

Transforming Careers in Mental Health for BIPOC

Strategies to Promote Healing and
Social Change

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That Affirm and Value Who We Are

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Linda P. Juang

Let me introduce myself. I am a second-generation Taiwanese American who grew up in Minnesota and who now lives in Berlin, Germany. I went to the University of Minnesota to study child development and then to Michigan State University in East Lansing to study developmental psychology. For much of my life, I have lived and worked in spaces that were mostly white. In snowy East Lansing I wrote a dissertation titled *Autonomy and Connectedness Among Asian American College Students* because, I admit, I wanted to better understand myself. From there, my work continued to focus on minoritized youth growing up in immigrant families. I wondered how youth made sense of themselves and their ethnic-racialized identities while living in inequitable societies. I started my research in the US and continue here in Germany, a context where there is still little attention to such issues from a psychological perspective. What I learned over the years from these experiences is that the research that helped me figure out who I am as a minoritized scholar could, at the same time, make a contribution to the field because it focused on a population that was often overlooked in studies of adolescence. This fits into the now well-documented phenomena that if you are an underrepresented minoritized scholar, you are more likely

to include underrepresented minoritized people in your scholarly work (Roberts et al., 2020).¹ You should know that if you engage in me-search, you will be expanding scientific knowledge in important ways, not least by contributing to a more representative knowledge base. You will strengthen the field, for the better.

Today, I am a Professor of Inclusive Education at the University of Potsdam. I am one of the few professors in Germany with a non-German citizenship² and one of the very few women of color.³ This severe lack of representation is a problem because who we are contributes to how we engage in our work. Our lived experiences and backgrounds contribute to the research questions we study, populations we are interested in, who we include in our studies, how we interpret data, and theoretical frameworks that we engage with (Nzinga et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020; Syed et al., 2018). If only a narrow range of diversities are represented among researchers, our knowledge will be flattened and incomplete. In other words, our identities are central to the science or work that we do.⁴ Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on three aspects of ethnic-racialized identity – content, contexts, and configurations – to reflect on how these aspects contribute to navigating an academic career that affirms and values who we are.

The Contours of Identity

Galliher et al.'s (2017) identity framework distinguishes between identity content, contexts, and configurations. Reflecting on these dimensions helps us think about how our ethnic-racialized identities contribute to our strengths

- 1 Roberts et al. (2020) analyzed over 26,000 empirical articles in cognitive, developmental, and social psychology and showed that white researchers are more likely to have white participants in their studies and less likely to have People of Color. Researchers of Color are more likely to have participants of Color in their studies and less likely to have white people. If the field is dominated by people racialized as white, this makes a difference for who is included (or excluded) in our science.
- 2 7.4% of professors in Germany are international (have a non-German citizenship) and the percent of international professors has increased by only 0.1% since 2011 (German Academic Exchange Service, 2023).
- 3 Because official data on ethnicity or racialized groupings are not gathered here (“race” is closely tied to its misuse and abuse during the Holocaust, resulting in a strong taboo on collecting such data, Juang et al., 2021), there are no clear numbers on what racialized groups are underrepresented, making it difficult to see where disparities lie.
- 4 Marsh and Furlong's (2002) aptly titled paper “A skin, not a sweater” argues how our ontological and epistemological positions are always present when doing our research.

and assets as we navigate the pathway to become mental health practitioners and scholars in our various communities.

Ethnic-racialized identity refers to the overlapping ethnic and racialized aspects of how individuals think and feel about being a member of their ethnic-racialized groups (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). From developmental and social identity perspectives, a strong ethnic-racialized identity provides a sense of belonging to a valued social community (Erikson, 1968; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Aspects to consider are identity content (*what* defines our identities), identity contexts (within and through *which contexts* do our identities develop) and configurations (how our multiple identities *go together*). I describe each of these aspects and discuss how they can further our own understanding of who we are in relation to the work we do and the careers we are building.

Identity Content – Who Are You as a Minoritized Scholar?

