



2014

Self-Reflections of a Gay Immigrant Social Worker

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Virtual Commons Citation

Lee, Jonghyun and Robinson, Kate Willow (2014). Self-Reflections of a Gay Immigrant Social Worker. In *Social Work Faculty Publications*. Paper 51.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/socialwork_fac/51

Self-Reflections of a Gay Immigrant Social Worker

Jonghyun Lee and Kate Willow Robinson

Abstract: Social workers strive to end various forms of social injustice that cause the marginalization of people and their suffering. One way to dismantle social injustice is to engage in a self-reflective process. As a form of self-discovery, self-reflection guides us to recognize our own experiences of privilege and power as well as inequality and oppression. In this article, I utilize intersectionality as a method of self-reflection to examine the ways race/ethnicity, sexuality, and immigration status intersect and create a particular form of vulnerability. Making private experiences public takes courage. Nevertheless, through self-reflection, I reinforce my moral and ethical commitment to fairness, respect for diversity, and human rights for all!

Keywords: social justice, intersectionality, Council on Social Work Education, gay, immigrant, Asian, heterosexism.

Social Work and Social Justice

The locus of the social work profession is social justice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2012). Following its humanitarian concern, I am committed to helping people meet their basic needs and strive to end various forms of social injustice that cause marginalization of people and their suffering. To empower especially those who are oppressed in our society, I promote social justice through my engagement in advocacy, social action, policy development, and community organizing. In addition, social workers pursue social justice through direct engagement with individuals and families from diverse backgrounds (CSWE, 2012).

It is important to recognize that social justice can only be actualized through a collective endeavor made by our society as whole. As noted by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, social justice should be “based on the values of fairness, equality, respect for diversity, access to social protection, and the application of human rights in all spheres of life” (United Nations [UN] Economic and Social Commissions for West Asia, 2010, p.1). To promote social justice, I have to espouse a moral and ethical attitude toward equality. Believing in the dignity of all people, whether they are members of the dominant group or an oppressed group, is fundamental to dismantling social injustice. Without this belief, there is a little hope that we can create a just society (Spencer, 2008).

Unfortunately, social injustice is exercised in its varieties and contributes to human suffering. Due to differences in race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, nationality, immigration status, religion, and other socially constructed divisions, some people are targeted for exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, homophobia, and violence (Young, 2002). Social injustice inhibits the ability of people to achieve potentials and to express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Moreover, social injustice causes psychological, physical, and spiritual deprivation of people (Swenson, 1998).

Challenging social injustice is easier said than done. One way to dismantle social injustice is to engage in self-reflective practice. It is a form of self-discovery that enables us to recognize our own experiences of privilege and power as well as inequality and oppression (Spencer, 2008). Such a practice enables social workers to engage in the self-corrective process that assures our continual professional development. Intersectionality, in this regard, can be a useful methodology for self-reflection. It guides us to understand the ways in which race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other socially constructed divisions intersect and create power and privilege as well as oppression and marginalization.

Using intersectionality as a prime source of self-reflection in this essay, I examine the ways race/ethnicity, sexual-orientation, and immigration status intersects and create a particular form of vulnerability and privilege in

my own life. Making private experiences public takes courage. To present my reflection with confidence, I incorporate a number of theoretical insights and empirical evidence into my reflective analysis. This form of self-reflection has contributed to my intellectual and professional growth as a social worker. Most of all, self-reflective analysis has reinforced my moral and ethical commitment to fairness, equality, respect for diversity, and human rights for all!

Intersectionality Theory

In “The Sociological Imagination,” Mills (1959) describes a human being as “a social and an historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures” (p. 158). Indeed, a person cannot be adequately understood as merely an isolated biological creature without taking into account the social reality and the institutions that are enacted upon the life of that person. Individual identity, then, is constructed through a person’s interactions with the social world.

Self-reflection can be a practice of ‘intellectual craftsmanship’ that must be grounded in social workers’ professional endeavors (Mills, 1959). It enables us to engage in a continual process of self-correction through examining our own lived experiences in our professional work. Such an intellectual endeavor enhances our ability as social workers to recognize the diversity among people and the ways they experience oppression, marginalization, power, and privilege.

