Chapter 2
Intersecting Stories of Power and Discrimination: Narrative of a Female Program Director of Color

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As a female faculty of color, I am no stranger to discrimination on the job. But many incidents are not overt, making it hard to interpret, label, and talk about my experiences. Since I do not often give voice to my feelings of being discriminated against, I do not tend to describe myself as being subjected to gender, racial, or ethnic discrimination. Nonetheless, it is there and it is subtle (Sue et al., 2011).

Here is one story that describes less overt discrimination in all of its ugliness: When I worked as the program director at a university, two students made academic requests to switch programs. I should have been the final decision maker on such matters, but an administrative officer approved the students' requests without consulting me. I did not learn about these changes until a year later when the students were registering for classes. Because the administrator had since resigned by that time, I was left to salvage the situation. I had to explain to these students that the approval they had received previously was in fact invalid because it had not been rendered in accordance with university policy and procedures, and I had to attend to their resultant frustration about the system.

This was one of several occasions when I had been excluded from a programmatic decision-making process by this administrator. Though we had a cordial working relationship, this pattern of bypassing me made me uneasy. Many times I felt the need to give her face and to tolerate her behavior because of who she was in relation to me—she was an older White female who had been in her position for almost 20years. She carried privilege as to race, age, and seniority at work because I was a faculty of color, younger than her, and new to the institution. In this particular situation, she left behind a systemic problem for everyone to resolve. But I was also left wondering, "Was this done to undermine my authority? Or was it an

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oversight?" It was difficult to articulate this experience because the discrimination was subtle and invisible, but also persistent, as I had experienced many other similar incidents with her. Research has shown that professional experiences like this involving gender, ethnic, and racial discrimination are common among Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks (Turner, 2002).

Before I left Singapore to study in the United States many years ago, a wise pastor said to me, "Be yourself." I took this to mean that I should be true to who I am. I am a Christian. I am a cis-female. I am a Singaporean of Chinese descent. These social identities intersect and inform one another. This combination of gender, ethnicity, and race categorizes me as a woman of color. My social location in the US context also includes an added layer of being a migrant.

As an immigrant woman of color, I may find strength and power in my ethnicity, gender, and national status. A colleague used to say that I am comfortable in my own skin, but my challenge is being a woman of color in a dominant discourse that privileges a particular race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and national status. In this way, the Asian female's journey of becoming and being a mid-level faculty leader reflects the complexities of the current landscape of academia and the multiple hierarchies that female faculty of color must contend with. Over time, I have learned to develop my sense of self from different social locations and make meaning of contradictory experiences of power and disadvantage. This chapter is, therefore, a self-reflection that explores my professional experiences and situates my narrative within a particular cultural and social context. Specifically, it is the story of one female educator of color in leadership examining the factors that shape her professionally.

I am now a faculty member and program director of a marriage and family therapy (MFT) program. My current work focuses on the overall operation of the MFT program, including oversight of the curriculum and of clinical training. Having worked in higher education institutions for more than a decade, I would say that ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, and religion are deeply intertwined with teaching and research agendas, mentorship goals, and the leadership style I employ to navigate the MFT program. My identity as an Asian female academic leader cannot be split neatly into any one of these characterizations, as they are intertwined and visible. What is not visible is my religion and its impact on my professional life. While my Christian faith in the Protestant tradition is privileged in American culture, my gender and racial and ethnic backgrounds are not. For example, female faculty of color tend to be undervalued in academia, prompting a higher rate of attrition and lower rates of tenure advancement (Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011). In general, Asian Americans experience their fair share of racism and discrimination (Wong & Halgin, 2006). Recent reports of microaggressions, racial profiling, xenophobia, hate incidents, hate crimes, and harassment toward Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders during the COVID-19 pandemic are prime examples (Raukko, 2020).

Reflecting on where I fit within these systems of advantage and disadvantage in higher education is as uncomfortable as it is necessary. Being uncomfortable in this manner may be key in today's world because navigating the tension between the dominant discourse about professional work and the discourse on power and

disadvantage with its emphasis on gendered and racialized groups can be emotionally exhausting. Truth be told, as a faculty member in a leadership role, I often find myself struggling to manage a particular set of interpersonal and complex professional spaces within the institutions I work. But to be able to weave past and present experiences and future plans into a compelling whole is necessary and generative, which is why I am sharing my personal experiences. As is customary, I assigned pseudonyms and altered details to protect identities of others in these narratives.