A method to reveal the *what* in identity are studies taking a narrative approach. If I were to ask you to *think of a time in an academic setting when you were aware of your ethnicity*, what would you say? Who was there, what was happening, and how did you feel?⁵ (Please take a few moments to think about how you would respond.) The narratives that we tell (and re-tell) to ourselves and to others reveal how ethnicity and racialized or minoritized experiences are reflected in our lives. Importantly, these narratives also reveal something beyond the self: they shed light on the broader sociocultural context or societal structures that both constrain and afford our identity development (Fish & Counts, 2020; McLean & Syed, 2015). In thinking of a time when you were aware of your ethnicity in academia, for instance, you get a sense of whether your various identities are valued by the broader society. Do some of your identities enjoy privileges? Or are the identities that are important to you marginalized? Which identities are you open about and which identities do you feel like you have to hide? If your story does not fit into the master narrative – a culturally shared script reflecting a norm for the way we are supposed to be – what alternative narratives do you create? And how do we create alternative narratives

⁵ This type of prompt has been used in several field-changing studies of ethnic-racialized identity, e.g., Syed and Azmitia (2010).

beyond what society tells us who we are (or were) and what we can or cannot be? To create alternative narratives, regardless of where we are living in the world, we must learn our histories.

I read Erika Lee's (2015) book *The Making of Asian America: A History* five years ago, when I was 47. It took me this long to have a more solid understanding of my shared history. Asians have been in the US far longer than many think they have (Filipinos have been in the US since the 1500s), they have fought in every major war since the 1800s,⁶ and have participated alongside African American, Latinx, and other minoritized communities protesting war and imperialism, fighting for civil rights and fair labor.⁷ We were there all along, we just have not been included in the telling and re-telling of our stories.

The longer that I live outside the US, the more I also identify with the Asian diaspora, finding points of connection with Asian-heritage individuals growing up in Germany and Europe. Understanding that Asian American and Asian European identities are also political identities (Maeda, 2009) connects me to those who are collectively racialized not just as "Asian," but also as "other," as "foreign," and as an immigrant. As we learn more and build on the histories that connect us to minoritized people in other times and places,⁸ we clarify and strengthen our identities. Not being able to access our histories means denying the important contexts of our identities, limiting the ability to understand ourselves.

6 I had never seen photos of veterans of the US American Civil War or WWII who were Asian American until several years ago. This website *Belonging On and Off the Battlefield: Asian Americans in the US Military* has a good overview: www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=6301eee806184a9c885374869c325ba4&bookmark=Civil%20War

7 To learn of the ways that minoritized people have been systematically marginalized and excluded can be painful, so finding and connecting with people sharing similar experiences will be important to do.

8 The historian Olivette Otele's book *African Europeans: An Untold History* (2020) is another good example of the importance of history for identity. Otele documents how African people have been a part of Europe since antiquity, through trade and migration and also through colonization, slavery, and empire. Knowing about the presence of African Europeans is not enough. We need to also know their stories and contributions to art, science, music, and European society in general. This is important for who is seen as European. The myth that European = white is not true. Indeed, professional societies such as the American Psychological Association (APA) contribute to this racialized myth by offering guidelines that indicate that it is acceptable to use "European-American" or "white" interchangeably (APA, 2022). This myth erases a rich history of diverse peoples. It is so important to read the work of historians. It makes us rethink and interrogate

Identity Contexts – Are We in Spaces That Affirm or Undermine Our Identities?

We know what kind of contexts affirm identities. For young people, academic spaces and curricula that value and acknowledge diverse identities and emphasize equity, openness, and inclusion, promote a sense of belonging and create a context for youth to not just survive but thrive (Bañales et al., 2021; Celeste et al., 2019; Dee & Penner, 2016; Gay, 2013). As an early career scholar, do you have spaces that affirm your identities rather than undermine them? If you are “the only” in your department (e.g., the only Asian-heritage queer person) and feel isolated and not affirmed, you may need to look beyond your departments or other places of work to find safer spaces and communities. And, you may need to look for ways to try and shift the culture in your organizations to create that community for yourself. We need to find those safer spaces, find allies, and find people we trust.⁹

