BUILDING HIGH PERFORMING GLOBALLY DISPERSED TEAMS:
CHALLENGING INEQUALITY TO ESTABLISH TRUST

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores barriers to the establishment of trust needed for high performing teams due to inequality in the context of a global economy. Postcolonial Theory is introduced to illustrate how inequality is a key aspect of diversity in the current context of the global workplace. Different philosophies underlying the values and norms in organizations are examined to make sense of contemporary approaches to diversity management in terms of how power, difference, and identity are addressed. This provides an understanding of the context of current team development praxis in working with diversity. Using autoethnography, the author tells personal stories of working in diverse teams to convey the complex ways in which power, difference, and identity coalesce in real-life experience. Some theoretical foundations are developed for facilitating the building of team trust in contexts with different philosophical approaches to diversity. Addressing social justice in Organization Development work is considered.
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Appendix A – OD Network’s Statement on Diversity and Inclusion
Dedication

I want to dedicate this piece to Grandma Ruth and Gramps, my paternal grandmother and my maternal grandfather who both passed away during this thesis journey. Grandma Ruth worked as a nurse/mid-wife at Nyunkunde in the interior of the Belgian Congo as a young woman and mother. She was tireless in her efforts to make the world a better place. She was creative, unstoppable, and always saw the cup half full. I am blessed to have had such a woman as a role model. Gramps always had stories to tell of working on the Canadian railway as he put himself through Dentistry College. He showed a passion for his profession, and was always contributing to his field by researching new ideas in his practice, coming up with new inventions, and travelling to conferences around the globe to share his ideas. He was a staunch supporter of my education, and was always eager to hear of what I was learning. I miss them both and thank them for everything they shared with me to make this academic journey possible.

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(S)he who learns, teaches.
(Ethiopian proverb as cited in Netaob, n.d., p. 14)
Chapter 1: Introduction

The Challenges of Building Team Trust in a Post-colonial World

Background

The many shifts and changes of our global society are having a significant impact on the workplaces of the new millennium. As an Organization Development (OD) professional, developing my craft in response to these changes is crucial to be effective in supporting the health and vitality of modern organizations. One such change has to do with our current context of an information age in which knowledge drives the economy. Employees in 1986 reported that 75 percent of the knowledge that they needed to do their job was in their own minds, compared to only 15 to 20 percent by 1997 (Goleman, 1998).

This no doubt reflects the explosive growth of information. More knowledge has been generated in the twentieth century, it is said, than in all of history before, and the rate of increase continues to accelerate as we enter the twenty-first. (Goleman, 1998, p. 203)

Goleman (1998) quotes John Seely Brown, chief scientist at Xerox Corporation’s Silicon Valley R&D facility: “Everything is done collaboratively, like everywhere in today’s high-tech world. There are no lone geniuses anywhere. . . . We traffic in human capital; ideas don’t come from a lone head, but from collaboration in a deep sense” (p. 202). In this context, teams, rather than individuals, are the basic unit of work that can manage the volumes of information required for effective knowledge work. With work becoming increasingly complex in this way, the inputs of diverse individuals and the ability to explore their various perspectives to come up with excellent innovations has become a foundation for competitiveness in the marketplace. “We’ve come to depend on the group mind as never before” (Goleman, 1998, p. 203).
“If knowledge is the primary asset to be properly managed by the knowledge-intensive organization, then virtual, cross-functional teams that create and share new, high-quality knowledge are the new primary business units” (Young, 1998, p. 46). The emergence of our knowledge economy provides a context in which teams are presently the key unit of work in organizations of all kinds, with ever increasing importance in the future. Young (1998) refers to “virtual” teams, which is a reality of teamwork today, influenced by two more aspects of our modern day workplace: technology and globalization. Employees are increasingly working in teams whose members are spread across the globe, supported by Information and Communication technologies (ICT).

Enabling teams to be high performing is therefore an important area of praxis for the field of Organization Development. Team development is based on theories of group dynamics which are applied to facilitate effective collaboration among team members. Collaboration in teams has the inherent potential of making a group of individuals become more as a whole than the sum of their parts (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003; Senge, 1990). “The result of collaboration is not simply the sum of each individual’s original knowledge and contributions, as new insights arise from the collective thinking” (Young, 1998, p. 47).

When teams operate at their best, the results can be more than simply additive – they can be multiplicative, with the best talents of one person catalyzing the best of another and another, to produce results far beyond what any one person might have done. The explanation of this aspect of team performance lies in the members’ relationships – in the chemistry between members. (Goleman, 1998, p. 205)

In summary, helping a group of individuals develop the interdependence required to be a team, rather than just a work group, requires attention to the process of developing relationships, based on various theories of group dynamics.
Bruce Tuckman (1965) proposed a well-known model of group dynamics which is a popular basis of team development (Laiken, 1994a). His model describes the processes that a group undergoes as it progresses from a collection of individuals to a high-performing team. Patrick Lencioni (2005) describes five dysfunctions of teams and proposes that overcoming these dysfunctions will lead to a high-performing team. The two models fit well together – Tuckman’s model describing a process illustrated by a four-stage cycle, with Lencioni’s model describing the outcomes of Tuckman’s different stages. The combination of these two models forms a useful theoretical framework with which to understand team development.

The hybrid Tuckman/Lencioni model of team development forms a solid basis with which to describe the dynamics of any team process. In essence, the entire process of team development rests on the formation of relationships built on trust. This trust, which Lencioni specifically addresses in his model, is established in Tuckman’s first stage of team development, the “Forming” phase. This trust is the basis for the team to be able to successfully navigate all of the subsequent stages of team development as a team moves towards becoming high-performing: “Storming” to master conflict, “Norming” to achieve commitment, and then “Performing” when accountability is embraced and attention to the individual and the collective are in balance. If there isn’t sufficient trust to leverage, teams will likely not develop to their full potential. Thus, trust is a key to team success.

One of the main goals of my thesis research is to lay the groundwork for team development praxis in its ability to support teams to build trust in the global workplace. “When it comes to teams, trust is all about vulnerability” (Lencioni, 2005, p. 14). Yet
teams that are dispersed globally are faced with the dual pressures of working virtually, as their communication is supported by technology, and working with a high level of diversity among team members. Both of these pressures challenge the ability of teams to build vulnerability-based trust. I would like to contribute to a better understanding of working with global teams to help them successfully navigate these pressures.

The nature of virtual work has commonly been studied from the perspective of how technology inhibits team performance (Emelo & Francis, 2002; Gillam & Oppenheim, 2006; Handy, 1995; Hart & McLeod, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Lee-Kelley, Crossman, & Cannings, 2004; Young, 1998). “Computers represent a great ironic dilemma: While they serve to connect us to information and people around the world that we’d otherwise never know, they also drive a wedge between people and inhibit genuine human, personal interaction” (Emelo & Francis, 2002, p. 17). The challenge lies in the fact that this new medium changes the form of communication, with important consequences for relationship building. However, I believe that focusing on technology is only a part of the story when it comes to establishing trust in globally dispersed teams. “New and sophisticated communication technologies will be only as helpful as the willingness of people to cross the boundaries that separate them” (Metiu, 2006, p. 433). I believe that in looking closely at the current global context in which we live, we will discover that our shared history of colonialism has created status differences among people which have the potential to negatively impact the effectiveness of dispersed teamwork.

Metiu’s (2006) recent ethnographic study of a software development team dispersed between India and the U.S. provides insights into how dispersed groups
collaborate. Using grounded theory, she came to discover the informal strategies of status closure by the high-status group of American engineers as they resisted collaboration with their low-status Indian counterparts. Sociologists refer to “closure” as the process by which higher status groups monopolize opportunities to the detriment of other groups (Metiu, 2006). In her conclusion, Metiu (2006) states, “Status affects the initial conditions and propensities to interact, respect, and learn about another group, the interpretations afforded to the other group’s activities, and the actions taken toward the group” (p. 433). Within a global social context with historically established boundaries of power and status, “the difficulty of doing remote work doesn’t rest primarily (or even necessarily) with the limitations of communication technologies, but instead with the interplay between social and physical boundaries that separate groups” (p. 433).

Understanding the current global context of postcolonialism will elucidate the basis for the power and status differences which can form barriers within teams in a diverse global environment. Such an understanding is the first step for team facilitators to begin thinking about expanding their praxis to be able to deal with issues of social oppression related to power and status differences which affect group dynamics.

Postcolonial theory will help to shed light on the present reality of inequities which divides our world into West/non-West or North/South, by contextualizing these within the past process of colonialism. The key is that a legacy of great social injustice is still present in the societies and organizations of today. My motivation for this thesis

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1 These status differences (“high status Americans” versus “low status Indians”) were observed by Metiu in the particular group that she studied in terms of how power was distributed in the group. They should in no way be understood as essentializing traits of Americans or Indians. Metiu (2006) suggests in her conclusions that these differences in status and power in the group, based on social identity, mirrored relations at the societal level (status was low for those people in the group from a Third World country). She points out how these relations were reinforced daily through the behaviors of the high status group members as they acted to defend their higher status, for example by controlling resources and dominating decision making in the group (Metiu, 2006).
comes from the standpoint that this legacy of injustice is conceivably creating a situation in which organizations are not able to work effectively in the global arena, since traditional matrices of power likely hamper the successful development of high-performing teams. In a global society locked in the injustices of the past, how can organizational team members demonstrate vulnerability-based trust with one another? How can all members contribute to making their organizations, and thus their societies, more effective?

The notion of vulnerability-based trust among dispersed team members is questionable from a postcolonial perspective. Historically disadvantaged people are already vulnerable to people who have inherited positions of power, a reality fraught with injustice. How can Organization Developers like myself, engaged in creating more just workplaces, suggest that people from low-status groups be vulnerable to those from high-status groups? Can I even hope that people from high-status groups will authentically show vulnerability to members of low-status groups? Metiu’s (2006) study demonstrated “the pervasiveness and effectiveness of informal closure strategies, even in the absence of an organized association, and in the face of official discourse and contractual relationships that support[ed] the intergroup collaboration” (p. 432). Even as the macro-organizational context was primed to support global collaboration, team members exercised informal processes at a micro-level to subvert this collaboration. It is exactly at this level that team facilitators can intervene to support collaboration.

Metiu (2006) reflects that “status and power relations between identity groups in organizations generally mirror relations at the societal level” (p. 433). The status differential which plagued the Indian and American software team was based on the
context of (neo-)colonialism, with the American members benefiting as a high-status
group of the West, and the Indians being subjugated to a traditional low-status position of
the non-West. If globally dispersed teams are to be effective, it seems that team
facilitators will need to work with team members at the micro interpersonal level to
challenge power and status barriers so that members can start to build solid relationships
based on trust. Team facilitators need to facilitate the creation of a shared social space in
which team members can safely and authentically be vulnerable with each other. This
thesis aims to contribute to a body of knowledge that would equip team facilitators to
empower globally dispersed team members to build effective relationships established on
a basis of trust. Toward that end, the research reported here addresses the following
issues.

Contents of the study/Research focus

The main topic areas addressed in this piece of research are:

1. Rethinking diversity management by developing a critical understanding of this
   praxis field, for example to increase capacity in organizational contexts (such as
   in globally dispersed teams) to address the power dynamics associated with
difference;

2. Exploring the theoretical foundations of how to challenge the inequality inherent
   in globally dispersed teams in team development praxis;

3. Expanding our influence as OD practitioners in challenging social injustice
   reproduced in the workplace.
Three main questions framed the research contained in this thesis.

Research Question 1

How does postcolonial theory challenge our current approach to diversity management in organizations, resulting in rethinking the context for team development?

I will explain my insights as to how contemporary diversity management is based on a belief in the benign management of differences among people. This belief is based on attitudes about diversity perpetuated by the ideology of multiculturalism in our society which assumes that all people are equal. Applying postcolonial theory to the organizational context puts into perspective the link between diversity and inequality in our contemporary context, illustrating the importance of finding ways of addressing oppression due to diverse social identities in organizational teams.

Research Question 2

How can team facilitators work to create a vibrant shared social space for all team members?

This study will extend to practice my understandings of the power issues created by the context of a postcolonial global society. I will consider what implications this has in terms of current theories of group dynamics to build high performing teams. This will serve to develop a theory of how to work as a team facilitator in a postcolonial workplace with globally dispersed teams. How can we support historically disadvantaged people in a postcolonial reality to be included in our organizational teams in ways that maximally benefit both the organization (the business case of leveraging diversity for effective
teamwork) and the individuals themselves (the social justice case of bringing equity to the workplace)? How can we challenge high-status individuals to become aware of their privilege and learn how to work for the benefit of the team and not just themselves and/or their status group?

**Research Question 3**

**What is the role of OD in addressing social injustice?**

In addressing power at a micro level in team development, what inroads can organizations make in responding to the legacy of history and social injustice? In other words, in challenging social injustice that is reproduced in the workplace, through addressing workplace inequity that has a dysfunctional influence on working relationships, how much influence can this have on changing social relations beyond the workplace? OD has traditionally looked at power in terms of class, critiquing and challenging the power that management holds over workers in hierarchical organizations. With an understanding that power creates a hierarchy in diverse workplaces by affording unequal status based on social identity, what inroads can OD make in addressing this kind of power? Are we as OD practitioners willing to push our practice to these new frontiers?
**Methodology**

*Theory Building framed by my Story*

I pursued two parallel levels of inquiry in addressing my research questions, although one level only became apparent to me along the thesis journey. The obvious level of inquiry was a study of the literature, but the level that would prove to augment and balance this was a deep honest dialogue with myself, finding a voice to tell my story of living and working with difference in the world. A richness has come out of an interplay between these two sources of learning, starting from my own experiences, seeking understanding in what others have discovered and written, taking prying questions back to myself. Figuring out how it might be possible to support globally dispersed teams to build trust across difference has involved a process of constant dialogue between what I see and what others have seen.

I began my thesis journey intending to explore how to overcome the barriers of technology in globally dispersed teams, while my supervisor and teacher gently encouraged me to explore the area of difference. She knew that I had a lot of personal truth to share with the world, and a lot of issues to unpack as someone who had wrestled with the challenges of working across difference. There was a lot of truth to be discovered in my experiences, for the benefit of sharing with others, but also for the benefit of working things out for myself. It was when I finally began asking questions that came from my experience that I became passionate about my research topic and started having ideas to share in the form of research findings, giving shape to my research process.
I first position myself within my research topic by writing about my background, or standpoint, because it is from this that my interest and understandings have emerged. My experiences affected my understandings and perceptions as I engaged with the literature on this topic, so I share these as a reference point for the reader to know why I engaged in the way that I did. In this thesis, I also share two personal stories which capture the complexity of working across difference in groups. I have included and integrated these experiences in this piece of writing to include the voice of one who has wrestled with these issues in practice. I have done this intentionally to ground my work in practice, and thus build understanding and insight into meaning. But how is telling my own story part of a piece of research?

Contemporary research literature tells us that, “there is no single, legitimate way to make sense of the world” because our perceptions of reality are filtered through our mental frameworks, our cultural codes, our personal biographies, and the forms of representation we choose (Eisner, 1993, p. 54). From this perspective, I recognize that my own sense making of the reality of the team experience in the global workplace is also an important, albeit not “objective,” source of data for my project – objective in a traditional quantitative epistemological sense of being free from personal influence. On the contrary, I subscribe to the view that “experience . . . [is] a legitimate way of knowing” (Kovach, 2005, p. 28). In the research pursuit of creating new knowledge, experience is a valuable way of eliciting understanding (Shank, 2002). Therefore, my work is informed by my own experiences of the dynamics of difference in teams. My experiences serve as one of the ways to elucidate meaning, along with paying close attention to the words and experiences of others, whether spoken or written.
Autoethnography is a research methodology of personal narrative whereby the researcher’s own experience becomes the topic of investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). “The goal is to use your life experience to generalize to a larger group or culture” through a focus on a concrete experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). However, this evocative narrative approach stands in stark contrast to the statistical approach to representation and generalization used by traditional social science. In the way that I incorporate my experience as a source of understanding in this piece of work, I would like to “challenge our assumptions . . . that govern the institutional workings of social science – arguments over feelings, theories over stories, abstractions over concrete events, sophisticated jargon over accessible prose” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746).

Personal narrative is a form which shares experiences with the reader and makes them an active participant – they are given room to interpret their own meaning from the story and are empowered to reflect on their own life. The challenge is managing the delicate balance of interpreting the experience explicitly and having individuals interpret the truth within the story for themselves, since in narrative, the reader is also part of the experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Tierney (2003) suggests that our memory of the past is shaped by our present day ideology, our social and cultural frameworks. Congruent with postmodernist theory, identity is “not something fixed and predetermined” but is “constantly re-created” (Tierney, 2003, p. 313). The objective of life history work in a postmodern age is to challenge the established norms of “truth, legitimacy and identity” (Tierney, 2003, p. 306). Life history work thus seeks to “create ways to decolonize those who have been
silenced, forgotten” (Tierney, 2003, p. 314) and to “redefine and redescribe” (p. 306) all individuals and groups, “open(ing) up avenues for change” (p. 308).

Bell (2003) suggests that “stories are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns” (p. 4). They “are not simply individual productions but cultural and ideological as well . . . and so reflect and reproduce existing social relations” (Bell, 2003, p. 4). Stories are told to reinforce and legitimize the dominant discourse or “public transcript,” supporting the position of the dominant group in society (Scott, 1990, p. 18 as cited in Bell, 2003, p. 5). In the case of a privileged group, the stories will position them in a good light, with a reassuring message of hope that social progress is being made (Bell, 2003). At the same time, stories told by those people from groups that are marginalized in society make up a “hidden transcript” or counter-narrative to the hegemonic discourse (Scott, 1990, p. xii as cited in Bell, 2003, p. 5). They bear witness to the persistence of prejudice and discrimination in society. For example, the themes of counter-narrative stories in Bell’s (2003) study on racism were personal danger and vulnerability; differential treatment and assaults on dignity; white blindness, insensitivity, and cruelty. Telling such stories reminds us that there is still much work to do in creating a world that truly does embrace difference.

Although most of the stories that I tell in this thesis are from the point of view of a person of privilege, I believe that they still constitute counter-narrative. Most of the social locations that I occupy (e.g., race, class, ability) are as a person of privilege. The sense in which I think that these stories are still counter-narrative is that I expose privilege, countering the dominant discourse that social relations are based on equality. I also question my privilege, I wonder how I might work to relinquish my privilege to support
better social relations. Challenging privilege and challenging myself when I used my privilege to marginalize others is, according to my understanding, counter-narrative. At the same time, I occupy some social locations in which I have experienced marginalization. These are gender and ethnicity (in the case of being a foreigner in Germany). These identities gave me firsthand experience that inequality still exists, and inspired me to work for what is right and just. Part of what I am trying to understand in writing my stories is the act of balancing multiple identities, occupying mostly privileged social locations, but also having firsthand experience of marginalization. It is curious to me that I can know what it is like to be disempowered in a marginalized social location, and yet at the same time, how difficult it can be for me to question the power I have in other privileged social locations, which can serve to disempower others. This double standard is difficult to rectify. I hope that this paradox and complexity comes across in the stories that I tell here.

I hope that through this narrative approach, my work will resonate with practitioners, illustrating the realities of diverse teams and, thus, challenging them to stretch the boundaries of their praxis as they support more just and effective workplaces. Including and reflecting on my own experiences as I work through the literature for my thesis reflects the value that I place on being a reflective practitioner, a value that I strive to embody in the way that I write my thesis.

This is not to say that choosing to take this route is easy. I still hold reservations in taking a personal narrative approach. In conventional research, “if you don’t subject narrative to sociological, cultural, or some other form of analysis, treating stories as ‘social facts,’ then you are not doing social science” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). My
understanding of autoethnography is that the “narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). Without analysis, settled theories, concrete conclusions, and abstracted facts, I have wondered, can stories constitute a piece of research? As I said in the introduction to my methodology, my stories have been running as an unspoken level of understanding throughout my research process. I finally decided to take the plunge and give this undercurrent a voice. Finally, there was meaning to my facts!

Breaking storytelling down into pieces, parts, and priorities destroys it. There are some truths that we just know, we can’t prove it but we know them to be true. Storytelling moves us into the place where we trust what we know, even if it can’t be measured, packaged, or validated empirically. (Simmons, 2001, pp. xviii-xix)

Another concern that I have had in including my stories in this thesis is not based on my fears of maintaining rigor in research, but it was about my own vulnerability and the vulnerability of other characters in my story. If I present my story to let it be open to multiple interpretations, what perceptions might others, readers who are total strangers, have of me? Do I want my hidden stories to become part of the public transcript? What about others in my story, could my interpretation of their actions hurt them in any way? Theoretically, in the name of change, this sounds like an endeavor which I would like to support. I thought this change would be about challenging the hegemonic discourse that we have largely overcome oppression in the world. How would this act of research change me, the researcher, as well?
My Standpoint

Humble Beginnings

I don’t remember much of my early childhood growing up in Ontario. Actually what I really remember is the trip that took us away from Ontario, in my Dad’s little Renault in the dead of winter. I was sitting up with him in the middle of the night as an eight year old, helping to watch for road signs in the middle of a terrible snowstorm along the northern tip of Lake Superior. My dad, my younger brother, our dog, and I were driving west, moving to new pastures, so to say, after my family had lost their dairy farm in the recession of the late 70s. My mom was packing up our things and then would fly to Vancouver with my baby sister.

The couple of years we spent in Vancouver were spent in preparation for a much larger journey. As my father delivered the mail, and studied theology at UBC, and my mother worked as a receptionist in her father’s dental office, they were hatching a plan to work in the developing world. Angola won out over Haiti as our destination. They began language studies, and raising support to move to Angola to work in rural capacity building. That’s where my life would become framed by working in diversity, where it would become part of my cellular make up, part of my soul. There was an important lesson to be learned before I left the American continent, which would serve me well for the journey to come.

The summer we left Vancouver, amidst packing and vaccinations, my mom enrolled me in summer day camp. This camp was inspired by the idea to bring hearing and hearing-impaired children together in our community. When I showed up for camp the first day, I was the only hearing child who was registered. I was privileged as an able-
bodied child, able to communicate most easily with the leaders, but I remember feeling
very lonely in this position of privilege. I was not part of the world of signs shared by the
other kids, there was no way I could learn fast enough in the few weeks that I
participated. I couldn’t seem to find a bridge to their world. They seemed to mistrust me,
someone with whom they couldn’t sign. I would sit on the swings and swing alone, sadly,
feeling like an outsider where there was no door in. I wished I could find a connection, I
longed to be their friend, and to share something of their uniqueness which intrigued me.
My mom gave me a book on signing for my tenth birthday that summer. I managed to
squeeze it in as the last item in my suitcase before we were off to the opposite side of the
world. I also brought with me my experience of being an outsider due to my social
location, even a privileged social location.

_Angola: Out of Africa_

My family moved to Kalukembe, a small village in a deep rural area in the middle
of Angola. This village had no phone, no T.V., no computer, but it did have electricity
and running water for certain periods of the day, a store where we could buy staples like
rice and sugar with communist food tickets once a month, and the only functioning
hospital in the country, according to all of the foreigners who lived on the mission. It also
had a school which I could see from the window of my personal “classroom” – my
classroom being in the form of a desk nudged under the window in my parents’ bedroom.
While I would sit at this big table every day working on a curriculum provided to me by
the Ontario government, I would watch the children in my community play in front of the
school. They hardly ever entered the small mud-brick building because their teacher had
to spend most of his day tilling his fields to feed his family.
I used to think if I had X-ray vision, I could see my best friend Theresa’s house at the end of the long red dirt road that came curving around our house and soared to the top of the hill that rose before my classroom window, cutting deeper into the red earth after each rainfall, lined by towering mango trees. Theresa lived with her blind mother and younger brother in a one room mud-brick house in the vast refugee camp that surrounded the mission hospital. She was their caregiver at twelve. I had met Theresa at choir practice. I was the only foreign kid who had joined the local church choir, which would meet a few times a week for practice. This practice was mostly held in Umbundu, a language that I would never learn. It was pretty easy to figure out that the language was written phonetically, so I didn’t have a problem learning the songs when Theresa wrote them out for me. This sparked some fascination among my peers, many of whom were illiterate and were baffled that I could read the words, but not speak the language!

Theresa wasn’t all that popular with the other kids from the village. She was a refugee kid which made her an outsider. However, she was top of her class in that small school that I would watch every day and thus, although an outsider as well, had been invited to join the choir. She didn’t have a lot of time to play, so outside of choir practice, she would visit to learn sewing with my mom.

One day after a visit to Theresa’s house, a tiny shack in a vast sea of shacks, where I could see the rats running around their few pots and cans, I told my Mom that I hated being so rich. Why did we live in a big house, and have so many clothes, when my friend, who was brilliant, hard-working, and beautiful, had nothing? My Mom looked at me and reminded me that a year ago in Vancouver, I had cried about being so poor. She pointed out that actually, we were now poorer than we had been in Vancouver, but that

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2 I have used pseudonyms for the people in my story to protect their identity.
we knew that this was in fact rich on the global scale of things. This disparity and the paradoxes in the disparity were hard to swallow, and I don’t think I have ever stopped chewing over this thought.

At the end of every week, my mom would stuff a big manila envelope full of each of our school assignments and send them off to Canada. My assignments would loop back to me a few months later, with my spelling corrected, my math checked, and my knowledge about Canadian history and geography ascertained. The curriculum, however, was only the tip of the iceberg of my learning in this distance education program conducted in a global classroom. One year, my teacher was a farmer’s wife from Kitchener. My classmates were dispersed across the globe in Mali, Brazil, and on a boat sailing around the world. I wrote about our pet monkey, about listening to bombs going off in the middle of the night, about finding no air pollution when I conducted a science experiment, and about the lady without a nose and the many people without limbs watching our choir performance at the hospital on Christmas day. My teacher would write me notes telling me about her life when she returned my marked lessons to me. She wrote about her dairy cows, about her kids getting snowed in from school, and about the local bake sale to raise money for Africa. She was writing about her world, I was writing about mine. I would read her stories over and over, trying to remember life on a farm in Ontario. I wonder if she could even imagine what my life was like, in this place where we lived, worked, and played amidst poverty and conflict.

