aim at becoming truly multicultural or inclusive (Jackson & Hardiman, 1994; Miller & Katz, 2002). Moreover it might seem obvious that OD practitioners are committed to the eradication of social oppression, it is not so in practice. MCO differs from more traditional forms of OD in several respects:

(1) it focuses directly on issues of social identity and attendant oppression, (2) it assumes that organizational cultures and practices reflect the dominance of White male elites, (3) it assumes that attitudinal change is a minor, albeit important, element in organizational change (Chesler, 1994). In addition, MCO differs from most traditional diversity efforts in its systems approach that goes beyond concerns with climate, management training in cross-cultural relations, or policy-level innovations.

An essential element of all MCO change efforts is the development of staff that understands oppression and discrimination, organizational development and change, adult learning theory and practice, and their own attitudes and behavior toward themselves and others different from themselves (Cross, 2000). A critical initiative in the selected MCO system change efforts we worked with involved the development of internal MCO change agents and consultants. The initiatives, differing by organization, included nurturing a core internal change team, developing inter-group dialogue facilitators, and grounding diversity champions in MCO theory and practice. We demonstrated the power of cross-cultural collaboration, while simultaneously transferring our knowledge and coaching internal practitioners in creating their own innovative interventions. Since the three organizations and interventions differed, the ways in which we played out our roles with one another and with these organizations differed as well: context matters!

The nature and power of our collaborative, cross-cultural relationship in MCOB

The preferred consultant team in MCOB practice reflects diverse social identity memberships, particularly race and gender, often sexual orientation, as well as others. Consulting in cross-cultural teams can establish credibility and build trust by reflecting the social identities of different organizational members and giving authentic voice to their experience. It also can demonstrate the hoped-for outcomes of MCOB interventions by modeling an effective cross-race, cross-gender collaborative working partnership. The partnership role demands a personal willingness to work on one's own issues and dedicating oneself to continued personal growth in diversity and social justice. It is based on an agreement to courageously work the social justice issues within the consultant partnership, in the work and with the clients. The common ground shared in the MCOB consulting partnership is mutual and sustained support for grappling with the ongoing challenges confronted in doing the work.

The collaborative MCOB consulting partnership that we established was initially based on our most apparent social identity differences of race and gender, our professional affiliation as scholar-practitioners, and our bond as social justice activists. Our work together permits us to act on our values and deepens our personal friendship by witnessing each other's good work and relying upon one another in some tough situations. Maria is a woman of Color and Mark is a White man. Maria is a second generation American born, Black woman of Cape Verdean descent. Cabo Verde is an African nation colonized by the Portuguese, hence the Latin name. Within the subordinate racial group of Blacks, she is a member of a minority ethnic-cultural group. Mark is an older White man of European-Jewish descent, second generation American born. Within the dominant racial group of Whites, he is a member of a subordinate religious-cultural group. We often observed how people of our own racial group put us through "special tests" because of our minority ethnic-cultural identities. As one example, Maria was

asked to explain her race and ethnicity to a group of African-American leaders who had French or English names so they could understand how she belonged in that affinity group. In another situation, Mark was given at best a lukewarm reception into a predominantly White group because he had missed the first day of a session because it fell on Yom Kippur. These tests also led to our conversations about intra-racial dynamics that furthered appreciation for and trust in one another.

Professionally, we both identify as scholar practitioners or practical theorists. The owner of a consultant firm, Maria is OD/MCOB practitioner who is also a scholar, teaching in universities regularly but secondarily. In contrast, as a profes-

We often observed how people of our own racial group put us through "special tests" because of our minority ethnic-cultural identities. As one example, Maria was asked to explain her race and ethnicity to a group of African-American leaders who had French or English names so they could understand how she belonged in that affinity group. In another situation, Mark was given at best a lukewarm reception into a predominantly White group because he had missed the first day of a session because it fell on Yom Kippur.

sor of sociology at University of Michigan, Mark is a scholar who practices OD/MCOB regularly but secondarily. We recognized and appreciated building synergistically from each other's backgrounds and strengths with complimenting perspectives. Some examples of our collaboration include translating academic jargon into corporate language, using corporate cases to illustrate academically derived concepts, bringing the realities of external under-represented constituencies to burst the corporate and academic privilege bubbles, and challenging the one-up perspectives of leaders with action research results from their own organization's membership.

