

## Chapter 9

# What We Have Learned: Different Locations, Shared Experiences



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In this collection of personal essays, the MFT academic leaders examine the intersectionality of their social location, where differing social positions reinforce and interact with opportunity, power, marginalization, and discrimination. Multiple reciprocal influences are reflected in our lived experiences as MFT professors. The authors who have been in MFT academia, defined as education, supervision, and administration, between 5 and 20 years are attentive to issues of power and disadvantages in various academic and clinical settings. We see how these MFT leaders weave together their stories of achievement and discrimination. Each leader reflects on their commitment to social change and openness to continue in this type of work to support other faculty, professionals, and students in similar situations. Though each author's story is unique and profoundly inspiring, many commonalities connect the authors together and convey a larger story. The larger story as suggested in the title of this book "*Intersectionality in Family Therapy Leadership—Professional Power, Personal Identities*" is about MFT educators' collective encountering of inequality and discrimination as a result of our social locations and our greater access to power and resources that we used in initiating social change within our sphere of influence. We are not alone in these encounters, but with collective action through sharing experiences with colleagues, we gain success in our professional work.

In this concluding chapter, we want to highlight what we have learned. In particular, we will underscore the themes of visibility/invisibility, intersections of both oppressed and privileged stories, the continuous internal dialogue and critical

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reflection, and using privilege to support the marginalized. Although each author has vastly different social location characteristics, all found ways to utilize their social locations to make a deep impact within their social and academic environment. These personal essays brought to light the dynamics between the MFT leaders' position of power, multiple social locations, and the discourse of structural power and inequality that disadvantages certain groups, together creating a significant phenomenon shaping their work narratives and professional identities. Before turning to the commonalities, we summarize how each author contends with those issues.

As she recounts her experiences, Karen Quek views the multiplicity of social location as intricately linked to her leadership development process. She draws our attention to the challenges of discrimination and opportunities to respond differently, which have informed the shaping of a female leader of color. Her marginalized voice was either silenced or talked over. She was bypassed in many decision-making within the system. Now, she finds ways to deal with that by giving voice to those who appear voiceless. She mentors younger colleagues and students from differing backgrounds by providing an environment of stability and psychological safety so that their voices can be heard. Being in a position of power, she leads her program, where each story and each voice matters.

Alexander Hsieh's narrative combines his Taiwanese American male identity with the MFT profession that has challenged his cultural norms. This interaction has created an internal dialogue around the juxtaposition of his own racial and cultural identity, along with his academic position of power and marginalized communities. As Alexander reflects on the social power as an MFT program director and clinical director, he has to decide how that privileged opportunity is utilized to benefit students and communities who are marginalized. He reflects on the contrast between his own cultural values and how that might bias his interaction with his local community. So, the interaction between his cultural and gender values, his academic roles, and place of residency allows him to change the landscape of mental health, bit by bit, using that privilege to affect his community both on a micro and macro-level and to support and hold space for marginalized communities.

Narumi Tanaguichi's narrative examines how the layers of intersectionality are often confusing, and how having power influences her engagement with others. Over the course of her narrative, she reveals that intersectionality associated with her identity as an Asian, queer, and immigrant woman often makes her invisible, but her newly acquired power as a MFT program director offers visibility within the institution. Because power and visibility come with responsibility, she intends to take up space as often as she can—even if that is uncomfortable to her—and open up space for others who are invisible.

The Spanish phrase "*Sí, se puede*" that translates as "Yes, it can be done" is a collective mantra to motivate and inspire the underrepresented, educate students about social justice issues, and help students learn how to respect and even positively esteem those who are different from them. This is key to Sergio Pereyra's narrative. He draws on discourses about Latino masculinity, Mormonism, and academic culture to articulate how he overcomes discrimination, reveals his Mormon

religion, and integrates himself into the professional guild. While he acknowledges that change is a constant in the education system, he endorses taking a not-knowing stance, striving to educate himself about others and remaining open to new knowledge. Sergio reflects on how the striving starts first with himself, but also how it contributes to marginalized communities. He concludes with “*Si, se puede*” (we can) make changes when we have the heart and willingness to do so.