Every Saturday afternoon, my Mom and I would set out to Ouvido’s house, passing through the leprosarium where people with faces that were sadder than their

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3 We were given an exercise in my school lesson to place pieces of paper covered in Vaseline outside for a few days. This was to catch particles that would be evidence of air pollution. My pieces of paper never showed any evidence of particles.
injuries would watch us go by while they pounded their corn. Ouvido was a five year old boy who was hearing-impaired. We unpacked my sign language book from Vancouver and began to teach him and his parents some signs. He was angry and alone, and he would hit himself and others. The first sign he learned was “fish.” Dried fish from the coast was a staple food. The first time he signed it on his own, we were arriving at his small hut, and he pointed with glee at my mom and signed “fish lady!” His parents were really embarrassed, because it was disrespectful in their culture to associate anyone with an animal, reminiscent of a past of slavery and colonialism. His face was beaming from ear to ear. Actually, so were theirs when they realized that my mom was thrilled with her new name, and they shared how the boys with whom Ouvido herded goats were also learning the signs. Ouvido was becoming a great goat herder, they said, which was an important way for him to support his family. His community rallied around the possibilities of sign language, and Ouvido was given the trust to make an important contribution.

Rosa was a lady who worked in our household. There was a lot to do, since all of our food had to be prepared from scratch. Bread had to be baked (after the worms had been picked out of the flour), fruit had to be preserved for the winter, and animals had to be raised and their meat prepared. One day, Rosa didn’t come to work, and after several days, my mother and I went looking for her. When we got to her small hut, she lay inside with a wee baby. She had been pregnant, but she had kept this a secret by binding her stomach because she was having a baby out of wedlock. The community banned her from attending church for a year, including barring her from many important support services. The father of the child on the other hand faced less stiff consequences from the
community. I wondered why the community would disadvantage a tiny baby, and his loving mother. I was aware that there seemed to be different rules that governed men and women.

After three years, we left Kalukembe. No sooner had we gotten home to Canada, than my father had a new job with World Vision. We were going to live in the capital city of Harare in Zimbabwe, while my father worked in northern Mozambique doing disaster relief work, in yet another war torn country on the African subcontinent. Zimbabwe had won its independence from Britain five years previously, and was at peace under the new black Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, so we lived in this peaceful nation while my father worked in Mozambique.

_Zimbabwe: A Colonial Experience_

We showed up at our new Zimbabwean school in their last school term (their school year started in January), my sister and I awkwardly wearing our green, red, and white checked dresses and my brother with his same colored tie hanging precariously crooked below his wary face. The structured school environment took some adjusting to after several years of managing ourselves, but the strictness, including public humiliation and corporal punishment, was devastating. The next year I was fortunate to start high school at an alternative school (it was the only school in Harare where students did not wear uniforms, and where corporal punishment was banned), filled with many Western diplomat and development worker kids from Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands, and a peer from Canada, diplomat kids from other African countries such as Uganda, and then

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4 Sub-Saharan Africa may not technically be a subcontinent, so I use this word liberally to refer to the southern part of Africa, which is somewhat politically independent as the SADC region.
mostly white Zimbabwean kids whose parents could afford the private school fees, and whose kids, for many reasons, weren’t happy in the local school system.

Our afternoons were taken up with tennis, cricket, and piano lessons, going shopping, and swimming in the pool in our backyard that reflected the explosion of blossoms such as bougainvillea and hibiscus that filled our garden. The only real connection that I had to black Zimbabweans was to our gardener and night guard who lived in the servant’s quarters at the back of our house, and our maid, Hope. She lived in a high density suburb outside of the city, where I would visit her daughter, Patience, once in awhile. I loved the days I spent in the township with Patience, visiting her friends and cooking sudza\(^5\) and greens with her mom. We would connect in these moments, laughing at kids goofing around in the street, or soaking in the sunshine and the beauty of the landscape on a walk, but my life of lip gloss, legwarmers, and Madonna, and her life of going for water, pounding corn, and cleaning her house seemed like more than worlds apart. Then, Hope became very ill and passed away, and Patience became the female head of household.

When Hope died, Lovemore then came to work in our household. His wife and children lived in a rural area, and he had found work in the city. He could afford to go home and visit them once a year. When I asked my mom why we couldn’t give him extra holidays and money to go home more often, she said that (white) Zimbabweans in the community had complained that foreigners were rewarding their household workers too much, causing their staff to be disgruntled and making it difficult to retain and hire good people. She didn’t want to rock the boat in the community too much, because they were already paying him a high wage. Now that I was sixteen, my parents would leave us on

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\(^5\) This is a Shona word for cornmeal that is a staple food in Zimbabwe.
our own for the weekend, with Lovemore there to do the cooking. We would ask him to make boiled pudding everyday because it was the most delicious pudding we had ever eaten. It pained me that he couldn’t make this boiled pudding on the weekends for his children.

Meanwhile, while I was juggling the disparities in Zimbabwe between the life I knew at my predominantly white private school and the glimpses I had into the realities of black workers around me, my father would travel regularly to Mozambique to carry out his work with refugees, people who were displaced by a raging conflict, in the second-poorest country in the world. His return from one particular trip was a turning point, for him, and for us all. He was working in one of the refugee camps, helping to distribute food aid one day when a group of people arrived from a distant village. The only clothes they had on their backs were banana leaves. They were barefoot and starving. They told of how the soldiers had come into their village, pillaging and burning everything, and of how they were the only ones to escape into the jungle. There, bandits had robbed them of their clothes. They had been walking for days through the jungle with no food to get to a safe place. My father told us how he had wept when he saw them. I remember how he wept as he told us this story.

It was hard to share his burden, but we all questioned in our own way the big house, the night guard, the private school. How could we have so much when others had so little? What justice was in that? I wondered how there could be such inequity, and why the work being done to address this seemed to only ever be a drop in the bucket. My father also questioned the ethics of how foreign aid organizations worked. Once in the system, he began to wonder if development work wasn’t benefiting those who were
already privileged too much, while not addressing systemic injustices and inequities to challenge things like a cycle of poverty. Tired, disillusioned, but hopeful to challenge the way development work was done, after three years in Zimbabwe, my family headed home, well, sort of, to Winnipeg. My father was going to work for the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, an organization which took food donations from farmers across Canada for the developing world.

On our way home from Zimbabwe, we skipped school for a few months to travel around the world in 40 days as a family. We first visited Lusaka, Zambia, and I was struck how this country where there was no conflict could be so poor. Nairobi, Kenya was beautiful, but I felt uneasy because of the crime. It was really when we got to Asia, though, that a sense the vastness of our global diversity began to impress upon me.

China was the most different place that I have ever experienced. Africa had so many remnants of European culture, there was a kind of familiarity about it, but this place felt very foreign. On our bus tour to see the Great Wall of China, we stopped at a public washroom. There were no doors on the stalls, and the toilets were holes in the ground. I felt very embarrassed about the lack of privacy. Then, an American tourist came in, walking up and down the washroom spraying air freshener out of an aerosol can, clamoring about how badly the place smelled. My cheeks were burning as I felt her take over and judge this public space, which was not hers to judge in the first place. I resolved to go into a stall. Hong Kong, Macau, Thailand, and India were equally crowded, hot, chaotic places that swirled before my eyes like a kaleidoscope, portraying the diversity of people on this planet.
Arriving “home”

Within two weeks of getting to Winnipeg, the guidance counselor was taking me to my new Grade 11 homeroom class. I stood at the doorway while the teacher introduced me, while the other girls looked me up and down, resulting in smirking and eyeball-rolling at my rolled up pant cuffs and baggy sweater, high fashion in Zimbabwe, but obviously not here. I could feel my cheeks burning. In math class, the teacher informed me that I needed a scientific calculator. When my parents said it would be a few months before we could afford to buy me one, the teacher lent me his, for the whole year. Thank goodness he pulled me aside after class to give it to me.

Most of the other kids already had their driver’s licenses. I had waited to do this because in Zimbabwe, they drove on the other side of the road. I took the driver’s education classes at school with the students a year younger than me, and passed the test with flying colors. When I went to my father to get the money for driving lessons, he told me I would have to wait a year. He told me that if it were my younger brother asking, that would be a different story, since boys were naturally good drivers and he could be sure he would pass the first time. I felt this was grossly unfair, I wasn’t being judged based on merit, but on an assumption of my ability based on belonging to a certain social identity group of which I had no choice. It started to prepare me for this kind of prejudice in the world I would soon enter as an adult.

I often butted heads with my history teacher. At the time, I thought this had to do with him making mistakes, and then being stubborn and not admitting that he was wrong. For example, his knowledge of southern African geography was abysmal. One day, he mixed up Botswana and Zimbabwe on a map. He would not stand to be corrected, even
from a seventeen year old who had lived in the sub-Saharan African region. As he taught us about the history of Canada, though, many other examples may not have been so black and white. Now I believe that as we each came from our very different experiences which formed fundamentally different interpretations of the world, we each saw history in a different light. As a young student, though, it was hard to explain and defend my views, especially to explain the different social contexts that I had experienced.

One day, one of our Angolan friends, Esther, showed up at our doorstep in Winnipeg. Her late husband had been my father’s dear friend. I walked with her through our neighborhood one day. She stopped in front of each house and gasped, in disbelief and amazement. She couldn’t get over the vast wealth that each Canadian family possessed. She had thought Canadians were generous and helpful, but now that she saw how little they were actually sharing and sacrificing, she became angry. She left disillusioned with the thought that we weren’t really doing anything to share our blessings with the less fortunate in our global community, that we weren’t really striving for equality. It reminded me again of the two disparate realities that I seemed to belong to, moving in and out of these spaces, only ever a partial self in any circumstance.

Before I sadly dropped history in Grade 12, finding it too difficult to reconcile my views with my history teacher, he encouraged me to do a project to figure out what my views were. I wrote about colonialism, and how it had influenced the contours of the world we lived in. He was fascinated, and asked me to speak to his history classes about this topic, and my experiences with it. As I spoke to my fellow students, you could hear a pin drop in the room. He had given me a place to talk about the reality that was an important part of my experience, letting my peers in on my world. As I went from class
to class talking about my time in Africa and the inequalities left from a colonial past, my
talk began to take on the tone of a preacher from the deep South. Although my peers
listened intently, life would go on as usual afterwards. I thought that we should hatch a
plan to save the world, but they were back to their music, their parties, and their fashion
magazines. Knowing more about the inequities in the world didn’t move them to action.
As I was nearing the end of high school, I was thinking about how I would like to
contribute.
Conclusion

I hope my story begins to convey why I feel like I am living in a global village. I have told this part of my story to illuminate why I am interested in supporting teams dispersed globally to work effectively together, and why my primary focus is helping them build bridges across the differences that can separate them. I want it to provide some context as to why I as a white woman from Canada would like to include the issue of inequality in a diversity framework. I have shared some experiences of privilege; I have shared other experiences of marginalization. Culture is certainly one difference which separates us across the globe. However, based on this personal reflection, it is a recurring story of inequities from the combination of such social locations as class, gender, and race that structures our current social context. All this shapes my view that transformation of our social interactions is necessary, and causes me to ask what possibilities might exist for such transformation. Reflecting on my story is a solid beginning for engaging in equity work:

It is important in . . . equity work that we explore how the life experiences of individuals mould what individuals learn about their own and other people’s social identities and how these identities are valued differently by our society. It also shapes how individuals think about acting for social justice. This, along with the types of power afforded or denied by the organization in which they work, affects how individuals act to challenge or perpetuate inequities in the organization. (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 18)
Introduction

Understanding Diversity Management

When I told my graduate sociology class studying race and ethnicity that my interest as an Organization Development (OD) professional was in facilitating globally dispersed teams, and specifically managing diversity to help these groups of people build trust for effective collaboration, there was an air of great interest, but also of suspicion, in the room. “What do you mean by ‘managing diversity’?” they asked. The room was full of teachers and sociologists, not many others who were familiar with mainstream managerial and organizational discourse. “Managing diversity” was a curious activity from their perspective.

“Diversity” is a catch term for all manner of differences among people and is currently a buzzword in mainstream literature on organizations. It also represents an ideology prevalent in current thinking on management and organizations as to how to conceive of difference. Our understanding of why differences exist and what this means for intergroup relations will ultimately affect how professionals like myself will work with differences in a group such as a global team. As I have quoted Metiu (2006) as saying, “the difficulty of doing remote work doesn’t rest primarily (or even necessarily) with the limitations of communication technologies, but instead with the interplay between social and physical boundaries that separate groups” (p. 433). Exploring the issue of difference is useful in addressing the interplay among social boundaries that
separate groups in our global village. For these reasons, a starting point for me in this research was to understand contemporary diversity management as the framework within which difference is managed in organizations, the framework which forms the basis of working with diversity in organizational teams.

As I have worked through the literature on the concept of diversity management in organizations, I have discovered multiple camps taking different perspectives on the subject, similar to what Michaela Driver (2002) discovered when she reviewed the literature on the Learning Organization, another important concept in organizational science. Driver distinguished between two camps which she calls the “consultancy school,” who are practitioner and performance-oriented, and the “academic school,” who are research and theory-oriented (or “anti-performative” according to her). I have found myself sitting on the fence, trying to decide to which camp to subscribe; whose “truth” to undersign.

As a practitioner, I am inspired by the positive ideals espoused by the consultancy school of diversity management which, as in the case of the Learning Organization concept in its ideal form, envisions “a new workplace paradise for employees resulting in phenomenal organizational performance and success” (Driver, 2002, p. 34). At the same time, I am wary of being too utopian, based on my experiences with regards to challenges and difficult circumstances due to differences between people, where even the best intentions to manage diversity successfully ended in failure. I am interested in elucidating the reservations of critics who challenge diversity discourse as a negative ideology which, as in the Learning Organization, may create “a new workplace nightmare for employees in which they are exploited in even more devious ways and locked into
‘psychic prisons’ to carry their organizations to competitive success or simply serve the devious interests of those in power” (Driver, 2002, p. 34). Driver (2002) sums up the extremes of the two contrasting perspectives as “Foucauldian gloom or Utopian sunshine” (p. 33).

Driver (2002) presents two schools which each have a different take on the concept of the Learning Organization. There is an implicit assumption in her work that the Learning Organization idea was a response to a traditional approach to managing organizations. The consultancy school developed the idea of the Learning Organization as a way to address challenges with this traditional organizational practice; the academic school then pointed out the limitations of the consultancy approach, illuminating how this approach could actually support the continuation of problematic management effects. In exploring the field of diversity management in organizations, I will explicitly describe the traditional approach to managing diversity. I will call this approach the “management school.”

In my overview of diversity management discourse, I would like to present the contributions of both the consultancy and academic schools in terms of addressing the challenges associated with the management school’s approach to diversity in organizations. Each of these schools has limitations inherent in their approach, which I will also explore. Driver (2002) sought to distill the contributions of each perspective to

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6 Peter Senge wrote a seminal text on the Learning Organization. He popularized the term and added to the research in this area which Chris Argyris and David Schón had pioneered. These originators of the Learning Organization concept were academics, but their approach was still from the consultancy school as it came from a values system that sought to find better ways of organizing by focusing on how people could best express their full potential through learning. It looked at the life-enhancing features of a system in terms of learning and development. The academic school is also made up of many academics. In organization science, their values system leads them to look at management concepts in terms of how they address power in a system. They see uncovering and challenging power hierarchies as the key to unlocking the potential in a system. Their view is that any concept that allows power, intentionally or not, to continue to be held over others will limit the potential of a system.
find a middle ground on which to build to enhance practice. With a similar intention, I would like to explore the different schools of diversity management, with the intent of finding a practical, and critically reflective, understanding of how to work with diversity in organizations. Critically reflective practice will expose limitations, with an opportunity for continuous improvement.

I am not sure, however, if the views on difference from the different schools are completely reconcilable, and this is not my aim in this research. Rather than aiming to create a clear-cut framework with which to work with diversity in teams in the global workplace, I would like to arrive at a clearer view of the different camps that exist with regard to notions of difference. Greater clarity will be helpful to me, as well as other practitioners, to know where we stand relative to others and even perhaps to know where we want to stand if we don’t find ourselves there yet. It will also give practitioners an idea of where different team participants stand with whom they are working, with the possibility of strategies to access all people in a team. I had thought that perhaps staying on the fence and embracing a combination of the perspectives would be a constructive position with which to move diversity management forward. Perhaps a more realistic goal is to know the different fields that the fence divides, and to gain an understanding of what it means to stand in each of these fields. This understanding should provide support in navigating the complexities of OD practice in real life.
Diversity Management as the Business of OD

“In today’s workplace, diversity awareness is a basic competency. As demographics continue to change, diversity becomes ever more important for OD to increase its relevance and effectiveness” (Greene & Berthoud, 2007, p. 12). The field of OD can be defined as the art and science of implementing planned organization change (Alon, 2004). As part of the systemic view with which OD professionals work, the scope of their work includes supporting organizations in building capacity to effectively work with difference, helping to identify and then implement necessary changes at all levels of the organizational system. All this begs some very basic questions: What does it mean to effectively work with difference? What does effective diversity management look like? Thus, diversity management is no longer a separate specialty, but is a key competence area for OD practitioners as they work with organizations to become more effective (Brazzel, 2007; Greene & Berthoud, 2007; Katz & Miller, 2007). It is certainly a key competence area for facilitators working with globally dispersed teams. Understanding diversity management praxis in organizations provides a framework for addressing issues of difference – the social boundaries that separate groups – in organizational teams.

OD is synonymous with change and thus learning, but what is the nature of the change and how are practitioners seeking to implement it? OD is a relatively new field, only really becoming a distinct discipline in the 1960s and 70s (Alon, 2004). Perhaps the word “distinct” is still debatable because the roots of OD are so varied. Even to this day, currents from many different disciplines run into the field, each bringing its own perspectives. Thus, the breadth of the field of OD can be traced to its roots and understanding this historical variance can illuminate the different approaches that OD
practitioners use when working with diversity in organizations. It can illuminate their
diverse understandings of effective diversity management. Due to this historical
development of the field of OD, practitioners and academics in the field may subscribe to
any of the three schools mentioned above that take different perspectives and thus
approaches to diversity management. Perhaps predominantly, though, OD professionals
tend to subscribe to the consultancy school.

In a wide-ranging field like OD (Laiken, 2001), it is helpful to reflect on the range
of value systems which make up the field. A useful framework to conceptualize this
range of value systems comes from Habermas’ three paradigms – the technical, the
humanist and the critical – which he suggested were produced by the “social struggles of
the modern age” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 69). The management, consultancy, and
academic schools are based respectively on technical, humanist, or critical value systems
or world views. Thus, the three schools are along a continuum of different value systems.
Understanding these value systems can help elucidate why certain schools take certain
approaches to working with difference, and can provide insight into starkly opposing
perspectives.
**The Philosophical Underpinnings of Organizations**

The knowledge about organizations – the knowledge base for the field of OD – has been pieced together from the different world views. The earliest contributions to our knowledge and overall conception of modern organizations were made by Scientific Management (Taylor), Bureaucratic Theory (Weber), and Administrative Theory (Fayol) in the early part of the last century. At that time when large organizations were emerging, these approaches respectively developed scientific principles for work processes, organizing principles in the form of hierarchical structures, and administrative management principles – all intended to efficiently organize the many people along the value chain. These foundational organizational theories are firmly rooted in the technical paradigm, which addresses the important human need to efficiently manage and control the material world in which we live (Plumb & Welton, 2001). The scientific approach of Taylorism to work out efficient work processes during the heyday of the modern era epitomizes the technical paradigm in organizational theory. “Relentless adherence to . . . [the organizational concepts above] have left a legacy of organizational forms that are tenaciously hierarchical and inflexible, unresponsive to turbulent environments and notoriously inhospitable to human creativity and learning” (Laiken, 2001, p. 288).

In a world which places value on economic success, many practitioners working in organizations have relied on the technical paradigm to meet the ideals of effectiveness in this context – “productivity, efficiency, cost-effectiveness” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 70). Learning and change in an organization with such a value system has relied on the technical paradigm for experts to deliver absolute truths to workers in an authoritative fashion, building skills and knowledge specifically to enhance work in the organization.
In a society and age which “place the efficient production of wealth above almost all other concerns” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 70), the technical paradigm forms the historical value system in most of today’s organizations.

The Human Relations movement in the late Forties brought a radical shift in thinking about organizations with its humanist values. Organizational theory based on the Human Relations movement reflects the humanist paradigm which strives for “what ought to be” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 71). From the perspective of the humanist paradigm, professionals working in organizations have addressed “how to be more ethical, more just and more humane” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 72). “Ultimately, most OD professionals believe that creating work environments that are respectful, life-enhancing, and supportive of continuous learning and creativity will benefit the individual as well as the organization” (Laiken, 2001, p. 291). The core values that the field of OD has tended to emphasize – human development to realize individual potential, fair treatment without discrimination and with dignity, open communication that is forthright, honest and has integrity, and balancing autonomy with the constraints in an organization (Burke, 1997) – fit well with the humanist paradigm. Thus, much of current OD practice espouses humanist principles.

OD practitioners take a “whole systems” approach because, “they are constantly aware that change in one part of the system will eventually affect all other parts” (Laiken, 2001, p. 292). Along similar lines is a “whole learner” approach, which “explor(es) such aspects as the emotional, cognitive, social, physical, and spiritual characteristics of adults as learners” (Laiken, 2001, p. 292) – a humanist approach to supporting holistic learning. A learner-centered orientation “places the learner or client at the centre of the process,
with the facilitator in a responsive, supportive role” (Laiken, 2001, p. 293). This is a humanist approach in which the educator facilitates the process of learning, standing in stark contrast to the technical paradigm in which the educator is an expert authority. Self-directed learning which values the autonomy of the adult learner falls within the humanist paradigm (Plumb & Welton, 2001). This corresponds to OD work in that change in a system is facilitated by leading stakeholders through a process of discovering for themselves what needs to be changed and, thus, learned and then planning, implementing, and evaluating the success of this change and learning themselves (Laiken, 2001).

Although the humanist paradigm at the basis of much of OD has resulted in tremendous transformation of organizations, in our current context of unjust power structures in our world, the critical paradigm is promising to the field of OD as a perspective which seeks to further disarm these injustices. An interesting twist in the story of the founding philosophies of OD is that Kurt Lewin, who is often heralded as the father of OD through his contributions of action research and sensitivity training, which were the basis of the Human Relations movement, was a Marxist. Perhaps his inspiration to develop an approach in the form of action research which includes all stakeholders in the process of organizational change came from a desire to address class hierarchies. His sensitivity trainings were meant to build cultural awareness, perhaps a way to deal with the power hierarchies of race and religion. His methods are used by humanist educators today, but this shows how OD’s roots have also been influenced by a critical desire to resist hierarchies of power.

The premise of the critical paradigm is that, “human knowledge is subject to the distorting influence of power. . . . [which] can distort our efforts to understand both what
is [technical] and what ought to be [humanist]” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 72). This paradigm views pedagogy as having the mission to empower people to recognize “distorting ideologies” so that they can take charge of their own destiny (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 73). Thus, learning and change from the perspective of this paradigm seek to “oppose the limits [that existing power hierarchies] place on people’s understanding of themselves and their world” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 74). In practice, learning and change, the work of OD in organizations, under this paradigm aim for critical awareness and transformative action (Plumb & Welton, 2001).

In the current context of global inequalities along lines of difference, OD practitioners will need to work with the global citizens who make up organizations to bring about transformational change. A critical approach to learning can empower people to challenge the existing unjust power relations and ideologies and take action to change the status quo. “Choice” was one of the OD values listed by Burke (1997) which makes “people in organizations . . . free from coercion and the arbitrary use of authority” (p. 7). This value comes from a critical perspective and corroborates the idea that OD practice includes critical pedagogy to address issues of power.

In summary, OD professionals may work from a basis of any of the three schools. The academic school based on the critical paradigm offers an interesting perspective of difference which takes into account the systemic inequities of our post-colonial world.
Workplace Diversity in a Post-colonial World

The academic school takes a critical approach to diversity management in organizations. The critical approach uses critical theory to thoughtfully reflect on the status quo, which we usually do not question but take for granted, to see if there are missed opportunities to make things better. "Critical theory is not to be confused with critical thinking." Rather this is an approach that seeks an understanding of unequal power relations, through exposing the role of ideology in maintaining power structures and contextualizing power relations in their socio-historical context (P. Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 286). Thus, a critical perspective is a systemic perspective. The purpose of illuminating how power is being manifested in social relations is “the ongoing construction of social arrangements that are conducive to the flourishing of the human condition” (P. Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 289).

According to critical theorists, “our understandings are socially constructed, often in distorted ways. Such distorted understandings . . . can be systematically exposed, explained and eliminated through a process called ideology critique” (Foley, 2004, p. 14).