Our collaboration has not been without struggles relative to the demands of our primary work contexts (Wasserman & Kram, 2009). Mark has suggested to Maria

that she write more, although it meant taking time from consulting and perhaps not meeting clients' and associates expectations and needs. Maria has asked Mark to consult more frequently, though doing so encroached on his time for teaching, writing, and research. Managing the tension between scholar and practitioner roles can be a difficult balancing act.

We share a common ground of social justice activism. Separately each of us has been a community organizer to eliminate discriminatory practices, an initiator of social affinity groups for personal growth, and a developer of emerging social justice change agents. We belong to common professional and personal support networks of colleagues and friends dedicated

to eradicating social oppression. Our race and gender identities and the difference in our generations meant that the socio-political environments of our activism differed. Mark's activism was shaped by the civil rights, voter-rights, and desegregation era of his youth and his experience organizing advocacy groups for families of children with cancer. The U.S. and international Black liberation, student, women's, and Pan African movements of her youth shaped Maria's activism. Mark channeled his activism into conducting action research and creating models useful to social justice change agents, including himself as he consulted. Maria channeled her activism into translating social justice change models and practices into change movements in organizations, writing about and for her consulting practice.

Early in our work relationship and continually deepening over time, we developed a high degree of personal, as well as professional trust, affection, and respect for one another. This deep relationship was facilitated by Maria's appreciation of Mark as a White male colleague who could support her without being protective and who could join forces with her in response to inappropriately personalized racial or gender attacks. Mark appreciated Maria's willingness to work with his embedded racism and sexism, his lack of corporate expe-

Some particular race and gender dynamics during this work with the university highlight the way our own identities played out with organizational members. For instance, some White men faculty members were so intent on demonstrating their own expertise, and so threatened by our leadership, that their responses started to become a distraction to others. We agreed that Mark would move close to them and try to neutralize their negative impact and suggest behavioral alternatives. In another circumstance, some African-American women administrators appeared to be unintentionally but constantly buffering or mitigating team members' progress. We agreed that Maria would work closely with them, providing coaching in a more effective set of behaviors.

rience and her support when working with people acting out their prejudice and pain inappropriately with him. As we let each other do our own thing around an agreed upon agenda we also debriefed in ways that took issues, but not ourselves, seriously. Sometimes when reflecting on our presentations and interventions we found humor in each other's perspective and whether we said or did what we intended. Our freedom to joke with one another in public and obvious enjoyment in working with one another positively affected organizational members' level of trust and engagement.

The common ground and trust we developed also provided the security to challenge each other's style, interventions, and thinking. Thus, we have had an ongoing dialogue that has been a productive incubator for emerging models for

practice and for encouraging greater client engagement and challenge. Our reflections on this partnership have revealed that:

- » Each of our social identities brought to the partnership and the workplace different experiences, outlooks, and ways of relating to MCOE practice.
- » Each of our professional standpoints brought some particular strengths and weaknesses. While in most contexts these standpoints are disrespected by the other, in our partnership they fueled a higher order integration of both schol-

arship and practice. As one organizational member commented, "Maria was more the therapist and Mark more the professor—a good team."

- » Both Maria and Mark saw one another as scholars and knowledge generators (although perhaps different types of scholars) and as practitioners or activists (although perhaps as different types of practitioners).

We discuss some of these differences and commonalities in the following descriptions of the consultations.

The scope of the consultations and client/organizational reactions

The multicultural organizational development change work in all three client

organizations was contracted with Ramos Associates as the primary consultant. The overriding goal of these system-wide MCOE efforts was the creation of inclusive, supportive work environments for all members (Chesler, Lewis & Crowfoot, 2005; Cox, 1991; Jackson & Hardiman, 1994; Miller & Katz, 2002). This approach involved: a core organization-wide change team of top level executives, managers, formal and informal leaders; an organization-wide human resources leadership change team; and change teams for each line of a business (LOB) and/or departments. Our MCOE consultation to those charged with planning and implementing organizational change efforts included (in different degrees in different consultations):

- » Organizational assessments
- » Strategic planning toward an inclusive environment
- » Alignment of MCOE mission, values and performance expectations
- » Diversity training, development, and coaching

We experienced many reactions to our partnership over the years and across client groups, particularly some frequent patterns of reactions to our cross-cultural pairing. While we shared power within the context of specific interventions, overall the primary power, for reasons of relevant expertise, experience, and primary contractor relationships, rested with Maria. For some participants, this was a very welcome and even inspiring experience. As two African American women noted, "Having Maria take the lead made me feel good. I identified with you and was proud of you," and "I saw Maria as a strong leader and Mark as second in command." At times, the reality of a woman of Color as the primary power, and the role of a White man as secondary, was confusing or challenging to organizational members, especially to those steeped in traditional race/gender assumptions and stereotypes. As a White man said, "I struggled with the differences in their styles—Maria took up space and Mark stayed more quiet." The power reversal was not confusing to us because we both had experience as leaders and subordinates in cross-race and cross-gender teams and coalitions. In

the planning and design sessions as well as in public presentations described here, we deliberately alternated leadership roles.