Starting My Academic Journey

I started my academic journey during the new millennium. The transition to a new working life in academe was refreshing after many years working at several nonprofit corporations in Singapore and in the United States. I entered academe with life experiences, confidence, and excitement. This shift was a continuation of my life goal, which is to foster loving and healthy couple and family relationships that promote mental health. Because of this end, I am committed to the training of marriage and family therapists—not only practical techniques, but also developing the selfhood of therapists. However, teaching is not all I do; advancing to an administrative position seemed to be the next logical step. As I took on a program director position, I became more aware of the multiple forms of hierarchy that underlie institutions of higher education. I have worked with several universities, and moving from one school to the next taught me how to adapt and be flexible in new environments. As I encountered diverse academic cultures, I learned about and came to appreciate many academic structures. But I also experienced and observed cultural bias and insensitivities. I found myself in many painful situations of holding a position that is simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged.

In reflecting on my narratives, I choose to enter, not escape, the tangles of teaching and administering an MFT program. Over the years, I had subconsciously written off many negative experiences for various reasons. I do not like to make people feel uncomfortable, whether individually or as a group. The mental strain associated with trying to manage such tensions may be too much to bear. I do not know how to confront the issues, as these are not so clear-cut. Many colleagues who did confront them did so as a last straw before they left. While my experiences are not generalizable to all female faculty of color, this reflective account provides important tools for other professionals in similar situations.

The call for cross-cultural competence in academic institutions has not translated into an equitable work environment for faculty of color in leadership. Interpersonal and professional challenges have inhibited the development of such leaders. Many faculty leaders of color have encountered obstacles related to the intersectionality of their ethnicity, race, gender, and immigrant status. For decades, faculty leaders of color have narrated their experiences of isolation and harassment (Stanley, 2006), exposing the scars that result when colleagues question their competence and achievements or even backstab them (Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014). Scholars

of color have also documented experiences with professional jealousy and unsupportive supervisors, difficulties in career advancement, experiences of hostility, microaggressions, and treatment as outsiders (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Harris, Trepal, Prado, & Robinson, 2019; Lumby & Coleman, 2007; Stanley, 2006).

These sentiments echo my own experiences; I am not alone. More often than not, faculty leaders of color seem to get the short end of the stick in an already-difficult field. Like many others, I was the only faculty member of color in the departments I have worked at. And being in administrative leadership at a programmatic level increases loneliness and isolation. I have not been trained to manage these types of challenges, and thus feel unprepared for them.

A Story of Discrimination: The Content

The following account is a personal example of how multiple social locations shaped my response to a situation of marginality.

At one university, I was the only female Asian faculty in the department. I was not happy in this role because of problems in the department, but I was also seemingly on a course toward tenure and promotion because I have a very good track record in teaching, scholarship, and service. One day, I requested to meet with the dean concerning a job offer I received from another institution. I had been agonizing for months about whether to stay or to move on, and this job offer would have been a great opportunity to get a new start. He was shocked and expressed disbelief that there were problems in the department. But instead of addressing my concerns, the dean directed me to talk to my supervisor. When I did, I was blasted for surprising her with an offer letter from another institution. While I was very surprised by the reactions of these administrators, I wanted to work on these issues rather than ignore them.

Responses of my colleagues from different institutions varied. In general, my White colleagues said that I should leave and not deal with the issues. However, my Asian American colleagues said to confront them and deal with them for the sake of the next generation. One Asian American senior colleague and a sought-after activist once remarked, “As the Chinese saying goes, be like water—water is soft, yielding, and fluid. Water wears away rock, which is rigid and unyielding” (personal conversation). As a rule, she said, if you learn to be flexible, gentle, and yielding, you will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. Harmonious working relationships are important to me as an Asian and a Christian because they embody well-being, justice, and love. Convinced that it was better to work things out, I decided to stay. I declined the new offer and stayed, thinking that I could make change happen. But there was little movement, and conversations became awkward. I felt as if I had fallen off the edge of a cliff. I second-guessed myself, and that affected my confidence. After 1 year, it became clear that I needed to move on, so I left.