I believe that intersectionality is a wonderful theoretical framework for social justice oriented self-reflection. First introduced by Crenshaw (1991), this particular theory maps out the ways socially and culturally created divisions are intertwined and operate as sources of disenfranchisement or power. In other words, intersectionality is a theory that analyzes how oppression, inequality, power, and privilege are created and exercised

through the simultaneous effects of multiple social and cultural divisions (Weber, 2006).

For instance, while discussing violence against women of color, Crenshaw (1991) explained the way women of color are oppressed due not only to their race, but also their gender. The complexity of women of color’s lives cannot be delineated appropriately by looking at either the racial or gendered dimension of their lived experiences separately. By focusing solely on their experiences of marginalization through racism, we are at risk of ignoring their suffering of patriarchy. Through such a monolithic and singular frame of analysis, such as racism, we cannot acquire full picture of the lived experiences of women of color and their suffering.

In addition to race and gender, Lorde (1998) further emphasizes the importance of considering other dimensions such as class and sexuality that are critical in shaping the life experiences of women of color. An upper middle class, white, heterosexual woman’s experience of life must be drastically different from that of a working class woman of color who identifies as lesbian. In the former case, white women of higher socio-economic status who have relationships with men may experience disadvantages based on their gender yet enjoy the privileges of their class and race. In the latter instance, the women of color may face multiple disadvantages due to their race, sexual orientation, and economic status.

Another aspect to be considered is that social workers should avoid ranking oppressions or claiming one is any worse or better than another (Young, 2002). We must not simply divide the oppressor and the oppressed based on a given set of circumstances. Instead, we have to recognize the cumulative impacts of race, gender sexual orientation, ability, and immigration status, and other socially constructed divisions on the life experiences of each individual. This way, we will develop better insights about the ways in which each of these socially constructed divisions intersect and create power and oppression as well as privilege and marginalization.

**Making Private Experiences Public:
Intersection of Race, Immigration Status,
and Sexuality**

As I consider how my personal experience contributes to intersectionality as a method of self-reflection for social work practice and teaching about social justice issues, I often ask myself questions. “What if I did not move to the United States and study social work? Would I ever be able to learn the impacts of race, immigration status, and sexuality on human development and behavior?”

Through my first-hand experiences of living as a person of color, a non-native English speaking immigrant with temporary visas, and a gay man, I learned the devastating effects of racism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia on human growth. While maneuvering through various challenges that I have encountered, I acquired critical insights on the issues of social justice and human diversity quite essential for all social workers. Indeed, my teaching and scholarship is deeply influenced by my personal experience of being categorized as a person of color, an immigrant, and a gay man in the United States.

According to Bisman (2004), social workers are moral agents who should seek to “change social structures which perpetuate inequalities and injustices” (p. 120). As a social work educator, I believe that the social work profession’s mission and its moral imperative to social justice and human diversity, among many, should inspire, guide, and motivate students’ engagement in social work learning. My students’ careful inquiry about social justice and human diversity lead them to grow as confident social workers who are committed to the profession’s mission to enhance the well-being of people and their social environment.

I am very fortunate to be in an academic setting where social justice and diversity are respected and encouraged. My undergraduate and graduate classes are comprised of

students from varying backgrounds. At the beginning of each semester, as a part of course introductions, I tell my students the stories that have led me to become a social worker, and ask them to share why they want to become a social worker. Through telling stories and listening to those of others, we become aware, as a consequence of differences among us, that some may experience oppression or marginalization, while others enjoy power or privilege. My pedagogical intention is to assist my students to acquire insights about the ways diversity shapes not only the life experiences of people but also their professional development.

My Name is Jonghyun Lee

“My name is Jonghyun Lee. Have you met anyone whose name is Jonghyun before?”

Every new semester, I begin classes by asking this question. Of course, most of the time, none of my students have heard of a name similar to mine, nor can they pronounce it correctly. However, I find that this is a significant and useful starting point to help my students engage with the issues of social justice and diversity among people.

As soon as students see my appearance, hear my accent, and mannerisms, they immediately recognize the differences of our encounter from those of other professors that they find in their other classrooms. A former student of mine remembered that some of her classmates expressed mixed emotions and anxiety about their learning and how my appearance and accent may affect their grades.