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7 The term “post-colonial” is used to refer to the time period after formal colonialism which is our current context; it signifies the end of the era of formal colonialism, but this post period still “carries implications of latent colonialism” (P. Prasad, 2005, p. 217). Meanwhile, the term “postcolonial” is used to refer to the scholarly tradition of looking at both the past and present circumstances resulting from the process of colonialism (P. Prasad, 2005). The postcolonial tradition thus views colonialism as a process whose impact still has implications in our current context; it is a continuing factor affecting our societies of today (P. Prasad, 2005). Colonialism is a process which has had a huge impact on our world (affecting a huge part of the globe – at its zenith a few European powers controlled three-quarters of the world – and having this influence for a long period of time, a period of more than 500 years) (P. Prasad, 2005). At this huge scale, colonialism has served as the basis of many processes, structures, and institutions forming the contours of our global societies; postcolonialism seeks to understand how these continue to affect our current reality (P. Prasad, 2005). Neocolonialism refers to the process of colonialism as it is now reproduced in our current context, for example through global institutions such as the World Bank ensuring economic dependency of the former colonies on the West, “ensuring that old global asymmetries remain in place” (P. Prasad, 2005, p. 270). “Neocolonialism” refers to current reformulations of colonial processes that are underway, as opposed to simply ongoing effects of the past formal process of colonialism. A. Prasad (2006, p. 123) seems to use the formulation “(neo-)colonialism” as a way to refer to both colonialism and neocolonialism at the same time, which I have adopted in my own writing. The scholarly tradition of postcolonialism addresses the circumstances resulting from the processes of both colonialism and neocolonialism (P. Prasad, 2005).
Ideology is described as a shared worldview of our reality which gives us order and meaning but masks "social contradictions, creating false expectations, and thus limiting societal possibilities and human potential" (P. Prasad & Caproni, 1997, p. 287). Critical theorists consider the concept of diversity to be an ideology and seek to challenge the unquestioned assumptions which this ideology is based on, especially to illuminate distortions in the way that power influences our socially constructed reality of difference.

Postcolonial theory or postcolonialism is a critical approach which contextualizes social relations within their socio-historical context as a basis for understanding the unequal power relations that exist in our current context. Therefore, postcolonial theory sets the stage for understanding the way in which human difference, or “Otherness,” is conceptualized in our current context and, thus, is a useful framework with which to contextualize diversity discourse. “At the core of the postcolonial tradition lies an understanding of colonialism as one of the most significant and omniscient social processes to have taken place over the last five centuries” (A. Prasad, 2003 in P. Prasad, 2005, p. 267). Western (neo-)colonialism and non-Western anti-colonialism “have deeply influenced the nature of our world” and postcolonial theory seeks “to take stock of the consequences of the fateful colonial encounter between the West and the non-West” (A. Prasad, 2006, p. 5).

Postcolonial theory and criticism . . . represents an attempt to investigate the complex and deeply fraught dynamics of modern Western colonialism and anticolonial resistance, and the ongoing significance of the colonial encounter for people’s lives both in the West and the non-West. (A. Prasad, 2003, p. 5)

Although critical theory is now commonplace in management and organization studies, postcolonial theory has been largely ignored (A. Prasad, 2003). However, it offers incredible potential as a theory which can provide useful insights into the field of
diversity management. It is also a framework which could explain some of the dynamics of a global workplace, in a world whose very contours have been shaped by (neo-) colonialism and anti-colonialism. For example, Mirchandani & Butler (2006) conclude that, “more useful approaches to diversity would begin with a study of histories of colonialism and slavery through which much of the fixity around our contemporary notions of colour, difference and diversity has been formed” (p. 485). Revisiting and perhaps reinventing the strategies of contemporary diversity management can enable “working in diversity in a way that feels closer to the original intents of reducing oppression and discrimination and fostering genuinely more open and humane workplaces” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 524). The lens of postcolonial theory seems to be a useful one with which to carry out such an endeavor.

Edward Said made a significant contribution to the field of postcolonialism with his work called Orientalism (1978) (A. Prasad, 2003, 2006). Said studied colonial discourse which he concluded “is founded on the fictive assumptions that, ontologically and epistemologically, ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’ are binary opposites that do not share in the same humanness” (A. Prasad, 2006, p. 123). The Orient is equivalent to the non-West, while the Occident is equivalent to the West. Colonial discourse constructed a hierarchical system of binaries which created a reality in which the West was superior to the non-West (A. Prasad, 2003, 2006). Such binaries are white/black-brown-yellow, masculine/feminine, and developed/undeveloped, in which the first term in the binary is “the privileged term, and was considered superior to, and more desirable than, the second term” (A. Prasad, 2003, p. 12).
In this way, “postcolonialism is useful to workplace diversity researchers because the colonial encounter significantly shaped Western perceptions of ‘otherness’ (e.g. other races, ethnicities, cultures, religions, etc.), perceptions that largely continue to survive” (A. Prasad, 2006, p. 125). The view that some differences among people are better than others is, thus, socially constructed by the continuing processes of (neo-)colonialism. Perceptions of race may be most obviously affected by the processes of colonialism, but the (neo-)colonial hierarchy encompasses many more aspects of human difference as well, including the other common distinctions of gender and class (Loomba, 2005), making it a particularly useful theory to study diversity. In summary, postcolonial theory posits that difference is not benign, but that there is a hierarchy which privileges some characteristics over others. This hierarchy of difference has shaped the contours of our world for centuries through the processes of (neo-)colonialism, and continues to exist in our current context of a post-colonial world. This perspective would conclude that addressing difference will mean addressing the power hierarchies, “the . . . social . . . boundaries that separate groups” (Metiu, 2006).

In summary, most organizations in our current context are strongly rooted in the technical paradigm, belonging to the management school. The humanist breath of fresh air often brought into such organizations, with management principles premised on the technical paradigm, has made our workplaces more ethical, more just, and more humane. This has been done through work guided by holistic, learner-centered, self-directed approaches. The humanist paradigm is the foundation of the consultancy school. The critical paradigm, on the other hand, is the basis of the academic school, offering a view to challenge the misuse of power, which is the root of inequities with regards to
difference. This means challenging (neo-)colonialism which continues to force people into a hierarchy based on the social identity groups to which they belong. Each paradigm seeks to address the “social struggles of the modern age” in a chaotic, unrelenting world: the technical paradigm focusing on being true, the humanist paradigm focusing on being right, and the critical paradigm focusing on being just (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 69). I will now explore how difference is taken up by organizations based on the different paradigms of the three schools, and how the different value systems affect how difference is addressed in organizational teams. Each school has both contributions and limitations with regards to diversity management. Awareness is the first step to best practice.

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8 It has been interesting to consider the difference between being right and being just. Both of these goals, based on different value systems, can bring amazing transformational changes to work environments that are so focused on being true that people get forgotten in the equation. As mentioned in the previous section, OD works from both the humanist and critical perspectives, challenging workplaces to be more ethical and thus humane, both by promoting learning and development at all levels of the system and by challenging unjust power structures.
Conceptions of Power

The traditional management school: Difference as a problem.

Many western societies – the context in which I am currently situated – are becoming increasingly diverse as people migrate to these places from around the globe (Hesse, 2002; Winant, 2001), changing the demographics of the workforce and the market. Other trends are having an impact on workplace demography as well in western countries, such as an aging population and women who work rather than staying at home to raise a family like their mothers and grandmothers before them. At the same time, organizations are becoming increasingly connected globally through a global economy, and information and communication technologies. Of course, the global workplace is characterized by a high level of difference among people, making diversity a reality in our current context. However, this diversity is usually not reflected in the hierarchy of traditional organizations. The people in positions of power continue to be predominantly older white men, with a sprinkling of white women in some places. For example, a recent study in Germany found that although women make up almost half of the workforce, less than 5% of positions in senior management and less than 10% of positions in top management are held by women. Also, these women managers earn a third less, on average, than their male counterparts. A prominent example of how diverse people are grossly underrepresented in positions of power in our world’s institutions is the fact that Senator Barack Obama is only the fifth black U.S. senator in history! Therefore,
organizations may be beginning to represent the diversity in society at first glance, but this does not mean that diverse others have equal access to power in traditional organizations. This raises the questions: why is this and what can be done about this?

In such organizations, difference is perceived to be a problem. The solution based on such a perception is “to be primarily concerned with smoothing over these differences with a view to maintaining systemic stability (even at the expense of all other social considerations)” (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, p. 370). In other words, difference is ignored and the day to day challenges of working across difference are not addressed. This leads to a situation of “preserving the prevailing societal relationships of power, privilege and hierarchy . . . and facilitating the pursuit of ‘corporate’ goals which often only reflect the narrow sectional interests of the organizational/societal elites” (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, pp. 369-370). There is no place to question the fact that power is amassed in the hands of a few, and no place to question the hierarchy of binaries that privileges some people due to social location rather than merit by affording them undenied access to power in the system. This in turn marginalizes others, again due to social location, by not allowing them fair and equal access to power in the system. A. Prasad & Elmes (1997) allude to this in saying, “diverse social and human groups are made to interact with one another within an overall matrix of power which accords a position of routine, unacknowledged, and frequently unchallenged privilege to one group (e.g., white males) at the expense of others” (p. 371). Diversity may be the current reality of many workplaces in our current context, but this diversity is not coupled with equity. It is this lack of equity between different others that will surely hinder true collaboration among team members in the global workplace.
A. Prasad & Elmes (1997) purport that the ever-present reality of power being held by a privileged social identity group at the top of traditional organizations is based on an intentionality by this group. This could certainly be the case. However, it might also be fair to assume that many of those who currently hold the power are oblivious to the negative impact of hierarchical systems in traditional organizations. They may not know of any other way but to hold power over others. Unfortunately, many probably don’t question this convenient situation, since they benefit from it. Nirenberg (1998) suggests that traditional organizations stand under Hammurabi’s curse. Hammurabi was a king of Babylonia who almost 4000 years ago created a code which “separated the act of thinking (being responsible) [the task of management] from the act of doing (following orders) [the task of workers]” (Nirenberg, 1998, p. 7). In other words, it created the conditions whereby power was concentrated in the hands of a few at the top of the organizational hierarchy. Nirenberg (1998) concludes,

Obviously, in the 4000 years between Hammurabi and us, the separation of management from labor and the distinction between owners and employees have become so embedded that most people believe these separations and distinctions are in fact a reflection of the natural order of things. This is understandable: 4000 years is a long time to live under one system of organizing and, most of us, though we know better, consequently have a difficult time imagining a different future. At some level, we perhaps are victims of Hammurabi’s curse. Regardless, whether we are or aren’t, we clearly are hesitant to alter the familiar, to try a new model that, while it would be more consistent with our inner longings and spiritual well-being, would also destroy the status quo. (pp. 7-8)

Due to the lack of equity for different others in traditional organizations, and the fact that management, intentionally or not, has not worked at addressing the limitations to holding power in the organization for such people, equity initiatives in this paradigm came from outside. These have taken the form of formal legislation such as Affirmative Action in the U.S. or Employment Equity programs in Canada (Mirchandani & Butler,
Sinclair (2006) proposes that contemporary diversity management was a reaction to this scenario – it was an effort on the part of management to take back the control over workplace relationships. Diversity management developed as a philosophy that downplayed the issue of equity, to the point of forgetting about this altogether, and reframed difference as a resource that could be leveraged, and certainly controlled, by management. This approach still falls under the technical paradigm, since it is not out of a concern for moral or ethical questions that diversity is embraced, but out of a pure desire for more productivity and efficiency for economic success.

**The modern management school: Diversity as a resource.**

An experienced OD practitioner offers a stern critique of contemporary diversity management practice through a quote from an employee: “diversity is not about being black or white, it is about ‘green’ (the colour of the United States dollar bill)” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 520). In the current mainstream organizational discourse on diversity management, diversity is reframed from being a problem to being a resource that organizations can capitalize on to increase organizational effectiveness and success, namely a resource which will directly contribute to the bottom line (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006; P. Prasad & Mills, 1997; Sinclair, 2006). From this perspective, managing diversity is perceived as a managerial imperative in successfully responding to the external trend of changing market demographics (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997). In other words, if diversity is managed properly, it is a trend which can and should be capitalized on. Sinclair’s (2006) critique of this approach comes from the situation in which economic gain shadows – partially or entirely – the ethical reasons for embracing diversity.
The view that diversity is a resource to be leveraged for economic gain is in line with human capital theories which consider people as economic resources that bring value to the firm (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997). In accordance with this popular view in Western capitalistic cultures (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997), organizations must implement effective strategies to tap the potential of diversity’s resources. Organizations that can “manage diversity” position themselves favourably to attract and retain the best talent, which could be diverse talent in a diverse labour pool (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997). Such organizations can also seek competitive advantage by leveraging strengths inherent in the differences of diverse employees, for example by having an employee from a certain identity group to secure a better standing in the market with customers from the same identity group (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997; Thomas & Ely, 1996).

If the moral and ethical questions surrounding diversity issues are addressed by managers in an organization, alongside the desire to leverage diversity for economic success, the view of diversity as a resource is not so problematic. The critique of diversity as a resource is a critique of only seeing diversity as a resource for the economic gain of the organization, while not addressing the ethical aspects of supporting diverse individuals. In a well-functioning organization, both are possible, so that the ethical reasons for promoting diversity are balanced with the potential for economic gain. Actually, ideally, one could support the other. This balance is what OD professionals should strive to produce in their work. The cynical tone underlying the critiques of diversity as a resource is cautionary: if people are only seen as resources, this can dehumanize them. Critical theorists are familiar with all too many real world situations which are dysfunctional due to focusing on diversity as an economic resource at the
expense of ethical questions (Sinclair, 2006). Sinclair (2006) points out the risks of giving too much primacy to “the business case” of diversity:

By chronically prefacing diversity with the business case, diversity becomes conditional on a calculation. Any moral or justice arguments for diversity management get jettisoned, labelled as tired old affirmative action. . . . Indeed practitioners are often fearful about mentioning social justice or phrases with ‘moral’ in them. Allowing the business case to set the terms of diversity management defines what is discussable and non-discussable rendering invalid the language and principles of rights and equality. Diversity is, they say, all about ‘strategic HR management’ not about people and how they are treated. (p. 520)

In the context of viewing difference as a resource to capitalize on, the word “diversity” came into common use in organizational settings in referring to human differences. This word has a “generous feel to it, it is welcoming, inclusive, embracing; like international or pluralist or ecumenical, it suggests a largeness of conception, a transcendence of sectional interest, an openness to the variety of human pursuits and achievements” (Caws, 1994, p. 381 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 39). Cavanaugh (1997) points out how language carries connotation, symbolism, and meaning, so the use of a feel-good word like “diversity,” as opposed to, for example, “equity,” contributes to an ideology of diversity as a desirable ideal to be embraced by organizations, as another resource brought to work by employees. Thus, referring to difference with the word “diversity” puts the issue of difference in a positive light, which is the current mainstream way of thinking in organizations, or in other words, is the mainstream discourse regarding difference (Cavanaugh, 1997; P. Prasad & Mills, 1997; Sinclair, 2006). P. Prasad & Mills (1997) point out how diversity is celebrated in organizational literature with “evocative metaphors such as the melting pot, the patchwork quilt, the multicolored or cultural mosaic, and the rainbow” (p. 4). These metaphors create a desire to incorporate, even
embrace, diversity in our societies and organizations, as a resource that promises "cultural richness" and "socioeconomic contributions" (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997, p. 4).

**The consultancy school: Diversity for learning and growth.**

I proposed that the philosophy of diversity management in organizations has underlying values from the technical school. Of course, this is true when the intention is to benefit from difference as a resource for the sake of the organization, without considerations for creating better workplaces for different others. There are several ways in which organizations try to benefit from diversity, often to the detriment of diverse others (Thomas & Ely, 1996). One way is known as “tokenism.” This is hiring diverse others only to fulfill quotas to conform to legislation where it exits or to make the organization look diverse for the benefit of their image (Thomas & Ely, 1996). Another way is called “pigeon-holing.” In this case, diverse others are hired only to leverage special talents that they may have, such as language skills, to have a stronger market standing or to enhance business possibilities, but limiting these people from contributing the full range of their skills in their work (Thomas & Ely, 1996). In these cases, the organization stands to benefit from individuals’ diversity, but the employee usually remains limited and marginalized both formally and informally, as merely a token representing diversity or pigeon-holed to contribute only a part of themselves, in the organization.

Diversity management can also be practiced from a humanist standpoint. In 1996, Thomas and Ely noted a more progressive approach to diversity management which they observed in only a few organizations that they studied. These organizations are set up to learn from diversity so as to integrate the presumed value inherent in employee
differences into the way the organization does its work, creating an opportunity to use
diversity as a resource for growth and renewal (Thomas & Ely, 1996). Such an approach
is informed by humanist principles which encourage people to “express their full
potentiality” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 71) and which seeks to create a better future for
all stakeholders, including for the organization as a whole. The approach to diversity
management in this case would be that of inclusion, of creating workplaces which include
different others in the mainstream work. This is another popular approach to diversity
(Mirchandani & Butler, 2006).

Approaching diversity as an opportunity for learning and growth to benefit all
stakeholders is in line with the popular consultancy school concept of Appreciative
Inquiry. One of the main ideas behind Appreciative Inquiry is that starting from a place
that sees potential brings more energy to a system to move in the direction of that
“positive change core” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007). Appreciative Inquiry is based on
the idea that our knowledge is socially constructed (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007), so by
framing how we see the world in a positive light, we can impact our reality. By framing
difference as an opportunity that can benefit all, we set the conditions for this to happen.
To bring this back to the discussion of power, a sense that diversity can benefit all
assumes that power will not be used to disadvantage different others. The question here
might be whether hoping that power will be shared, because this brings learning and
potential to an organization, will actually make this happen.

In P. Prasad & Mills’ (1997) analysis of the prevalent “showcasing” of workplace
diversity successes in organizational literature, they note:
What remains interesting, however, is the superficial level of treatment in these celebrations of corporate diversity efforts. Discussions of companies’ successful diversity programs rarely explore the subterranean domain of race tensions, gender frustrations, and ongoing resistance. They present the happy face of diversity without paying much attention to what lies behind it. (p. 12)

In the current context of a diverse global workplace, in which difference between team members is less the exception than the rule, organizations give “diversity” a positive spin, purporting that diversity is a valuable asset to be celebrated. “However, there are persistent signs that the management of diversity is a Herculean task requiring much more than managerial enthusiasm, optimism, and good intentions” (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997, p. 5). In declaring that diversity is an asset, organizations draw attention to an ideal of incorporating this existing trend to benefit their operations. However, they cast a shadow on the challenges involved, conveniently blaming their employees when the ideal is not met. It may be easier said than done to include different others in holding power in organizations.

*The academic school: Diversity as a smoke screen for power hierarchies.*

“Despite a legacy of literally centuries of institutionalized discrimination in the United States, Otherness is soon to be history... due to the fortuitous intersection of two elements – the reconfigured demography of the American workplace and positive thinking” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 32). Tongue-in-cheek Cavanaugh points out from a critical standpoint the ludicrous oversimplification of the superficial celebratory organizational discourse with regards to difference. However, he dispels the belief that naïveté or wishful thinking are at the core of the mainstream diversity discourse. His analysis concludes that it is an intentional strategy by those in power to maintain their
privilege and status in the organizational hierarchy. “‘Celebrating workplace diversity’ can be understood as a preemptive ideological project that aims to neutralize race and gender (the Other) before current demographic trends politicize them” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 44).

Under the current reality of changing workplace demographics, workforces are becoming increasingly diverse. In the face of this reality, “appeals for a more tolerant workplace today will possibly head off unsettling questions about the ‘persistence of male advantage in male organizations’ (Acker, 1992, p. 248) tomorrow” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 44). In this scenario, celebrating diversity becomes a “depotentiating” discourse (Battaglia, 1995 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 45) in the sense that it keeps white male privilege from being threatened because they remain in charge of the agenda. Seen from a critical perspective, this positive ideology of diversity results in a tolerance that is practical, but safe; “the Other is accepted insofar as he or she enriches the center” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 45), or enriches those in power who stand to benefit. In this paradigm, “it seems a bit premature to equate celebrating differences with celebrating equality [italics added]” (Mackinnon, 1987 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 44). Thus, in this critique of the ideology of diversity, it can be seen that the current discourse serves to maintain unequal power structures in organizations, reinforcing the hierarchy of postcolonial binaries. Meanwhile,

The real experience of diversity sits in another world. This is a world where small- and large-scale domination is a fact of daily life, where subjugation and repression are constant experiences. The form that this subjugation takes varies from the more overt abuse of racism, sexism and vilification through to more subtle but sinister forms of domination. Among my MBA students – female and male, from various racial backgrounds – I hear and read accounts of routine victimization and
vilification, where being spat on, abused and excluded are daily experiences for certain students. (Sinclair, 2006, p. 522)

The real world marked by everyday oppression for different others is not going to change anytime soon if “those who sit at the pinnacle of privilege encoded within complex organizations” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 45) continue to propagate an over-simplistic discourse of celebrating diversity. From this perspective, the clever production of tolerance by the powerful to protect their power, and thus maintain their privilege, is the crux of diversity management.

This critique may seem harsh in vilifying “those in power.” Perhaps such harsh critique is necessary to challenge people to address the realities of being a different other in the workplace. At the very least, it is useful to know that there are people who are tired of the status quo; tired of the hierarchical system of binaries which has determined their fate due to their race, gender, or class. bell hooks (2003) talks about how many black people, for example, have given up on the possibility that white people will ever change, that their lives will not always be thwarted by racism in society. It is important to know that some people are tired of power being held in the hands of a few, whether this is intentional or not. From this perspective, rather than relying on the goodwill of the people who stand to benefit from the status quo to support difference in the workplace, transformational change will need to come from the marginalized resisting the asymmetries of power (A. Prasad, 2006). Also, if the strategy of celebratory discourse could be ruptured and replaced by one that authentically recognized the dilemmas of workplace diversity, the challenges of difference could finally become the work of the whole organizational system, rather than expecting individual organizational members to “figure it out.”
Conceptions of Difference

The management & consultancy schools: Difference is benign.

The prevailing notion of diversity follows from the ideology of multiculturalism in Western societies, which categorizes diverse groups in society based on different cultural backgrounds (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). All cultural groups are considered equal, so differences among the individuals in these groups are considered benign (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). The organizational discourse around difference in the multicultural societies of the West follows suit and is therefore also markedly benign. Culture thus provides the framework with which to conceive of difference in Western society and organizations, and it is presumed that there are no power hierarchies when it comes to cultural differences.

Bunker, Alban, and Lewicki (2005) talk about six promising research areas in Bradford & Burke’s (2005) edited work on the future of OD. In their discussion of virtual teams as one of these areas, they recommend two books on the topic. Both books address managing differences as part of the scope of virtual team practice; both, however, only address cultural differences. Cultural differences are definitely relevant, valid, and

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9 From the common perspective that difference is a problem or even an aberration, the word “benign” puts difference in a different light. In this sense, it refutes the notion that difference is like some kind of disease, as the opposite of “malignant.” Thus, the prevalent view that difference is benign suggests that difference is not a problem or aberration. This seems like progress. However, in using the word “benign,” I can get across the notion that when difference is conceived of in this way, it also has its limitations. “Benign” is also defined as meaning “gentle, mild, kindly” (Thompson, 1995). Unfortunately, although it may be the desired state to see difference in this way, this is not the way that people who are different from the majority experience their differences. I argue that differences are not really “benign” in our post-colonial context, even if we may want to believe this, and that assuming that they are “benign” can ignore the important reality of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression that people who are different from dominant groups in society experience. Therefore, using the word “benign” is meant to show how thinking may have moved beyond thinking about difference as a problem, but how at the same time, this thinking covers up the fact that it is, indeed, a problem still for marginalized people.

10 Much of the current understanding of cross-cultural differences is based on work conducted by Fons Trompenaars which resulted in six well-known dimensions of cultural diversity (Hampden-Turner &
useful, but only relying on cultural frameworks to make sense of difference can limit our understanding of the dynamics between different people. Sinclair (2006) challenges that cross-cultural management and globalization discourses provide a language and ensuing conceptualization of group differences encountered in the global workplace which make it possible to avoid the “more confrontational and disputational categories of difference, such as race, gender and class” (Tomlinson & Egan, 2002, p. 95 in Sinclair, 2006, p. 523). As a practitioner, this makes me wonder what the basis is for the omission of more contentious differences from our overall framework for understanding difference.

Since multiculturalism considers all of the different cultural groups making up a society as being equal to one another, it is a model which includes all individuals in its definition of “diversity” (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). Within this system, membership in a specific social identity group, based on differences such as race, gender, or class, is not considered to be meaningful, and thus important, because all groups are considered equal. Since it is not “politically correct” in our multicultural societies, and definitely not in our harmonious organizations, to address social identity group differences, except for cultural differences, the only other way to make sense of difference is to attribute it to the level of the individual, to understand the psychology of a person. This is certainly the case in team development work.

Based on theories of group dynamics, team facilitators work to help team members build trust at the beginning phase of group development. A foundation of trust

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Trompenaars, 2000). Geert Hofstede is another well-known contributor to cross-cultural theory. His work resulted in five dimensions of culture. In a lecture on qualitative research, P. Prasad questioned that the quantitative research methods which Trompenaars and Hofstede used resulted in an accurate portrayal of cultural differences, especially because it may not have captured the complexity of culture (P. Prasad & Prasad, 2007, April). There may even be on oversimplification of cultural differences, never mind the omission of other forms of difference.
is considered to support teams in becoming successful (Lencioni, 2005). Behavioral profiling to become aware of and understand differences among team members is one of the key exercises conducted in this phase. These differences are conceptualized in the form of innate differences at the level of individuals, such as personality styles (for example, in terms of Myers-Briggs personality types), conflict styles (for example, in terms of the Thomas-Kilmann approaches to conflict), and leadership styles (for example, in terms of Situational Leadership preferences). “The idea here is simple: give team members an objective, reliable means for understanding and describing one another” (Lencioni, 2005, p. 25). This behavioral profiling is also meant to “teach team members to get comfortable being exposed to one another, unafraid to [be honest with each other]” because this will lead to people being willing to be vulnerable with each other, which is necessary for relationships built on trust (Lencioni, 2005, p. 18).

