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Reflections on the Education Doctorate:

A Traditionally Untraditional Journey

LeAnn Fong-Batkin
University of California, Davis
lfongbatkin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In this reflective essay, I explore learnings and reflections along my doctoral journey and analyze how this journey has been untraditional for an education administrator. As a scholar-practitioner, I include a section on the impact of societal changes since the COVID-19 pandemic. I then document continuing challenges for women of color administrators and refine imposter syndrome theory in my own way. Finally, I offer some thoughts about how to move forward.

KEYWORDS

doctoral program, Imposter Syndrome, women of color, leadership, peer-led mentoring

BEGINNING THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY

At the start of my doctorate in educational leadership (EdD) program over a decade ago, I had no idea what I would learn. I knew that I received admission to a great program from which I would learn many things and expand my network. However, I did not anticipate the depth and breadth of what my learnings would be, both during and after my program and the effect that those learnings have on me as a woman of color. Seeing my dissertation come into existence was quite an experience. I knew that one of the things I wanted to do was to help the future generations behind me since mentoring and networking are necessary for women of color leaders and administrators.

Working full-time while working on an EdD is admittedly one of the hardest things I did, along with changing employers during the doctoral program. When I began the program, I also had the familial responsibilities of parenting two preschool-aged children (who are now in college) and becoming part of the sandwich generation as my mother developed Alzheimer's disease. The sandwich generation is defined as "those who provide care to both their children and elders at the same time" (Turgeman-Lupo et al., 2020, p. 862). Many colleagues told me "I don't know how you do it all." I could not have done it all without the support of my husband, family, and friends. Many of us in my cohort were managing multiple responsibilities—but we were there for each other. Our cohort became a second family and source of support to me.

As I entered the dissertation phase, my advisor, a woman of color, was another amazing source of support to me, providing mentorship and talking through our experiences as women of color. She was one of the few faculty of color for the program at the time and provided resources and connections to others – one of whom also became my mentor.

CHALLENGES IN MY TRADITIONALLY UNTRADITIONAL CAREER JOURNEY

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work for a variety of education-related organizations, including state agencies, research and nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education. I have been lucky enough to meet many of my mentors throughout my career who have supported me through this journey. Over the years, I have worked to become a subject matter expert in several topics, including diversity, equity, and inclusion, legislative and statutory language, longitudinal data system development, and education and higher education policy, among others. I am fortunate to be mentored by many colleagues and administrators, encouraging me to "step outside the box" and have enjoyed networking, mentoring, and connecting people in my networks.

As my career progressed through the year, I noticed that not only being a woman—but being a woman of color administrator and leaders has its challenges. I have personally seen and experienced racism, sexism, and bullying behavior in the workplace, along with microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (people of color, women of color, or Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender)" (p. 24). My own experiences include facilitating a group and being intimidated by one of my group's members. I have been admonished by someone at the same level for doing something that they thought was wrong. In another experience, I was unprofessionally challenged by another person in front of others during a meeting. The stories that my dissertation interviewees shared with me were becoming true right in front of me as a part of my own experiences.

After these incidents, I contacted my mentors and asked for advice. My mentors told me that I was not alone and shared their own personal stories. In certain cases, the pieces of advice I

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received were to confront the individual, consider filing a formal complaint, and/or to leave the organization. Don't get me wrong—the advice provided was correct, but also anxiety-producing. Mix these issues with the challenges of being a member of the sandwich generation and caring for my family, and it could have been a recipe for disaster. I still feel the traumatic effects of racism, sexism, and bullying, but I am slowly working through these issues.

It took me a long time to recover from each of these events – and while I'm better at dealing with these issues, the anxiety still exists. Each of these encounters led me to question myself. What am I doing here (at this organization)? Do I belong? What did I do wrong? Basically, I was blaming myself for the actions of others, which is wrong.

In one instance, I remember debating whether to add "Dr." to my name tag. I contacted a colleague who has been my mentor for decades and asked her. She said yes – it provides a degree of standing, especially for academia. Why was I questioning adding my earned doctorate to my name tag? It was not until later in my career that I identified the imposter syndrome as a theory that was playing out in my life.

While working on this article, I came to another realization – as a third-generation Chinese American (my grandparents immigrated to the United States, and both of my parents were also born in the United States) – I felt like I do not totally belong to either the Western (American) culture or the Chinese culture. Although I was born and raised in California, I do not look like my husband who is Caucasian and still do not understand idioms that well because my parents did not use them. I understand some cultural references, but they are also limited since I had limited exposure to them.

For the Chinese culture, I look Chinese, but do not speak Chinese. At Chinese restaurants, the hostess would ask me questions in Chinese, and I would have to tell them I do not speak Chinese (I am "American Born Chinese"). My parents spoke two different dialects of Chinese and they decided it would be too hard to teach us to speak Chinese. I am truly Chinese American—but never fitting into either culture could have been the start of when I noticed *my version* of the imposter syndrome.