Gita Seshadri’s chapter takes the reader on an internal processing journey from anxiety to confidence in her academic position. She shares how her assumed privilege and role confusion shape her journey of self-discovery and deepen her understanding of humility. The implicit messages from her South Asian background conflict with the not-so-subtle messages from her American experiences. In doing so, she recognizes on a deeper level the importance of exploring social intersectionality in her personal and professional life. She concluded that not undertaking this work would make the invisible even more hidden. Undertaking this work, as it relates to her journey, puts her on a course for humility, thoughtfulness for others, and leaving space for others’ reflective responses. She concluded that she has grown more confident while limiting the impact anxiety has on the nature and quality of her professional path.

Chen Hao-Min’s narrative delves deeply into power differences associated with culture and gender hierarchy embedded in the social cultural discourse and the profound impact on her professional trajectory and relationships in the workplace. In her narrative, she highlights the limit of social power due to gender inequality and structural racism. Her story of the love-hate relationship with her mother is embedded in a patriarchal societal structure. In a similar manner, she sees a parallel to the current academic structure, where her social location related to gender, culture, and immigrant background continues to be subjected to discrimination. As an educator who now holds a position of power, she takes a postmodern stance in her work to level power differences and promote the power of multiple perspectives.

As an ally for social justice, Christie Eppler, a White, cis-female, heterosexual, middle-aged program director, narrates intentionality in her work and employs growth-oriented conversations in order to gain deeper empathy for people on the margins and an enhanced understanding of systemic privilege. She acknowledges her privilege and articulates a commitment to eradicating White fragility by talking about social locations in the program, in classes, and in the larger couples and family therapy community. This conversation about justice and dismantling White privilege will be a continued dialogue.

Despite our diversity, our narratives indicate how ethnic, race, and gender inequalities affect what happens to us as educators, clinicians, and supervisors. We are aware of the possibilities of sexist and or racist treatments and structural racism and seek to promote an environment that celebrates differences and promotes a commitment to social justice. That commitment includes finding ways to deal with ongoing inequality and disadvantages so that we can move forward in our journeys. With access to professional power as educational leaders, we conscientiously seek to make a difference in promoting our junior colleagues and students who are starting out in the field.

## Visibility and Invisibility

Visibility generates attention. That may be a fact of life and consistent across all forms of science. We often comment on the visible changes of the seasons with appreciation for the changing colors of leaves and the first snow, but rarely highlight the unseen like gravity or the transmission of sound. Socially, our interests peak when couples argue in public or when they exhibit excessive public displays of affection. Meanwhile, secure attachment, masking of insecurities, and emotional affairs are less visible and often need much more effort to bring to attention. The visible are often synonymous with speaking up, speaking loudly, taking charge, having grander stature, and sometimes being more forceful and confrontational. The invisible, on the other hand, tends to work in the background, display more humility and slow to boast, and are more likely to be marginalized. In social constructionist thought, visibility is a privilege while marginalization leads to invisibility (Christensen, 2019). Our various intersectionality of sexual, gender, ethnic, and immigrant identities open us up to be increasingly invisible. While the literature argues that power and privilege bring about visibility, most leaders in these chapters speak on how each balances this visibility with their marginalized invisibilities. In addition, visibility creates a layer of burden for MFT leaders to use the privileged visibility to bring about positive change for the disadvantaged and the marginalized.

The theme of visibility versus invisibility is commonplace across the various chapters. Many of the authors acknowledged and shared instances of invisibility, but also instances where their social location allowed for heightened visibility. Narumi's positionality as a program director grants visibility, while her identity intersection as an Asian, queer, immigrant woman subjects her to being invisible. Similarly, Karen's experience of invisibility to an administrator leads her to create more visibility to faculty and educators of color so that diversity and multiculturalism is highlighted rather than an afterthought. Hao-Min's power-differential experience based on the subjection of the dominant discourse to her minority narrative impacts how she skillfully navigates her professional relationships to create more visibility within her program. Meanwhile, Hao-Min also has to overcome her own cultural invisibility built on cultural hierarchy to create her own personal agency and garner more visibility. Finally, Gita's professor status provides visibility, which she uses in conjunction with her collectivistic qualities like humility, work ethic, and consideration of others to clear a more visible professional path.