Through trial and error, I learned to manage my emotions, be at peace when I do not see light at the end of the tunnel, and pick my battles carefully. There are now

times when I allow negative experiences to roll off me like water off a duck's back. I look back over my academic career and realize that holding fast to my own values and beliefs based on the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and religion, while also attempting to remain objective, can be exhausting. I have had to learn which battles are worth the energy it takes to pursue them.

This situation might have ended negatively for me had there not been new insights emerging from deeper knowledge of my social location that I could draw on to help advance my passion for the MFT field. Increased self-awareness has been beneficial—I can understand myself and others better and negotiate situations and relationships with more grace, not only to guard my own spirit, but also to serve my students and the program well.

A Story of Discrimination: The Process—My Internal Dialogue

Making sense of discrimination narratives is a personal endeavor that draws on social location reflecting both a dilemma and a solution to it. It involves a dilemma because no matter how a female faculty of color responds to bias, her actions risk penalty, and her career may be obstructed (Turner, 2002). A solution can become evident when the process partially dismantles the taken-for-granted dominant discourse. When trying to make sense of my own experiences, struggles with the limits of social location can constrain my desire to vocalize my stories in ways that make me self-conscious about what I may be saying. However, Nash (2008) highlights the usefulness of considering the agency that different social locations permit in different contexts. Knowing how positions of privilege and disadvantage intersect guides me in my decision about whether to speak out and how best to describe my encounter. The more I become aware and the more I listen and try to understand others' experiences and narratives, the more I recognize the humanity in each person.

When the above incident happened, I spent much time deliberating about whether I should bring it up to my supervisor, whether the person was just ignorant, and whether it was culturally appropriate for a junior faculty member to raise such an issue. I feared what the outcome might be. I wondered how much I wanted to risk and how it would affect me and come back to haunt me. In addition to thinking about personal consequences, I also thought about the systemic impact and the others involved. How could I have broached such a sensitive subject in a way that did not cause my colleagues to feel attacked or to respond by being defensive? Risk-taking is not in my DNA in such situations. As with many such events, I swept it under the rug. Over time, however, it became a small but persistent frustration. In other similar situations, whether I moved ahead with confronting the issue or let it go, each decision carried significant consequences—draining my emotional energy and detracting from my mental health. Unfortunately, I built a tension internally. It was difficult to raise awareness about racial prejudice when White colleagues from

the dominant discourse did not see power, privilege, and disadvantage, I began to rationalize that they nevertheless meant well. It would be difficult and taxing for them to perceive something from another's point of view and to do it correctly. Yes, I found myself needing to take care and protect my White colleagues from having to deal with such challenges.

Certainly, my perspective on such encounters was very much colored by my social location and the way intersectionality framed those experiences. For example, my Christian faith gives me privilege in a faith-based institution; my gender, race, and ethnicity marginalize me; and my immigration status remains hidden. Knowing how these positions of privilege and disadvantage intersect guides me in my decision to speak out and how best to describe my point. But the colliding dynamics of several social locations—racial and ethnic cultural background, female, and conservative Christian—could prove to be a "triple whammy" in processing localized discrimination. Context and locale matter. Would vocalizing my concern backfire? To not vocalize it seems cowardly and perpetuates the stereotype that Asian females are quiet and submissive. In some situations, I gave in to Asian female stereotypes by being silent, living harmoniously, and keeping the peace. Because I am already a minority in dominant spaces, it can be hard to call out situations involving a social hierarchy that lends itself to Asian female leaders being silenced. Other times, it seems the best option is to "let go and let God"—a strategy that I used in situations when I sought to practice gratitude in the midst of injustice and to pursue justice, mercy, and understanding. But how would this strategy be helpful? This sort of back-and-forth internal dialogue is critical for self-regulation, self-reflection, and processing purposes (Morin, Duhnych, & Racy, 2018).