Zhong (2023) examined the idea of Bhabha's Third Space Theory that analyzes the gap between cultures in the context of the show *American Born Chinese*. Zhong (2023) mentioned the tension between native culture and American mainstream culture in the main character, who is Chinese American and struggles to fit in with his peers while dealing with a friend who is a Chinese exchange student.

> By proactively finding his own balance between native culture and American mainstream culture and seizing the right to interpret his identity, Wang Jin can successfully break free from the "othering" gaze of American mainstream society and find the unique identity of a Chinese American. (Zhong, 2023, p. 41)

This article provided me with some potential theoretical explanations of how the imposter syndrome may have started early in my life. Zhong's article highlighted that I have a right to interpret my identity in my own way.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL CHANGES

My doctoral program trained me to be a scholar-practitioner. I know how to analyze and see how theory plays out in our lives, but also know that society plays a large role in how women of color move through their careers. No one could have predicted the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on our lives, families, and careers. The amount of trauma our society experienced together heightened many challenges. The effects of the global pandemic have also intensified the pressures of work and home, increasing the levels of stress, especially for women in higher education who had already been juggling the conflicting demands of work and home pre-pandemic (Johnson et al., 2023).

In addition to the theories discussed in my dissertation, I now needed to add anti-Asian hate in society and culture, due to the speculation about the origins of the pandemic. Zhang et al. (2023) identified the anti-Asian sentiments as a "global phenomenon" during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of my colleagues, whose parents own a Chinese restaurant, had bricks thrown at it that broke their windows. Another colleague's mother, who is Asian, was told to "go back to your country" as she rode the train to work. She refused to ever take the train again.

Anti-Asian sentiments are not new and Asian Americans have dealt with xenophobic prejudice, bias, and discrimination (McGariety-Palmer et al., 2023; Takaki, 1989). Racism in today's world has been felt by many of us. It is disconcerting and can take a toll on your mental health—especially when it happens again and again.

People of color, especially women of color and Asian Americans have been, and continue to be under much scrutiny. There have been attacks on the ideas of Critical Race Theory (CRT), one of the theories used in my dissertation that acknowledges the complexity of the multiple identities held by people of color (Solorzano, et al., 2000). Hutchens and Miller (2023) pointed out that in multiple states, legislation has been proposed or enacted to suppress ideas related to CRT that can be traced by to Donald Trump's presidential administration, although Joseph Biden rescinded those when he was elected. The attacks on CRT made me angry because it acknowledges the multiple identities that people of color carry. Making CRT the "fictional boogeyman" that the media, certain pundits, and elected officials used to pass anti-CRT legislation negates the experiences of people of color (Hutchens & Miller, 2023, p. 5).

Since the pandemic, racism has become more overt than covert, the opposite of my findings from my dissertation. Over a decade ago, the racism and sexism that my interviewees experienced were more covert and occurred through microaggressions. How do women of color leaders address this racism and sexism and that is now more overt? One potential answer lies in the mentoring and support that women of color need in their careers. For example, what happens when a high-level administrator above your position makes a comment against you, such as "you are so well-spoken for an Asian woman?" Do you confront that individual in front of others or not? Often, we are so surprised by microaggressions that it's hard to respond in that moment. I often asked my mentors for tips on how to respond to these situations, and in each case, the answer depended on whom the person was and if this was the first time that things like this happened.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN OF COLOR ADMINISTRATORS

My dissertation, *Traditionally Untraditional* (2011) captured some of these challenges. Through my qualitative study of 13 women of color administrators, I learned that my participants

encountered racism, sexism, and cultural differences that affected their career journeys. Applying the theoretical framework of the intersectionality of gender and racialization allowed me to deeply analyze the career trajectories of these women of color – many of whom were the first in their families to attend college and become administrators. Without support systems, such as mentoring and networking, the participants would not have been able to move through their untraditional career paths successfully. My dissertation defines "untraditional" paths as those that do not follow the typical trajectory of someone becoming a faculty member, department chair, dean, vice president, and president. Several of my interviewees worked outside of academia before they joined the academy.

I use my own experience – is my own path untraditional? Yes, because I am an education administrator, but not in a university setting. I do not have a background in teaching. However, my career has always focused on education – whether it was working for a computer training center, state agencies, academia, or nonprofit organizations.

There are numerous reasons why many women of color may have untraditional career paths – especially in education and higher education. Turner (2007) found that the pathways to the presidency for college and university presidents are "narrow for women of color" (p. 3) and identified barriers – not only for women of color faculty – but also those in senior-level administrative positions that include not being considered for administrative positions, having their scholarship devalued and ignored, and being torn between family, community, and career responsibilities. For example, one of the women of color I interviewed for my dissertation turned down a promotion because her family asked her not to work out of town, far from where their family was located (Fong-Batkin, 2011).