Because of this reason, instead of letting my students leave the first day of class with much anxiety, I utilize my difference as a way to connect with them. I attempt to get across, sometimes very directly, the idea that “Hey, there is nothing to lose! My students already saw me and heard my accents.” Sharing my story is not a self-disclosure. Rather, it is a form of “use of self” for teaching. While explaining my name, my professional and educational backgrounds, and how I came to be a social worker, I introduce, both implicitly and

explicitly, the concepts of “intersectionality.” While listening to my story, students are able to familiarize themselves with the dimensions of diversity that create my identity as a Korean, immigrant, and gay man as well as the impacts such categorizations have on my own personal journey as a social worker.

“Allen was my name for a couple of years.” I say to my students, “You know, people cannot pronounce Jonghyun easily. Because of that, they reluctantly say my name and eventually forget it.” I go on and explain what it is like to be being forgotten among people. “Often times, I felt invisible in class and other social settings. I thought that by having an English name I would not be forgotten.”

My students asked me why I chose “Allen.” “Well, there are many English names and people suggested different ones including Winston.” I hear a big laugh. “Do I look like Winston?” I ask. Students laugh out loud. “I know why you laugh. I don’t look like Winston, do I?” Then I say, “The reason I chose Allen is because I love Woody Allen’s movies.” There is another big laugh. It may be because my Korean look does not match ‘Woody Allen’ either. My students would not think that a Korean man with such a strong accent would understand Woody Allen’s humor, and the American culture melded into his films. I wonder if they find it even exotic.

I continue my story. “Although Allen worked pretty well, I had to let it go. People remembered me as Allen, but I felt something was missing. You know, as you see me, I didn’t find Allen within me.” I hear a sigh of relief, and some students even say, “That’s good. You got your name back. You have to have your real name!” Now comes the moment where I explain the meaning of my name and its cultural significance.

“Well, I have to say I am destined to be a social worker from birth.” I say. “In Korean, my name Jonghyun means a black bell which signifies a bell with resonating sound. My

mother chose it for me, and she is an amazing woman.” I explain that in Korea, under its strong patriarchal culture, newborn children’s names are usually made by male figures in the family, including a father or a grandfather. I tell my students, “But my mother was courageous. She confronted patriarchal culture by deciding the name of her own child.” I tell my students that this is an act of resistance against injustice or a form of rebellion. “You know, she might have been a feminist!” I say. “She wanted me to be a social worker who could resonate in the lives of people who are oppressed and marginalized.” I hear another laugh from students; this time, their laugh has a serious tone in it.

Being Asian: A Stranger From a Different Shore

“Slanted eyes. You have slanted eyes,” she said.

“Slanted eyes?” I asked.

“You know, Asian people have weird eyes like this,” she said as she pulled at the outside corners of her eyes to stretch them out.

That was the first time I knew that I was viewed as an Asian in the United States. My individuality goes missing due to my physical appearance. I am now categorized as Asian through a dividing practice. Foucault, as cited in Rabinow (1984), explains the dividing practice as the various modes of manipulation that objectify people by categorizing them through exclusionary practices, which gives people both a “personal and a social identity” based on “pseudo-science” created by dominant culture (p.8). This type of classification confirms existing hierarchies of races and measures their moral and inborn capacities. As a form of systemic violence, such a practice manifests through acts of exclusion, harassment, degradation, humiliation, or intimidation (Young, 2002). As in the case of many immigrants, I have to deal with both subtle and explicit forms of racism due to my appearance and accent.

“Go home you Chink!”

I encounter these offensive slurs on the street. No matter how frequently I experience them, facing both subtle and blatant forms of violence is hardscrabble. It is an affront to me. These racial comments are a constant reminder to me of my lack of place in the United States. They alienate me as the other who does not belong here, and also threaten my sense of security, confidence, and overall well-being.

However, I cannot respond or ask for justice. Otherwise, I would be seen as an angry, unappreciative, noncompliant, and difficult to work with, defensive Asian man. Or, I might be viewed as a flat liar who seeks sympathy from others. I feel this way because when I've brought these statements up to others, I've been told the following: "Are you sure that's what they said? You might have misunderstood." "It's a joke, don't you understand?" "Get over it! That's what grownups do." Ironically, these responses implicitly force me to remain silent. The blame is on me. "Why are you here? Go home!"

