Relational Social Justice: Looking in the Mirror with Others Bearing Witness

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For many of us, working in the community began as, and continues to be, a contribution to social justice. My decades of work for social justice as a practitioner and educator of therapists, educators, and other healers have afforded me many gifts. One of these is insights to ways we can engage across differences to connect us with others for greater equity and fairness. Providing therapeutic services and training others for sensitive, welcomed work within communities will be my legacy. Working through public mental health settings means working with people most in need who have the least resources. During the ongoing health pandemic, inequities and unfairness have become more pronounced and even exacerbated. Housing, health care, food and nutrition, employment, education, social services, and foundational civil rights are not automatic "givens." What many of us thought to be civil rights finally won are the focus of battles to be fought once more.

Many families, with whom we work so hard to forge therapeutic alliances and working relationships, are oftentimes poor or underemployed, or at the precipice of some life circumstance. Many have faced multiple losses or traumas or are multi-oppressed, experiencing little in the way of influence or real, sustained power. Mutual trust and respect are highly valued. Many Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) will encounter racial traumas throughout our lifetimes. We have figuratively had to hold our breath for the next act of racism or bias to be experienced, directly or indirectly. As we have witnessed, some individuals have had their breathing restricted by unequally treating systems such as law enforcement, education, health services, and employment. Some, such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, died at the hands of individuals supposedly representing justice systems.

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Clearly, victims of systemic inequities have been held down from opportunities in life. Having our breathing restricted is akin to constricting our human spirit.

I view my work as an educator in the community as one of the primary ways in which I confront injustice and create space for the human spirit to grow. In this chapter, I will describe some of the particular life experiences that have especially impacted my journey into this work, my approach to first "looking in the mirror" and sharing these reflections with students, and finally different ways that I "invite others to witness" as I support them in their own growth. My own growth is also never ending.

1 Acknowledgement of Our Self, Family, and Social Location

I find it essential to be aware of the foundations of our own cultural selves as we do the work of social justice and advocacy. We benefit from recognizing our own social location and ways our lives have been shaped in early development. I identify myself as a third generation, Chinese-American, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender male. I grew up in a large family (the middle child of seven children across a 14-year age span) and was raised lower working class. Having enough food for each meal was sometimes a challenge. My hard-working Chinese-American father served the community as a highly dedicated postal worker. My fairly mono-lingual, Cantonese-dialect speaking mother worked raising us in our small home, doing her best to make those limited meals. While one might say my family was economically stretched or poor, we were intensely immersed in valued relationships of family and siblings. In this way, I felt relationally enriched. My interactions with my siblings also created questions that I would pursue as I grew older. Why were my two sisters treated differently than the boys? Why were jokes told about some ethnic groups considered funny, while jabs taken at my own Asian-American identity were hurtful? Learning was multifaceted. For as long as I could recall, education was always highly valued as a means to better one's future and the reputation of my family. I was one of the first in my family to complete an undergraduate degree. I am the only one to earn master and doctoral degrees. No matter what, throughout my life I have always been reminded about humility while growing up in my home.

I have been highly influenced by several sources throughout my life. Some of these major influences include strong Asian women, civil rights leaders, and ordinary people with extraordinary things to convey. These were often racial or ethnic individuals, young and old, with some who were willing to sacrifice their lives to share their truths. Growing up in a largely white community in West Los Angeles, I longed to hear from people who were more like me; people of color. The civil rights and peace movements framed my social and educational experience. As with so many children, by default the television acted as a babysitter of sorts. Witnessing injustices, political unrest and violence related to war, and protest movements for peace and equity were undeniable realities on the nightly news. My older brothers were enamored with folk, rock, and soul music of the time. Television and music on

the radio served as cultural windows and mirrors. Social justice and the fights for equity were not just for me to see but also to hear; to experience viscerally.