Focusing on difference at the individual level, as is prevalent in team development praxis, means focusing on how the effects of the multiple identities that an individual has (e.g., gender, race, etc.) coalesce into a unique identity, affecting how an individual thinks and acts in society and, therefore, in an organization. Mainstream team development praxis, therefore, focuses on the final result of the social dynamics of identities, seeking to help people work with “what is,” rather than on understanding how

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11 The Thomas-Kilmann and Situational Leadership models are typically used to provide a framework for group leadership. They are not typically used to highlight differences, although I believe they can be used for this purpose. The Thomas-Kilmann instrument measures people’s tendencies in responding to conflictual situations. Different people have different natural responses to conflict. The instrument can be used to survey a team and discover what different conflict styles different people tend to use. This can help people understand how others will tend to respond to conflict. Situational Leadership is a model which purports different approaches to leadership depending on the situation, offering leaders a framework to know how to best lead someone with a certain level of development for a specific task. Different people have different natural tendencies in terms of how they lead; the model then provides a framework as to how they should lead in different situations. There is a questionnaire to determine one’s natural leadership tendencies, which can highlight differences between people’s natural leadership preferences in a team.
these identities interplay in the social sphere, which would be more of a focus on “what ought to be.” Addressing what ought to/could be would be a way of looking at removing systemic barriers due to social identity group membership for all people to reach their full potential at work. There may be aspects of a person’s identity that can never come to full fruition in the workplace if this person is limited to conform to the dominant norms. Thus, behavioral profiling may give insight into how a person thinks and acts, but doesn’t create awareness as to why they think and act as they do, which could lead to an explanation as to whether this person is empowered in the system to think and act fully or whether barriers are imposed on them to fit into the dominant system. When team development praxis only focuses on the psychology and disregards the sociology of difference which would consider a person’s unique position in the social systems that structure relations in organizations, it misses a part of the complexity of the effect of difference in a team. Helping people to also develop a systemic view of differences would empower teams to question barriers and find ways for everyone to offer their resources. Becoming aware of difference is definitely an important first step, a step which can help a team build trust. Addressing contentious social identity group differences as well as cultural and individual behavioral differences will capture the full picture of difference and make this a meaningful whole.

Both the technical and the consultancy schools regard difference as benign. I believe where their approaches diverge is in how they portray the knowledge about difference. The technical school is concerned with an absolute truth, with measurable, reliable, valid facts. The quantitative studies to discern cultural dimensions are an example of the technical approach. They outline the norms and values that are inherent in
different cultures. The facts that are distilled from these studies can be used as rigid
frameworks with which to categorize the social world. They create a profile of people
from different cultures, setting our expectations of how people from a certain culture will
think and behave, giving us one set of explanations for the way in which people from
different cultures are different from one another. The same restricted understanding of
differences can also come from behavioral profiling exercises. If someone is found to
have a specific profile, we set expectations, including of themselves, for the way they
will think and act in social contexts. These categories can be very useful for people in
coming to better understand themselves and others and start to become aware of
differences. The danger of such categories is when they are seen as absolutes and thus
taken to the extreme (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). In this case, they can lead
to stereotyping which can limit people. In organizations, this can lead to pigeon-holing
different people in a way in which we believe they can contribute, without seeing the full
person and the many different categories to which they belong. Especially in a very
global environment, where people may have many different influences, it is particularly
difficult to assume absolutes will govern their thoughts and behaviors. The norms and
values constituting a certain culture are still only a normal distribution, a bell curve,
within which individual members of a culture, for many different reasons, may or may
not fall (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000).

The consultancy school has a different approach to the benign differences of
culture and individual psychology. From its humanist perspective, there is no absolute
framework with which to understand differences. Rather, developing a general
understanding that differences exist in a relative framework is the goal of the humanist
approach. Senge’s (1990) concept of mental models is a well-known example of the humanist approach to conceptualizing difference that is used in OD. Mental models are the “deeply held internal images of how the world works” (Senge, 1990, p. 174), they are the cultural and psychological glasses which color our views of the world. Rather than describing the nature of these glasses as in the case of the technical paradigm, the consultancy school concerns itself mostly with learning about the presence of mental models that tend to “exist below the level of awareness” (Senge, 1990, p. 176). Building awareness and understanding of different perspectives is the key goal of this approach. Even without knowing what the actual values and norms are that govern a person’s cultural identity, I can know that they have a different perspective of the world. I can value, appreciate, and respect a different person by accepting that difference is a cherished resource. This humanist approach to difference highlights the brand of multiculturalism that I have come across in Canada. Although this approach to difference is commendable in terms of its vision of building bridges across difference to promote harmony in diversity, it may be somewhat utopian in terms of being oblivious to a historical legacy of power hierarchies due to social identity group differences which continue to influence social relations in our current reality.

The academic school: Difference is charged by historical power hierarchies.

Alana Lentin (2005) explores the development of the ideology or “regime” (p. 381) of multiculturalism in western countries from a critical perspective. The consequences and implications of racism were in painful view after the Holocaust, so in the 1950’s, the UN developed a policy on race that was meant to abolish racism (Lentin, 2005). This policy forms the foundation of multiculturalism which is the prevalent way of
thinking about difference in societies in the West today (Lentin, 2005). The policy in effect replaced the politically charged concept of “race” – which was now considered to have no scientific validity – with the benign concept of “culture” – which was assumed to be non-hierarchical – as a way of categorizing human difference (Lentin, 2005).\(^{12}\) However, Lentin exposes how the ideology of multiculturalism has actually become a barrier to addressing racism in our contemporary global society because it keeps us from addressing racism at its source.

Multiculturalism is currently state policy which nations can use as a facade to claim that they respect all differences. Aberrations such as racism are considered, therefore, only to exist at the individual level, and the institutional level becomes untouchable, and undiscussable.

Thinking culturally about difference is the default position for not talking about ‘race’ and avoiding the charge of racism. But this very need for such a substitute covers up the fact that the hierarchy put in place by racism has been maintained. It no longer exists as blatant persecution. It is more ambivalent. It can continue precisely because it has been deleted from official discourse. (Lentin, 2005, p. 394)

Diversity management is the equivalent on an organizational level to multiculturalism on a societal level, the former having been derived from the ideology of the latter. Diversity management, like multiculturalism, can provide a discourse that does not allow the persistence of unequal power relations to be acknowledged and therefore recognized and addressed. Also as in Lentin’s (2005) rendition of the story of multiculturalism, diversity

\(^{12}\) Although the anthropologists who dominated the group that developed the UN policy on race sought to portray cultural differences as benign, there were still difficulties from their western perspective not to think in terms of a hierarchy of advanced and primitive cultures (Lentin, 2005). Thus, although theoretically, the ideology of multiculturalism which came out of the UN policy attempts to downplay a hierarchy between cultural values and norms, such a hierarchy seems difficult to dispel from a western colonial mindset. The benign concept of culture was meant to replace the charged concept of race, but in many regards, one hierarchical system replaced another hierarchical system. Thus, even as cultural differences have been propagated as benign under multiculturalism, people still have a tendency to perceive differences in terms of a power hierarchy.
management can be perceived as a strategy of the elite to manage and control the issue of
difference in the system, and to do this in a way that keeps their advantage as elites. The
hierarchical binaries are still in place, but it is politically incorrect to talk about them.
“Such a position is often described as being color blind – that is, one that neither notices
nor focuses on any kind of biological or socially constructed differences” (P. Prasad,
Pringle, & Konrad, 2006, pp. 8-9). This is seen as a way to avoid being “needlessly
divisive at a broader cultural level [which would be] ultimately detrimental to the
accomplishment of an integrated society” (P. Prasad, et al., 2006, p. 8).

From a postcolonial perspective, people who have been marginalized by the
oppressive power of unjust systems have been disadvantaged culturally and economically
for centuries, causing them to endure systemic disadvantages and negative stereotyping.
The legacy of colonialism has been far-reaching and profound, its effects also being felt
in the workplace. Looking at things in this way, it is easy to see why color blindness –
ignoring that difference exists – in and of itself can not overcome discrimination after
centuries of oppression. The problem with color blindness is captured beautifully by P.
Prasad et al. (2006):

Color blindness overlooks the powerful cultural and economic legacy that
centuries of exploitation and discrimination leave for historically
disadvantaged groups. Entire epochs of slavery, patriarchy and
colonialism have resulted in some identity groups lacking skills,
confidence and institutional support to enter into and advance within work
organizations. At the same time, they have also left us with a collection of
adverse stereotypes toward women, African Americans, gays, etc., that
prevent their full inclusion into the workplace. Given this legacy of
discrimination, it is somewhat naive to imagine that an attitude of color
blindness on its own can overcome systemic social and organizational
discrimination. In sum, ‘blinding’ oneself to race, gender, sexual
preference and other socially significant differences cannot, by itself, erase
the consequences of many lifetimes of oppression and/or discrimination.
(pp. 8-9)
Unfortunately, it all too often masks discrimination. Finally, in fostering denial about the continuation of racism and other oppressions, color blindness allows people to ignore more subtle forms and even blame the victims when they are unsuccessful in a system in which discrimination against them is institutionalized (P. Prasad, et al., 2006).

Using culture as the only acceptable way to categorize group differences in our multicultural societies, “the primarily Caucasian male monoculture currently monopolizing positions of power in corporate suites around the globe” (Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 42) espouses the view that the hierarchy of binaries no longer exists, just by saying that it no longer exists, and in this way, holds onto privilege. “Politicized approaches that stress institutionalized racism [and other institutionalized oppressions] and that look to ground the anti-racist project in the lived experience of racism’s targets” (Lentin, 2005) would provide an alternative approach for diversity management practitioners that has the potential for addressing the power hierarchies in organizations to surface the marginalization that this incurs.

The conventional view of OD seeks to enhance organizational effectiveness by working at all levels of the system: micro (individual), meso (group/team), and macro (system). Thus, most practitioners take a holistic view in establishing more effective organizational systems, with initiatives addressing all aspects of the system and their interplay with one another. However,

For the most part, the theories and models that OD practitioners use do not consider the existence and implications for organizations of dominant and subordinated identity groups, power differences among groups, prejudice, and institutionalized racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. (Brazzel, 2007, p. 17)

These aspects of an organizational system are a product of the greater social systems in which organizations are embedded. It seems that one way of thinking is that an OD
professional’s systems view stops at the boundaries of the organization itself, that social issues are not the task of OD (Brazzel, 2007; Greene & Berthoud, 2007). Without an understanding of the broader context affecting the way differences are taken up in society in line with this way of thinking, the power dynamics surrounding issues of difference will remain a mystery in organizations. A “problem with divorcing workplace diversity issues from the social and historical context surrounding them is that an understanding of power/dominance relations between groups is often lost” (P. Prasad, et al., 2006, pp. 12-13).

Although many OD professionals may be ignoring the context of the greater social systems in which organizations are embedded when (not) addressing social identity group differences, there are some contributions in the field that can be drawn on in this regard which would refute that this is standard practice in OD. Trist and Emery, notable members of the famous Tavistock Institute in London, developed the concept of “Open Systems Design.” This model recognizes the vital connection and thus interrelatedness between organizations and their outside environment (Alon, 2004). This is foundational to the broader concept of systems thinking, and would lead OD professionals working in diversity to think about the social systems which may affect the meaning of difference in our contemporary society. It is also a model which suggests that organizations have an effect on the external environment through their exports. From this perspective, challenging inequities in organizations could result in changing society.

Barry Oshry is an OD theorist and practitioner who has concentrated his work to look at power relations in organizations. In his popular book, Seeing Systems (Oshry, 1996), he talks about “Tops”, “Middles,” and “Bottoms” in his work on power, which is
the concept of class hierarchy common in OD. However, he also talks about the
“Dominant” and the “Dominated,” and in his writings about the “Dance of Power,” he
refers to High-Power and Low-Power people. He even has a chapter on the politics of
gender. Thus, when Brazzel (2007) suggests that OD practitioners do not address power,
oppression, and discrimination in organizations, perhaps this is referring to his experience
of how OD practitioners are working on the ground. With works the like of Barry
Oshry’s, OD professionals have theories available to them to challenge oppression and
discrimination due to the abuse of power in organizations. Perhaps there is often a
disconnect between espoused theory and theory in use among OD professionals in
addressing this issue.

An understanding of these broader systemic effects in the social construction of
difference would facilitate OD professionals in “promoting genuine workplace diversity . . . efforts aimed at destabilizing and subverting . . . [postcolonial hierarchical] binaries.”
theoretical framework that addresses structural and systemic factors, while Mirchandani & Butler (2006) suggest a framework which exposes “patriarchies, colonialisms, racisms and feminisms” (p. 484). Postcolonial theory offers such a framework to identify
structural and systemic factors, which would provide OD practitioners with the necessary
holistic perspective, affecting how organizations approach difference in the global
workplace. Sinclair (2006) quotes a diversity consultant:

I use my theory to say in ways that they can hear that they are not gender-
neutral. I use the theory to highlight the systemic issues. I disrupt their
discourse that this is normal. I disrupt their certainty. They are like
chooks13 in the chicken house. I try to get them all off their perches of

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13 In colloquial English in Australia and New Zealand, this means a chicken or fowl.
certainty and flapping and prevent them going back to roost in the same place. (p. 525)

It would be useful if OD praxis, including team development praxis, could develop and more widely use approaches for dealing with social identity group differences, to complement the understanding that we have of individual differences through behavioral and cultural profiling. One of the primary tenets of OD with regard to what makes a system effective is that every individual is empowered to contribute their full potential to the system. Empowerment will mean addressing the colonialist system of binaries still in place in our global societies, and thus in our organizations across the world. Heeding the critical perspective of difference that there are power hierarchies which render differences unequal and that these hierarchies are institutionalized in our society will help to make these social identity group differences discussable, surfacing them for scrutiny and transformation.

Conceptions of Identity

The management school: Reductions of a complex world.

As a manager of several adult education centers in Germany, I got a taste of the challenges of working in an organizational system with all of its intense complexity. Managing people to be able to deliver effectively on the work was hectic, turbulent, and at times wildly chaotic. Add to this the complicating dynamics that difference brings to the workplace, and it is easy to understand the desire by management to reduce the complexity of yet another factor in the organizational system. Various approaches are used by different organizations to take a stab at managing diversity by simplifying the reality of difference in an attempt to contain complexity.
One such approach was illustrated by a study by Mirchandani & Butler (2006) of the diversity initiatives of a leading Canadian company. In this organization, separate task forces were set up to address issues of equity and inclusion for the minority groups identified in the organization: women, Aboriginal peoples, people with disability, and visible minorities (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). This approach assumes a fixed identity of those belonging to specific groups, such that a task force might be able to figure out a specific approach to supporting people with that identity. It also reduces complexity by looking at one identity at a time, although many people will belong to more than one of these groups at once, which could compound some of the issues in their reality. This represents an approach based on the technical paradigm which is done in the name of the “efficient control of the material world” (Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 70).

An alternative approach taken by many organizations is to lump the dimensions of difference between people, such as race and gender, and even different aspects of human experience like thinking and feeling (Brazzel, 2007), into one big area called “diversity,” creating one single category and managing this with one single approach, with the view that all differences are valid, but equally benign (Sinclair, 2006). “The idea of diversity as a catch-all solution to a range of structural challenges for organizations is enormously seductive” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 523). When diversity is seen as a catch-all concept, diversity management becomes a catch-all approach. However, again, a part of the complexity of diversity is that people’s social identities are a mix of different identities, the combination being activated in unique ways in different contexts (Elmes & Connelley, 1997).
Elmes & Connelly (1997) explain how understanding other individuals according to their membership in certain social identity groups is a psychological strategy that assists in sense making. It is a psychological tool that we use which categorizes objects to aid us with quick responses in a our challenging environment (Elmes & Connelley, 1997). This strategy, however, can lead to pigeon-holing or prejudice which occurs when we generalize about social identity groups, assuming that everyone who has a certain identity will have certain characteristics (Elmes & Connelley, 1997). In the basic process of prejudice, we make assumptions regarding the identity of others – assumptions regarding how they think and what their actions mean. This practice is especially misleading in a global workplace where people hold multiple identities that interact with each other and where there also may not be a fixed profile for a specific social identity group.

The consultancy and academic schools: Capturing complexity in reality.

Sinclair (2006) describes the challenges of diversity work with “eager managers [who are] firmly committed to the ‘can do’ managerial camp and impatient with theoretical reservations or reforming agendas” (p. 517). I participate in an on-line discussion group organized by an OD professional association, the OD Network. Recently, we have had many interesting discussions about racism, sparked by Obama’s speech on race and the controversy of Reverend Wright, and the political turmoil in Zimbabwe with its colonial past. Someone shared a quote from Jacob Burckhardt, a famous historian who said, “Beware the terrible simplifiers.” What he meant by this was that we are prone to oversimplifying reality, to finding quick answers to reduce complexity. In the process, though, important aspects contained in that complexity are
lost. For many reasons, we don’t take the time to get below the surface of an issue, including of course that those who are comfortable with the status quo are taking a big risk to examine and address what is there. Making diversity a catch-all for all aspects of human difference is certainly one such oversimplification.

For more than twenty years, Joan Acker has been exploring the pervasive presence in organizations of such universalizing simplifications. She argues, “rendered body-less (universalized, race-less, gender-less; thus inoffensive because no longer a ‘woman’ or ‘black’ in an Ayn Rand man’s world), generic men and women will finally gain admittance into the paradigmatic fraternity of universal masculine workers” (Acker, 1992 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 44). Although all difference is considered equal in organizations based on the management school, somehow the white European male identity is often taken to be “normal” and, in this case, the act of universalizing difference is a strategy to force others to comply with this generic type to “fit in.” In this way, implicitly, certain identities are preferred over others. Postcolonialism explains this as a Eurocentric\textsuperscript{14} attitude, which places all things European at the centre and strives to promote these as superior and therefore desirable (A. Prasad, 2006).

While identity can be subsumed by a generic type, so that more people are cloned in the image of the powerful, another aspect of universalizing diversity is that the needs of specific identity groups are not met. Diversity as a catch-all promotes the notion of false unity between social identity groups (Sinclair, 2006). For example, “the experiences of women are not all the same, and black women are not comfortable that white feminists speak for them (Moreton-Robinson, 2000 in Sinclair, 2006, p. 523). Also, there is no

\textsuperscript{14} Europe is conceived of broadly in this case, going beyond the geographical location of Europe and extending to the values of European culture extended across the globe.
evidence that a diversity initiative targeting one social identity group will help the cause
of another social identity group (Sinclair, 2006). At the same time, universalizing
diversity could lead to a focus on some identity groups to the exclusion of others. The
ideology of diversity obscures what it pertains to be about, and that is difference. It
“holds onto sameness while ignoring difference” (P. Prasad, et al., 2006, p. 8). Allowing
a dimension of diversity like culture to subsume difference, as discussed in the previous
section, is like putting a blanket over all of the other dimensions, hiding the complex
dynamics that they bring to social relations, including the complex dynamics of the
interplay between diverse identities within individuals.

Not only are people’s identities a combination of different identities – usually a
mixture of dominant and subordinate social identities (Elmes & Connelley, 1997) – but
these multiple identities interlock or intersect in complex ways because they exist in
relation to each other (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). Thus, dimensions of diversity such
as race, gender, and class may be better understood as processes rather than traits (Glenn,
1985 in Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). There is no formula for figuring out the
relationship between a person’s multiple identities, nor are they fixed, since they are
located in specific geographical and historical contexts (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006).
Elmes & Connelley (1997) argue that those people belonging to minority identity groups
“each day experience the dissonance of social identity conflict” (p. 158). Inconsistent,
conflicting demands are placed on people due to their different identities, especially
placing stress on those who have minority group identities to delicately balance in a
dominant system (Elmes & Connelley, 1997). “For [minority group members], then,
existing in the dominant system of meanings and values that structure culture and society
may be a painful double dance, clicking in, clicking out – the divided consciousness” (Du Plessis, 1985, p. 149 in Elmes & Connelley, 1997, p. 158).

The prevalent oversimplification of diversity as a uni-dimensional concept in the workplace compromises the effectiveness of current approaches to diversity based on this questionable concept, since the many aspects of diversity’s complexity are reduced in these approaches. Perhaps this is why Jacoby (1994) states, “workplace diversity may have become little more than an organizational and educational buzzword, simultaneously signifying anything, everything, and nothing” (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997, p. 17). A more nuanced understanding of diversities would help organizations capture the complexity of identity. Maintaining the complexity of diverse identities would allow the full potential of diversity to be captured, so that this can contribute to the organization, while maintaining the well-being of the people in the organization.

Both the humanist and the critical paradigms give support to the idea that it would be beneficial to figure out how to hold the complexity of identity, rather than trying to reduce or distill it. The consultancy school perspective offers Barry Johnson’s popular OD concept of Polarity Management in this regard. In essence, Johnson suggests that an issue is a polarity to manage rather than a problem to solve if the issue is ongoing (and therefore seemingly unsolvable) and when the issue can be explained by the presence of two opposing, but interdependent forces (1996). In the case of diversity, he suggests that it is a polarity with the opposing forces of uniqueness and connectedness (Johnson, n.d.). These are the upsides to the polarities of diversity. Each polarity represents downsides as well. The opposing downsides are isolation and sameness (Johnson, n.d.). “The challenge
is to move away from the downsides and to move back and forth between the upsides of the two polarities, in order to accrue the benefits of both” (Laiken, 1997, p. 40). Thus, Polarity Management is an OD approach which tries to allow space for the uniqueness of differing identities, while allowing for connectedness within the system through integration and inclusion. This approach allows for a systemic approach which holds complexity by balancing the parts within the whole.

The academic school contributes to the idea of managing the complexity of diverse identities with its theory of intersectionality. Basically, this theory is based on a critique of the “essentialist logic of identity politics” which supposes that “all members of any given social group share a [singular] ‘core of oppression’ ” (Razack, 1988 as cited in Slamet, 2007, pp. 17-18). It suggests rather that identity is more complex than that.

My understanding of the complex interplay between race, class, and gender is related to a more fluid and contingent conceptualization of each. . . . I regard race, gender, and class as social constructs used to produce and maintain unequal power relations; however, I also recognize that these constructs oversimplify a social reality that is more fluid, complex and contingent. (Slamet, 2007, p. 20)

A critical approach to identity thus provides an understanding of the ways in which people’s multiple identities intersect or interlock and how this can complicate and compound oppression. Slamet (2007) also reminds us that,

Intersectional theories . . . also suggest that the lives and social identities of everyone . . . are shaped by race, class, and gender to produce different experiences of privilege and penalty. This conceptualization sheds light on the inter-relationship between penalty and privilege and the larger system of power in which we are all implicated” (p. 22).
From Abstract Theory to Concrete Experience

Through an analysis of the literature, I have explored the field of diversity management. How this field is practised in an organization is determined by the underlying philosophy of how to manage the social system of the organization, including the social dynamics of power, difference, and identity. These factors interplay to create a context which serves as the backdrop for globally dispersed teams. I have had some profound experiences learning and working in very diverse groups, punctuated by many instances where social barriers served to separate group members. I will now share two stories as examples of these experiences. The themes and issues in this literature analysis should be illuminated as the complexity of working across difference is captured by relaying my experience of this reality. These stories will give a glimpse of what it might be like to work in a highly diverse globally dispersed team, with different conceptions of how to address power, difference, and identity in organizational contexts based on differing underlying philosophies.

The first story tells the tale of my time studying in an MBA program at a university in Germany. Most of our work was done in small groups. In these groups, we were definitely asked to perform as a team, since we had to work together for a common purpose and shared responsibility for our goals and reward for our outcomes (which is the definition of what makes a team and not just a work group by Lencioni, 2005). Thus, this story illustrates work in diverse teams, within a diverse organization (our cohort of students at the university). The approach to managing diversity within the context of the university, which was practised by our professors (who were in essence our leaders) and adopted by the majority of students in our class, was largely based on the technical paradigm. This story, therefore, captures my experience of working across difference in
an organization based on the management school. On the one hand, as a woman, a
foreigner, and a non-native speaker, I was marginalized in the context of mostly German
men. At the same time, as a white person from a wealthy nation in the West/global North,
my unearned privilege also had implications as I worked with people of color from the
East/global South. I explore the double dance of balancing both privileged and
marginalized identities, the challenges of managing a divided consciousness in a social
system. It is particularly interesting how our diverse MBA class, specializing in
International Consulting, managed the diversity in our organization. We were being
prepared for a global marketplace, with the word “globalization” at the forefront of all of
our discussions. We were a diverse group of people who had been selected for the
program so that we could develop our skills to work globally. What were our experiences
of managing the differences that are par for the course in the global workplace, though, in
a group that represented a global village, with people who had come together to study
from seven different nations?

The second story is again taken from a class experience. The context of this
experience is an organization (an academic department for Sociology and Equity studies)
largely influenced by the critical paradigm. The class was studying race and ethnicity, so
my privileged identity as a white person was directly under scrutiny through our
academic discourse. This space was interesting because although it was in Canada at a
university that was predominantly white, the non-dominant group of people of color in
society was the dominant group in this particular space. All of a sudden, my white
privilege in Canadian society no longer went unquestioned. This story explores the group
dynamics of my identity as a person of privilege in a context in which diversity
management was approached through the academic school. It draws on my marginalized identities to learn to understand how my privilege affects others. One important element of the story is how I hold onto hope that it will be possible to connect with people across the social barriers that separate us.
Chapter 3: Storytelling

“The answer is always in the entire story, not a piece of it”
(Jim Harrison as cited in Simmons, 2001, p. 83).

Prelude

Through recounting stories of my experiences of working across difference, I am able to capture the complexity of how power and difference affected our social relations. This narrative dimension of my work is new and exciting to me, and I ask you as the reader to explore the complexity of life in our post-colonial context by immersing yourself in my world. “It is . . . important to keep in mind that ethnography is more about generating insights than predictions (Geertz, 1973 as cited in P. Prasad, 2005, p. 82) and that the ‘truth-value’ of a text is more important than its ‘fact-value’ ” (Bate, 1997 as cited in P. Prasad, 2005, p. 82). An ethnographic study results in a narrative which “weave(s) an insightful and nuanced story,” so that the insights of the local story will shed light on our own stories as well (P. Prasad, 2005, p. 82).