In order to survive, I must be aware of my skin color and other aspects of my physical appearance. I must be careful in showing my talents, skills, or intellectual capability. Otherwise, I risk being stereotyped as a nerd, passive, or an overly competitive, dominant Asian man.

Shah (2000) depicts how Asians are stereotyped under the "model minority myth." It is a racist view that overtly categorizes minority groups into either bad ones or good ones. According to the U.S. Census Bureau report prepared by Ryan and Siebens (2012), among those whose ages are 25 and over, Asian-Pacific Islanders show 52.4% of college and higher level of educational achievement in comparison to 29.9% of the general population. This may be due to, at least partly, immigration policy that prefers highly-skilled workers and the larger influx of professionals from Asian nations (Kaushal & Fix, 2006). For example, Asians are more often admitted to the United States with

employment visas that require higher professional skills and knowledge. 27% of immigrants from Asian nations received permanent resident status through the sponsorship of their employer in comparison 8% of those who came from other parts of world (Pew Research Center, 2012).

However, this report does not capture levels of extreme variability in educational achievement existing within Asians in the United States. A closer look at data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011) reveals that college and higher levels of educational attainments are indeed concentrated in particular ethnic groups including Asian Indian (81.3%), Korean (56.3%), and Chinese (53.4%). In contrast, according to the report made by Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center (2011), Vietnamese (27%), Hmong (14%), Cambodian (14%), and Laotian (12%) show the lowest levels of the college and higher educational attainments among Asian ethnic groups. The existing large disparity in educational attainments between different Asian ethnic groups suggests that many Asians do not have credentials that can secure their access to living wage jobs, health care coverage, and opportunities to build assets.

When Asians in the United States are considered as a homogenous group, the median household income is \$66,000, as of 2010, which is about \$16,200 more than the overall population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2012). It is important to recognize that Asian households are more likely to be multi-generational, with older persons or children being unemployed living in the same household. This means that actual income should be divided by a larger number of people. This may be why, despite their substantially higher rates of educational achievements and median household income, Asians in the United States show lower median household wealth (\$68,529) than their non-Hispanic white (\$112,000) counterparts. The term household wealth refers to the sum of assets including cars, homes, savings and retirement accounts minus debts such as mortgages, auto loans and credit card debt (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Similar to household wealth, Asians in the United States are more likely to live under poverty in comparison to their non-Hispanic white counterparts. For instance, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) set the poverty threshold for 2012 at \$11,945 per year for an individual under 65 years old and \$23,681 for a family of four. As of 2011, the poverty rate among non-Hispanic whites was 9.8% in comparison to a 12.3% poverty rate for Asians (Gabe, 2012). When Asian ethnicities are considered individually, we can see even greater income inequality. According to the White House Report (2013) Hmong showed the highest poverty rate (37.8%) followed by Cambodian (29.3%), Laotian (18.5%), and Vietnamese (16.6%). The notable socioeconomic variability within these Asian ethnic groups warns us not to make a precipitate generalization. There is no such a thing as a model minority! The model minority label effectively silences many Asians, keeps them from addressing their needs, and conceals existing disparities between sub-groups of Asians.

Since it was first created by Western Europeans following their global expansion beginning in the 1400s, race has been used to rank human populations (Sanjek, 1994). None of “the underlying scales of racial quanta of intelligence, attractiveness, cultural potential, and worth” have been proved to be real. However, “racial categorization” and “racist social ordering” continue to be inherited “as fixed in nature” and are “served to expedite and justify” racism (Sanjek, 1994, pp. 1-2).

By asserting that “racism is more than a matter of individual prejudice and scattered episodes of discrimination,” Feagin and Vera (1995) define it as “the socially organized set of attitudes, ideas, and practices that deny African Americans and other people of color the dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers white Americans” (p. ix). No one chooses her/his identity before birth, yet one is born predisposed to the unequal roles that make her/him disenfranchised, exploited, and

marginalized due to his/her skin color (Harro, 2000).

Consequently, racial oppression confines people of color by prohibiting them from developing, exercising, or expressing their abilities, capacities, or even their needs, feelings, and thoughts (Young, 2002). Various attempts have been made to eradicate racism. Unfortunately, racial prejudice is still at work at all levels of our society. Consequently, the prevailing racial prejudice perpetuates “otherness” and imposes negative and distorted images on certain groups of people, which dismantle their dignity and rights.