Our family was one of the few in my community and early schooling who were of Chinese descent. My first significant partner was a Jewish woman. I was 15 years old. We learned about what it meant to be in an inter-racial relationship, still uncommon at that time. It was from her that I learned about the Holocaust, the importance of root or home culture, and not forgetting ancestral histories. The 1960s and 1970s were significant periods of racial unrest and social protests long overdue. Activism for social justice was at a high, not just as talk, but actual action to consider. Witnessing and taking part in such protests, painful as well as triumphant, would leave me with an indelible impression. Those who I was drawn to, and those drawn to me for support, shared similar passions and willingness to question authority.

2 The Foundation of Our Work: Social Justice as a Process of "Looking in the Mirror" at Oneself and Others

In a naïve way, cultural competence was often thought of and even portrayed as learning about cultural others (i.e., working "outside-in"). In its worst form, this might be seen as some form of voyeurism or anthropological appropriation. Even at its best, cultural competence means understanding a client's cultural background and influences from an outsider's perspective. While this approach might support a good working relationship, it may also pose a "working for" rather than "working with" mentality. Cultural humility, on the other hand for me, poses a stance of "not knowing," of holding oneself accountable, and, in some ways, "looking into the mirror" at oneself. Social injustices are often not just unique one-time situations; rather they are ones that occur as part of a pattern of repeated mistreatment of micro- or macro-aggressions against others. With injustices replicated and sustained in systems it must be asked in what ways as individuals are we victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of such inequities? In this way, I think of a process of teaching about social justice as needing to look at oneself in the mirror with others bearing witness. Looking in the mirror means being aware of one's own identity and social location, power, and privilege, and impact through societal 'isms. It also means having others bear witness to what we are seeing and experiencing, and being accountable to our perceptions.

3 Use of "Self" in the Process of Teaching for Social Justice

Strategically sharing one's own life experiences can be beneficial for educating others. I often share with students that I grew up during the era of social protests and civil rights. Seeing African Americans being chased, hosed down or struck with

batons, or worse, by riot police had a profound impact on me. Seeing and listening to the passionate pleas of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X left indelible impressions that I would take into my later career and life. Longing for peace during the Vietnam War, icons like Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and protestor Daniel Ellsberg formed ideas that I would follow. As a young adult, I was disturbed by the racially motivated killing of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man on the eve of his wedding in Michigan. Mistaken as Japanese by unemployed auto workers in Detroit, he was stalked and killed. When the presiding judge allowed the perpetrators to go free with no jail time and only a paltry monetary fine, I was outraged. Ironically, my eventual career came about as a result of protests as well as resistance.

The generation I grew up in influenced my view of social justice. As a senior at Brown University, I worked in a study lab with a young psychology professor. Because he was also new to teaching and learning, he was open to exploring questions together. My assignment was shadowing one of two autistic twin boys, observing and charting their behaviors. At the time, aversive conditioning was being utilized. For instance, when there were undesirable behaviors being shown such as mild head banging or self-biting, the young boy was given mild electric shock. I recall being repulsed by what I thought was unjust and unethical treatment. My professor welcomed my reactions. It was then that I decided to go into the field of psychology and psychotherapy to contribute to more just and humane interventions. This professor who guided my thinking and sensitivity is a member of my professional genogram. Subsequently, even more significant are individuals who quickly shaped my career practicing therapy. There were strong, feminist Asian scholars and highly respected practitioners such as Evelyn Lee, Reiko True, Christine Iijima-Hall, and later, Jean Lau Chin. Robert Jay Green, founder of the Rockway Institute for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Psychology, recommended me to the American Family Therapy Academy (AFTA), not only as a new member but as one to receive the annual social justice and diversity award. This was early in my career. It was also at AFTA meetings that I met Monica McGoldrick and Nydia Garcia Preto, who were life changing for me, furthering my passions. They were to become my professional, chosen family members. Sharon C Ngim, an attorney and my wife, concretized mutual commitments for "serving community needs" at all levels.