On the one hand, the back-and-forth internal reaction may align with my personal desire to create spaces to build and engage in more conversations. On the other hand, my response was a matter of searching within myself for some principles to guide my actions. But I encountered a sense of isolation when dealing with my experiences of discrimination. A story about discrimination is not so easily integrated in my professional identity because this recognizes a subjugated identity, which Hardy (2018) remarked is constantly under assault and, therefore, needed to be protected.

Consequences Being in the Minority at Work

There is a lack of professional role models of color in academia, and even less diversity among educators in leadership roles (Moore, 2017; Stanley, 2006). Lacking mentors who possess knowledge of the minority experience means faculty of color will suffer from little sponsorship and greater feelings of isolation. Dealing with isolation and the frustration associated with trying to live up to a professional ideal that fails to support diversity is emotionally draining. These feelings can often be overwhelming. Colleagues of color have remarked that such emotions are not always visible and may instead brew in silence. There is concern that verbalizing

such issues makes one appear overly sensitive, but the other option—remaining silent—has the effect of minimizing the problem. This is a constant dilemma for faculty of color.

Aside from not seeing professional role models of color, there are real costs when one is consistently in the racial and/or ethnic minority at work. Scholars have documented that faculty leaders of color may continue to face challenges in developing collegiality and may be ignored (Alexander Jr & Moore, 2008). Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2009) suggest that working in isolation creates "status distance"—that is, how far one is from the institution's norm and power structure. Faculty leaders of color may share the same level of status as other colleagues at the institution, and thus should in theory have similarly high-quality relationships with those in authority. However, status distance resulting from working *in silos* often affects participation rates during discussion as well as the degree of influence one has over group decisions.

Faculty leaders of color must actively seek new ways to engage with issues around ethnicity, gender, and immigration status; develop safe spaces for deeper dialogues; and look for different resources. When we remember that we are not alone—that many came before us and many will come after us—it helps to build strength and offer respite as we navigate our individual, social, and professional environments. In the following section, I will focus more on practical ways to consider power, resources, strength, and connection within the context of academia.

Supportive Practices

Mentors Who "Get Us"

Faculty leaders of color need mentors who "get us and are not threatened by us" (Chang et al., 2014). Because of the lack of professional role models of color, having a mentor is very important. Mentors can serve as power brokers to help their mentees access opportunities within a professional network of power and privilege (Eby & Allen, 2008). My mentors have certainly helped me navigate the complex process of negotiating academic demands to ensure success in my work. I relied on both formal, traditional one-on-one mentoring, and an informal mentoring network consisting of like-minded professionals to survive and thrive in my career.

When I started my first full-time academic position, I had no prior knowledge about the benefits of mentoring. Formal mentoring was provided to me; this arrangement involved meeting regularly and having meals together, the ultimate purpose being to facilitate my adjustment to the new environment. I gained new knowledge about the culture of the university, teaching tips, advice on what to look out for, etc. Not having to seek out my own mentor was helpful. The formal mentoring was beneficial, especially since it came from someone who was from a different discipline and who was more senior. However, though this mentoring arrangement served its purpose well, it was also short-lived, limited to one semester.

Having a network of peer mentors is equally if not more important than receiving formal one-on-one mentoring, especially in the field of marriage and family sciences. This type of mentoring provides the sociopolitical capital needed to advance professionally and valuable psychosocial support in the workplace. Colleagues in my personal network mostly hail from within my discipline in MFT. I have had the especially good fortune of experiencing a student-faculty relationship evolve into a collegial relationship with my dissertation chair. She is fully aware of her social standing as a White female academic and author. She leads me into the world of academia and walks alongside me—extending opportunities to coauthor several articles, conference presentations, and scholarly publications. Clearly, she is a model to me. The connection with her throughout my PhD program and later as a colleague in a larger context is a gift. She has selflessly offered her time and words of wisdom. I can reach out to her anytime without hesitation—that is how approachable she is to me and many colleagues of color. She strongly encourages me to pursue the MFT field. And the more I learn about the relational and systemic paradigm of MFT work, the more I realize my desire to contribute to this area because the field fits my philosophical and spiritual commitment.