The particular interventions referenced in this article occurred in three very different organizations. A brief description of each and the highlights of the corresponding intervention are provided.

A USA-based science and technology company operating in many countries was a long standing client. In response to an ever-increasing demand for tailored training and consultation from geographically disbursed businesses centers, Ramos Associates created a curriculum for internal MCOB consultants, with participants from all lines of business (LOB) and corporate functions, not just HR. Three phases of the program included use of self as an instrument of change, MCOB models/theories, and organizational practice. The self-selected participant group in the MCOB consultant training was demographically and professionally diverse. All were change agents engaged in corporate-wide or LOB valuing people/diversity efforts, including organizational assessments, upward mobility planning, critical incident investigations and intervention, and internal or external constituency relationship building. Our work was to transfer our academic approach about social justice and develop their skills as multicultural organizational consultants. Maria's identity as a corporate-related woman of Color opened the doors to certain privileges, especially among corporate leaders and members of under-represented social identity groups. Mark's identity as a White man opened some doors of privilege, yet in this corporate sector some doors seemed stuck at half-open, as his knowledge was seen as interesting but not necessarily to the point.

The final stage of this MCOB internal consultant development program included one-on-one debriefing and advising sessions with each of the participants. We gave the internal consultants targeted feedback on what we saw as their strengths and areas for further development and offered follow-up coaching upon request. In an event that highlighted the nature of our cross-cultural partnership, Mark received a call from a Black woman HR

manger who sought his advice on handling a unique problem. A group of White men leaders had taken a gender-mixed group of employees out for a celebration dinner. Towards the end of the celebration, fueled by libations, one of them yelled "hog run", followed by several of them dropping on their hands and knees to the floor and scrambling under the tables to look at the women's legs, etc. The HR manager wanted to share her personal reactions and professional concerns with a trusted White man consultant. Mark checked in with Maria about the issues for this Black woman manager, subordinate to the leaders in question, that he might not have considered, and whether there were any precedents for dealing with this type of incident (No—it was a totally unique situation at the adult level). Also, given its bizarre nature he needed to share it with her.

We worked with a large, Tier 1, national, public university with multiple undergraduate and graduate programs to implement a new MCOB effort. Maria and Mark consulted to an internal change team of representative leadership from all departments on an ongoing basis to support the President's MCOB initiative. The demographically diverse internal change team included faculty, students, union and non-union managers, and professionals. Organizational members and representatives responded in particular ways to Maria and Mark's social and professional identities. Mark's identity as university-related, White, man opened doors to certain privileges especially among the faculty. Although there was a great interest in corporate best practices in MCOB, Maria's "business approach" was seen at times less applicable.

Some particular race and gender dynamics during this work with the university highlight the way our own identities played out with organizational members. For instance, some White men faculty members were so intent on demonstrating their own expertise, and so threatened by our leadership, that their responses started to become a distraction to others. We agreed that Mark would move close to them and try to neutralize their negative

impact and suggest behavioral alternatives. In another circumstance, some African-American women administrators appeared to be unintentionally but constantly buffering or mitigating team members' progress. We agreed that Maria would work closely with them, providing coaching in a more effective set of behaviors. Finally, we switched leadership roles in the execution of a critical preliminary step with the client organization. In meetings to discuss the assessment of campus climate it was clear that a few White women bypassed Maria and spoke primarily to Mark. Our debrief of the meetings identified two underlying factors in these interactions. The overt factor was the understandably high regard they had for Mark as a social scientist who had done this work on other campuses. The covert factor was racial privilege expressed by White women toward Black women as a pattern of treating them as invisible or competing with them regardless of the apparent status or experience differential. Rather than confront it straightforwardly, on this occasion Maria asked Mark to take the lead in following up with this group on the development of a campus climate survey. Maria's goals were to avoid getting caught up in this dynamic and to expeditiously execute the climate survey. All MCOB consultants have to choose which tests they take on and we knew the consultation would provide other opportunities to work these intragender racial dynamics.

