

Profile

Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

Award-winning professor, psychologist and consultant focuses on diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion in the work place

By Arthur Lightbourn

Generally, academics are not considered "men of action."

Not so, Professor Bernardo Ferdman.

He's definitely a head guy, an organizational psychologist, an outstanding international scholar-practitioner at Alliant University, and a kind man, but if you're a rattlesnake, and you curl up in the sun on his doorstep, watch out.

The normally mild-mannered Ferdman transforms into The Terminator.

When this reporter arrived at Ferdman's Carmel Valley residence 20 minutes early, there was a hand-printed note taped to the front door which read, SNAKE, or was it SHAKE, hard to decipher, with a large arrow pointing downward.

Hmmmm.

Within minutes, Ferdman drove up.

"Sorry," he said, "I had to take my 3-year-old son to pre-school and I wanted to warn you about the snake."

"The snake?"

"There, didn't you see him, in the corner right by the door, a rattlesnake."

Ferdman, who spent part of his youth, as did this reporter, growing up in the snakeless confines of New York City, had, as any responsible homeowner, would, called Animal Control. Unfortunately, and perhaps predictably, they were busy and couldn't come out right away. "So," they suggested "here's what you do.

You take a shovel and...."

"That was very gross," Ferdman shuddered when the deadly deed was done. "Very gross," and then he speculated aloud, "I wonder what you're going to write about this."

Admittedly, not too many interviews begin so dramatically, but, what the heck, that's life in the "Wild West" canyon area of Carmel Valley where Ferdman lives with his wife, Andrea, and their three children, and where a man has to do what he has to do.

Ferdman, 47, was actually born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, into a white, middle class Jewish family.

He was a fourth generation Argentinean. His engineer father and the family moved to New York when Ferdman was 7 years old. "I knew three words of English," he recalled. Actually, five words: "Yes," "No," and "Empire State Building."

"I had to deal with the 'sink or swim' approach in the New York City public schools at that time in 1966 — P.S. 144 in Forest Hills, Queens.

"I remember my second grade teacher...used to paddle kids when they misbehaved and made us copy sentences off of the board, 'This is a cow. It gives us milk.' 'Our President is President Johnson and he is winning the war in Vietnam for us.'"

"That was my introduction to being North Americanized," Ferdman remembered.

"They had a tracking system in the schools and they assumed I must have been stupid because I didn't speak English, so they put me in the lowest track," he said.

Although his family was able to provide a private tutor for him to learn English, at the same time "as a family, we were learning what it was like to be immigrants and dealing with all those issues of prejudice."

Even in a Jewish camp where he went one summer and where his mother taught Hebrew, he remem-

bers kids calling him a "Spic."

"So, in a sense, I was always in a minority."

Fortunately, after a few months in the second grade, he eventually, with the intervention of his mother, ("Hey, what are you doing to my kid?") was given a standardized test that revealed he wasn't such a dummy after all. He was reading at a sixth grade level.

In January, he was placed in a higher track class where the teacher played guitar and taught them Woody Guthrie songs like "This Land is Your Land."

Educationally, he was on his way.

But, he allowed, if his mother hadn't had a good understanding of the educational system and hadn't intervened, he might have languished and have become increasingly frustrated.

"I remember consciously noting as a third- and fourth-grader, how immigrant kids would get progressively more violent...they didn't know much English and they didn't know how to express themselves and would take it out on me and other kids.

"These early influences relate to some of the things I do now. My work focuses primarily on diversity and inclusion. How do we understand cultural diversity and how can workplaces integrate differences more effectively to benefit everyone. A particular specialty within that is Latino development and Latino leadership within work places."

Nationally, Latinos make up about 14.5 percent of the U.S. population, and 35 percent of the California population, largely attributable to strong birth rates, rather than immigration.

After four-and-a-half years in New York, in 1970, when Ferdman was 11 and the eldest of four children, the family moved to Puerto Rico where his father continued to work as an engineer.