A Divided Consciousness

When I started an MBA in International Consulting at a university in Germany, I joined a cohort of 18 students for a year of intense study. We had block seminars three days a week that were based on group work with case studies, simulations, and in-company projects. On the first day, I sat in the classroom where we would meet for the next year, looking around at the unfamiliar faces. The old wooden desks and chairs were arranged in a horseshoe which would remain the format for the coming year. I sat with my back to the window, the window that looked out over the valley of the famous jewellery artisans of Germany. I wondered what I had gotten myself into.
Most of the people in the room were white German men. These men were engineers, lawyers, psychologists, IT specialists, philosophers, and business people specializing in finance and international business. One of the white men, an HR specialist, turned out to be Dutch. There was one German woman, who was the youngest of us all. She sat there biting her nails, criss-crossing her legs in her psychedelic jeans, tousling her burst of cranberry red died hair. She had just graduated from HR at this university and was the only student to join our program straight from undergrad. Two Asian women huddled in the corner closest to the door. One of the women was from China, another was from Thailand. They had both worked in their fields of linguistics and finance in their homelands, holding multiple degrees, including other international graduate level ones. A darker man took the chair at one end of the horseshoe; I sat facing him across the room at the other end of the horseshoe. He was an engineer from Brazil. A third middle eastern business man sat among the other students. He had an Iranian name; he was quick, though, to point out that he was German.

Our Organization Development professor designed the first week to facilitate a team building process with us. A bunch of cards lay scattered on the floor in front of us. Our professor asked us to choose one based on what we thought our role might be in the group. The cards named roles of people who traditionally made up the courts of European kings. I saw roles like “jester,” “musician,” and “cook,” as well as even “king” and “queen.” Then one caught my eye and, instinctively, I picked it up. This card said “advocate.” Such a person in the days of king’s courts would make a case for justice before the king on behalf of the subjects of the land. As I explained to the group why I had picked up this card, my thoughts took me back to Africa where my parents were
working against the injustice of poverty. This was my strong connection to a passion for justice. I felt my cheeks burn as I realized my personal, honest story was running away with me. Did I want to share my passion for justice with these stiff suits sitting in front of me? When I was finished, many in the group smiled and looked intrigued. I certainly had no inkling at that point to what extent I would advocate for justice in the group. Nor did I realize the toll that fighting against injustice would take on all of us.

We then went on to develop group norms. The group norms read like a handbook on German culture: people would be punctual, we would all show a strong work ethic (which was determined by investing many hours of work), and decisions would be made by an open show of hands: one (wo)man, one vote. There seemed to be no question in the mind’s of the Germans, the dominant group in our cohort, that these norms were superior to other alternatives. We also agreed to hold a monthly team meeting among ourselves, where we would openly discuss issues of relevance to the team. We would rotate the facilitator function among ourselves. I was concerned about two people who were missing this first week: a Chinese businesswoman and a Turkish man who was a specialist in linguistics. The majority of German men decided that decisions could be made for people who were absent. Our team norms were established. These norms may as well have been ensconced on a tablet made of granite. We would revisit them to enforce them, but challenging the democratic decision making process for example, where the German male majority tended to always vote in a certain way, while minority voices usually had no influence, proved impossible. I learned how democracy can privilege the majority, while silencing those on the margins.
The next day, as I got off the bus at the university, I bumped into people in my class, a Chinese woman and two of the German men. Another German man who had graduated from our program the previous year approached us, having met us in the orientation the day before. I smiled and greeted him; he barely glanced at me. He started speaking to the German men and the three of them walked with a light skip in their step to our classroom. I was shocked that he didn’t greet me. I learned later that his cohort group was locked in desperate conflict between the German students and the foreigners. I guess he didn’t have any use for another foreign person. I felt that this man snubbed me because of my belonging in a specific identity group. It was a bitter taste of what was to come.

In the computer lab that day as this former student got our e-mail accounts set up and introduced us to a project management system, I asked if he could correct my name in my e-mail address. It had been written Anne-Cristin, a fairly common name in this area of Germany. I explained that my name was “Cristin” and that my second name was “Anne,” but that this second name was not a name that I ever used. Germans don’t typically get second names, so they couldn’t imagine that I could have a given name that wouldn’t be used. The same German man who had ignored me at the bus stop continued to ignore me. When I tried to explain that English speaking people often have given names that they don’t use and that my name was really only “Cristin,” the other German men in my class asked me to stop wasting time. They pushed aside my request as a silly concern.

I was called “Anne-Christine” by most of my German classmates, professors, and university staff for the extent of my program. My name was called on graduation day as I
went onto the stage to collect my degree. I had taken my passport to the Registrar’s Office to ensure that they would put the correct name on my degree. The Rector of the University called “Cristin Stephens-Wegner.” As I went onto the stage, I could see the stunned faces of the German men who had not wanted to listen to what my real name was. They were astounded that my official name was “Cristin” and that I could obviously have a second given name that wasn’t married to the first with a hyphen. One of them nodded to me in acknowledgement, his face flushed with embarrassment.

Our first course was in International Economic Relations. The professor used a large map at the front of the class to talk about economies around the world. When the professor skipped over an area of the globe, the entire continent of Africa, I was compelled to pray. His response was that African economies would never be able to rise out of extreme poverty, so these were in essence irrelevant now and forever. He went on to say that no amount of reconstruction would be helpful, so development work was useless. I wondered how we could dismiss a whole continent, with no hope of and thus engagement for a better future, and not wonder if this was an appropriate world order. I pressed on and asked him how we could forget about this continent after it had been devastated by a history of European colonization. The African continent had been devastated by legacies such as slavery and colonialism; we had gotten them into this mess, shouldn’t we now help them get out of it? Didn’t the corporate world with all of its resources and power have a role to play in creating a better world?

Both the professor and my fellow students had looks of consternation on their faces – some were confused, others were annoyed, yet others were angry. It was firmly believed that Europe had long made amends for colonization and that this was just an age
old excuse. Africa’s problems were Africa’s doing. The business world was going to march ahead in the name of progress, and the weak would be left behind. The marginalization of colonized peoples was their problem. I didn’t have the sense that the business people surrounding me cared about using the power and privilege that they had access to as a way to build a better world. Their business endeavors were about the survival of the fittest, about their own personal gain, which made me worry about the plight of poor and vulnerable people. I wondered, though, what the role of business should be in contemporary society.

Our next class was in Organization Development with the same professor who had led our initial team facilitation. The first day, he asked us to get into pairs. Each pair was to present a topic to the class that semester which would form the basis of our seminars, and of the pair’s mark. Most of the assignments in our program were done through group work, so our marks were closely linked to how we performed as a team. When the professor asked us to form pairs, the young German woman immediately waved her hand at me from across the room to catch my attention. She skipped across the room and asked me to be her partner. I was thrilled, relieved to have had someone ask me, relieved that it was someone I felt comfortable with. There was a commotion, a flurry of activity as people found their partners. When the professor asked if we were all finished, the Thai woman gingerly put up her hand. She didn’t have a partner, and nor did the Turkish man.

The professor wondered if they could work together. The Thai woman graciously asked if they each might be able to partner with a German student. Both had just arrived in the country just weeks before. Neither of them was familiar with the culture in terms of
expectations for such an assignment, or with the environment such as the library system, and neither felt comfortable yet in the language. The professor thought that her request was quite reasonable and asked if there might be a group who would be willing to reform, each joining one of these foreign students. There were some whispers, some shaking of heads, but no one was willing to join them in a team.

The professor became anxious, he pressed harder. He looked at me, raising his eyebrows in consternation. I could see that he was deeply disturbed by the undercurrents in the group. I didn’t know how to react, I raised my eyebrows in solidarity with him. I, too, felt concerned. I realized much later that he was probably hoping that the student who had identified themselves as an advocate the week before would play their attested role. I was shocked by the dynamics, but I didn’t know what to do. The German students shifted uncomfortably on their feet, their darting eyes avoiding contact with the professor and the foreign students. I felt torn. My language skills were stronger, I had lived in the country for five years now, I had a German husband as a cultural translator. I wondered if I should offer to join them. My partner never considered breaking up our pairing. She was already paired with a foreigner, and wasn’t that the issue? I could almost hear her heart pounding in her chest. I didn’t push her. Maybe I should have. However, there was a part of me that was also afraid to pair off with the other foreign students. I pushed those thoughts deep down. I told myself I was supporting my partner who needed the comfort of another woman in the sea of grey suits around us.

In a country where job applications must include university transcripts, so that marks are an ever present artifact directing a career path, the risk of pairing with someone different, and someone who was possibly weak due to questionable language competency
or even educational background, was too great. Our group had decided that the Thai woman and the Turkish man were outsiders that day. This burden that we placed on them weighed heavily on both of them well beyond our program. They were marginalized by the fear we had of partnering with them across difference. However, other foreigners like myself and the Dutch man had been popular partners. What privileged me to make people curious about how I was different and see this as a potential advantage, while they balked at exploring the differences of other foreign students? Language competency was the reason given at the surface. I began to think about lines drawn due to skin color and the status of our home countries (“developing” versus “developed”) and it made me physically sick. The enactment of exclusion in our group that day became an implicit group norm that plagued our group culture forever.

The Brazilian man drove me home that night. He was furious about the injustice that had happened in the classroom. I realized that I was not the only one to have seen it this way. In conversations in the library, the cafeteria, and amidst project work, the foreign students formed a solidarity, a place where we could talk about the exclusions that were happening. I was a soul that seemed to move between the two groups, the foreigners and the Germans. The German students were quite open and welcoming to me. However, I could see the undercurrents of prejudice and discrimination against other foreign students and this stirred a desire in me to fight for justice. We decided to confront our group at our first student team meeting.

We wrote a piece together detailing what had happened in the OD class from the perspective of the foreign students, including a description of people’s feelings of exclusion and marginalization. We wrote it as a generic piece, not using any names, not
speaking directly from anyone or to anyone. The Asian students explained how difficult it was to confront people openly from their cultural standpoint, but they had a deep desire to be understood, to have the marginalization stop, so we were trying to find a way to confront the group within limits that suited all of us.

I read the piece out loud during our team meeting. I can’t remember how it came to be me, but this was the first time that I stepped up in my self-professed role as an advocate. After a couple of lines, I was asked to go to the front of the room. I sat and faced the group. I could hardly read the piece as my heart pounded wildly and I lost my breath. I wasn’t looking at anyone, but I could feel all eyes riveted on me. The message sat like a lump in the back of everyone’s throat. The Turkish man was angry and twisted in his seat, he faced the German students and shared his sense of European domination. I realized we were no longer only speaking about the undercurrents in our group, but we had moved to talking about undercurrents in German society. I felt myself flinch with the rest of the Europeans. The German facilitator of our meeting that night stopped him in his tracks. He redirected the conversation by thanking us for our courage to share this message. He said that for him, it was as though we had put a mirror up in front of him and he wasn’t sure he liked what he was seeing. He suggested that we each needed time to gaze into that mirror and question ourselves. He suggested that we examine ourselves honestly and deeply. We all left the meeting subdued, pondering individually how we could move towards a culture of inclusion.

The topic that I had prepared to present to the class with my partner, the German woman, for our OD seminar was on “Cross-cultural Consulting.” We were the only ones to pick this from the list of suggested topics from the professor. I was extremely excited
to get this topic, as I was keen to learn more about cultural theory as a way to understand difference. This was a topic that I was passionate about as my daily experience was confusing, challenging, and all-encompassing as a different other. We used the picture from psychology which some people saw as an old women, while other people saw as a young woman, to illustrate the idea that people may view the same reality, but have very different interpretations, interpretations guided by their own perceptions. We talked about culture as providing a lens through which people see the world, coloring their perceptions. When it came time for a class discussion on our topic, I tried to challenge my classmates to think about their own cultural glasses, and wondered how these might be affecting the way we worked together in our group.

The professor jumped out of his seat and thwarted this attempt to address issues in the group. He said this wasn’t the time or place to address our own group experiences. He glanced at me with an annoyed, somewhat aggressive look. I have never figured out why he reacted this way, especially since he had seemingly looked to me to be an advocate when our group had excluded foreign students only a few weeks previously. Perhaps my tone was accusatory in some way, as a foreigner begging the dominant group to try to engage with the idea that reality is socially constructed so that they would become more open to other perspectives, more open to my perspectives. Perhaps there was no time to address process in the form of group dynamics when learning was to be measured by the content covered in the presentation. Time ruled our social relations in this context. There were still three more presentations to go. Perhaps I had touched some sort of nerve, challenging the dominant group of which the professor was a part. It seemed like a lost opportunity to begin talking about how different perspectives were legitimate, valid, and
valuable in their own ways, a concept that seemed useful to explore in our multicultural group. The theory that was all of a sudden injected into our reality with implications to figure out some of the challenges in our group was kept at arm’s length.

We bumbled our way forwards as many in our group made an effort to be more inclusive. This took the form of mixed project groups, with air time in class presentations for all members. However, this inclusion was more of a facade, a symbol to the outside world that we had gotten over our issues of prejudice and discrimination, but I was quick to learn that inclusion had nothing to do with equity. Behind the scenes, the foreign students were denied a voice and robbed of their dignity. We would either have to put up a huge fight for our ideas and opinions to be heard in project work, or passively accept the menial tasks that our classmates would entrust us with, like making coffee, picking up books at the library, and formatting group papers. I began to choose the route of passive resistance.

In one instance, I felt my body physically give up in fighting to have my voice heard. I withdrew, dissociating from the work and the group. I presented a speech to the class that had been dictated to me word for word by my team mates. I had had to memorize it and rehearse it in front of them for their approval. I felt like a prop, a female with a Canadian accent stuffed into a pink business shirt saying something cute and clever at the front of the room. When we didn’t get a perfect mark, the two men in my group marched off to complain to the professors, who told them they would only engage with their complaint if the whole group were present. When my classmates came back to get my support, I refused. The feedback from the professors was in line with ideas that I had tried to share with the group and I wasn’t going to be a prop again as the third group
member to bail them out now. They looked at me in disbelief. I couldn’t explain my thinking to them. I didn’t think they would get it, but I was also worried that they would use it as an opportunity to tell me that I was overly sensitive or something like that. They had marginalized me enough; I didn’t feel like setting myself up for more.

Another time, I thought that I had had a wonderful white German male team mate as we put our ideas together, to the extent that I felt that they belonged to both of us, that they were no longer recognizable as having come from either one of us. Our professor was thrilled by our presentation, but only approached my team mate after class. He invited my friend to lunch, wanting to discuss our ideas further. My team mate paused, looking over at me. “Sure,” he replied, “I would love to.” He went off with the professor leaving me to clean up.

I began to notice that the German man with an Iranian name would apologize for his name each time he introduced himself to one of our guest lecturers, ascertaining with certainty that he was German and had lived most of his life in that country. He proved to be the most “typically” German student in our group, defending his vision of German values with rigor and intensity. As he defended his own identity as being German, despite his darker complexion and foreign name which seemed to make him question how people might perceive his identity, he seemed to defend any encroachment on the German values that he held so dear. In practical terms, this meant that he kept at bay the many challenges from foreigners in our group to perhaps approach our work together in ways that he perceived as different from “the German way.” It seemed as though as he tenuously strove not to be different, to fit in as mainstream in Germany, he worried that other people’s differences might somehow infect him, and expose him as not having a “pure”
German heritage. One day I challenged him over lunch, begging him to be proud of his name and what it stood for, and to stop apologizing for who he was. Silence fell at our table, everyone looked surprised as I challenged how he dealt with his difference. He agreed sheepishly. I wondered what this man must have gone through to feel the need to defend his belonging in Germany, the only place he knew to call home.

Halfway into the program, we began our course in Intercultural Co-operation which was to equip us to work across differences in a multicultural workplace. The course was comprised of a series of guest lecturers – an independent consultant who did cross-cultural training, an internal consultant who worked in the cross-cultural training department of a large German multinational corporation, a trainer who ran cultural orientation programs for Germans going into international development work, and a professor from the top university doing cross-cultural research in Germany. We were introduced to all manner of concepts about culture, mostly focusing on the cultural dimensions from the Dutch culture gurus, Hofstede and Trompenaars. One particular class stands out.

The professor who conducted cross-cultural research ran us through a module that he had developed for the German Foreign Service. The module focused on Sudanese culture as compared to German culture. We learned all manner of facts about Sudanese culture, always in relation to German culture, through observing and analyzing scenarios on video. We then took quizzes and were asked to act in role plays, either in the role of a German or a Sudanese person, to test our learning. At the end of the day, I challenged the professor on this methodology. It seemed to suggest that there was a certain way of being German or Sudanese, and that to engage with people across difference successfully, we
had to be aware of the specifics about culture. I suggested that it might be better to address more general attitudes about difference in trainings, to challenge people’s sense that reality is concrete and that there is an absolute truth, for example. Building skills such as dealing with ambiguity and respecting different values seemed like life skills that people could then take into all situations, in a world where diversity marks many social encounters. It would set them on a useful path of learning the details of culture through their own experiences, something I didn’t think could be taught through a list of facts in a course. He listened, smiled, and then responded that in his experience, this wasn’t possible. It wasn’t possible to change people’s attitudes and behaviors by challenging their values, but it was reasonable to ask people to learn and memorize facts about culture so that they knew what do to in specific situations. Thinking of the vastness of possible scenarios, and the ambiguity of reality as I knew it in the global workplace, I wasn’t convinced.

Despite the cultural models, concepts, and frameworks presented in our coursework that theoretically should have helped us overcome the differences in our group, we continued to struggle to work collaboratively together. Could it be that in making culture the only acceptable way of framing or talking about group differences, as we were being prepared for working in the global corporate world in our program, that the prejudice and marginalization relating to other differences such as gender and race could not be surfaced? It seemed that anything else was seen as inappropriate – radical, militant, trouble-making. Also, although different cultures were presented as being equally valid, the dominant German group maintained the view that their Eurocentric cultural approach was best. German cultural norms such as punctuality at all costs and
strictly structuring time, activities, well, everything, were seen as superior ways of doing things. Although the language of culture was comfortably benign, people still found a way to conceive of a hierarchy in terms of culture. Why was it so difficult for many of us to get away from placing differences in a hierarchy? How did this limit our ability to work with one another?

In a formal mid-program check with our program director, our Brazilian male classmate took the professor to task on the program not taking into account the needs of women. I completely agreed with him, but I had no idea that he was going to bring it up. As an example he noted that all of our professors were men, so he felt that there were no appropriate female role models. The professor had to explain the concept of “gender” to the German students – through the English word, because there was no equivalent in German – with the result that the German students considered it disrespectful that foreign students would challenge their culture as being gender-biased. Instead, we were chastised to improve our cultural sensitivity. The professor did not contest their response. One German man piped up that North American feminism was radical, militant, and trouble-making and had no place in Germany. He looked at me, although I hadn’t even brought up the topic. Now I was furious, though, because he was trying to tell us that we were making a problem out of nothing. This made me angrier than the daily discrimination that I faced in that context as a woman. Any hope of addressing this issue was squelched in that moment, the lid on that bubbling cauldron was slammed shut.

So often the feedback that we received as women from the professors felt like they were chiseling us painfully into a male likeness. Showing vulnerability and emotion was seen as a sign of weakness that would not lead to success in the business world. One
of the women from China made a fabulous presentation in class for an exercise in marketing her consulting concept to a fictitious company. When she came back from getting her feedback from the professors, she was furious. They had taken off a full grade because she had used flower shapes on her presentation board, done to tie into a popular Chinese saying of flowers in a field which had framed her presentation. The professors said that flowers were an inappropriate symbol for a business presentation. Through such constant chiseling, I struggled to reform myself in line with the male image that my teachers purported. This inauthentic rendering of myself was neither satisfying to my evaluators nor to myself. As I tried to figure out how to be anew, I was like a child experimenting with boundaries. Sometimes I was too aggressive or cold, and would face repercussions from those around me as I discovered that I had swung too far along the continuum. I felt like I was losing touch with who I was, and what I was willing to sacrifice for professional success.

An alumnus from our program came from one of the big business consulting firms in Germany to run us through a day-long simulation. We were divided into groups that were competing to win a consulting contract before a simulated Board of Directors, made up of the alumni student and one of our professors. Our first task was to choose a project lead. This would be the person who would represent us to the Board. The young German woman in our group asked if she could take on this role. We were all enthusiastic about her having this opportunity. When we told the former student, he laughed outright and then he angrily asked us why we were wasting his time. He said that he would never send a woman to take on a task as important as landing a consulting contract with the Board of a large company. He said that this woman would never get the
time of day from a Board, who were always older men, so we needed to reassign this role to a man who might actually do this in real life.

I will never forget that blatant display of sexism and the pain that it seared through my whole body. What was I doing in this MBA if I was going to be limited in using my skills in the workplace? I began to rise out of my chair to leave and go home. There was no way that I would take this abuse for the whole day. The German woman grinned and bore the rebuttal. She pretended to be cool with it, she didn’t invest energy to contest the injustice. She begged me to stay, along with the rest of the group, when the man was out of the room. If I left, she might have to explain that I was contesting the exclusion of women. They convinced me that they needed my help to get the work done that day and were desperate for a good evaluation. I sullenly stayed, but neither my mind nor my heart was invested in the work. No amount of coaxing brought me back. During the debriefing at the end of the day, the whole class seemed sullen. This injustice didn’t sit well with anyone. Maybe there was something to gender discrimination in this society. When the man left, our professor wanted to know what was wrong, he felt we had been somewhat unthankful to the alumnus who had taken the day to work with us. He was the same professor who had let the discussion of gender go by the wayside a few months earlier. I didn’t feel like being the one to open that cauldron, I just wanted to go home and cry.

In our Business Ethics course, we ended up in a debate on the right to life versus the right to choice. The topic was purely meant to provide us with an example to practice some of the ethics principles that we were learning. It ended up providing a forum for many of the students to voice their opinions on the role of women in society. The
prevailing view was that women should stay at home and not work, never mind have a career, if they chose to have a child, that child-rearing was the responsibility of the woman, and that a woman was reneging on that responsibility if she didn’t stay home full time with children during their school years. I looked over at my Chinese friend during our discussion. Her head was bowed, the tip of her nose turned pink, and I watched a big tear roll down her cheek. This woman was pregnant at the time, although we would all only find out a few months later. She cried as the German men dictated that they would consider her a bad mother if she now chose to continue her career. Perhaps she was overwhelmed by the big decision as to how to move forward with this huge unexpected change in her life, as she and her husband thought about balancing family and career.

Our final class project was to draw up a legal consulting contract for one of our law courses. The Thai woman, one of the Chinese women, the Turkish man, and myself joined forces to put together an English contract, based on English case law versus the German continental system. None of the German students were interested. The people in my group were willing to take on the challenge of working in a third language (German being their second), while I looked forward to working on the project in my native tongue. We did a huge amount of work since we found little in the university library on what we were looking for. Also, the timing fell over the Christmas holidays and two of our team mates went back to their home countries for a month, so much of our work was done as a virtual team. We also put in much more work than was actually necessary because we were adamant to present something wonderful to dispel any beliefs that our foreign student group was in any way inferior to the German project groups.
We worked differently as a team than when we worked with the German students. Each of us got a section to present and was fully responsible for this, versus having to follow orders on what we did from the German students. The Thai woman and I collaborated on our sections in Germany. After our presentation, the professor approached me, rather than our whole group, and praised our work. He asked me if I had done all of the work myself. I insisted that the Thai woman and I had worked on our sections together in Germany, that we were equal partners. I mentioned that the other two team members had been away and so had worked on their sections more on their own. I was feeling a bit frustrated in the moment that this had actually meant a lot of extra work for the two of us in Germany, which I may have insinuated when I said that they had not really partnered on the work.

We had always received group marks for our projects, everyone in the team receiving the same mark. For the first time in our program in this last course, the law professor assigned each person only in our group a different mark. I got an A, the Thai woman got an A-, the Chinese woman got a C, and he failed the Turkish man. When the marks came out, the last threads of trust and respect holding our larger group together fell to pieces. The three Asian women met with me, the three of them sitting like a panel of judges across the table from me. They were furious. They were sure that I had gone to the professor behind their backs to take the recognition for our work for myself. I told them how the professor had approached me after class and what I had said in the moment. I felt terrible. They had seen me as an ally, we had had such a great group process, but I was no different from the German men. The foreign students were furious that I had betrayed
them. I left the room in tears. The second Chinese woman who wasn’t in our group took
compassion on me and helped the foreign students build bridges again.

The German men seemed to react with “Schadenfreude.” ¹⁵ They actually seemed
happy that one of the foreign students stood to fail the program, and that I, the one who
had always been an advocate and had challenged them many times on being prejudiced
and discriminatory, was the one to bring this foreign student down. In class I felt as
though the German students were leering at me. I had purported to challenge injustice,
but in the end, I was the biggest perpetrator of all. No attempt was made to rebuild
bridges with the German students. The law professor refused to speak to the other
students in my group, but he called me at home. He was concerned that there was such a
fall out, and was concerned about its effect on me. I encouraged him to talk with the other
students in my group, and I tried to explain their perspective. He wondered why I felt so
pressured by them. When I finally used the word “racism” and explained that they might
perceive this situation in this light, he ended our conversation abruptly. He never made
himself available to speak to the other people in my group. On the four-hour train ride
home for the weekend, I talked to a friend about the situation on my cell phone. An older
businessman looked over at me when I hung up and said in a kind voice that this story
would not seem all that important one day. I wondered when that day might come.