We also worked with a USA based pharma company operating in many countries. In an effort to sustain corporate sponsored initiatives, Ramos Associates created an inter-group dialogue facilitator development program for human resource professionals employed at many facilities. The development included four components: inter-group dialogue participation, theory and models of intergroup dialogue, individual assessment with personal and group coaching, and practice of intergroup dialogue co-facilitation in cross-cultural pairs (Huang-Nissen, 2005; Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler & Citron-Walker, 2007; Ramos & Mitchell, 2001).

Our agenda was to demonstrate how to work as collaborative cross-cultural facilita-

tors, build a common ground of knowledge about intergroup dialogue, and coach individuals and pairs of facilitators. Individuals' reactions to us were based on their personal awareness and understanding of social identity and justice issues. Some People of Color and especially women of Color, bonded or attempted to bond deeply with Maria and distanced from Mark. Some other women of Color openly challenged Maria's power. Some White men sought racial validation from Maria; others evaded or avoided deep contact with Mark. Some White men bonded, or attempted to bond with Mark and distanced or hid from

gender dynamics. And facing the caution or distance from People of Color Mark sought to do the work and show himself to them. Indeed, as one man of Color stated, "I appreciated Mark's point of view as a White man."

Maria generally responded to People of Color who bonded with her, especially women of Color, by developing supportive and challenging relationships. When men or women of Color challenged her, she often used their actions as an opening for moving them to the edge of their comfort zone and into learning. When White men challenged her, she first dealt with the

edgement towards each other, we each took our roles: Maria with support and affirmation to the Latino man, providing the space for him to tell his story, Mark with support to the White woman as she struggled with her naiveté and acknowledged her shame, both of us facilitating others' reflections to move the learning around the group.

The cross-cultural collaborative pair as an intervention

We quite deliberately used our pairing as an evocative intervention in these collaborations. Our mere presence as a pair generated a rich mine of content and process relative to cross-race, gender, age, and professional identity issues, particularly relative to power and privilege. We were able to experiment with different ways of unveiling these covert processes through our interactions, as the following examples suggest.

- » Anticipating the challenge posed by our apparent reversal of race and gender primacy, we planned interventions to deliberately use such confusions or challenges as "learning moments"—to deepen conversation concerning race and gender stereotypes about power.
- » When our perspectives, related to our social identities, differed or were unclear, we sometimes explored them in front of clients—modeling how a cross-cultural partnership works through issues.
- » We publicly used our own social identities, and clients' reactions to them, as examples of broader patterns of power, privilege, and oppression in intragroup and intergroup relationships.
- » We utilized our relative competencies in both scholarship and practice to avoid the clients' easy trap of expecting (and seeing) most of the conceptual inputs being made by Mark and most of the practical conduct of experiential exercises being made by Maria.
- » Above all, we operated as a pair, a team, and we were aware of participants' potential to demand race/gender loyalty or to diminish our power by separating us.

We quite deliberately used our pairing as an evocative intervention in these collaborations. Our mere presence as a pair generated a rich mine of content and process relative to cross-race, gender, age, and professional identity issues, particularly relative to power and privilege. We were able to experiment with different ways of unveiling these covert processes through our interactions . . .

Maria. Some other White men saw Mark as a "race traitor" and as a danger to the hidden knowledge of White male power. Some People of Color tested Mark to see if he was a true ally. Clearly, both race and gender dynamics played a role all the time.

Generally Mark responded to overt challenges by relaxing and letting them develop, seeing how others in the group reacted; sometimes he was "triggered" and temporarily retreated. Usually he was able to refer to and use these incidents to illustrate general principles in race and gender interactions in later work with the group. When White men or women bonded with him, he tried to respond empathically by entering into deeper challenge and support, and by exposing enough of himself to make it safer for them as White people to make (and grow from) racial mistakes. He did not immediately respond to individual White people who avoided or distanced from him, but over time used these incidents as examples of broader racial and

surface issue, often turning it back onto them in an inquiring mode. She then engaged the covert message or concern that underlay their behavior or statements, referencing conceptual models to help them understand the meaning of their behavior.

We always talked after these sessions about these interactions, and our responses to them, discussing whether we thought each of us had handled a specific situation effectively and planning how to surface and make use of the event in future work with individuals or the group. For instance, during one dialogue session, an internationally-based Latino man described to the group how he had been banned from school dances because of his dark skin color, while his light-skinned cousin had been allowed to enter. The reaction by a White woman who held an international HR business partner position was tears and shame, because she had lived in that country totally unaware of the colorism that existed. With a quick look of acknowl-

Lessons for others and ourselves

Based on our experience and conversations with organizational members and colleagues, we make the following recommendations to cross-cultural collaborative teams.