Additionally, a group of Asian American professors from various universities took me in as one of their own during a National Council of Family Relations annual conference I attended. Since then, we have participated in informal reciprocal support circles. I believe what brought us together was a set of shared values around care for one another, collaboration surrounding journeys of underrepresented Asian American professors, and deeper dialogue as to diversity issues. I believe this need for alliances and coalitions to connect on issues is still important to many faculty leaders of color. This is consistent with Stanley's (2006) conclusion that female educators of color seek out relationships in "safe spaces"—professional and personal mentoring outside of their own institutions.

Tap into Resources Wisely

Being the only female Asian faculty member in my program, I was able to gain a little more funding to advance my scholarship. Therefore, I have attended more conferences and shared my research trajectory in various academic spaces. This support was helpful in that I gained more exposure for my work and was able to raise my scholarship voice and visibility. Positional power as a resource is definitely available to me because of my role as a faculty member and a program leader. Seeking ways to redistribute this resource and to empower those who need it is an important goal for me. This concept, with examples, is explored more in the later part of this chapter.

Safe Places to Be Affirmed

Most academics understand that the institution has to be a place where they can boldly share ideas and have rigorous intellectual exchange in a respectful manner. But the environment may not be safe enough when there is a clash of racial realities. Difficult conversations about topics such as color blindness, meritocracy, privilege, or marginalization are challenging to navigate and may result in a clash of worldviews. When such occasions arise, researchers have remarked that faculty of color find themselves in the unenviable position of processing their personal feelings while also wanting to address the emotions being expressed (Jackson, 2019; Stanley, 2006). Safe spaces allow for difficult subjects to be discussed openly without the risk of disrespect and harsh judgment. Scholars have indicated that being aware of power, racial, and ethnic assumptions and attitudes plays a vital role in creating safe spaces in which to have difficult dialogue (Chang et al., 2014). Like chipping away at a boulder, it will take many conversations with different groups, mostly well-meaning ones, to draw out the destructive nature of taken-for-granted discourses and to change perspectives.

Spiritually Connected

Social location in the spiritual sense is defined as communion with the sacred—that is, God (Pargament, 2007). For me, spirituality is associated with thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relation to honoring and relating to the God in the Bible. "On some days … we have to know that … God has us covered because everything around us is telling us we are not really good enough" (Chang et al., 2014, p. 382). This is applicable to academia. Researchers Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) remark that female minority faculty members are more likely than are white women and men in other groups to be judged harshly for any sign of failure by their colleagues. Further, these faculty leaders are likely to be penalized more for any mistakes; these mistakes may be misconstrued as lack of capability or as intellectual inferiority.

I certainly felt this way sometimes—as if colleagues were waiting to catch my mistakes. It was present not only in my academic work, but also in others' evaluations of me. I have practiced clinically in my field's industry for many years. I took on a full teaching load and still published in several top journals. I initiated several symposia at national conferences and served on regional and national boards. I managed the mental health graduate programs. Yet, there were many occasions when someone said or did something that made me feel like a second-class citizen. For instance, despite my achievements and my role in the programs I oversaw, I was reduced to a generic word—"ladies"—in emails sent to all the administrative assistants. As another example, some student-related decisions passed me by when my approval should have been sought.

As a female leader of color, it was important that I be viewed and respected as a leader who has succeeded based on merit, but instead I sometimes found myself discounted because of my gender, race, and ethnicity. Those were the "some days" when I would let go and let God. This spiritual connection was necessary for me to continue making progress in my professional and personal development despite tiring circumstances. God knew how to handle what I could not.

Bridging the Divide

It is important that faculty of color are trying to negotiate their different identities and build more inclusive networks (Moore, 2017). Building a community of practice among faculty leaders of color is a good thing. As individuals in the group interact and communicate, they can further develop this professional community, and ultimately mentor and guide the next generation. Diversity among a group of professionals offers a realistic microcosm of the world we live in and the possibility of a different vision. It encompasses multiparty negotiation to work together to achieve a collective goal. However, diversity slows the process down, particularly when we are attempting to mix race, gender, immigration status, and class in community. There is no way to have diverse people in a room and not have people make mistakes. In fact, there will be enormous room for misunderstanding. Even with the best of intentions, all can stumble. As someone once said, "There is no dishonor in being wrong and learning. There is dishonor in willful ignorance and there is dishonor in disrespect."