Through my professional family, not only was I asked to share my thinking on treatment of diverse families, I was also invited to write book chapters and present at annual conferences at the Multicultural Family Institute of New Jersey (MFINJ). Being welcomed into a professional family deeply committed to diversity and social justice with an ability to not only teach embedded principles within them, but also discuss them, was and remains invaluable to this very day. For my own biological family of Chinese heritage and ancestry, injustices were witnessed and often to be endured in order to "pass" or be accepted as new immigrants. With this additional new family and community I could be myself, question unfairness, test out ideas, share my outrage, and protest against acts of racism, sexism, classism, inequities, and more. My passionate ideas about fairness, equity, and justice were allowed a place to be shared with similar others. I "found my voice" and was able to finally

open up, let go to be my genuine self, even to celebrate when I was understood. I found connection and community. In turn, I want to pass this experience on to others.

4 Creating a Context for Learning and Relational Engagement

I hold a perspective that social justice is a lifelong commitment with teaching embodying a deeply meaningful context for learning. I have found it essential to establish and maintain an environment for safe, relational, socially just education among students by creating "learning agreements." These agreements commonly include confidentiality, speaking from an "I" place with self and other accountability, being aware of occupied space during shared interactions, maintaining full presence, listening and talking with mutual respect, agreeing to disagree, engaging in dialogue rather than debate, using mindfulness for self and others, and striving to embody personal and professional compassion. Astute skills in group process for modeling these learning agreements, reiterating them and pointing them out strategically goes a long way in establishing safety and trust for rich, authentic interactions. The interchanges that follow are often deeply meaningful and memorable.

I have previously written extensively, and in detail, about powerful ways for teaching diversity and social justice (Mock, 2019). In that chapter I describe the overview I use to effectively train students on related principles of diversity and cultural competence, as well as humility, social location, intersectionality, and social justice. I also speak of preparing for situations of anticipated challenge. These are critical opportunities for new educational experiences. Learning agreements – framing and consistently embodying and demonstrating them – are essential. Again, these agreements frame critical stances and an enduring environment to share experiences.

5 Calling Others "Out" to Bring Them "In" for Critical Learning

Racial and cultural communities have experiences related to social justice on a daily basis. These experiences can be dynamically brought into teaching spaces and places. As an example of ways such courses can be so critical to education, I have taught a graduate course titled: "Asian Americans: Socio-cultural and Psychological Perspectives." This course, which I have taught for decades, fulfills a requirement for all doctoral psychology students to take a course centered on one cultural community. I have a range of students, some with personal experiences to differing degrees as Asian Americans, and others who have little or seemingly insignificant experiences as they do not identify as being of Asian ancestry. I often begin with a

process of personal centering with learning agreements and sharing of strategic self-narrative.

I teach and have students explore histories related to specific Asian American Pacific Islander Native Hawaiian communities. We even challenge the construction of these politically and socially constructed identities. Questions such as "how are we the same, yet different under such an umbrella?" create rich dialogues. For example, students learn that while being listed under such a heading, Pacific Islanders do not feel fully seen or valued, with some having more experiences resonating with those who are Indigenous or Native American. After framing important history as might be done via Asian American or ethnic studies, I then strategically arrange for my students to learn in the field. Berkeley is the original land of the Ohlone. Early learning includes going to Angel Island, which was the home of the Miwok. Angel Island was also the first checkpoint for laborers from China, not only seeking work but a new home. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first race-based legislation unjustly focusing on one cultural group for immigration. I also facilitate my students "learning deeply in context" in Japantown, where the majority of Japanese-American residents in the early 1940s lined up to report to internment camps under Executive Order 9066. Students may study ayurvedic medicine via a South Asian practitioner or have a meal in the Little Saigon Vietnamese community in San Francisco speaking with an elder or young person about their identity and life or family experiences. Inevitably historical and racial trauma arise in such stories of immigration or being a refugee, or of mistreatment and social injustices via racism and other negative social forces of marginalization and not being fully valued.