This experience deeply affected me. I had been so angry at the white German men
for the way they excluded others, always assuming that they were better, that it was
devastating to think that I also could hold this belief myself and act on it to exclude
others. Even if this was not the root of what had happened, the very thought that I had

¹⁵ This is a German word with no equivalent English translation. It means being joyful in the misfortune of
others.
marginalized and not stood in solidarity with my friends of color, my friends from non-Western countries, shook me to my very core. The last three months in the program, as I conducted a consulting project at United Nations Volunteers, I began to regain some of the hope that I had lost that it could be possible to work with others effectively across difference. The concluding remarks of my thesis based on this project went as follows:

This past year has been a time of immense professional as well as personal growth for me. And my project at the UN provided a final setting to put on the finishing touches in this regard. Through my background and experiences the issue of interacting in a cross-cultural environment has always been in the forefront. I have always engaged in a process of personal reflection regarding my own conceptions of what it takes to be cross-culturally competent, of course with the desire to reflect such competence in my own attitudes and behaviours.

The MBA – IC program . . . stretched me (to the limits, I would say) in terms of not only talking the talk, but walking the walk of cross-cultural understanding. We were challenged to manage the diversity in our group projects, not only with the goal of “making it through”, but with the higher objective of using the diversity to maximise the effectiveness of our work. Having the wisdom to approach diversity as a unique gift and knowing how to reap benefits from it is definitely a fine art. And I was not at all confident at the end of our lectures that this objective was at all realistic in today’s world.

Then I started at the UN – in my view the organisation where I would expect, more than anywhere else, people would be able to embody and live these ideals of valuing and managing diversity. The staff team was truly a patchwork quilt of people from all nations: from Nepal to New Zealand, Madagascar to Bolivia... and everywhere in between. And I saw people respectfully working side by side and I saw it working... and my fears were subsided. The diversity was like a breath of fresh air to me. . .

A quote from Kofi Annan has stuck in my head. ‘First you have to dream up castles in the sky. Then you start to build the foundations.’ In my castles people live in true harmony. And my life’s calling I guess will be to build the foundations. And to close the circle of thought: the foundations will be built through a process of learning... (Stephens-Wegner, 2003, pp. 76-77)
As I re-launched into my professional life after the MBA, I had a vision to help organizations manage difference in a way to both benefit them and the individuals who were different. The only framework which I had to understand difference was through culture, having worked with cross-cultural curricula in my work before the MBA and through the required course in “Intercultural Co-operation” in my MBA. This course had not equipped us, though, to manage the inequalities that marginalized different others in our group. I joined the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research and began to frequent their conferences. At one such conference in Berlin, I noticed a company advertising “diversity management,” a curious notion. I also heard about a program in Toronto in Adult Education. Meanwhile, all my work as a consultant/trainer was based on leveraging my English language skills. Even with the fluency in German to complete an MBA second in my class, and now with a German graduate degree in tow, the only way that my skills and knowledge were used in the German market was to leverage my unique ability as a native English speaker. Then I had a dream.

I don’t usually remember my dreams, but every night I started to dream of being in a little boat out in the wide ocean. I was tossed around by the waves, but I stayed out there because I needed to get somewhere. Getting to this destination felt very urgent. However, every night the dream ended having not yet reached this destination. When I was accepted into the program at OISE in Adult Education, the dream stopped. My husband and I decided to take on the adventure of moving to Canada.
Hope Springs Eternal

In my last course at OISE, I studied the sociology of race and ethnicity. My husband dropped me off for the first class on our way home from a holiday in Germany. I marched into the classroom into what I assumed would now be a very familiar place. However, this would not turn out to be the case. As students trickled into the room, I began to become very aware of my whiteness. The people around me were people of color, of every ethnic background I could imagine. Their hair was marvelously braided, tied in a scarf, or framed their head in a halo of glossy curls. The white professor took her place at the front of the room. This space felt different because I was not used to being in the minority as a white person in Canada. This space excited me as I was sure that we were going to connect to have a powerful experience learning about how we could contribute as educators to equity and social justice.

We began with a discussion of how to manage our conversations in this space. The professor warned us that the topics would be difficult, so thinking about how we could work constructively together would be useful. I suggested that we could consider using dialogue with its notions of suspending assumptions, balancing advocacy with inquiry, and seeking to co-create a pool of meaning by accepting different people’s interpretations of reality. This I felt would help to create a safe space. The professor, however, didn’t believe that it was ever possible to create a safe space when speaking about an issue such as racism. In the end, there were some loosely held ideas in the room as to how we could work together. We only reopened this conversation in the last class, when emotions exploded and people shared how they felt that race had been an oppressive force influencing the social relations in the class. Although at a cognitive
level, we were discussing race theory as fledgling academics, at an emotional level, our stories and experiences of marginalization and oppression, or in a few cases, unjustly held privilege, were being surfaced in each of us. Someone mentioned how traumatizing it was to have to relive these stories.

As someone who would like to stand up against racism as a form of oppression, I felt like an ally. In an early class, in a discussion about the abuse of prisoners in Iraq, I spoke of my outrage for the victims. I shared how I felt that the abuse was heightened by the fact that a woman was involved in degrading the Muslim men. A black woman stated how my view showed my ignorance of Islamic culture, with a misunderstanding of the role of women in that culture. She felt I was discriminatory. A woman from Iraq said that I had downgraded the abuse of the victims, which made her very upset. I was shocked that my statement had offended people, when my intention was a heartfelt sadness for the victims. I felt I must have been misunderstood, but I sat in silence, shocked and saddened. I wondered if the German students during my MBA program who had often not responded when we confronted them with their ignorance had felt the same way.

I remained silent in the group, very uncertain about how my viewpoint would come across and thus not comfortable to share this with the group for fear of judgment. The few other white people in the class were also, for the most part, silent. After a few classes of silence, which I felt I was doing for my own protection, some black students mentioned how silence was another form of privilege of white people. They felt that it was another sign of power, that we could be silent when we wanted to. I felt like running out of the room in tears. I didn’t, though. One of the pre-service teachers mentioned how she had challenged the class in her program on the issue of racism. Many of her peers had
been brought to tears. She had shared in our class how this had enraged her. She felt that tears were not enough to make up for years of oppression. She felt that they got away with not taking responsibility for their role as white oppressors when they started crying and hid behind their emotions. She seemed to view those tears as crocodile tears. Not wanting to offend anyone with my tears, I kept them to myself.

I began to wonder about the barriers that separated people and I began to become aware of my power and privilege as a white person in the world. With shattered hopes of the possibility of racial equality, I hung onto an article by a renowned black woman who said that losing hope could only result in no end to oppression. She believed that white folks could be genuinely anti-racist. When I timidly shared my thoughts on this in class, the professor was quick to point out how this was an example of white benevolence. It was easy to be benevolent as a white person when we didn’t face daily discrimination based on our race. I retracted into my shell again, although I wondered why it was so hard to believe that a woman who faces daily discrimination based on her gender couldn’t empathize. The people of color in the room discussed how even white spouses in interracial marriages were racist, in their experience.

One of our final discussions was about the genuineness of white people’s intentions when they make declarations of being anti-racist, as these may often only scratch the surface. We watched a clever clip from Australia which challenged young urbanites who posted trendy signs on their homes that the land used to be held by certain Aboriginal tribes. A group of these tribesmen in traditional dress showed up at the doorstep of such a home, asking if they could stay for the night since it used to be their land. It intrigued me and I pondered to the class how difficult it was to renounce
privilege. I hoped that people would choose this path, but it would be tricky as an educator to get people to recognize and be willing to relinquish their privilege and the power associated with this. I chose the only example that I felt connected all of us in the room, that of the privilege of class, from my framework of experience, relative to people in Africa.

This comment started another furor which again was hard to explain. People denounced me for judging them to be elitist in class, many could be poor. I wondered how they were poor sitting in this graduate class compared to the people wearing banana leaves in the refugee camp in Mozambique. People denounced me for putting Africa in a bad light – to talk about “starving children in Africa” was somehow a racist cliché. I thought about my childhood friend Theresa who lived in a refugee camp, her tummy rumbling from only one meal a day. They challenged my privilege as a white person in Africa. I acknowledged that I was privileged when I lived there. However, I thought to myself how I was sure that most of them had never lived in a house made out of mud brick in the midst of a civil war, with a suitcase always packed under their bed in case the rebels came and abducted them in the middle of the night.

I think they were angry that the white person with privilege in the room challenged them on their privilege. I had not meant to challenge them, I meant to challenge us. It was a way I had hoped to connect with them. Yet again, I was an outsider based on my social location, which happened to be a location of privilege in this case. It was particularly bitter because I thought when I began the class that we would want to change the world together. Two discussion questions presented by a student in our last class sums up the atmosphere of our course: Was it possible to forgive people of color
who didn’t believe that racism was prevalent in our society? Was it genuine or contrived when white people were surprised to learn that racism is live and well in our current context?

In this space, I felt unhappily pigeon-holed as a white person in the room. Everything that I did and said was interpreted with an assumption of my standpoint, but no one knew the complexity of the identity that lay behind my white face and Canadian accent. For example, I often mentioned that I had grown up in Africa. Many people seemed to understand that I was trying to gain some credibility in being aware of race issues and being familiar with black spaces. More than this, I was trying to explain that, “being anti-racist feels as simple and as natural to [me] as breathing” (hooks, 2003, p. 54). hooks (2003) describes how many or most of the anti-racist white people who she had encountered had made this choice due to childhood experiences, and this is what I was alluding to. Not only did I grow up in Africa, but I grew up in a community there which radically resisted racism, so an anti-racist stance is part of the core of my being. This was yet another experience that left me wondering what to do about ingrained notions regarding other people in the complex environment of the global workplace.

I kept these thoughts to myself throughout the course. I didn’t feel that I should challenge the class on the dynamics in our group as one of the only “white oppressors” in the room. One black teacher approached me in the second to last class. He shared how his wife was white and how she had been an example to him that white people could be authentically anti-racist. He had been talking to his wife about the dynamics in our class as he was quite disturbed by the divisions between black and white people that had played out again and again in our group. We had a wonderful chat and I was relieved to
see that someone else in the class was sensing the difficult dynamics as I was. It was helpful that he was a person of color and I really appreciated that he was willing to discuss this with me. Here we were, a black man and a white woman connecting and wondering how to help others build bridges and hold onto hope, especially as we were soon all to leave this course as educators.

Our professor joined us at the end of our discussion. She mentioned to me that she was impressed that I had stuck it out in the class, because she recognized it had been a difficult atmosphere for me. She was amazed that I hadn’t cried. I assured her that I had cried, as soon as I left the class every week. I told her how as the dynamics became more and more difficult for me, it had clinched my resolve to stay. If I left, I was saying to myself that it wasn’t possible to have hope. I was determined to hold onto hope until the very last day that we would find ways to build bridges to each other. The black teacher suggested that he was going to challenge the group in the final class. I felt my stomach lurch. As we parted ways on the subway, he said softly to remember how many times my classmates had been hurt and disappointed by the impact of racism in their lives. This was a space for them to open up something inside of themselves that almost always had to be kept hidden from view. My compassion for my classmates deepened.

In our last class, the man who was concerned about our class dynamics had an opportunity to address his concern. A whirlwind discussion ensued and half of our three-hour class was taken up as people addressed the issue. At least an hour had gone by and no white person had spoken. I felt my body pulsating with my beating heart as people shared their truth. People were angry, people were sad. Some people had also been upset with the class dynamics, other people felt that it shouldn’t have to be a concern – who
ever watched out for them in white spaces? Some people talked about how difficult it had been to relive their traumas of being discriminated against due to their color, by both individuals and the way society is organized in general. One woman kept saying that the black teacher shouldn’t speak for others, that a white person should share their experience. We white folks all sat as though we had been set in stone. Who would venture into this bees nest? People felt offended that the black teacher had painted a picture of black people in the course as angry and aggressive, since this supported familiar stereotypes of black people as being hostile. I reflected on how if there was any hostility, it was based on a deep sadness. As the professor asked to finish up the discussion and move on, I opened my mouth.

I had been listening intensely, that is why it had taken me so long to speak. I didn’t want to speak for the sake of speaking, but only if I had something to say. I spoke for myself, I used my own experiences as examples. In the discussion, my statement about “starving children in Africa” had gotten more airtime. Someone who hadn’t been in the class the week previously mentioned that they had even heard about my preposterous statement out on the street. This sounded a bit absurd that my statement would be so horrible that it would have been talked about on the street, until she explained that she had bumped into someone there from our class. I tried to explain to the group about how my experiences and thus identity were complex. I tried to explain in more detail that I had grown up in Africa and that I had experienced poverty firsthand. I wasn’t just stereotyping Africa, but I had been speaking from my own experience. I hoped that in seeing that I had a history that made me question white privilege and racism from an early age, that they might finally believe that my anti-racist intentions were genuine.
The group listened to me intently, which is when for me, the first seeds of trust were sown. At least they respected me as a person as they showed interest in understanding me. The man from Somalia spoke out. As a white person, especially as a person in international development with backing from the West, I had been privileged in Africa. Again, I acknowledged that I had been privileged. The man from Sri Lanka said that he didn’t believe that white people would ever relinquish privilege. I agreed with him. I thought to myself that this was the point that I had been trying to make. It will be difficult to have the powerful recognize, never mind relinquish, their privilege. A black woman encouraged me to read more postcolonial theorists’ writings to question advocating for marginalized people from a position of privilege. She suggested that it should be marginalized people who lead their struggle. As we spoke, you could hear a pin drop. Our hearts were all a bit exposed that day. It is really too bad that we only began to address our group struggles in our last class. We had a chance to start to dialogue, but we didn’t ever get to see how the seeds of trust that were sown that day may have begun to change our relations with one another. Also, conversations had been started as we thought about challenging oppression in the world, but these were bound to never finish.

We broke off our conversation to share a potluck dinner together. I felt myself shaking. I approached the man from Sri Lanka and talked with him a bit more. He was so annoyed with the way that school children in Canada were taught about the developing world. There were so many points in the Ontario curriculum for children to learn about charity and development work and get involved. He didn’t see this in a positive light. He felt it gave them a very one-sided view of places like Africa. He was tired of the stereotypes that it enforced. I felt awkward and alone during the meal. Now I couldn’t
wait for this class to be over. I had toughed it out, but was it worth it, I wondered? One of the black women in my class came over to me. I hadn’t spoken with her before. She was one of the youngest people in the class, I would guess. She wished me all the best and gave me a big hug. That hug meant the world to me.

As we wrapped up our class, some of the students wondered why all of the readings from the last week were so hopeful after a course of messages that racism was alive and well in our society today, messages that had greatly burdened us all. I couldn’t stop myself from saying the last words of the course in questioning what this whole course had been about if we didn’t have some hope that the current social conditions of ongoing oppression would end. We all laughed.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Diversity Management with a Social Justice Approach

In taking stock of where I have landed at the end of this thesis journey – a journey which took me to both analyze the literature and reflect on my own experience – I believe I have gained an understanding of the complexity of addressing diversity in organizations. I have also learned about the importance of balancing celebrating diversity with attending to issues of equity. I have envisioned this equilibrium of diversity and equity as a double-sided coin. Ideally, the coin needs to be kept spinning, so that both sides of the coin are always in view. If the coin is allowed to stop, it will soon fall over and only one side will be visible. As soon as the focus is only on one side, something of the richness and opportunity of difference is lost. I pondered at the beginning of the thesis whether a middle ground perspective based on both the consultancy and academic schools was useful and possible. It wasn’t my intention in this research to establish a decisive framework of how to manage diversity, but as I have worked on this topic, I have come to recognize valuable contributions from each school.

I have learned that many contemporary organizations herald diversity management as an imperative because of the popular belief that this makes economic sense (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006; P. Prasad & Mills, 1997; Sinclair, 2006). I have argued here, however, that a singular focus on the business case for diversity may not really offer a solid basis with which to address the challenges that difference brings to the workplace (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997). Instead, I am suggesting that an important way forward for real change to happen in organizations around the issue of difference may be for the focus of managing differences to come from an equity perspective. Of course a
form of this approach has been implemented in Affirmative Action and Employment Equity programs (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). However, implementing the equity approach to comply with legislation has also not been effective, creating a backlash which partly contributed to the development of the current approach to diversity management, held securely in the hands of management (Sinclair, 2006). Instead, an equity approach coming from the perspective of social justice would seek to challenge the social relations which marginalize and oppress different others in the workplace, with intentions beyond obtaining a prescribed amount of diversity on the payroll. Such a social justice approach would need to have a solid foundation. This could be gained from the middle ground perspective by distilling value from what both the consultancy and academic schools contribute to diversity management. This social justice approach would become about learning to “manage in diversity” rather than to “manage diversity.”

Perhaps the most important contribution of the consultancy school to a social justice approach is that it promotes diversity as an ideal. An ideal may realistically never be reached, which could be another tactic by those in power to claim success, because while they have begun the journey towards a diverse workplace, they may never arrive at a fully equitable situation. On the other hand, there is one quality which is also inherent in putting out an ideal and which could serve a social justice approach well. This quality is hope. Hope is the belief that oppression can be challenged and overcome (Brazzel, 2007). I think that the consultancy school can at least offer this glimmer of hope, because without hope, I see no momentum forward. Hope’s persistence will “give truth to the reality that [oppression] can end” (hooks, 2003, p. 65). Basing practice on a foundation of hope, on a fundamental belief that things can change, seems paramount to make this
practice viable. In Quayson & Goldberg’s (2002) book on postcolonialism, they quote Theodor Adorno as saying, “the only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (p. xiii). There can be hope without oversimplification and superficiality to ignore complexity, and without blinded optimism.

Meanwhile, the academic school’s essential contribution to an approach based on social justice is that it provides a systemic understanding of our current post-colonial context, providing a necessary framework with which to recognize unequal power relations, and the ways these are maintained. The postcolonial perspective also provides insights into strategies of resistance (A. Prasad, 2006). Being mindful of the critiques of contemporary diversity management “may limit the potential for abuse of the positive ideal and minimize its potential as a weapon for the powerful few against the powerless many” (Driver, 2002, p. 48).

“If the road to hell – with its ‘diversity management’ signposts – is paved with good intentions, the path to heaven – to subjectivity, agency, liberation, and radical change – is no piece of cake” (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, p. 373). Both the humanist and the critical perspectives on power, difference, and identity offer approaches which promise to enhance the effectiveness of stirring up the organizational melting pot! The traditional organization based on the technical paradigm assures that power is held in the hands of a few – intentionally or not – and that both the power hierarchies associated with social identity group differences and the complexity of identity are ignored. This is hopefully challenged every day by OD professionals as they support the development of what’s right and what’s just. The influence of the different paradigms on the practice of
diversity management in organizations has implications for working with globally dispersed teams.

**Implications for Praxis**

**Trust and Conflict in Globally Dispersed Teams**

Conventional wisdom in the OD field says that building trust and managing conflict are necessary steps for a team to become high performing (Lencioni, 2005). In this thesis, I have argued that this view is based on humanist principles associated with the consultancy school because it purports that it is both necessary and possible to build trust and manage conflict for effective teamwork. I support this view which is the foundation of team development praxis and in this final chapter, I will explore further the implications of trying to put this underlying philosophy into practice. I maintain this view from a position of hope that it is necessary and possible. I will also explore the challenges that both the technical and critical schools make to the prevalent team development theory of building trust and managing conflict.

The three paradigms – the technical, the humanist, and the critical – result in varying understandings of and thus approaches to managing difference in organizations. The norms and values of a paradigm are embedded in the policies and structures of an organization. Thus, these diverse understandings and approaches set the institutional context in which an organizational team will address its differences. Understanding what conditions the various paradigms create in terms of the ability of teams to build trust and manage conflict is a useful point of reference for team facilitators as they work with globally dispersed teams.
According to Lencioni, difference among team members needs to be addressed for both steps of building trust and managing conflict to be effective. This is because discovering the truths about each other in the form of exploring differences “is exactly when the seeds of trust begin to grow” (Lencioni, 2005, p. 31). Becoming familiar with the glasses through which other team members see the world – how their world is socially constructed – in the form of their differences can start building bonds between members. These bonds are the first strands of trust. Sinclair (2006) proposes that conflict “may be a true marker of working with diversity” (p. 522). In this view, diversity heightens the conflict potential of interpersonal interactions in groups. The dissimilar ways of seeing the world can clash, providing good fodder for conflict. Understanding the basis of difference and how it is contributing to conflict may help teams through the conflict. Thus, according to prevalent team development theory, building bridges across difference helps team members both to build trust and to manage conflict which are key for teams to become high performing.

Team development literature predominantly espouses a celebratory discourse regarding difference along the lines of the consultancy school. It extols the virtues of diversity in teams as a resource that will enhance team, and thus organizational, performance. A criteria for team effectiveness is considered to be “having, using and celebrating strong elements of diversity” (MacIver, n.d., p. 8). From this perspective, diversity brings tremendous levels of creativity and quality to a team’s work. The members of high performing teams are said to become interdependent as they complement each other’s diverse skills for the benefit of the team (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Well-aligned teams are said to have supportive relationships in which members
respect each other by acknowledging and valuing their differences (Leigh & Maynard, 2002). In this case, “diversity is an asset since it provides the benefit of different perspectives that are assumed to improve team performance” (Mirchandani & Butler, 2006). “Embedded in different styles, approaches, opinions, points of view, backgrounds, cultures, and genders are the various angles on a problem, which, when considered without prejudice [italics added], may hold the key to resolution” (Laiken, 1994b, p. 5). I like this statement because while it is in line with the discourse that diversity can be a valuable asset in teams, it suggests that it is only useful if people are able to see it without prejudice and really open their minds to difference. It doesn’t just extol the virtues without recognizing the challenges. The work of team facilitators is to develop capacity for people to open their minds in this way. Again, this is a humanist perspective that believes that there is a need to build such capacity, while maintaining hope that this is indeed possible. Where does that leave team facilitators who hold this perspective when working with organizations and/or individuals who have technical or critical perspectives on difference?

The management school: Stressing harmony.

I have adopted the view, which is well-accepted in team development praxis, that conflict is a natural part of the process to come to decisions that are best for the team. As the theory goes, this is because working through differences as they surface in the form of different opinions, viewpoints, and approaches often has conflict potential (Lencioni, 2005). However, this stands in sharp contrast to the inculturated attitudes that prevail in organizational environments. Taking the stance that conflict is a natural part of the process of healthy team development challenges the status quo and I will explore the
implications of this. This is because organizations under both the traditional and modern management paradigms have environments in which team members are primed to avoid conflict. Lencioni (2005) supports this when he points out that there seems to be an all too common fear of conflict in organizational environments. Laiken (1994b) comes to the same conclusion: “The result of inculturated attitudes is a rampant and unquestioned avoidance of conflict, particularly in organizational settings” (p. 5). One might speculate why such an attitude towards conflict is so inculturated in organizations structured by the technical management paradigm.

Traditional organizations have resisted becoming diverse, especially at higher levels of the organizational hierarchy (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997). These organizations are now getting used to the combined effects of the reality of diversity at all levels of the hierarchy, and the novelty of much more work being conducted in teams in a Knowledge Society. Since difference typically increases conflict, members not used to interacting and working with different others may be ill equipped to deal with the conflict that often ensues. If each person in a team believes that their truth is the absolute truth, without understanding that their own standpoint affects their perception of truth, conflict can result from each person defending their perceived authority of holding “the truth.” With a tradition of power holding versus power sharing in a strict traditional hierarchy, and an ensuing preoccupation with authority, perhaps conflict is perceived as a blatant attack on this authority. As people compete with one another for a better place in the hierarchy through a strategy of the survival of the fittest, conflict is perhaps due to, or at least perceived as, disagreeable competition for the advancement of the individual in the organization, rather than for the benefit of the organization. However, conflict is a
healthy part of group dynamics which, when managed constructively, contributes to the high performance of a team (Lencioni, 2005). Lencioni (2005) makes this point when he says,

Any team that wants to maximize its effectiveness needs to learn to [have] . . . productive, ideological conflict: passionate, unfiltered debate around issues of importance to the team. . . . In fact, if team members are not making one another uncomfortable at times, if they’re never pushing one another outside of their emotional comfort zones during discussions, then it is extremely likely that they’re not making the best decisions for the organization. (pp. 37-38)

I think that emotions also have an important role to play in the conventional discomfort with conflict. Perhaps emotions are not seen as having a place in professional life, perhaps only certain emotions are considered appropriate. How are anger, fear, and sadness, as some examples of emotions that can result from conflict, viewed in the organizational environment of (self) control and (self) discipline? Space seems to be lacking in the organizational environment for the whole self, which would include one’s feelings and emotions. In organizations dominated by men, who in western society are socialized not to express their emotions,\textsuperscript{16} this part of our human experience is limited in the organizational environment. Avoiding conflict, then, is seen as akin to managing emotions appropriately in the public space of organizations. Feelings and emotions begin to show the aspect of vulnerability that Lencioni (2005) refers to in emphasizing the importance of trust in teams. Encouraging vulnerability in traditional organization settings is an approach that takes people out of their comfort zones as they find a new space to express their full range of experience, namely also their emotions. I think it is interesting that we have to relearn how to be vulnerable with one another in

\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps more accurately, men are socialized to downplay certain emotions while being told that others are acceptable. I have seen that anger is often seen as acceptable, while being fearful is not.
organizational settings. I think that it is also interesting that those who are already vulnerable due to marginalized identities may be those who can set the precedent:

Compassion, generosity, solidarity, and sensitivity to others are crucial values; that they are more often found in the oppressed than among the oppressors indicates that it is the dominant social order that devalues these traits and distorts them to serve the interests of the powerful. (Ferguson, 1985, p. 94 as cited in Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 21)

Lopes & Thomas (2006) point out that “this may appear to be a radical claim that is far from self-evident” (p. 21). However, they reflect that this fits with their own experience as practitioners promoting equity in organizations. “As we review where we have seen the greatest evidence of these values . . . it has more often been among those who have experienced oppression” (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 21).