Often, visibility and invisibility are determined by social location and can change when someone's social location changes. Visibility plays a key role in how we carry out our responsibilities in academia, especially from the perspective of administration. While operating as an educator and supervisor might demonstrate a clear leadership figure, administrative roles often operate behind the scenes and away from the public eye. Because administrative roles may not always be at the forefront, they may be more invisible. While we are all visible in the professional world by various physical traits, other qualities, such as SES, sexual orientation, faith traditions, and

nationality, are less so. These invisibilities may become more prominent with social interaction through experiences of racial and sexual discrimination, external pressures of interpersonal context to conform through traditional social norms, and microaggressions within racial communities. Faculty of color discussed the intertwining of gender, racial, and national identities and how these categories interacted to inform how we were perceived by the dominant culture. While visibility allows us to be heard and to be accountable to our positional power in the academe, invisibility may present a challenge to a freer expression of ourselves due to the need to protect self, to maintain a professional status quo, and to avoid any conflictual situations.

## **Intersections of Oppressed and Privileged Stories**

There is power when stories are told. When narratives are shared from the first-person perspective, it gives the reader a firsthand account of events, personal history, the internal dialogue, and instantaneous reactions. These stories, at times, may be difficult to write just as much as it can be to read. The authors interwove intimate stories of oppression and stories where they gain greater access to opportunities and upward mobility. Stories of privileges and oppressions were sometimes confusing and conflicting. In Narumi's account, telling her story of intersecting identities and her path to the position of a program director, while confusing, creates visibility not only for her, but queer women in similar positions. Sergio's internal dialogue concerning his struggle and fit in the academe as a junior professor with diverse social identities brings about support to marginalized populations. Alexander's articulation of his privilege associated with the professional position as program director and his Asian identity, which is oppressed within the larger societal context, shape his passion for the underserved and increases his social responsibility for the local community. Hao-Min's navigation of the gendered constraints that shape her relationship with her mother has also led to more personal agency and built an incredible sense of resiliency, leading her to be a stronger leader for her students. As Gita tells her story, she gains confidence to draw on what can be seen as contradictory identities while decreasing levels of anxiety to clear a more distinct path in her professional journey and how she can impact her students.

Telling stories of oppression opens individuals up to many of our most vulnerable experiences. Many times, individuals who are in positions of power have difficulties being vulnerable because institutional cultural beliefs suggest that vulnerability gives away power and opens ourselves up to weakness. In reality, research has shown that vulnerability helps us build character and relationships and empowers us to gain control of our shame (Brown, 2012). Although there were many moments of silent pain, hurt, and suffering throughout each of our stories, our struggle and eventual rise from those anguished oppressions ultimately gives the authors strength and courage to meet the next challenge. Each oppression story links us with readers who may have faced and experienced similar instances of

oppression, thus, building relationships with those whom we may never know. The true power of oppression stories resides in this open invitation to those who read our stories and make a connection.

When we tell our privilege stories, we begin to acknowledge that we have gained from an imbalance distribution of power. For some of us who grew up with a different set of cultural norms, talking about our own privileges may bring about a sense of guilt and shame because we may be judged by our ethnic communities to be overreaching and lauding our success. Therefore, it can be very easy for individuals, especially those of us whose cultural backgrounds emphasize humility and modesty, to hide our privileges because guilt and shame are difficult experiences to deal with. So, the courage it takes to tell privilege narratives by the authors also implies the need to take and accept responsibility in the ecosystem of oppression.

## **Our Internal Dialogues and Critical Reflections**

Making sense of the intersection of our privilege, oppression, and power experiences takes a microscopic lens to our internal processing abilities, as we have frequently reflected on what may seem both uncomfortable and challenging. For all of the authors, it was a journey of external stimulation (i.e., what was said, something happening in their communities, actions taken by others, etc.) translating into internal processing to create awareness and growth. The authors all reflected on how this self-reflection lead to growth as a leader. None of the authors specified a beginning point and an end point for the processing. Instead, it is something that each author will continue to be challenged by and make strides in. Similar to how we in the field of MFT say that cultural awareness and cultural humility are a never-ending process (Fisher-Borne, Cain, & Martin, 2015; Hook, Davis, Owen, & DeBlaere, 2017), understanding our social location and how the intersectionality of our diversity interacts with our professional roles will be a continuous process. The difficult journey comes when we keep challenging our academic position of power, both in action and processing, while our social location keeps changing and evolving.