- » Be open and authentic with each other, acknowledge mistakes, and continue your learning, and above all stay fresh and alive (Shepard's "first rule of thumb") in the midst of challenge and contradiction (Brazzel, 2007; Shepard, 1985).
- » Trust, respect, and admire the differential expertise and experience of both partners and generate affection for their personages, because expertise and experience does not exist apart from other personal dynamics and characteristics of the partnership.
- » Acknowledge and continue to inquire about the meaning (personal and professional) of different social identities/backgrounds and their impact on the partnership and on organizational members.
- » Challenge organizational members to think and act beyond concerns for diversity itself and to focus on their own and others' privilege and oppression, the existence of structural inequality and oppression, and the ways in which the organization and society sustain and might alter these patterns.
- » Be willing to model for others how to challenge the stereotypes that only credentialed scholars working in the academy have theoretical or conceptual knowledge and that only consultants with corporate experience have practical or activist knowledge and ability.

Finally, we encourage OD practitioners to work in cross-cultural, collaborative partnerships reflecting the diversity of the world and the workplace. MCOB requires such collaboration and challenges the numerical dominance of White people in the field. Demonstrating multicultural theory and practice must be a core competency of our profession. MCOB work that involves acting on the commitment to social justice, acknowledging the things

we have learned from and shared with one another, and enjoying our friendship and collegiality, has valued benefits for ourselves and our clients.

We have been on the cutting (perhaps bleeding) edge of consultants working in interracial and inter-gender teams with organizations on issues which have been called at various times, diversity, MCOB, multiculturalism, pluralism, inclusion, etc. We have seen the change efforts morph over the years: the expected changes in the work population have occurred; the globalization of industry has become reality; and some People of Color and women have expanded their life opportunities. Even though the need for diversity is so inescapable that the business case seldom has to be made, much more change is required to lessen the level of structural inequality in major corporate or educational organizations and in the society at large.

References

- Brazzel, M. (2007). Diversity and social justice practices for OD practitioners. *OD Practitioner*, 39(3), 15-21.
- Chesler, M. (1994). OD is not the same as MCOB. In E. Cross, J. Katz, F. Miller, & E. Seashore (Eds.), *The promise of diversity* (pp. 240-251). New York: Irwin & NTL.
- Chesler, M., Lewis, A., & Crowfoot, J. (2005). *Challenging racism in higher education: Promoting justice*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cox, T. (1991). The multicultural organization. *The Executive*, 5(2), 34-47.
- Cross, E. (2000). *Managing diversity: The courage to lead*. Westport: Quorum Books.
- Huang-Nissen, S. (2005). *Dialogue groups: A practical guide to facilitate diversity conversations*. Los Altos, CA: Corner Elm Publications.
- Jackson, B., & Hardiman, R. (1994). Multicultural organizational development. In E. Cross, J. Katz, F. Miller, & E. Seashore (Eds.), *The promise of diversity* (pp. 231-239). New York: Irwin & NTL.
- Miller, F., & Katz, J. (2002). *The inclusion breakthrough: Unleashing the*

Maria C. Ramos, EdD, is President of Ramos Associates LLC, an OD consulting firm focused on large systems change, Diversity and inclusion, training and development, and executive coaching in corporations and non-profit organizations. Recently, she has taught at George Washington University, Syracuse University, and Goddard College. Ramos is a member of the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. She is reachable at maria@ramosassociates.com.

Mark A. Chesler, PhD, is Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Michigan and Executive Director of Community Resources Ltd. in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is an activist scholar conducting research, teaching, consulting, and organizing on issues of personal/organizational change around social privilege and oppression. He can be reached at mchesler@umich.edu.

real power of diversity. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Ramos, M., & Mitchell, C (2001). Dialogue throughout an organization. In D. Schoem, & S. Hurtado (Eds.), *Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, community, and workplace* (pp. 210-221). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Shepard, H. (1985). Rules of thumb for change agents. *OD Practitioner*. 17(4), 93-98.

Wasserman, I., & Kram, K. (2009). Enacting the scholar practitioner role: An exploration of narratives. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*. 45(1), 12-38.

Zúñiga, X., Nagda, B., Chesler, M., & Citron-Walker, A. (2006). *Intergroup dialogue in higher education: ASHE Higher Education Report*. 32(2). New York: Wiley Periodicals.