Being an Immigrant and Gay Man

“To attend the graduate program in Boston, Massachusetts.” When entering the United States, I told the immigration officer that my purpose in coming to the United States was to attend a social work program. In order to avoid possible rejection of my visa petition or deportation, I had to give an acceptable reason for my entry. Although the statement that I gave to both the U.S. Embassy and the immigration officers was true, it was not my sole reason for leaving my home in South Korea. I came to Boston to live with my partner. I did not disclose this equally important reason because of the fear of deportation due to my relationship with a man; a relationship that is not recognized as “normal.” Not only am I a gay man, but I am also an “alien” whose immigration status and sexuality were under the surveillance of the United States government.

In the summer of 1999, I left behind my family, friends, and profession and moved to the United States to build a life with the man whom I love. The United States is the home country of my spouse, and we chose Massachusetts as a place where we could pursue our academic and professional goals. Our initial wish was to live without prejudice, at both institutional and individual levels, being placed upon our sexual orientation. However, this was an illusion. Quite contrary to our faulty fantasy, we saw and continually suffer homophobia, heterosexism,

and violence against gay, lesbian, and transgender people in the United States.

Because of the heterosexist federal immigration policy, I had to live under a student visa to maintain my legal status in the United States. The financial cost and psychological toll involved in keeping my immigration status were very costly. I explain to my students how many times I had to fly back to Korea in order to renew my student visa.

I share the pressures I was under to achieve higher academic standing to make sure my visa application would go through smoothly. Another way in which I was under pressure to perform was also with attendance. "I don't have a right to be sick!" I constantly reminded myself. If I missed classes due to illness, I knew that I could be in trouble, and that it might negatively impact my immigration status.

My students express shock and incredulity when they hear that my thirty-plus-year relationship with my partner was not valid under federal immigration policy, which only recognized marriage between a man and a woman. Since I moved to the United States, I have been a resident of Massachusetts, which recognizes marriage between same sex couples. However, my partner and I could not marry because immigration policy is administered on a federal level. In fact, if immigration officials knew of my relationship, it might have threatened my legal status.

I tell my students the fear that my partner and I shared each time when we entered the country from our trips abroad. Immigration agents could have denied my entrance to the country if they knew of my relationship with another man because our relationship would imply that I intended to live in the United States permanently. Through my story of immigration experience, I wanted my students to learn the impact of social policy on the lives of individuals and their well-being.

Charades Required by Immigration Law

In 1975, Richard Adams received a letter from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) that stated, "Your visa petition...for classification of Anthony Corbett Sullivan as the spouse of a United States citizen [is] denied for the following reason; you have failed to establish that a bona fide marital relationship can exist between two faggots" (Hazeldean & Betz, 2003, p. 17). Regardless of their committed and loving relationship, Adams' immigration application to sponsor his partner was rejected with a homophobic insult. Under the immigration policy of the time, they were only "two faggots," and Adams had no right to secure legal immigration status for his partner.

Although family unification is the primary goal of United States immigration policy, this goal, until recently, fell short for my partner and me. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) defined "marriage" as a union between one man and one woman. Under this Act, heterosexual citizens or permanent residents in the United States could sponsor their foreign national partners as a fiancé(e) or spouse for immigration, even if their partners were undocumented.

However, gay and lesbian citizens or permanent residents of United States had no way to sponsor their foreign national same sex partners (Nieves, 2004). The federal government administers immigration policy and DOMA prohibited gay and lesbian citizens from sponsoring their partners for immigration. Neither Vermont civil unions nor the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial ruling that grants same-sex couples the right to marry could confer any privileges (Sheridan, 2003, December 28). What Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders [GLAD] (n.d.) recommended was, "foreign nationals should not marry...marrying your same sex partner or applying for a change in immigration status based on marriage to a same sex partner may lead to deportation or future denial of your visa application."

The term 'bi-national same-sex couples' refers to same-sex couples in which one partner is a citizen of the United States and the other is not. Using the data from American Community Survey (ACS), Konnoth and Gates (2011) present interesting data. As of 2010, there were nearly 650,000 same-sex couples living in the United States. Among those, 28,574 were bi-national same sex couples. This figure did not include 11,442 non-citizen couples in which one partner is a permanent resident. It has to be recognized that estimating the exact numbers of bi-national same-sex couples is extremely difficult. Due to the uncertainty of their immigration status and fear of deportation, many of these couples might have kept a low profile.