The internal processes are often the start of an ongoing occurrence. The authors are faced with many internal complexities that they must navigate toward their continued path as a professor, educator, supervisor, and administrator in the field of MFT. Karen processes the multiplicity of social locations as she looks to develop more leadership qualities and empower others to become leaders. In doing so, she had to first reflect on her experiences of power, privilege, and oppression and determine how best to use her experience to best mentor students while leading an MFT program. Before taking action and connecting more with his students and the Black community, Alexander had to conduct more internal work by reflecting on his privileges as an Asian American male before he could empathize with students and connect with the hurting Black community. This was more action-orientated and focused on challenging his perceptions rather than a passive interaction between his experiences of privilege and oppression. Gita mindfully strikes a balance between

privilege and humility in her professorial role, one that requires an action perspective to challenge those two areas. Sergio also has to process his identity as a Latino, heterosexual, Christian man, and the points of intersectionality to come from a not-knowing stance and to open himself to new knowledge. Narumi internally processes layers of intersectionality to create visibility and focus on experiences of discomfort. Hao-Min has a constant experience of processing her relationship with her mother to bring about her own personal agency but also crediting it to her built resiliency. She acts to not allow her relationship with her mother be the sole definer of her leadership role with students. Finally, Christie navigates her White privilege and her marginalization as a woman and strikes a balance between advocacy and challenging her privileges before using her position of power to bring about program change. Each author reflected on how the internal dialoguing had to be action-based rather than a passive acknowledgment. The difference here being that to acknowledge and reflect on our experiences may be an initial step, but must be followed by piecing together our stories of power, privilege, and oppression before we could advocate and promote change. This key element must start with ourselves, and each author's story depicted such process.

## **Using Power and Privilege to Support the Marginalized**

All the authors introduce the discourse of power and privilege into our professional narratives and our place within it. We recognize that we have earned credibility within our professional community, and we do not take our professional advantages lightly. All the authors detail how we use our perceptions of privilege and power to increase our effectiveness with the student population, supervisees, or local community, especially the marginalized populations. Specifically, using our positional power, we seek to build an inclusive and fair environment to restore dignity of faculty and students living on the margins, to encourage discussion of intersecting identities, and to openly express their ideas without the fear of being judged or penalized. Additionally, the use of power and privilege is not just limited to the academic level, but instead extends to our local communities.

The MFT professors are not just called to teach, conduct research, and practice clinically, but we are encouraged and expected to be involved in our communities. We are often asked about our communities of interest and how our missions of diversity affect our mental health community. The social responsibility for academic leaders often is an unwritten expectation within our profession, especially for persons from and representing diverse communities, and our authors described this commitment. Sergio integrates his cultural identity into an ongoing responsibility to support and empower his oppressed Latino students. In addition, Sergio's internal processing of his Christian identity and position of power has taken him to a journey as an ally for the LGBTQ communities. Alexander takes the journey to challenge his perceived privileges as an Asian American to connect with and listen to the local Black community who often do not have access to adequate mental health services.

These stories move beyond the limited focus on less privileged students and faculty colleagues of color; they demonstrate connections with other marginalized groups outside our profession and institution. This connection borrows each author's power derived from the status as professors, supervisors, educators, and administrators so that the marginalized communities can gain more visibility and hopefully promote opportunities for change to occur. We hope that each additional connection with communities that are marginalized can build a vision against systemic and structural racism. One might argue that there is added burden with our acquired positional power. Yet, each author has recognized how their social locations, often conflicting, informed their social and professional identities, have inspired them to contribute to the underrepresented. This vision lights a path toward hope—one which we hope our field will continue to embrace.

## **Going Forward**

This book emphasizes the usefulness of intersectionality in capturing the complexities of our stories about discrimination and privilege from differing social locations. It is meaningful to the authors and editors as the topic of leadership from positions of both power and marginalization, in this case, professors and administrators in MFT education, has been little researched nor discussed. I (Alexander) recall the motto from my undergraduate alma mater (the University of Texas at Austin) “What starts here changes the world.” By our day to day decisions and actions, these MFT leaders are slowly transforming shared societal beliefs about our leadership positions based on gender, race, ethnicity, education, and occupation. However, we are cognizant of system and structural constraints. We hope our stories can spark more conversations within academia around social location, and how it has contributed to the way we carry out our daily duties and responsibilities.