For some, these immersion experiences may evoke feelings of guilt, shame, or being "intruders" or even "voyeurs." Facilitating and sharing dialogues about this are often valuable. Timely discussions about the history of colonization and how it has been and is manifested are key. Addressing white guilt and fragility are also necessary to confront inequities. This is where reminders of cultural humility and empathy, even taking them to radical levels as through the work of liberation psychology (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020), are very significant.

No matter where I go, there is no absence of teaching about history and diversity, and therefore lessons centered on social justice. It is more a matter of "to what degree." Making dormant perspectives come alive or raising new consciousness impacts learners in lasting ways that they retain for their subsequent work. No matter what and where, I reference lessons cutting across communities. How does prior Chinese exclusion relate to current anti-immigrant rhetoric? How were African-American and Japanese-American communities brought together during the internment camps? How were Indigenous, Native American communities viewed as less than human or used as scapegoats as were early Asian immigrants? How did the Bracero Program bring in laborers from Mexico but only temporarily to fill a labor void? When Japanese-American farm workers were interned during World War II, workers from other countries including Mexico were brought in to pick the crops. But these workers were not allowed to stay as immigrants. How does this relate to current debates and struggles regarding undocumented workers versus those

welcomed into the United States with open arms as new immigrants? I, as well as students, have found the many discussions and interchanges that follow such questions to be deeply meaningful as well as memorable.

6 Use of Self to Assist Others to Look More Deeply

At particular junctures of our mutual learning experience, I often model storytelling for my participants. It is my belief that, if we cannot perform things we ask of others, change is more difficult and less authentic. Knowing the "self-of-the-therapist" is essential. I selectively share some of my own stories as a Chinese-American growing up in a predominantly white, middle-class community in Los Angeles. My fellow learners inevitably become more engaged, often feeling safer to tell their own stories using the learning agreements I have established. Sometimes, at a particular juncture toward the end of the class, I work with the class by sharing a story of a social situation that appeared to be an incident of discrimination. I share the story of an Asian-American man similar to myself who seemed to be mistreated in a department store. As he tried to make a purchase in the store, he was regarded by the white salesperson as though he were not there. When she did attend to him, she interacted with him with suspicion as a "foreigner" who was out of place, not to be trusted. After he protested, she put the problem back on him, demeaning him by speaking slowly, as though English were not his first language (although it was) and insisting he not cause trouble. I ask attendees to consider why they might decide whether this was an act of discrimination (i.e., due to race, class, communication differences) or not, giving potential alternative explanations (such as, the man had been rude previous to the incident, a warning had been out that a man fitting his description had been a problem earlier; etc.). Together we try to construct the potential story and deconstruct it in order to consider how we might have intervened. In the end, I eventually reveal that I was that Asian-American man who was treated unfairly with discrimination.

The majority of participants often react with surprise, dismay, or even shock. Most come away from the story with greater understanding of how pervasive and insidious mistreatment through social inequities and power differentials can be even among those they may assume to be immune. As a highly regarded, highly acculturated, and educated professor they expect me to be treated with respect. But due to racism and stereotypes, I am not always treated as such. Rather than being culturally competent, the students experience and often react in ways appreciating cultural humility and personal compassion. Occasionally crossing paths with a few participants years later, they often tell me how they remember this story and disclosure. In summary, when teachers authentically share some of their own narratives, their teaching or vision for social justice becomes even more vivid and palpable because it is more easily relatable as well as memorable.