According to Konnoth and Gates (2011), bi-national same-sex couples reside in all parts of the United States. Approximately a third of bi-national same-sex couples are interracial and ethnically diverse. Nearly a third of bi-national same-sex couples raise about 17,000 children. An annual median household income of bi-national same-sex couples was over \$81,000 exceeding \$51,144 among general population. Approximately two-thirds of bi-national same-sex couples own homes and over forty percent of bi-national same-sex couples have college or higher degrees. Among non-citizen partners, more than eighty-one percent reported a very good command of English. Also, non-citizens in bi-national same-sex couples show extremely lower rates of unemployment at just two percent. Bi-national couples represent a diverse group of individuals from around the globe, and many of them raise children and contribute to the economic vitality of the United States (Konnoth & Gates, 2011).

However, the flip side of the fantastic data shows the vitality of the bi-national couple is rather sad. They reflect desperate realities that these couples had to endure. Acquiring professional knowledge and skills was the only way that non-citizen partners could seek to secure their documented immigration

status. Through their educational attainments, English proficiency, and professional skills, non-citizen partners find employment opportunities that could sponsor their visas that enable them to remain documented while living with their partners in the United States.

It has to be recognized that economic self-sufficiency among the bi-national same-sex couples is not evenly distributed. For instance, among the male bi-national same-sex couples, the median individual income of citizen partners exceeds that of their non-citizen partners by more than \$10,000 (\$45,816 vs. \$35,158) (Konnoth & Gates, 2011). In comparison, among female bi-national same-sex couples, the median income of the citizen partner was \$37,088 and that of their non-citizen partner was \$31,020. Moreover, the median income of those same-sex couples in which one partner is a permanent resident was less than \$20,000. Depending on citizenship status and gender, there is a significant discrepancy between individual incomes among bi-national same-sex couples (Konnoth & Gates, 2011).

Fortunately, on June 26, 2013, the United States Supreme Court declared that Section 3 of DOMA, which blocked federal recognition of same-sex marriage, was unconstitutional. Through this decision, all married same-sex couples, just like different-sex couples, can now enjoy 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections on the basis of marital status established in federal law. Gay and lesbian citizens may now sponsor their partners for immigration. However, the current ruling does not apply to every same-sex couple. It only dealt with federal recognition of marriage between the same-sex couples, but not each individual state. According to Section 2 of DOMA, individual states and territories do not need to legalize or recognize the marriage between same-sex couples. Despite sweeping changes that took place in regard to the same-sex marriage across the United States, fourteen states still do not allow same-sex couple to marry. This means that same-sex couples residing in those states will face continual challenges in receiving benefits, rights, and privileges that are otherwise available to opposite-sex couples.

Institutional Heterosexism and Its Negative Effects on Human Well-Being

It is disconcerting to see the negative health effect created by institutional heterosexism. Using the data drawn from the 1997-2009 National Health Interview Surveys, Liu, Reczek, and Brown (2013) analyzed the health status of nearly 700,000 men and women. Among those surveyed, 3,330 people are identified as same-sex cohabiters. The findings of the study reveal that same-sex cohabiters show poorer health status in comparison to different-sex married couples with similar socioeconomic status. Liu and colleagues surmise that a lack of social, psychological, economic, and institutional resources associated with marriage contribute to poorer health status of same-sex cohabiters in comparison to their different-sex married counterparts. In addition, stress caused by homophobia and discrimination against same-sex cohabiters is another contributing factor to their poorer health status. By banning same-sex marriage, the remaining fourteen states not only take away benefits, rights, and protections given to their different-sex couple citizens, but also jeopardize the health of their gay and lesbian citizens.

Liu, Reczek, and Brown's (2013) study also revealed multiple risk factors that undermine health and well-being of lesbian women of color. In their study, same-sex cohabiting white women show advantageous health status over same-sex cohabiting Black and Latina women. This may be due to their race and employment status. In addition to social discrimination and public malice against gay and lesbian people, same-sex cohabiting Black and Latina women face even more overt challenges. Due to their disadvantageous racial and ethnic backgrounds, these women endure more stigma, discrimination, and economic disenfranchisement than their white counterparts. Additionally, same-sex cohabiting Black and Latina women lack social support outlets that they could utilize in coping with adversities in life. Such life

conditions generate negative effects on these women's psychological well-being and physical health (Liu, Reczek & Brown, 2013).