“Organizations want diversity without the conflict. They want the solution without having to fully experience the problem. They want the organization or group ‘fixed’ but without having to look at their own power and privilege” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 523). Sinclair speaks from her experience as an OD practitioner addressing diversity in organizations. In organizations under the paradigm of the modern management school, which have positioned the idea of diversity as a resource, as something they desire, there is a disconnect in their understanding of embracing diversity. Diversity without conflict is about wanting a facade of diversity, perhaps to be in line with legislation or to promote an equitable corporate image. It may be about using diversity to the organization’s advantage, without considering the needs of diverse individuals. In this case, the needs of the organization take precedence, rather than balancing the needs of the organization with those of the individual.

I believe that not addressing the conflict that is inherent in diversity isn’t an authentic commitment to diversity. Sinclair (2006) touches on the root of the dissonance
in this way of thinking. There is no willingness in this instance to challenge power and privilege. Truly addressing difference to work through conflict will mean exposing and addressing unequal power hierarchies. If these are undiscussable and untouchable, then it will not be possible to build trust and manage conflict. The only other solution, then, is to avoid conflict, to put a lid on it, to promote harmony by pushing down conflict. Curbing emotions would also be a strategy in such organizations to keep conflict under wraps.

Theoretically, diversity under the modern management paradigm is considered a benefit to team performance, an especially helpful view in a diverse workplace where organizational members increasingly work in teams. However, difficulties in capitalizing on this benefit to team performance are attributed to individual team members’ lack of ability to manage difference. The onus to benefit from diversity rests very much on individual competence to navigate the waters of difference (Sinclair, 2006). My wording of “navigate the waters” already diverts from the celebratory discourse, but it is based on the realities that I have encountered in working in diverse teams. Although I definitely believe that diversity is an asset, leveraging it has proved a lot more difficult than I anticipated. So, am I not a good team player? As organizations put the responsibility for leveraging this resource for success on individual organizational members, individuals are left to “fix the burden of their difference or disadvantage through ‘practical’, ‘productive’ solutions” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 515).

Through careful study of these tensions, I have come to the conclusion that the approaches of both the traditional and modern management schools unfortunately don’t make conflict go away; this is wishful thinking. Instead, conflict continues to flow as an undercurrent in organizations and teams operating under the technical paradigm, with
issues that are undiscussable, but issues that pull at everyone’s energy and attention.

Unmanaged, conflict can also blow up in an uncontrolled way, damaging relationships and affecting productivity. Addressing the power behind difference will unleash emotions, and bring conflict to the surface – but then it can be dealt with. Therefore, the consultancy school strongly suggests the necessity of working directly with conflict. Team development praxis based on this school has a strong focus on conflict management. It provides skills in dealing with the “messy” parts of conflict.

The academic school: Stressing a fundamental lack of trust.

While the values underlying the management school result in a fundamental belief that conflict is not necessary, and thus should be avoided,\textsuperscript{17} the academic school avoids conflict from its belief that it is not possible to build trust across differences and have constructive conflict. This is in stark contrast to the mainstream organizational discourse about diversity that paints the picture of an ideal world for organizational members, where everyone is included and working together in harmony, with the promise of more economic prosperity. The academic school is critical of this picture because it glosses over the dilemmas of workplace diversity with what has been called an “upbeat naiveté that averts its eyes from the rampant conflicts and ruptures that are endemic to a changing and diverse workplace” (P. Prasad & Mills, 1997). It is a picture that is lacking the depth of perspective as to how we have conceived of difference historically, and what this means for our current context. It is a perspective that refuses to recognize the politics of difference and the willingness to address the conflict that this would entail.

\textsuperscript{17} Either conflict shouldn’t be addressed (ignore differences among people and don’t admit these can cause problems) or it doesn’t need to be addressed (view diversity in the organization as idyllic and quell any dissent).
Thus, one of the challenges in believing that building trust and having constructive conflict is possible is that issues of oppression are often not recognized in contemporary organizational settings. There is a sense from the critical camp that there is neither willingness nor interest in authentically opening up the Pandora’s box of issues of oppression. Unfortunately, those who know that oppression exists are those who experience discrimination on a daily basis. These people are coming from a place of extreme vulnerability to address these challenges in terms of their social positioning. My own experience in attempting to raise such issues matches Sinclair’s: “Anybody who names what is going on is excluded” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 522). It can be akin to career suicide to bring up these issues (Sinclair, 2006). Therefore, team facilitators should be aware that it may not only be an issue of lacking skills to manage conflict, it is additionally an issue of lacking power to address politics.

Lencioni’s (2005) discussion of vulnerability-based trust is open to criticism from critical theorists who take the perspective of marginalized people in an organization or a team. Many people are vulnerable to exclusion, discrimination, prejudice, marginalization, oppression – however one might want to phrase it – simply based on their social location. How can team facilitators expect marginalized people to actively make themselves even more vulnerable? Also, it may not be realistic to expect that those with power and privilege will ever be authentically vulnerable with others. This brings me to yet another dilemma. Team development praxis may promote constructive conflict for effective teamwork. However, while the more contentious dimensions of difference keep a team from building trust, on what basis can they have constructive conflict to work through issues of discrimination and oppression? In other words, if you need to first
have trust to have constructive conflict, having conflict to build trust is going to be difficult. From this viewpoint, critical theorists might suggest that it is impossible to build trust and have constructive conflict across differences that have historically disadvantaged some people through an arbitrary hierarchy of binaries.

Under these circumstances, I believe that OD professionals need to advocate for historically disadvantaged people, to stand in solidarity and support of them. There are challenges and opportunities in advocating for a specific social identity group, which are different depending on whether the practitioner is coming from a privileged or a marginalized social location with respect to the identity group. Brazzel (2007) says,

Knowing, being, and using all of ourselves as OD practitioners is an important diversity and social justice practice. . . . Using ourselves involves using all aspects of self, those about which we are proud and sorry. . . Using ourselves, with intention, to impact individuals, groups, and organizations. (p. 19)

Of course, advocating from a marginalized position (e.g., for women as a woman) has its advantages of being able to sympathize with that position, to understand its issues. The practitioner in this role is another marginalized voice that can challenge space to open up for other marginalized voices. However, such a practitioner is also in a position of lesser power, hoping that they can make the voices of the marginalized group they belong to heard. Their position is a bit precarious because there is still a lot at stake in challenging the positions of the powerful.

At the same time, practitioners in privileged positions (e.g., a white person advocating for people of color) can never know the oppression that comes with a certain identity group. They will always carry their privilege with them, which can always hinder them from fully understanding the location of a person whom this marginalizes. “The Dominants’ culture is invisible to them; it is the water in which they swim, the air they
breathe” (Oshry, 1996, p. 104). It can be very hard to make this visible to oneself and truly be able to advocate, despite the best of intentions, for someone who is marginalized. Also, as an advocate from a position of privilege, our identity is often tied up with seeing ourselves as heroic. Oddly enough this heroic identity is still one of superiority, of saving a weaker other. Postcolonial critics would challenge this act as one of actually reinforcing and reproducing a sense of superiority and therefore privilege, serving to maintain unjust power structures (A. Prasad, 2006).

Although it is therefore very difficult to advocate from a position of privilege, and one should always find room for marginalized voices, I believe that we, as OD practitioners, still have a responsibility to challenge oppression, even if it is not our own. A quote from bell hooks (2003) brought me a lot of encouragement at a time when I felt very misunderstood as an advocate in a position of privilege:

> It is vital that we refuse to allow rejection by any group to change one’s commitment to anti-racism. Love of justice cannot be sustained if it is only a manipulation to be with the in-crowd, whoever they may be. Many white folks worked for civil rights, then passively dropped the struggle when critiqued by people of color or told by them they were not wanted. Anti-racist white folks recognize that their ongoing resistance to white supremacism is genuine when it is not determined in any way by the approval or disapproval of people of color. This does not mean that they do not listen and learn from critique, but rather that they understand fully that their choice to be anti-racist must be constant and sustained to give truth to the reality that racism can end. (pp. 64-65)

In another piece of writing, bell hooks helped me to better understand why marginalized people may not be able to fully trust and be comfortable with a privileged person, no matter how good their intentions might be. She tells a story from her childhood of the terror that she felt as a black person when she had to pass through a predominantly white area on a journey to her grandmother’s. She concludes,
Even though it was a long time ago that I made this journey, associations of whiteness with terror and the terrorizing remain. Even though I live and move in spaces where I am surrounded by whiteness, surrounded, there is no comfort that makes the terrorism disappear. All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness. (hooks, 1997, p. 175)

In her research on race and racism, Bell (2003) noticed that even when participants talked about experiences from a long time ago, they were frequently not recounted in the past as though they were finished, but rather these experiences were told as though they persisted up to and through the present. Bell (2003) concluded that, “respondents offered such stories as emblematic tales that bridge past and present to illustrate the continuities of racism in contemporary daily life” (p. 9).

It is interesting that counter-narrative stories can have such a sense of timelessness (Bell, 2003). I personally found bell hooks’ (1997) statements about her sense of terror in her marginalized position very humbling in thinking about how deeply people carry the effects of oppression, and with what naiveté I may have expected to connect with people who are marginalized with respect to me despite my privileged position. Of course, I don’t want to lose my hope to do this, I just may need to be more patient with the process of building bridges across difference. I don’t think it is my prerogative as a privileged person to say I am ready to build a bridge. This should come from those at the margins. I think it would be helpful to team facilitators to recognize these dynamics of bringing people from marginalized and privileged social locations together when engaging a team to build bridges across difference.

Lopes & Thomas (2006) suggest that it is from marginalized people “that we have learned the most about the awe-inspiring capacity of human beings to forgive, rebuild, and imagine real alternatives” (pp. 21-22). Although it is these people who stand to lose
the most in organizations when we ask them to make themselves vulnerable, it is their humbling willingness and capacity to do this that brings the opportunity for transformative change around issues of difference to take place in organizations. What I take from the critical perspective as an OD practitioner who facilitates globally dispersed teams, is the importance of creating space for marginalized people to have a voice. Letting them drive the process of resistance when it comes to limiting diversity management practices in organizations is essential. They are well-versed in terms of the power of resistance because “they know at a visceral level the depth of commitment required to transform inequitable structures and systems” (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, p. 22). From the critical perspective, I also take the humility to recognize the limitations of engaging marginalized people from my own position of privilege. I have developed a deep respect for the graciousness that they are extending when they are willing to try again to trust someone of privilege, hoping that this time they might not be terrorized.

Cavanaugh quotes, “should we be surprised [at] managerialism’s incapacity ‘to apprehend the political’ ” (Mouffe, 1993, p. 4 in Cavanaugh, 1997, p. 47)? Whether naively or as a strategy to hold onto power, those with power in many organizations ignore the meaning of difference in our current context. In this way, they make it much more difficult for people to begin the conversations that are necessary to start engaging with the whole picture of difference, and in exposing all facets of themselves, begin to authentically build vulnerability-based trust. OD practitioners need to find a way to make space for marginalized voices to create awareness around the real issues of difference and stand behind them as they resist inequity. Writing about resistance and OD may seem a bit odd to some, since OD may be seen as an extension of the arm of management on one
extreme, or as working as a neutral mediator between management and workers on the other extreme. I was reminded of an important concept in adult education in watching the film, *The Politics of Learning*, by Donegan, Shilton, & Martin (1977) at the conference organized in 2007 at OISE to honor the memory of Paulo Freire. What the film highlighted for me as an educator was that learning is never neutral – it is always either supporting or challenging the status quo. Team facilitators will need to engage strategies of resistance to challenge the status quo around perceptions and approaches to difference in organizations if they want to bring about transformation and create the conditions for building trust and managing conflict.

**The consultancy school: Stressing constructive conflict.**

Since team development praxis views conflict as a healthy part of teamwork, it has an extensive toolkit to help groups work through conflict. Creating awareness and building skills for people to manage cultural and behavioral differences are predominant ways to help individuals “fix their burden” (Sinclair, 2006, p. 515) in terms of having the onus placed on them for making team dynamics work. I have experienced behavioral profiling in a team setting and have found that this is very useful in terms of learning to understand self and others better, and learning to be open with one another. Lencioni (2005) suggests that vulnerability-based trust is established through personality profiling, since people’s strengths and weaknesses are validated by an objective tool so that they are much more likely to be open about these with each other. A language is established

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18 The two extremes that I refer to here may be based on some current perceptions of OD. Based on the original literature in the field, OD has always seen itself as resistant to the status quo. I will delve deeper into this point in the next section where I discuss the implications of my thesis for the field of OD. I will propose that if current perceptions of OD have lost touch with the purpose of the field as working for social justice, that OD professionals get inspired by examples of ways in which OD was used for social justice in the early days of the field. I advocate for the view that OD be resistant to the status quo, and neither act as an extension of management nor as simply a neutral mediator.
with which the team can talk about their differences, so “you make it safe for them to
give each other feedback without feeling like they’re making accusatory or unfounded
generalizations” (Lencioni, 2005, p. 25). Developing cultural competency has a similar
effect. People begin to learn about how their truth about the world is socially constructed
and how there may be many valid different approaches to a problem. Thus, surfacing
such differences creates trust in a team, because one learns to understand and value the
validity of different perspectives and approaches, trusting that combined effectively,
these will result in a good outcome for the team.

The issues of difference that I personally have experienced as being the most
delicate to discuss in a group are those which are fraught with the dynamics of prejudice,
discrimination, and oppression in groups. I call these “the contentious issues of
difference.” The irony is, although these issues are the most difficult, they are often not
covered in team development work along with the behavioral and cultural differences. If
they are not addressed, they remain as the elephant in the room that is never discussed,
both because they are not recognized and because people fear their conflict potential.
Thus, team facilitators need to open up this potentially conflictual topic to build the
capacity for conflict in the team.

Perhaps beginning to explore the less contentious differences of behavior and
culture is a useful start to building people’s ability to work in diversity and build trust.
This would provide a basis with which to manage conflict in addressing the contentious
issues of difference, a process which should further the building of trust, based on the
assumption that conflict can be constructive in a team where trust among members has
been established (Lencioni, 2005). The challenge to team facilitators is to then go the
extra mile once some trust has been established to address the contentious differences as well. Exploring the historical basis of inequality, giving organizational members a language with which to speak about power differences (e.g., “privilege” and “marginalization”), and giving them space to explore their own and others’ identity will be important to creating the conditions for trust to be built and conflict to be managed effectively in a team.

In our OD class in the fall of 2005, Marilyn Laiken, my thesis supervisor, responded to an indignant response of mine to the seeming difficulty of challenging inequality in organizations. She pointed out that no one ever said that OD work was easy. Maybe that is where I need to leave my thoughts now: challenging inequity is not going to be easy, but I believe it is necessary to surface these issues for a team to ever be able to build trust and effectively manage conflict. I think that most OD professionals would agree that challenging inequality is both necessary and possible. The question is whether we might shy away sometimes because the work is so challenging. There is certainly a litany of other work waiting for us in organizations. Perhaps we put too much emphasis on safety for both ourselves and our clients. bell hooks (2003) challenges us on engaging with risk and on our thinking in terms of what kind of spaces might create useful change:

We cannot forge boundaries across the barriers that racism [and other forms of oppression] create[s] if we want always to be safe or to avoid conflict. . . . The emphasis on safety in feminist settings often served as a barrier to cross-racial solidarity because these encounters did not feel “safe” and were often charged with tension and conflict. Working with white students on unlearning racism, one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict. Trusting our ability to cope in situations where racialized conflict arises is far more fruitful than insisting on safety as always the best or only basis for bonding. (pp. 63-64)
Conflict is a cornerstone of working in diversity. If organizations are avoiding the messier aspects of diversity in an effort to avoid conflict, then perhaps consciously embracing conflict will be a way to get out of the maze of superficial diversity management. If learning to work with difference in organizations is limited by safety, then superficial diversity initiatives are bound to continue as the norm. In the case of diversity management, this safety is for both those people who seek safety so as not to have their privilege, and thus their power and identity, challenged, and people who seek safety in their vulnerable position as members of subordinate identity groups.

Practitioners may need to challenge their assumptions regarding the level of risk that they ask of team members when addressing diversity issues. Finding a starting point for organizational members to build trust to support constructive conflict, by pushing the comfort zones of dominant group members, while protecting the vulnerability of subordinate group members, looks like a delicate balancing act for practitioners.

However, it is essential in creating the ability to discuss the politics of difference which is paramount for effectively working in diversity.

In the process of writing this thesis, my thoughts on practice have been advanced most along the lines of “the theory of how to do it” rather than specifically in terms of “how to do it.” I think that this is in keeping with an ethos of the field of OD coined by a founder of the field. Kurt Lewin once said “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Marrow, 1984). Hopefully, team facilitators will take with them an understanding of the need and possibility to address the contentious issues of difference, once some basis of trust has been established through addressing behavioral and cultural differences. Although addressing the issues of power inequalities associated with difference will
likely be risky, the risks are worth taking for the opportunity for transformation and higher team performance. Facilitators will need to engage mindsets set in the technical paradigm with the view that conflict is necessary to create high performing teams by equipping people with the competency to engage with it constructively. At the same time, facilitators will need to engage with mindsets set in the critical paradigm with the view that constructive conflict can be possible, re-engaging them to embrace hope again by bringing an authentic discussion of oppressive structures into organizational settings.

I believe that team facilitators can keep their celebratory views of diversity, since hope is always good momentum to move forward and is the basis for good intentions for transformative change. However, they should always also be mindful of the difficult power dynamics around issues of difference in our post-colonial world. Unfaltering hope mixed with an understanding of the challenging complexity of diversity seems like a good formula for effective team facilitation. I think that this formula will also help practitioners maintain their hope. The work isn’t easy and acknowledging this from the beginning will keep people from getting discouraged when the going gets tough.

“Oppression can seem insurmountable in the world. Hope, combined with optimism, is the belief that oppression, as a social construct, is not permanent and can be dismantled” (Brazzel, 2007, p. 20). Only with such hope can we effectively engage an organizational system.
Implications for the field of OD

OD as a Vehicle for Social Change

Management and organization studies have many encouraging examples of people who have challenged the role of organizations in society. They have challenged the misuse of power in organizations in terms of a few benefiting unfairly from the many, and they have even taken the radical view that organizations are sites of resistance and transformation of unjust relations in society. Robert Owen was one such manager who inspiringly demonstrated the potential that changes in management practice can have on society (Quarter, 2000). At the time of the Industrial Revolution in England, when workers were typically “subjected to economic exploitation, political oppression, and social deprivation” (Altfest, 1977, p. 24), Owen ran his cotton mill in New Lanark with an approach that was admirable even by today’s standards of corporate social responsibility.

Owen introduced many progressive practices at his mill; a glowing example was his approach to child labor. He disallowed any children under the age of ten to work in his mills (Quarter, 2000). In comparison, it was common among other mill owners at the time to employ children as young as six years of age. He also encouraged children to remain in school until they were twelve and he reduced the workday for them by more than two hours (Altfest, 1977). He introduced nursery schools to take care of young children (Quarter, 2000) and he provided schooling for worker’s children (Altfest, 1977). With these policies, Owen sought to protect children by ensuring that they had access to a good education and that they didn’t have to start working at too young an age, with the
health risks associated with this. His advocacy for children did not stop at his company’s doors, though.

Owen saw injustices in his industry and not only introduced superior policies in his own establishment, and encouraged his colleagues to do the same, but he also sought changes in legislation to resolve these issues at a political level (Altfest, 1977; Quarter, 2000). He continued to hold his personal conviction that children should be better protected by fighting for legislation to regulate child labor. The legislation that ensued from this was “important in that the state for the first time accepted responsibility for the protection of civil rights” (Altfest, 1977, p. 28). What an accomplishment! Owen also challenged the state’s attitude towards poor citizens (Altfest, 1977) and encouraged equal access to public education (Quarter, 2000). Here was a wealthy industrialist who really advocated for the oppressed in his society. He also supported the trade union movement in Britain. His business model created a new understanding among the working class, strengthening the development of a constructive labor movement (Elsässer, 1984). Thus, impetus for change was introduced through the work of a visionary industrialist who challenged certain societal norms and in this way, evolved the systems of good government in Britain. Owen used his privilege and associated power and influence in society to do good, to do both what was right and just. He was a responsible corporate citizen, being actively involved in shaping legislation for a stronger, healthier nation.

Another character in the story of spurring on social change from the workplace was Mary Parker Follett. “It fell to [this] woman to play one of the biggest parts in the evolution of science of organization” (Urwick & Brech, 1957, p. 47). Mary Parker Follett was a political scientist and philosopher who came to studying the workings of industrial
organizations through her contact with laborers in community programs that she initiated (Urwick & Brech, 1957). Understanding industrial management flowed naturally from her interest in governance (Urwick & Brech, 1957) and she became another figure in the history of management and organizations who challenged the way organizations would work, including their role in addressing injustice in society. Based on the experiences that laborers shared with her, she was able to aptly create theories about management that wouldn’t forget the value of people in organizations. As a witness to social injustice, Follett was willing to share her observations and talk about issues that would make the powerful uncomfortable. Follett was a somewhat marginalized voice herself, as a woman challenging the male-dominated business establishment of the day and with her source of information coming from the margins, the poor laborers. From this marginalized position, she challenged organizations to step up in their role in society. She gave credence to the stories of the marginalized laborers as a basis for her theory-building, giving their voice authority in the production of knowledge about more just organizations. Would the “powerful” (Finch, 1988, p. 194) want to liberate the voices of marginalized people in the production of knowledge from their experiences to bring about social justice in the workplace (Kovach, 2005)?

Organization Development emerged as a discipline on the wings of such figures as Robert Owen and Mary Parker Follett, seeking social justice through workplace transformation. OD is a values driven discipline, challenging the singular focus on the reverberating themes in business of “competitive strategy, profit and loss, productivity, return on investment, efficient use of resources, and economic wealth” based on the technical paradigm. Instead, it seeks to refocus attention on people with the themes of
“freedom, dignity, empowerment, emotions, spirit, and holistic integration” (Marshak, 2005, p. 24) which are in line with the humanist and critical paradigms. This is a tribute to Kurt Lewin’s legacy, the figure who is often heralded as the father of OD. He was a social psychologist who had a passion for social justice. I wonder how much of his own story of being a Jew in Nazi Germany inspired this passion. He had a strong role to play in the human relations movement which challenged the engrained ideas about organizations set in the classical management era (Ironside, 2004). This movement brought a new focus on the social systems (people and their needs) versus the technical systems (work and production) of organizations (Alon, 2004).

The legacy of the human relations movement was an understanding that hierarchical power structures entrapped in the traditional pyramid organization did not serve to “unleash energy, stimulate creativity, instil pride, build commitment, prompt the taking of responsibility, and evoke a sense of investment and ownership” (Guba & Lincoln, p.227 as cited in Stringer, 1999, pp. 24-25). Lewin’s answer to bringing about social justice was to encourage the participation of all voices when working with an organizational system. Involving all stakeholders in a system – through principles of participation and inclusion – seeks to respect the dignity and identities of all people involved (Stringer, 1999). With such an approach, OD seeks to reorganize social relations so that power can be shared between people rather than some holding it disadvantageously over others.

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19 I have taken Guba & Lincoln’s description of the purpose of action research and am using it slightly out of context here to show what doesn’t happen when power is not shared and voices are marginalized in traditional hierarchical organizations. Kurt Lewin developed action research, which is an approach common in OD to help organizations learn to share power as they include all stakeholders in the decisions that will affect their lives.
Historically, OD clearly had a social justice focus. The focus on challenging oppression seemed to be mostly related to class differences, as OD professionals were finding ways for the poor laborers at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy to have a voice and share in the power.\(^{20}\) A. Prasad & Elmes (1997) talk about a report on education that was published in 1945 in the U.S. that was one of the early references to the “problems of diversity.” They note an interesting point that the report “sees diversity exclusively in terms of class” (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, p. 368). In a footnote they explain that at the time, statistically the workplace was white and male, so other issues such as race and gender “simply did not exist” (A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, p. 375). In our current context, of course, many other marginalized social identity groups are represented in the workplace. Since 1945, the world has been reinvented through the fall of a formal colonial system and the birth of new communication technologies. Since at one point, 85% of the world’s area was under European rule, post-coloniality is a global condition (P. Prasad & Prasad, 2007, April). The hierarchy of binaries from the legacy of colonialism brings with it problems of diversity for many more social differences than just class. The scope of OD work should now cover the whole gamut of diversity, as workplaces become diverse and we become sensitized to the meaning of difference in a post-colonial world.

“Organizations and, in particular, business organizations, are the linchpins of society. That gives them responsibilities beyond themselves, responsibilities that virtuality throws into high relief” (Handy, 1995, p. 42). Organizations representing

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\(^{20}\) In the U.S., OD also had an anti-racist focus. The famous sensitivity or group dynamics training of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) – a foundational OD institute – was established by Kurt Lewin for the Connecticut State Inter-Racial Commission (Marrow, 1984). It was developed out of the need to train leaders and conduct research on how to most effectively challenge racial and religious prejudice in communities (Marrow, 1984).
institutions from all sectors are “a central cohesive source of support and stability” (Linchpin, n.d. b) in our society as “something that holds the various elements of a complicated structure together” (Linchpin, n.d. a). Some will undoubtedly contest that business corporations should be the linchpins of society, but many will likely agree that if they shared the resources that they hold justly, they could use such a position for good. Handy (1995) suggests that virtuality throws this scenario into high relief because virtuality has created a global village and all of a sudden, problems on the other side of the globe are a part of everyone’s daily reality, including that of business. How can organizations be effective in a world which is not a level playing field in our current context of post-coloniality? With teams being a central unit of work in our present day Knowledge Society and trust as the basis of effective teamwork – the basis of effective organizations – we are back to addressing the challenges that a post-colonial context present to contemporary organizations. How can trust be built in the post-colonial environment?