While I always have a teaching plan, ripe opportunities arise for powerful learning spontaneously. My class topic for an afternoon was on racial violence,

historically and in the current context. As I was preparing for teaching in the morning, the following occurred on a street near the University of California, Berkeley campus: I heard a woman scream "You almost ran me over!" As I got closer to the scene, a middle-aged white man driving a pickup truck was shouting derogatory racial epithets directed toward the woman, who appeared to be a South Asian university student. As she was crossing the street with flashing crossing lights, the man had nearly struck her with his truck while cursing at her. He then stepped out of his truck verbally threatening her. As an ally to the woman, I thought quickly about the "Hollaback" intervention strategies I learned online to disarm racial situations. I first shouted out to bring the situation to the attention of other bystanders. I then quickly assisted the woman to withdraw from the man and his escalating tirade. We quickly went to a safe space close by where there was an officer available to speak with her and ensure her safety. The conversation an hour later about this incident I witnessed was timely; the class discussed the rise of anti-Asian violence during the Covid-19 pandemic, including its origins as well as historical precursors of systemic racism and prejudice.

Teachers must recognize their own held privileges. As an acculturated, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, Ivy-league graduate who is a cisgender male, I am seen as having certain advantages. Ways I address issues of gender, sexual orientation, ableism, social and class standing, and immigration might well be instructive to others. Accusations of being "white adjacent" need to be met with a discussion of how white supremacy attempts to divide BIPOC individuals for the benefit of those who have colonized and dominated non-whites. Intra-ethnic differences within groups might need to be addressed as well. I have had several such opportunities.

I recall being asked to speak at the national Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) conference. One of the goals of the conference was to address the diversity and complexity of what it means to be identified under the heading of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI). During my presentation, a woman who identified as indigenous Native Hawaiian did not feel that I, as Chinese American, could speak directly to her cultural identity. This interaction occurred with all conference attendees bearing witness. A subsequent conversation about the background of the AAPI designation with an understanding of the differences among us, including how an umbrella referencing gives strength in numbers in some contexts yet is invisibilizing in others, was very impactful. She shared how she felt more heard and seen, and therefore empowered. We had an open dialogue about this in front of the entire audience. As a result, other conversations took place among attendees. Continuing in my own recent work with AAPIs, I have found it very important to proactively acknowledge our intra-ethnic differences. My personal experience of visiting Guam, for example, has brought to light how colonization has impacted the Chamorros, the indigenous people of the island. While AAPIs may share somewhat in-common experiences, we are certainly not all the same.

7 Common Principles of Teaching Social Justice

Having done this work for decades, it is affirming to remember on an ongoing basis some of the major elements posed for social justice education for therapists in transformative practice. Common principles I always have in mind are to:

1. Balance cognitive, intellectual, factual aspects with emotional connections of the learning process, both shorter and longer term.
2. Acknowledge as well as support the personal experience of participants while bringing to light the systemic interactions among social groups. Concrete real examples brought into consciousness are most often remembered.
3. Attend consistently to social relationships and interactions within the learning situation or classroom. There must be careful observation and noticing of behaviors emerging in group dynamics and exchanges. Rather than blaming or judging conflicts that arise, for example, such interactions should be used for improving interpersonal communications and awareness of processes. These can be powerful moments of learning for future situations.
4. Utilize mindfulness, reflection, and experience for participant-centered learning. Acknowledging one's worldview and experience is often the starting point for problem posing and deep, meaningful ongoing dialogues.
5. Value awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes of the learning process. Increased personal knowledge, greater social awareness, and making accountable commitments are meaningful stepping-stones to social action. (Bell et al., 2007, pp. 42–43).

8 Making Overarching Commitments and Points of Accountability

Making a commitment as a family therapist or human service provider to social justice in everyday practice is among the hardest work that we do. I am also realistic about the fact that, although the aforementioned trainings can seem transformational in the immediate moment, they may not feel the same in the long term. Attendees often give me feedback that they feel more hopeful, invigorated, and more connected in their commitments to make a difference toward equity in their work with families. While I sincerely commend them for their genuine hard work, I also challenge them about the reality we face; that as we go back to day-to-day life, the social forces that underlie inequities will creep back in and may even undermine their newly constructed commitments to social justice.