Economic disparity experienced by members of the LGBT community are indicators that reveal inequities in access to and distribution of resources, privileges, and rights. Existing literature consistently raises concerns about the economic hardship experienced by gay and lesbian people. Using the data collected from four national and community surveys, Badgett, Durso, and Schneebaum (2013) report that gay and lesbian people in the United States are more likely to be poor than their heterosexual counterparts. Their findings indicate that gender, race, educational attainments, and geographical location have particular impacts on poverty experienced by gay and lesbian people. This means that a lesbian woman of color with less than a high school education who resides in either a rural or a small metropolitan area may experience a significantly higher level of poverty.

Contemporary social policy in the United States certainly adheres to heterosexual-normative, patriarchal, cultural values. They are used as an instrument of social control through encouragements and prohibitions. Legitimizing only an opposite-sex marriage as 'the good, the true, and the beautiful,' stigmatizes and marginalizes same-sex couple in our society (Hartman, 1995). Denial of same-sex marriage and its associated rights, benefits, and protections contributes to the higher rates of poverty and negative health conditions found among gay and lesbian populations. Particular vulnerabilities faced by undocumented lesbian and gay people and those who face ableism must also be also taken into our consideration.

Because of institutionalized heterosexism, prevailing racism, and heinous ethnocentrism, many people are categorized as "unnatural," "inferior," or simply "deviant others" (Lind, 2004). I should not be fearful of these vicious labels that deprive dignity, health and well-being of our fellow citizens and their equal rights. Rather, I must seek out ways to empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

people to have their basic human needs met and their rights protected.

I thank my students for their commitment to social justice and their assistance in the fight for the rights of gay and lesbian people. I tell them that their efforts awarded me the right to live with whom I love without fear of forced separation; once DOMA was repealed, my partner and I married July 23, 2013. I was teaching a summer class at that time. While I was unsure about sharing my new status with students, a student asked me about the ring on my left hand. I opened up to the class about my marriage, and received a warm reception. The students in my class baked a cake and made two male mandarin ducks as wedding gifts, honoring my Korean heritage and ethnicity. Through my experience of being an immigrant and gay man, students in my class saw the intersection of state law and federal policy, and the personal impact these may have on people.

The Intersection of Marginalization and Oppression and Privilege and Power

As a way to familiarize the concept of intersectionality and engage in dialogue that can promote social justice, my students and I carry out a Privilege Walk exercise in class. Originally adopted from Peggy McIntosh's article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," this exercise creates opportunities to identify types of privilege and marginalization that we experience due to the differences in our race/ethnicity, gender, economic class, religion, family backgrounds, sexual orientation, abilities, and immigration status. While listening to the statements relevant to privilege or marginalization, students will either move forward or backward. Of course, the Privilege Walk exercise is done in silence and all participating students will be ensured that we keep the things, which are discussed, confidential.

I participate in this exercise alongside students. I want to them to see not only my academic credentials and professional status

that have brought me much privilege and power, but also my experiences of marginalization and oppression as an Asian immigrant gay man. A student told me that, before this exercise, his focus was on my authority as a professor in class. However, the "Privilege Walk" exercise made him aware of the different dimensions of my life as a non-citizen, person of color, and my sexual orientation. Such awareness actually brought him hope to achieve his professional goals as a person of color from a working class family background. "Jonghyun, I saw you stood behind all the students in class at the end of the exercise. I saw your marginalized social position that could make you vulnerable. But you are a professor despite such vulnerability. I now think that I can be like you. I can achieve my professional goal and become a social worker."

Collins' (2000) conceptualization of a matrix of domination illuminates the complicated and ambiguous nature of oppression. According to the matrix of domination, "an individual may be an oppressor, a member [of an] oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed" depending on the context in which the individual stands (as cited in Sica, 2005, p. 231). Lorde (1998) argues that people often identify "one way which we are different, and assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be participating in" (p. 534). Unacknowledged differences in class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age, culture, and religion can distort our insight into the fundamental system of oppression. Oppression has multiple facets and they operate separately or in combination to create a system of advantages and disadvantages. It enhances privileges for some while limiting opportunities of others (Rothenberg, 2001). This recognition opens up multiple standpoints since almost every individual is affected by this multiplicity of life experiences that create oppression and power as well as marginalization and privilege.