In 1976, Ferdman entered Princeton University where he earned an A.B. degree in psychology in 1980, followed by a Ph.D. in psychology from Yale University in 1987.

In 1986, he joined the faculty of the University of Albany, where he taught for seven years in the departments of psychology and Latin American and Caribbean studies.

Ferdman joined Alliant as an associate professor back in 1993 when it was then known as the California School of Professional Psychology.

He teaches courses in cultural diversity in organizations to graduate students working on their master's or doctorates. The course seeks to help students understand cultural differences, learn how to work with the differences, and what are the strategies that organizations can use to intervene in moving toward more inclusiveness.

"These are people who, one



Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

Photo/Mike Sullivan

way or another, will be working with organizations and people. They might not specialize in diversity when they get their degrees, but they need to know about it to be effective practitioners. Our program is focused on professional practice...We call ourselves a professional practice university."

He also teaches working managers at UCLA's Anderson School of Management's Executive Education programs to develop Latino and Latina leaders, as well as other leaders of color, in both corporate and nonprofit settings.

"I teach, for example, classes on 'Bringing the Whole Self to Work,' how do people use more of themselves in the service of their goals at work...by being aware of the complexity of their identities, understanding who am I in a complex way, and how does all that integrate in a way that is unique to me and how does that give me more power, more value, when I draw on all those identities instead of trying to hide them from others at work. Some people may think that work is separate from life, and, in reality, it's not."

In general, Ferdman believes diversity is being more appreciated in the workplace.

"I think more and more people are realizing that this is an issue they have to deal with. Organizations are creating more internal capacity, more competency, working across differences. They are learning that it's a journey, not a destination. They are building skills in their people and realizing it's an ongoing process.

"They are learning now that the new frontier essentially is work-

ing on inclusion...it's not just about having the differences present, it's about how do we really behave with each other so that we can feel that we are a part of the whole enterprise, so that everyone gives their best and feels good. And the organization wins. So it's a win-win for everybody."

Ferdman is, in fact, working on a scale for measuring what he describes as "the experience of inclusion."

"It's the degree to which a person feels valued, engaged, safe, trusted, able to be authentic, not only as an individual, but as a member of particular identity groups.

"So I want to be able to be fully present as a Latino, as a Jew, as a father, as a husband, as a middle-aged person...and the same would go for others who have other identities along similar dimensions..."

There are many levels of inclusion, he said, including how organizations relate to the community and to the world.

On immigration, he said: "This country has a history of welcoming immigrants and I don't think we should stop now. I think we should do it in a way that is good for everybody."

As for the problem of illegal immigration, he said:

"I think a comprehensive immigration reform would be a good thing, finding a way to regularize the situation of people who are here. And then having a better system for bringing more people in, because people are going to come, no matter what."

Quick Facts

Name: Bernardo M. Ferdman, Ph.D.

Distinction: An organizational psychologist and consultant focusing on diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion in organizations, Dr. Ferdman is a professor at Alliant University's Marshall Goldsmith School of Management and recipient of the MGSM's first Outstanding International Scholar-Practitioner Award.

Resident of: Carmel Valley

Born: Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1959. Immigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was 7.

Education: A.B. in psychology from Princeton University, magna cum laude, in 1980 and a Ph.D. in psychology from Yale University in 1987.

Family: He and his wife, Andrea (nee Szulik), a speech language pathologist, met on a blind date in Buenos Aires, where he was attending a conference, in 1989. They have three children: daughter Maia, 13, an 8th grade student at Carmel Valley Middle School, and two sons, Yoel, 10, a fifth grader at Sycamore Ridge School, and Ilan, 3, a student at Congregation Beth Am Preschool.

Interests: Photography and spinning on a stationary bike.

Reading: Enjoys Spanish-language literature, including works by Isabel Allende, Laura Restrepo and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Favorite Getaway: Sedona, Arizona; and Buenos Aires.

Favorite Food: Asado, barbecued Argentine beef.

Philosophy: "Embrace paradox and ask lots of questions."