As an illustration of this systemic entropy or staying stuck in the same place, I sometimes ask trainees to address a letter to themselves. I have each write a thoughtful, personal note that lists what specific commitments they will make to social justice as family therapists. The commitments must be framed as specific acts, such

as “I will point out incidences of sexism as they arise” or “When my family uses derisive language, I will inquire about their meaning” or “When I witness acts that contribute to cycles of mistreatment, I will stand up and interrupt them” or “I will turn political acts of social injustice into opportunities to actively resist and protest in ways that meaningfully involve others.” I then take these commitments and put them in self-addressed envelopes. Some months after my teaching session is over, I send these self-written letters back to the trainees. I have had students tell me how powerful their response is on receiving their own letters. They reconsider their own accountability and how hard it is to maintain without consistency. Some will also tell me how liberating it was that they had actually followed through on their commitments.

Social justice work is not to be done alone or in a vacuum. I share this precaution with others while also reminding myself. The demands are high for not just the work itself but all that it entails intellectually, emotionally, relationally, and soulfully. I am often asked what I do as a “soul-healer” to stay healthy, optimistic, vibrant, and forward-thinking in my work. That is another chapter that we as social justice warriors must write, all the more in the context of current, challenging times.

9 Social Justice: Serving Community Needs Personally, Politically, and Professionally

While becoming therapists, we can learn the theories, mechanics, and components of interventions based in theory. Those who teach and practice social justice make connections between knowledge, awareness, and action. I beseech my students to recognize multiple spheres of influence in their daily lives. As they are becoming future family therapists, I challenge them to recognize the power they are taking on and the responsibility they are assuming with every child, adolescent, and family who encounters them. What we actually do with what we learn is the art of therapy. Similarly, the way I use narratives to teach about social justice is not simple or linear; it is a complex art with potentially beautiful results.

While I conduct my work for social justice with humility, affirmations or “booster shots” for our lifelong work, I find “serving community needs” as a welcomed form of ongoing self-care. Noting the positive effects of our work in the community is certainly gratifying. When our community work related to social justice is picked up by others, this can also re-energize us. Serving the community by trying to address their needs can be forever memorable, paving the way for others as well as other opportunities for contributing to greater equity and social justice. In other words, one’s own efforts may be found in others who then also carry on the work.

I have this as an example. While attending a community-based conference on race, culture, and practice, a prominent, nationally known, African-American trainer opened by challenging the audience. He pointedly asked how many in the large room felt they were significantly challenged during their graduate training

regarding race, especially white therapists, and their holding of power and privilege. Less than a handful raised their hands, and even then, only after a pause. One woman, a white supervisor, stated (my paraphrasing): "I don't know how many people know him, but Dr. Mock was one of my professors where I was trained about community mental health, and I learned a great deal from him." As it turned out, this supervisor did not know that I was sitting in the back of the room. She had been one of my graduate students in required community mental health and multicultural psychology courses. In these courses I share a perspective that working with others is less about us and more about families and communities, and services they need. It had been several years since I had seen this supervisor, and I was truly touched and grateful to know I had such a positive, lasting impact on her. I felt additionally uplifted and inspired to do more. Our work does matter, can multiply among others, and positively contribute to communities.

The work for therapists in furthering social justice has been, is currently, and will be challenging in the future. I remind all that many others came before us and many will come after. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was one who came before. Dr. King was "someone able to admit how often he was afraid and unsure about his next step…It was his human vulnerability and his ability to rise above it that I most remember. He did not pretend to be a great powerful know-it-all. I remember him discussing openly his gloom, depression, his fears, admitting that he did not know what the next step was. He would then say: "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step" (Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund as quoted by Loeb, 2010, p. 57). My students will take these steps as so many will after.

Our work is powerful, poignant, personal, professional, and political. As written earlier, I grew up impacted by the 1960s and 1970s. Those were times of change where there were critical movements furthering social justice. There were social activists and peace activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Malcolm X, among others, that led revolutions of progressive change. In March 1968, during his "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" speech at the National Cathedral Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice."

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