Collins suggests that we engage in dialogue that can "transcend differences and transform the

relations of domination” (as cited in Sica, 2005, p. 231). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) shows how dialogue can emancipate us from a dichotomized humanity that divides the world between the oppressor and the oppressed. For him, dialogue is “a process of learning and knowing” that involves an epistemological curiosity about the object of knowledge (p. 18). In this respect, the social worker’s role is not to fill his/her clients with ideas that are detached from the client’s reality, but rather to help clients “to enter the historical process as responsible subjects,” by awakening a critical consciousness that will eventually lead the clients to a new way of viewing themselves and others (p. 36). For social work educators, dialogue may be used within the classroom to dismantle barriers that differences may create. It should be used to bring awareness to students of their own experiences, those of potential clients, of their professors, and fellow classmates. Social work educators are charged with bringing critical awareness to students to bear upon their own lives and transfer into their interactions with clients.

Social Work Implication: The Bell Resonates In the Classroom and Beyond

Learning is a process of constructing knowledge in ways that make sense to each individual learner (Mezirow, 2000). In this sense, teaching is not a mere act of passing down information to students. Rather, it should be a process that assists students to be in contact with learning materials through their own lived experiences (Mezirow, 2000). Intersectionality has been a powerful theoretical framework that has enabled me to engage in a process of teaching and learning social work. This particular theory leads me to engage in a self-reflective process that examines power and privilege as well as inequality and oppression. As my mother did when she made a name for me, I gather courage to show the reflection of my personal experience publicly.

My hope is that this endeavor provides a way for social workers to promote our moral

commitment to change social structures which perpetuate inequalities and injustices.

I chose social work because of its primary concerns that emphasize humanitarian commitments and social justice. The profession functions in society to eliminate the various forms of oppression that amplify the deprivations of both people and their environments. To gain more in-depth understanding of my own lived experiences and their impact on my professional growth as a social worker, I engage in a self-reflective process using intersectionality as an analytic tool. Such a process has had a profound impact on me. It promotes my awareness about multiple realities created through simultaneous interactions between power, privilege, marginalization, and oppression. As a non-citizen gay man of color, I have experienced relative deprivation and marginalization. At the same, I recognize privileges created by my educational and professional backgrounds. This self-reflective process helps me to avoid a monolithic framework when assessing the problems in living. Instead, it encourages me to recognize the ways race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, immigration status, religion, and other socially constructed divisions intersect one other and affect the lives of people. It helps me to also bring this to my classrooms and teaching, and to inspire my students to use intersectionality within their own self-reflective practice and as they work with clients.

Intersectionality for self-reflection must begin in the classroom, and be an integral part of social work education that seeks to answer the call to social justice that is this profession. Using intersectionality in our teaching, social work educators can assist students to attain profound appreciation for the client’s strengths, contexts, and resources, which is critical in social justice based intervention. Because clients’ world views are shaped by their experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, age, economic class, education, religion, sexuality, immigration status, nationality, and ability, recognition of the interactions between these

socially constructed categories and their impacts on the lives of our clients should be central to social work intervention. In other words, using intersectionality, our students will gain theoretical insights that enable them to comprehend the client's social realities. Moving beyond simple binary analysis, intersectionality allows them to see the ways power, privilege, oppression, and marginalization are experienced by each individual client. At the same time, social work students will be able to recognize how their own experiences of oppression and privilege affect the social worker's interactions with clients.

Reinforcing humanity and social justice can be a slow process. I can take only a small step at a time. However, I know there are also thousands of steps that are being taken by others toward a just society (Ayvazian, 2001). Recently, we witnessed the fruitful outcome of our endeavors toward a just society: the Supreme Court ruling on DOMA is one such victory. I have conviction. I believe that if we not only earnestly dream, but also earnestly strive to enact change within ourselves, we can eliminate the divide between the oppressor and the oppressed and actualize human rights and social justice for all!

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