

Reflections by Jessica ChenFeng PhD LMFT

On AFTA Keynote 2019 Vikki Reynolds PhD RCC

Justice-Doing with each other: Doing Dignity and respect amidst the darkness of our work

There are many ways that I can engage with Vikki's presentation, but what I have decided upon is to speak from my own personal experience, particularly that of being an East Asian American woman – specifically, Taiwanese American – and as it relates to my history of feeling invisible, dismissed, unknown, and alone in family therapy justice-seeking communities.

What impacted me the most about Vikki's presentation was her posture and presence. As someone socialized in high-context cultures (greater emphasis on contextual variables/non-verbal communication), much of my reality is about what is felt. Vikki's posture during the keynote left me feeling disarmed, shocked, relieved, and seen.

I was disarmed because she centered marginalized voices by citing their work and their experiences and did not assume a position of being the knowledge-holder. She attributed her wealth of knowledge to those who are typically on the periphery and invisible to our academic spaces. In sensing her posture of humility, it left me thinking "I could maybe be real with her and I might not have to hide." The opposite is more often true for me: encounters where the other presents with a dominating certainty, assuredness, and a confidence that leaves me feeling like I need to be in agreement and deferent. There is something about being seen as the Asian American model minority (and a smaller-sized woman) that is exhausting. The posture expected of me is to be compliant, agreeable, likeable, and that I don't take up space. These daily expectations leave me with my guard up – the pressure to maintain such an image for my own sake and the sake of those who others think look like me.

I also felt shocked in listening to Vikki speak. Shocked because it was my first time hearing a white person call themselves a white settler. Her willingness to go there – the capacity for this type of critical consciousness – left me thinking "perhaps she could understand the complexity of my challenges with *honorary whiteness* and *forever foreigner* statuses." There is much privilege I hold with my education, U.S. citizenship, being cisgender and heterosexual, and with my light-colored skin. For these and many other reasons, there is a misunderstanding of Asian Americans as being close to whiteness. The pitting of Asian Americans against other people of color by saying you're the "model" minority and you're the closest to being white, leaves us – leaves me – feeling invisible and alone, especially when I want to engage around justice issues. It is rare for me to meet a non-Asian person who knows much about the history of Asians in America, and the way racialization and xenophobia impacts me and those who look like me. I only met Vikki for the first time after her presentation and though I do not know if she understands this part of my Asian American identity and experience, her posture gave me the hope that perhaps this could be possible.

Vikki's presentation also left me feeling relieved and seen. Her posture of admitting possible transgression and inviting dialogue seemed like another indicator of the possibility of connection. Her welcoming of being discomfited let me know that I don't have to worry about saving her face or about protecting her from feeling shame. As someone socialized in more hierarchical cultural contexts (which I value and find to be a gift), children internalize the social norm that we try to minimize the experience of shame in our families, and of others, especially those that are our elders, out of respect and honor for them. As a Taiwanese American woman in America, this translates into not wanting to offend or embarrass white people, especially older white people. All of it to say, when Vikki, someone who represents a white elder to me, lets me know that she's okay with discomfort, she's okay with admitting her transgressions, I am relieved from having to save her face which is another way of me trying to honor her.

Now having shared all of this, I am aware of my own challenges with critiquing the presentation of a white person. Part of this is because Vikki and I have yet to develop a working relationship. What I know is that with her, there is the capacity for *sociocultural relational connection* (Stone & ChenFeng, 2019) and if we continue to work together, I will continue to be sensitive to her posture and presence and how it impacts my inclination toward authenticity or guardedness. My entire upbringing and socialization makes it challenging for me to point out any concern or issue that I would have with her, so the way she invites dialogue, invites critique, invites the addressing of transgression, is necessary in order for me to feel as though I could keep journeying with her.

It is difficult for me to imagine the contextual variables changing because I view and experience Vikki as belonging and though I was born in the states, I am the foreigner. She is heard and seen, and I am invisible and dismissed. The justice work she cares about and strives toward is commendable, and the work I do within my own community is quiet, unseen, and hardly understood. And so it violates everything about who I am, the cultural values I uphold, and the racialized expectations put upon me, to voluntarily offer her critique. Writing this reflection in itself is a way for me to combat for a moment, the complex ways the racialization of Asian Americans silences me, and it feels good to speak and hope to be heard.

Stone, D and ChenFeng, J (2019). *Finding Your Voice as a Beginning Marriage and Family Therapist*. NewYork: Routledge.