Relationships are important contexts for developing our identities. It is not new advice to say that establishing relationships with mentors is essential. Most of us have been advised to seek out mentors at different points in our career, to include those who are a few steps ahead of us, and those much further ahead. Both offer different types of support and insights at different stages. No one had told me to find a mentor for my non-academic life, but this is important too. Academia is a big part of my life but so are my family, my friends, and my relationships. Find people who are living the kind of life that you admire. For me, there are two people about a decade older than I am who I see as mentors. They have managed to raise children, have good relationships with their adult children, are doing interesting and important projects as well as living a life that centers, I believe, on relationships. Finding non-academic mentors in addition to academic mentors at different life stages helps.

identity labels, such as who is really “American,” “German,” or “European.” If you are a minoritized scholar of color, know this history, it is yours too. One of my favorite short articles is by one of the few classical historians of color: Nandini B. Pandey (2020). The Roman roots of racial capitalism. *The Berlin Journal*, 34, 16–20. www.americanacademy.de/the-roman-roots-of-racial-capitalism/

⁹ Finding people you trust is important not just for your psychological well-being but academic well-being. Here is a good article by Ijeoma Opara on *How to protect research ideas as a junior scientist* that highlights the importance of creating a “trusted circle” of scholars who you can share ideas with: www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03750-0

It is also important to find spaces in academia that you think *deserve* to have you. Instead of feeling like we always need to fit into a particular space, we need to also consider whether spaces acknowledge and truly value what we bring. Do the people around you listen to what you have to say? Do they take the time to provide critical yet constructive feedback on your work? Do you feel like your ideas, inputs, and questions are taken seriously? This space ideally also allows for rest. In our work we are rewarded for doing a lot in a short amount of time even if it means late nights, few breaks, and ultimately harming our health. And for those from traditionally excluded groups, the additional stress of feeling you have to constantly prove that you belong may push you to work even more. A critique of these pressures, as the theoretical physicist Chanda Prescod Weinstein points out so eloquently in her book *The Disordered Cosmos*,¹⁰ is that “Our academic and economic structures are set up with capitalist incentives to keep it to yourself when you realize something is wrong and to favor quick, superficial work over work that requires deep, plodding thought” (p. 159). Do the spaces you inhabit allow for deep, plodding thought? Relatedly, do the spaces you inhabit allow for rest and the refusal to be overworked and undone?

One way I try to create such a space is to protect and prioritize time for writing, which often is slow and plodding (for me anyway). Writing is revision and resistance.¹¹ In our research group we meet once a month in person to write together in the same space for support and encouragement. We also have mini online-writing days, checking in with each other in the morning, writing for several hours until lunch time, then checking in before getting on with the rest of the day. It is a small thing to do, but sometimes these small things can help along the way. So I would encourage you to find a group to write with, not only for being productive, but to have a protected space to be quiet, for a few hours or a day, to think and write.

10 I highly recommend *The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred*. If you were ever told that “fill in the blank” program/university/field of study was not meant for someone like you or that you were not good enough, this book shows that gatekeepers and institutions sometimes are full of it.

11 Writing is so important. The short video “While I Write” by artist scholar Grada Kilomba is a powerful reminder of what the act of writing does: “While I write, I am not the ‘other,’ but the self; not the object, but the subject . . .”: www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/arts/design/amant-kilomba-portuguese-artist.html. I also really like Anthony Ocampo’s article urging us to think about *who* we are writing for: <https://magazine.catapult.co/dont-write-alone/stories/anthony-ocampo-why-doctoral-students-phds-need-to-study-creative-writing>. Finally, I try to read William Zinser’s book *On Writing Well* every several years. He reminds us that writing clearly is an act of social justice. If we are not clear in our writing, we are withholding knowledge.

Identity Configurations – How Do We Make Sense of Our Multiple Identities?