It is time—indeed, past time—for OD practitioners to challenge issues and actions that we know to be wrong, to run counter to the very foundation of our field, and to cause us to wake up in the middle of the night and question ourselves. (Burke, 1997, p. 18)

Coming from my MBA and the business world, the shift in thinking from the technical to the humanist paradigm was radical in my first year at OISE.21 The humanist breath of fresh air brought into organizations which were based on management principles premised on the technical paradigm has had a huge impact on our workplaces. It has done this by making them more ethical, more just, and more humane – with holistic, learner-centered, self-directed approaches. Burke’s (1997) plea to challenge OD’s “issues and

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21 It was here that I took to studying OD in an Adult Education department.
actions” (p. 18) is perhaps a plea to recapture OD’s humanist beginnings in the midst of a “cult of efficiency” (Michael Collins, 1991 as cited in Plumb & Welton, 2001, p. 71) or it is even possibly calling for a more critical approach to OD as practitioners challenge the effects of a post-colonial world. Although the humanist paradigm in OD has resulted in tremendous transformation of organizations, in our current context of unjust power structures in our post-colonial world, the critical paradigm is promising to the field of OD as one which seeks to further disarm these. The founding mothers and fathers of OD who sought social justice through workplace transformation – Robert Owen, Mary Parker Follett, and Kurt Lewin – all challenged the power structures behind people’s distorted ideologies as a way to promote social change. They were engaging a critical approach. How strongly does their influence have an impact on the field today?

Marshak (2005) suggests that, “an important issue facing [contemporary] OD therefore is the compatibility of the philosophical or ideological orientation developed in the 1960s with current conditions” (p. 26). He points out that in the 1960s and 1970s when OD emerged as a discipline, the broader society was more liberal. The social values at the time which prioritized individual development led people to begin questioning the prioritization of technical over social systems in organizations (Marshak, 2005).

However, now our current context has changed, becoming more conservative (Marshak, 2005). Marshak concludes that, “as a consequence, the ideological orientation and emphasis of OD is more marginalized today than ever before” (2005, p. 25). As OD practitioners seek to challenge unjust power in organizational systems that limits human potential, and challenge the contentious issues of difference – challenging societal norms beyond the doors of the organization – they are taking a radical stance to the status quo.
In deciding to take such a stance by practicing OD with its traditional humanist/critical values and orientations, they would do well to remember the legacies of Robert Owen, Mary Parker Follett, and Kurt Lewin when the going gets tough. These people changed nations because of their work, and paved the way for more justice in society.

With a legacy of striving for social justice as strong and vibrant as that of OD, with a clear set of underlying values to work to do what is right and what is just, the field is poised to respond to the inequality that continues in our global society today. I found an exciting development in this regard at the OD Network, an association which supports OD professionals around the world. They released a statement in January 2008 regarding their position on diversity (Appendix 1). It is a fascinating starting point for thinking about our responsibility as OD practitioners regarding social justice, especially with regard to our role in supporting “deep diversity,” a phrase that was used to identify the sessions on diversity management at OD Network’s conference last year. With OD’s values rooted in social justice, the field has a lot to offer a post-colonial world. “The elimination of oppression in the world is unlikely to happen any time soon” (Brazzel, 2007, p. 21). We had better get on it now!

Change does not need to involve one or two big acts that change the entire world. Change can result from one small act after another, an accumulation of acts, by people working together for social justice and inclusion. Telling the truth. Staying true to one’s values. Speaking out for diversity and social justice and acting to eliminate oppression in all of its forms. (Brazzel, 2007, p. 20)
Implications for Personal Learning & Growth

Organization Development is a praxis field that values balancing content with process. Upon reflecting on my thesis journey, I realize how much I have learned from the process of conducting research in addition to the content that I have been able to develop along the way. Since process reflection is a part of my practice as an OD professional, and a team facilitator, I will also reflect on my newfound understandings of the process of research. As I learned about qualitative research, I heard about the quest for meaning in the search for truth (Shank, 2002). These words about meaning over measurement sounded intriguing and I embraced a qualitative methodology with passion. However, it was only in the process of conducting the research that the quest for meaning began to make sense.

At first, I wrestled with the literature, hoping to pull together facts that would be meaningful in the configuration in which I placed them. It was when I turned inwards and began to give a voice to my story that my own quest for meaning in the search for truth rang true. I realized that conducting my research wasn’t about preparing abstract theories to take out into a generic world; rather this was about my world screaming for some theory so that I could find meaning in the experiences that I carried. This was about finding a way to express the meaning that I carried with me through my own unique encounter with reality, and about finding my voice to share my story in a meaningful way. Shank (2002) warns that “the problem is that we have not properly understood the role of meaning in the search for truth” (p. 12). Figuring out the personal narrative that is underlying a research endeavor puts us closer to understanding the role of meaning. My

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22 This is best understood as “a truth” versus “the truth” in the qualitative research tradition.
own story gave me a framework with which to pull together the facts constituting the content of my research in a meaningful way.

In reflecting back on my reservations about using autoethnography for my research, the critiques of the validity of experience in our modern-day world continue to somewhat haunt me. I wonder if my recounting of my experience may not be considered serious social analysis because it is assumed that subjectivity may not allow for an accurate portrayal of “the story” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, I have to remind myself that I strongly believe that there is no objective view of the world. The philosophy underlying the qualitative paradigm accounts for knowledge being relativistic: the knower and the known are interdependent, values mediate and shape understanding, events shape each other forming multidirectional relationships, and explanations are contextual (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The qualitative paradigm is also pluralistic: there are multiple realities which are constructed into an interconnected whole (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). From such a perspective, my subjective account of reality is as equally valid as any other account. Is there ever an interpretation to a story that would form an absolute truth? My truth in the form of my story stands as one view of reality and is a valid representation of reality as such. I have concluded that the risks of telling my own stories were balanced by the gains of insight into meaning.

In jumping into the deep end with a qualitative approach to research which was new to me, I have also learned that “when we look toward enriching our meaningful understanding of something, we cannot afford to ever lose sight of the whole” (Shank, 2002, p. 13). I began including my experiences in my writing as short epitaphs, plopped into the text on theory as examples. Reduced in this way, they felt like convenient
examples, but the approach seemed to lack any rigor, making it difficult to distill any truth from my experience. Also, there was a disconnect between them which reduced their power to convey the full picture of meaning. As soon as I finally chose to weave the facts into a story, putting examples into a fuller context, I felt that it became a meaningful whole.

Stories are “more true” than facts because stories are multidimensional. Truth with a capital “T” has many layers. Truths like justice or integrity are too complex to be expressed in a law, a statistic, or a fact. Facts need the context of when, who, and where to become Truths. . . . Story can hold the complexities of conflict and paradox. (Simmons, 2001, p. 33)

This piece of research was personally satisfying because I was able to address some deep questions from my own experience of the world. It was satisfying because telling my story provided a mechanism for me to link the cognitive realm with the emotional realm. I don’t think that it is possible for people, who are hard-wired with emotions (Choudhury & Dashtgard, 2008, 15 March), to talk about experiences of marginalization and challenge their own privilege without information flowing at the emotional level. It doesn’t seem to do justice to the issues of racism, sexism, and elitism – as some forms of oppression – when we only explore theory at a cognitive level. We need a way to explore the meaningful whole of the reality of inequality; this whole captures both our thoughtful understandings of oppression as well as how oppression makes us feel. Oppression affects all of us, both those in privileged and those in marginalized social positions. In looking at our current context, we can see “how the wounds of the past affect us now, bearing in mind that everyone is impacted by oppressive or unjust structures and systems” (Goodman, 2005, October, p. 1). Being unjustly dominant or unjustly dominated both reduce our humanity. I discovered in the process of my research that expressing the cognitive and emotional experience of the way
our post-colonial condition challenges our humanity is made possible through the process of storytelling. This is because “in the realm of feelings and emotions (by definition: irrational), ideas aren’t ‘organized’ in the traditional sense” (Simmons, 2001, p. xviii).

Part of the risk I sensed in telling my story was in taking a common approach to narrative inquiry of writing from a position of vulnerability (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). “Vulnerability is not a position of weakness, but one from which to attempt change and social fellowship” (Tierney, 2003, p. 315). My intention was to share my vulnerability as a source of empowerment, with a hope to spark positive change (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), in terms of building commitment and capacity for OD professionals to address social inequality in organizations. I also am not sure if there would have been any other way to engage in a counter-narrative. I think that the act of telling a counter-narrative is an act of vulnerability. In the hope for change, this seems like an act worth undertaking. In sharing my own meaning in terms of working in diversity, I have the opportunity to challenge the status quo to create better possibilities for building trust and managing conflict for diverse teams in the future. Castellano says,

Individuals and society can be transformed by identifying and reaffirming learning processes based on subjective experiences and introspection. . . . Those people who seek knowledge on the physical plane objectively find their answers through exploration of the outer space, solely on the corporeal level. Those who seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different, incorporeal knowledge paradigm. (Ermine, 1995 as cited in Castellano, 2000, p. 28)

Exposing my experiences of marginalization as a woman and as a foreigner in Germany are counter-narrative, because they surface the fact that discrimination based on social identity group differences continues to shape social relations. This counters the public script that suggests that inequality was left behind us with the end of colonialism.
From this perspective, my stories might seem self-indulgent and unnecessarily radical, making a problem out of nothing. Their power, though, comes from giving a voice to stories that are not often shared in the public sphere to counter the belief that oppression has ended.

At the same time, I engage in counter-narrative in the sense of recognizing the unearned privilege that gives me unfair advantage and power in the world. I do this by sharing the awareness of my privilege as a white person, an able person, and someone who has had access to great educational opportunities, has always had an inviting roof over my head and has never gone hungry, and has been able to travel the world (all adding up to class privilege). Exposing my privilege is counter-narrative first of all in questioning any sense of entitlement that comes with these positions of privilege. Rather than taking my privilege for granted and assuming others don’t have privilege because they are inferior – as the dominant discourse might suggest – I question the unfair system of hierarchical binaries which portions out advantage based on social identity. Finally, I wonder how I could use the power, influence, and status bestowed on me through certain social identities to do good in the world, rather than ignoring or holding onto my privilege to perpetuate unequal social relations.

Power is not in and of itself a bad thing. Individuals with power can use it to bring about results that benefit all people and communities. *A denial of power only results in its abuse* [italics added]. In . . . [equity] work we pay attention to how people with power can be effective allies with those who are the targets of oppression. . . . It’s about people getting clear about the power they have and the strategic ways they could use it for equity, rather than getting paralyzed by guilt. (Lopes & Thomas, 2006, pp. 18-19)

Coming to terms with one’s own privilege is as important as giving a voice to marginalized identities because “you cannot get rid of the subordination without eliminating the privilege as well” (Grillo, 1995, p. 19 as cited in Slamet, 2007, p. 22).
“As OD practitioners, we can help organizations go only as far in addressing diversity and social justice as we have gone in our own personal development” (Brazzel, 2007). To be able to address the power that is associated with difference in organizations, OD professionals need to have looked inwards to understand and come to terms with their own privileged and marginalized identities (Brazzel, 2007). I discovered that telling stories is remarkably therapeutic in coming to terms with such issues. First of all, it is the opportunity to give a voice to experiences which usually don’t get shared because they don’t fit with the public transcript.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited and those who stand in struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject – the liberated voice. (hooks, 1989, p. 9 as cited in A. Prasad & Elmes, 1997, p. 373)

It is also a tool for deep personal reflection on the complex, often conflicting experiences of holding both marginalized and privileged identities in the world, and what bridges can be built to connect with others across difference. The personal growth and healing that was made possible through exploring my own story has hopefully made me a better OD professional in terms of supporting organizations to effectively work in diversity. One of the Ghanaian PhD students who I met at the International OD Conference in 2008 reminded me that change begins inside the change agent. Also, Gandhi once said to live the change you want to see in the world. As a vehicle of change, OD professionals need to embody the changes they want to see in organizations.

At the International Organization Development Association conference in 2007, I began to hear OD professionals talking about the “use of self” in their practice. I understand this to be developing an awareness of self to be clear on what strengths can be
leveraged in oneself to influence learning and change in an organization. This past year I 
have been thinking about the ways in which I bring power and influence to a group. What 
I have begun to recognize is that I can leverage my willingness to be vulnerable. I am 
willling to show this vulnerability in the way that I tell my truth by sharing my 
experiences, including exposing my weaknesses and failures. Through storytelling “your 
wisdom and power to influence is waiting for you, like a bag of magic beans you shoved 
in a drawer and forgot” (Simmons, 2001, p. xix). This willingness to be vulnerable sets 
the stage for others to take risks in being vulnerable as well. It sets the stage for 
beginning to share counter-narratives.

Ahmed (2004) has warned of non-performative anti-racism; basically of talking 
the talk, but not walking the walk. I believe her idea could be extended to any form of 
oppression. She suggests that declarations such as acknowledging white privilege or 
communicating emotions of shame and regret at our own complicity in perpetuating 
oppressive social relations fall short of anti-racist actions. This is because just saying that 
one has anti-racist intent is not the same as doing something about racism. She even 
suggests that the act of saying can actually go as far as to mask the absence of the more 
important act of doing. OD practitioners like myself need to make sure that their intent to 
address inequality in organizations is more than just empty declarations, as many 
diversity initiatives seem to be, but that they seek to find ways to support organizations to 
keep an equity agenda in their diversity work. This begins with internal searching. 
Although storytelling could only go as far as saying according to Ahmed (2004), I think it 
can also be used for doing.
In summary, I have found storytelling to be a very useful tool as a researcher, to find a way to more clearly communicate the meaning that I make of reality. Uncovering the stories of my own experiences of working in diversity has been a way to uncover the truths about myself. This has allowed me to grow as an individual in terms of being able to better manage both my privileged and marginalized identities in the world, in order to reach my fullest potential. This includes finding resources within myself to work towards social justice. As I have grown to understand the role of power in relations between different people, I have developed the desire to support the organizations I work with in exploring the power hierarchies that are limiting people’s potential due to social identity group differences. In discovering truths about myself, I have better equipped myself to work with my clients. Now I can see the use of storytelling as an intervention as well. If storytelling helped me learn about myself, others could use this, too. Stories create possibility to uncover difficult truths in a system.

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers’ doors and was readily welcomed into the people’s houses. They invited her to eat at their table and warm herself by their fire. (Jewish Teaching Story as cited in Simmons, 2001, p. 27)

As a researcher-practitioner, I am excited by the possibilities of using storytelling to illuminate the hierarchy of unequal binaries in our post-colonial context. It seems that telling stories will give a framework for people to be vulnerable with each other, sharing their experiences of marginalization, exposing their privilege, and in so doing, sowing the seeds of trust.
Implications for Further Research

In his discussion of the increasing marginalization of the field of OD in the world of business, after Jerry Harvey’s (2005) article on the same topic, *Why don’t they take the tubes out of grandma?*, Marshak (2005) ponders the decline in doctoral-level practitioners in the field. He suggests that one of the reasons for the decreasing relevance of the field of OD is the declining amount of scholarship currently being carried out in the field.\(^{23}\) He suggests that many of the seminal texts that “helped create and give legitimacy” to the field were written by scholar-practitioners who were as familiar with the theory as with the practice of OD (Marshak, 2005, p. 35). He points out a shift in the OD publications of late from a “theory of how to do it” orientation to a “how to do it” orientation. In this way, there is a current disconnect between scholars and practitioners. Theory may not be getting integrated into practice, thus losing its usefulness, while practice may not be informing theory building to ensure the relevancy of the latter. In responding to this trend, with the view of building theory to inform practice, I think that further research would do well to figure out the theories behind the “how-to’s” rather than figuring out directly the “how-to’s.” Being able to draw on theory rather than on a how-to list will give practitioners flexibility to custom design interventions to effectively address differing contexts.

My suggestions for moving forward with the research in this thesis would be to now study a diverse, globally dispersed team. It would be interesting to study the dynamics that exist in such a team, especially the processes of building trust and

\(^{23}\) This sounds like a chicken and egg argument. It is hard to know whether the causal relationship might be reversed, so that the declining amount of scholarship is due to the decreasing relevance of the field of OD. Marshak (2005) notes, however, that the declining amount of scholarship may be related to other trends, for example that a much higher percentage of women currently make up the professionals in the field. Women may not have opportunities, as they combine family responsibilities with career for example, to pursue the level of scholarship that men who used to dominate the field can pursue.
managing conflict. Ethnography would be a useful approach to observe such dynamics. Now would be an opportune time to capture diverse people’s experiences of working in diversity, across very different local contexts, to add to my own experiences. It would be interesting to find out how different team members make meaning of their reality, and how these interconnected meanings contribute to team process. It would also be useful to understand how our post-colonial context contributes to people’s understandings of and how they work with difference. Further, it would be good to position micro team dynamics within the macro dynamics of the organization and our global society to find out how these two levels influence each other. To make it possible to study such a team and to understand the added complexity of local contexts coming together in globally dispersed work, it would be fascinating to study this team virtually by following the work that they conduct through Information and Communication Technologies. This should provide a complete picture of the complexity that team members face while working virtually with diverse people, living in contexts with which they may be unfamiliar.

This further research could help to extend theory building to enhance the practice of leading and facilitating diverse, globally dispersed teams. For example, what pedagogical methods can facilitators leverage to build awareness of difference, especially of difference associated with social identity? What theories underlie the politics of difference and how can these theories be conveyed to people working in organizations and be integrated into OD praxis? What options are there to transform the social hierarchies that bestow privilege on some people while marginalizing others? How can OD professionals through their systems understanding challenge macro policies and
structures that hinder marginalized people from living and working to their fullest potential?

In their book on *Difficult Conversations*, Stone, Patton, & Heen (1999) describe their findings about the essence of difficult conversations based on studying thousands of these, and suggest practical ways of managing such conversations. They suggest that such a conversation has three levels: the “what happened” (or truth) conversation, the feelings conversation, and the identity conversation. I believe that this is a good starting point for exploring how to work with teams experiencing the challenges of working in diversity. The kinds of interactions and conversations that they may need support with from a team facilitator are probably difficult ones.

In terms of addressing the “what happened” conversation, I have been wondering about dialogue as a way to uncover the dissimilar truths that diverse people have about situations, especially with regards to their understanding of difference. Dialogue is a tool mentioned both in literature from the humanist consultancy school (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1990) and the critical academic school (Allman, 2001; Freire, 2006). It would be interesting to bring these literatures together, to develop possibilities for dialogue to support processes to advance both “what ought to be,” and the limitations imposed by power on our ability to perceive “what ought to be.” In this way, people would be empowered to push the envelope in determining “what ought to be.” Thus, a further research question would be, how can dialogue be used to manage the “what happened” conversation between people with radically different perspectives of the world?
Working in diversity is an emotional process. Boler & Zembylas (2003) talk about the role of emotion in processes of transformation, especially in transforming attitudes around issues of difference and inequality. They talk about how educators will need to work through emotional resistance for transformation to occur. I wonder, though, if there may be resistance to showing and/or engaging with emotion, especially in the workplace. John Scherer, an OD consultant working with senior leadership teams, sees engaging openly with emotions as important for effective leadership and leadership development (2008, July 11). He thinks that inviting emotions into the workplace is critical to enhance performance, but wonders why emotions are often kept at bay (Scherer, 2008, July 11).

Here’s my question: Why is that aspect of reality-emotion, one that seems so central to life and vitality, so resisted? What is it about emotions that has earned them such a bad rap? What would happen if the creative energy embedded in emotion were to be tapped into at work? Isn’t that what every leader wants: loyalty, commitment, energy, enthusiasm? If they don’t live in the emotional domain, where do they hang out? Do leaders actually think they can generate those kinds of emotions in their people, and not themselves dive into the world of emotions? (Scherer, 2008, July 11, ¶ 15)

Perhaps there is a link between emotion and vulnerability, which makes people try to avoid their feelings and believe that witnessing the feelings of others is inappropriate. I think it would be very interesting to understand more about how to create safe spaces for people to express their feelings, and thus express the full range of their experience around issues of diversity. This seems especially useful in considering Lencioni’s view that trust in a team is based on being willing to be vulnerable with one another (2005).

Again, as in the case of dialogue, both humanist and critical theorists have contributed to the body of literature on emotions. These literatures – from the humanist theorists (Goleman, 1998; Rosenberg, 2003) and the critical theorists (Boler, 1999) –
could augment each other to provide team facilitators with a rich body of knowledge as they learn to support team members wrestling with emotions. Theory building through combining these literatures would be valuable to OD professionals as they seek to support transformation in organizations around working in diversity. Such study would help to support the feelings conversations that are often so difficult to access and address, to work with team members’ emotions that come with difficult conversations – with themselves and others – as they work in diversity.

Stone, Patton, & Heen (1999) talk about how difficult conversations challenge our very identity. Of course, working with people around issues of difference focuses directly on identity. Understanding the complexity of identity based on the interaction of personality, culture, and privileged and marginalized social identities would support the work of team facilitators. With this knowledge, they could better help individuals learn about their own and other’s identities to build trust. I believe that theories such as intersectionality are beginning to find ways to describe the complexities of interlocking identities, and more research along these lines would be immensely useful to practitioners.

Telling stories makes it possible to convey the complexity of the social realm, as snippets of experience are pulled together into a meaningful whole. I think that following from my thesis research, it would be interesting to explore more deeply the applications of storytelling in both organizational research and practice. For example, it would be valuable in an ethnographic research study of a diverse, globally dispersed team to see how to weave the stories of the different team members into a meaningful whole. It
would be interesting to consider what value this would add to knowledge building and understanding.

In the realm of practice, it would be valuable to continue the understanding of the role of storytelling in culture change in organizations, especially regarding culture change around setting the conditions in the organization to work effectively in diversity. As a way to pull the “what happened,” feelings, and identity conversations together, the method of storytelling seems to be a promising tool for team facilitators. Also, I found in my current research endeavor that telling the stories that are not usually spoken about regarding privilege, abuse of power, and marginalization made me feel vulnerable. Since team development praxis encourages team members to learn to become vulnerable with one another, to build trust as a solid foundation for good teamwork, then perhaps the way to encouraging this vulnerability is in asking people to tell their stories. These stories would be a way to capture the complex experiences of privilege and marginalization and begin to give people insights into how power is affecting their group dynamics. It would be interesting to further the understanding of how to capture and use such stories in practice.
Concluding Remarks

This thesis journey has afforded me the opportunity as an OD professional to develop a clearer understanding of different perspectives on power, difference, and identity based on different paradigms underlying the way organizations work in diversity. This has given me a framework for understanding the possibilities for helping globally dispersed teams build trust and manage conflict on their path to becoming high performing. I have also had the chance to reflect on the meaning of my work in a post-colonial world, in a profession whose roots lie firmly in promoting change in organizations for the higher purpose of social justice. It has led me to discover where I stand in relation to this whole topic, as someone with both privileged and marginalized identities which each need to be reconciled in unique ways.

In a recent memoirs writing class, we wrote poems based on the idea of what we carry with us in the world, including our hopes, fears, and beliefs. We brainstormed things that we carry, then we cut up our ideas and ordered some to create a meaningful poem. I want to finish with my poem which is a wonderful ode to my thesis journey and my entire MA program. It shows how I stand in the world, what my particular perspective is, and the passion I have for helping organizations find ways to work effectively in diversity. I want to help them balance addressing equity with celebrating diversity as they work with difference. It alludes to the challenges that this work brings to people who engage in it. It brings both personal and professional faces to my identity as they coalesce to a passion for transformation and social justice. It also seems like a fitting ending to a thesis that relied heavily on reflecting on my own experience and sharing my story. The poem is also a form of story, a last gaze inwards along this wonderful journey.
I carry the old jade earring that Grandma gave to me that broke on the subway station floor.

I carry Grandma sitting stroking Star, reading her books, sitting out in her garden reflecting in the pond.

I carry joy, joy from seeing the flowers bursting in my garden and stroking Star curled up on my lap.

I carry the blue forget-me-not, the red baby roses and the white lily of the valley, fresh and vibrant in my wedding bouquet.

I carry hope to be true to my womanhood and find a way to stay true to myself in a sea of stiff suits.

I want to believe we can live in harmony.

I carry Gramps (in) showing me his degrees and awards from his dental office now plastering the entrance to his bedroom.

I carry Canada where we find places to bring meaning and dignity to our identity.

I want to believe women are equal.
I carry them running around the townships caring for her orphans.

I carry Dad sleeping in a mud hut in Mozambique, carrying out leadership training under a big acacia tree during the day.

I carry tumult as people fight for dignity & life.

I carry Germany & the Berlin Wall & doing the right thing for change.

I carry hope for peace.
I carry hope for justice.
I carry hope for understanding.

I carry the fear of becoming hardened.

I wish I could stop carrying my books around, afraid of the truths they hold.

I carry the hope that they carry the truths. I am looking for, that in finally opening them I will be able to save the world.

I carry tylenol.
Appendix A

OD Network’s Statement on Diversity and Inclusion

One of the three strategic goals of the OD Network:

Accelerate progress on diversity and inclusion; create momentum and a call-to-action

a. Make a simple, public statement by the board about the OD Network’s beliefs and intent
b. Put our beliefs and intent into practice in the running of the organization, the creation of policy and the monitoring of the OD Network’s activities
c. Catalyze, facilitate and encourage conversations about diversity and inclusion in the formal OD Network, on our website, at the conference, in the board and with our partners. (OD Network, n.d.-b)

The OD Network implemented a. by making a statement in January 2008:

The Board of Trustees of the Organization Development Network makes the following statement:

1. Understanding and addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, privilege, and access are inherent to OD practice in the 21st century.
2. OD practitioners should be able to recognize the dynamics of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. They should understand how those dynamics can be internalized as individual beliefs and institutionalized in a system.
3. There are a range of orientations and approaches to diversity and inclusion, and the Board does not endorse one over another. However, practitioners should be conscious of the options before they choose a particular approach.

Given this statement, the OD Network will pursue an agenda that attends to diversity, inclusion, and access. Diversity and inclusion are one of the board’s three strategic goals in support of our efforts to be a leader in advancing the theory and practice of organization development. (OD Network, n.d.-a)
References


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