Bringing groups together based on complex, intersecting identities requires commitment and competency. Research suggests that faculty leaders of color support people of all backgrounds by being positive role models, bringing to the institution the societal reality of diversity, and reflecting the interest of the institution in people of color (Hassouneh & Thomas, 2018). At every institution where I worked, I engaged with both faculty and students (of color and White) in presentations, writing projects, and conversations at many conferences. Moving forward with others from diverse backgrounds has helped me understand how, in spite of the seemingly endless stream of negativity surrounding it, the journey of inclusion and generativity will bear its reward. I see this type of engagement as part of social responsibility I owe to the many marginalized groups that have claimed me in their membership. It makes my heart joyful to engage people in this process.

Being Generative

For me, experiences based on the intersections of social locations and professional roles have been valuable and impactful. They have taught me lessons that I want to pass on to the people after me—my students, fellow junior colleagues, and the professional community. It is my way to change the trajectory of others for the better.

Participation in these opportunities has allowed me to pick up the baton of mentoring for other people of color in academia. For instance, I was there for a newer colleague of color who was disappointed and hurting because of negative student evaluations. I have been in a similar predicament and completely understood where he was coming from. This was also a reflection of insufficient training for faculty in higher education. Despite his efforts to address issues in class, a few students requested that he not teach their courses in the future. Utterly depressed and paralyzed by those evaluations, he still made a choice to improve. I took those matters seriously. I investigated to give students a fair hearing, and I decided to mentor and support the male colleague for both his own good and the students' sake.

The importance of gender, race, and ethnicity has strengthened my commitment to being a faculty leader who stimulates conversation about these issues. This means acknowledging the diverse identities that exist within our communities and recognizing power and disadvantages as systemically situated in the worlds of our graduate students. Training students to closely examine the intersectionality of social locations ignites their curiosity about how to do work that is inclusive of multiple voices and how to create new meanings and lived experiences. This includes valuing cultural knowledge from traditionally marginalized communities, as well as emphasizing the significance of drawing on knowledge informed by other home cultures, regions, and migrant experiences to enhance the professional growth of students who are marginalized. Empirical studies by professionals of color suggest that those in higher positions could consider using their acquired power to alleviate the complex oppressions experienced by different individuals (Chase, 1995; Turner, 2002). Further, upwardly mobile professionals of color frequently express a sense of responsibility to use acquired power for the good of the group (Chase, 1995). In my position of power, it is imperative to do something about the discrimination experienced by students who are marginalized.

Occupying a position that allows me to do something about others' experiences of inequality has made me more intentional about creating safe spaces to share personal stories as well as conversations about social justice and identity exploration (Sue et al., 2011). In my earlier years in higher education, I did this by inviting faculty of color from different institutions to join me in sharing their stories at national conferences organized by the American Family Therapy Association, National Council of Family Relations, etc. This type of platform allows individuals to voice what they think and begin to practice some new ways of coping. A few years ago, I shifted, continuing to build team symposia, but now with the inclusion of White colleagues. Through my work within and outside the university setting, I hope I am modeling leadership from the place of my social location in a manner that is consistent in focus and that clearly conveys my passion for creating meaningful growth environments for all.

What Have I Become?

The journey continues. My experiences as an educator, clinical director, researcher, and program director well prepare me to work with multiple levels of hierarchy, some better and others less so, to consult and develop in the field I am passionate about. My lived experience gives me open-mindedness and a new awareness of how social location in all its complexity influences my professional journey. I am committed to fostering meaningful relationships with colleagues both within and outside my institution. I also need to be myself with my colleagues. This courageous narrative helps me break down barriers for others who might be in the same boat. Yes, my gender, racial, ethnic, and immigration identities come with certain stereotypes, and I am aware it might be energy-draining. But I have a responsibility to interrupt imbalanced systemic and relational dynamics whenever I can. Particularly by leveraging my privileged position as an educated and currently able-bodied cis-female with a Christian background, I have learned to raise my voice to systems that might disproportionately impact others.

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