## **Implications**

### ***Conversations Surrounding Social Location***

Administrators, educators, and practitioners should consider conversations surrounding social location from an intersectional lens in order to build spaces that are committed to interrogating how oppressed and privilege identities might intersect in their professional work. Here are questions that were posted to our authors as they began the process of self-reflection on social location, and how their academic positions have been impacted through their social location. It is especially useful for administrators, educators, clinicians, and supervisors who are interested in helping



colleagues, students, and clients who seek out the uniqueness of their lived experiences to consider exploring these questions:

1. Defining your social location
  - (a) How have your social cultural locations shaped who you are and how you see yourself?
  - (b) What is the relationship between your visible identity and your self-identification, and how is this influenced by your cultural context?
2. As a clinician: reflection on social location in your clinical practice
  - (a) How have your cultural influences shaped how clients see you?
  - (b) How do these influences affect your comfort level in certain groups and your feelings about particular clients?
  - (c) What kinds of assumptions are clients likely to make about you based on your visible identity, your sociocultural context, and what you choose to share about yourself?
  - (d) How might your areas of privilege affect your work (e.g., your clinical judgments, theoretical preferences, view of clients, beliefs about mental health)?
3. As a clinical supervisor: reflection on social location from a supervisory context
  - (a) How do you define and contextualize your social locations in order to understand and resonate fully with what and how your supervisees are struggling with clinical issues?
  - (b) How do you meet your supervisees through both differences and commonalities in social contexts?
  - (c) What do you do to provide spaces which allow for identifying and altering dynamics of power, privilege, and social oppression?
4. As an educator: reflection on social location in the classroom
  - (a) How might your presence in the classroom alter the environment?
  - (b) What is invisible to you due to your privilege?
  - (c) What is visible to you being a faculty of color?
  - (d) How might students respond to you based on your social identities?
  - (e) What needs to occur in the curriculum and in the classroom to account for your social location?
5. As an administrator/leader: reflection on social location in administration/leadership
  - (a) How do your social locations influence your belief in your ability to practice leadership?
  - (b) How have contextual influences shape your social positions? What implications might those have on the development of your leadership self-efficacy?

- (c) Do you consider yourself a leader/administrator from a social location that is rare among leaders/administrators? What kind of challenges do you encounter?

### *Conversations Surrounding Internal and External Dialogues*

One area, which was evident throughout each authors' reflections, was the internal and external dialogues that occurred and will continue to occur. It is through conversations that people are able to socialize, connect, discord, and discuss. We believe that difficult discussions about our own social location needs to be incorporated when discussing issues of power, privilege, and oppression. These types of conversations can occur between faculty members, within the program and university meetings, during clinical supervision, between clinical colleagues, and during community advocacy meetings. While these conversations may not always be the easiest to have, The following articles—Brady, Sawyer, & Herrera, 2016; Hsieh & Seshadri, 2018; Love, Gaynor, & Blessett, 2016; Murray-Johnson, 2019; Sue, 2016—have provided methods on how to conduct those conversations meaningfully. For instance, programs can provide space to “call-in” faculty to have conversation on microaggressions to promote leadership grounded on transparency, conversation, and self-reflection (Hsieh & Seshadri, 2018). Processing the internal dialogues makes the covert overt like retelling stories aloud in a supportive environment.

### *Conversations Surrounding Actions*

As stories are shared throughout these chapters, it is evident that more actions can be done within higher education system to combat prejudices that disadvantage faculty and students. On a student level, challenging the traditional classroom learning standards and infusing the classroom with more experiential exercises, narrative discussions, and difficult dialogues rather than lecture and PowerPoint presentations. In doing so, we remove the limits of a narrow perspective on education, and thereby diversifying the experience to students who do not fit into traditional education methodology. Often in academia, we can fall into the fallacy that there is a “right” or “wrong” way to educate and engage students to make sure they obtain the knowledge. In doing so, we become egocentric and do not take into account how our social location, power, and privilege may have shaped that ideology. Professors should learn how to introduce and engage intersecting social location, power, privileged, and oppressed stories with students at a developmentally appropriate phase of their educational journey by creating an open and safe space.

This same concept can also be applied from an academic leadership position when working with faculty of color, disadvantaged staff members, and when look-

ing at the methodology of curriculum. Working collaboratively with faculty often times can balance the various power dynamics, which may exist within the context of a faculty group. When senior White faculty collaborate on projects, committees, and program design with junior faculty of color, it gives the opportunity for privilege to be shared both on a rank and race level. These types of collaborations give more opportunities and voice to junior faculty of color and promote diverse perspectives. The hope is to foster a program narrative built on balance of privileged and marginalized perspectives, so, an MFT program can actually practice the standards of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion that we all preach from within our great programs.

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