Our multiple identities can be configured in different ways. They can be in conflict, be compartmentalized, or cohere (Galliher et al., 2017). How do your identities configure? Do some of our identities seem to be in conflict with one another? Do responsibilities to your family conflict with needs associated with building a successful career, such as moving across the country to take another position? Or do you compartmentalize different aspects of yourself, relying mostly on activating one identity in some situations and contexts, with some individuals and not others? Importantly, how do our central identities cohere? Coherence is described as having a “sense of harmony among identity contents, at various levels” (Galliher et al., 2017, p. 2014). How do we weave together our complex identities to simultaneously hold and embrace identities that society may tell us are incompatible or in conflict? Finding spaces that allow for this complexity is important. Prescod Weinstein’s book *The Disordered Cosmos* is a wonderful example of how a scientist who happens to be queer, Black identified, Jewish, and living with a disability, is able to hold all these identities and flourish in the field of physics, dominated by cis-heterosexual white men. It is not easy, and sometimes the fun of physics is outweighed by the racism, sexism, ableism, and patriarchy that she experiences regularly. Yet she is a singular voice in physics not in spite of, but because of, her refusal to leave important parts of herself behind while doing science.

In the same way, your particular social location – that unique configuration of living within overlapping societal structures that informs and reacts to your identities – provides you with a way of looking at things that others may not have. If you are made to feel different, if you feel out of sync with others, if you don’t see people who look like you in your department or in the spaces that you work in, this also means that you can offer something unique – not just your perspective but your experiences and expertise in how you view the world and create knowledge. Indeed, there is evidence that traditionally underrepresented early career scholars innovate (i.e., create more novel work) than majority students (Hofstra et al., 2020).¹²

12 The study included an analysis of over 1 million US PhD recipients’ theses and tracked their academic career. Innovation was defined as introducing novel linkages among scientific concepts. Importantly, the study also documented the unfortunate reality that despite being more likely to innovate, underrepresented PhD students are less likely to benefit (e.g., get an academic position) from this innovation compared to their majority peers.

In thinking of my particular social location and my various identities it is helpful for me to remember that I am, like some of my papers, a work in progress. The writer Kiese Laymon talks about life as a constant revision. This ability to be open to revision, to work on ourselves, our multiple and complex identities, figuring out who we are and trying to understand ourselves and the world around us, is something we will do for the rest of our lives if we want to grow. He says that revising is love, because if you love something, you go back to it, over and over. In an interview he says:

So for me, it was just the notion that revisitation is part of love. Like, we love songs. Often we go back and listen and listen and listen. And those re-listenings give us different portals of entry into us, into the song-maker, into all kind of stuff. And also, to revise in love, you have to listen to people outside of yourself. *You have to listen to other visions of yourself. You have to mind other people's visions of who you are to them.*¹³

What I take away from this idea of revision as love, revision as revisiting yourself over and over from different angles and perspectives and being reflected back from how other people see you, is that we need to constantly view and work on our kaleidoscope of identities to be able to understand who we are in the work we do. Find someone who can help you see something in you that you may not yet see yourself. Believe in your particular perspective and identities as a contribution in your work. We will always be a work in progress. Our multiple identities and the way they configure will always be a work in progress.¹⁴

13 <https://lithub.com/kiese-laymon-on-revision-as-love-and-love-as-revision/>, italics are mine to highlight how we need other people to show possibilities of ourselves. Kiese Laymon is a 2022 McArthur Fellow. Here is a thoughtful two-minute video where he talks about why the practice of revision (not being afraid to look back and grapple with what we have done to be able to do our best) is so important for life: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcCZwLr9DwA

14 This phrase “A work in progress” sticks in my head because it is the title of a middle school children’s book about a boy who struggles with body issues, finally accepting who he is and finding his self-worth. Jarrett Lerner is the author of that book, a very talented children’s book author who happens to be the son of my graduate school advisor Jacqueline Lerner.

Final Thoughts

In this chapter I talked about how the content, contexts, and configurations of our identities invite areas for reflection. Here are six things I hope you take away from this chapter:

1. Know that your ethnic-racialized identities reflect unique perspectives and experiences that strengthen your work.
2. Find people you trust. They may be in spaces beyond your department or organization.
3. Find non-academic mentors whose life (and not just work) you admire.
4. Create space for allowing slow, plodding thought.
5. Remember that writing and revision can be acts of resistance and love.
6. Remember that we are always works in progress.

You chose this book because you are on your way to a career in mental health and may be seeking out some inspiration for this path. Know that there are people out there who care about you, who share similar experiences, who know what it is like to question ourselves along this pathway. Find strength in this community. I wish you well.

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