Many women of color struggle with being in academia. Turner (2023) described the idea that faculty of color may feel that they are guests in someone else's house. "In fact, being a guest contributes to feelings of exclusion and isolation which can create a toxic environment" (Turner, 2023, p. 1229). One of my interviewees started her career during the time when affirmative action was being enforced in California. Affirmative action allowed one's race and gender to be considered in the hiring process in certain circumstances (Fong-Batkin, 2011). She felt that she had a target on her back and her colleagues would not talk to her because they thought that she got the position because of the color of her skin and would not speak to her (Fong-Batkin, 2011).

Turner (2021), in her review of *Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power and Resistance of Women in Academia*, noted, "Their narratives emphasize while one may be intelligent, resilient, and motivated, individual characteristics are not enough to counter the effects of unwelcoming and toxic work environments" (para.15). Throughout my career, I have seen and experienced unwelcoming and toxic work environments. In most cases, I decided to leave these organizations because I placed my mental health first.

One interviewee, who was a college president, attended many events where her qualifications were repeatedly questioned. "Are you really supposed to be here? That's the way it felt…But by the time you answer that for like the fifth or sixth or the tenth person at a public event, you just want to go up and say, 'Excuse me, I want to take the microphone and tell everybody all at one time what I did to become the president of the college" (Fong-Batkin, 2011, p. 139). This was not the only time this situation was brought up during my interviews. To this day, other women of color administrators told me that they have had to justify their knowledge and the positions that they held and have chosen to use longer versions of their biographies in conference proposals, presentations, and even in salary negotiations.

Many of us are still reeling from the suicide of Antoinette Candia-Bailey, the African American vice president of student affairs at Lincoln University. Weissman (2024) noted in her article that many academics see Candia-Bailey's passing as symbolic to their own challenges, such as racism and sexism Candia-Bailey's passing occurred after the resignation of Claudine Gay, Harvard's first Black woman president, who resigned after a hearing on campus antisemitism that was then followed by allegations of plagiarism (Weissman, 2024,). These challenges for women of color in academia can be damaging not only to one's mental health, but in Candia-Bailey's case, her existence.

Where is the hope for future women of color administrators? One of my interviewees spoke about the pressure that she faced as a college president. "And I also realize that there is a whole group of women that are walking in with me. And if I fail in some ways, then I jeopardize their chances" (Fong-Batkin, 2011, p. 133). Despite these challenges, the women that I interviewed spoke about their mentors and networks that have supported them throughout their careers. In my own experience, I know that I could not have gotten through my career without my mentors.

REDEFINING THEORY MY WAY

Given the theories I have mentioned in this paper that include Critical Race theory, imposter syndrome, anti-Asian hate, and others noted in my dissertation, I put my scholar-practitioner hat on to help me process the multiple traumas that I have faced during my career. As I was preparing to write this reflective essay, I saw this quote in the *Chief in Brief* newsletter and came to a full halt. "I don't do imposter syndrome and none of us should," said Sally Krawcheck, a former Merrill Lynch CEO (Connley, 2023, para 2). Krawcheck noted that she attended college and went straight to the Wall Street and was with the best, but that they were not much smarter than she is (Connley, 2023). This quote made me spin around, like someone had hit me with a punching bag. Here was a quote from a white, upper-class woman. How can she argue that no one should "do" the imposter syndrome?

I started to compare Krawchek's experience to my own. She was a Merrill Lynch CEO and here I am, with a doctorate in education leadership and policy, and almost 30 years' experience in education and higher education and this quote is making me question my own qualifications. Is the imposter syndrome that began as a child when I noticed my two intersecting identities (being Chinese American) continuing in my career? I needed to unpack this and dove into the literature on the imposter syndrome.

Ambri et al. (2018) covered the imposter syndrome, the glass ceiling, and other issues that affect women's career progression and success. Ambri et al. (2018) noted that the imposter syndrome causes women to undervalue their contributions and feel like a fraud where they consistently underestimate themselves. This article finally put a name to what I was feeling—underestimating myself. Every time women of color experience the thousand paper cuts (Mason & Goulden, 2002) due to microaggressions, racism, sexism, and other issues, these paper cuts chip through your mental health and can cause you to underestimate yourself.

Edwards (2019) explained how she overcame the imposter syndrome by reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar herself. “I now define scholar as someone who consistently strives to learn while concurrently educating others … Ultimately, scholars decide what success and failure looks like for them” (Edwards, 2019, p. 31). I took this to heart and am redefining what imposter syndrome means for myself. Before I knew about the imposter syndrome, I thought it was me that was the problem. I *finally* have a name for many of the challenges I have faced in my career. When you finally reach that top position and become an administrator, you think you’ve made it. However, certain experiences, such as racism, microaggressions, being treated unprofessionally and unequally, and being continually questioned, chipped away at the career and my self-esteem. It’s *not* me. It’s the society and environments that we live and work in. I now categorize these challenges not only as racism but define these as the imposter syndrome for me.

MOVING FORWARD

When I contribute to academic literature, I always want to leave practical tips behind. The recommendations for institutions from my dissertation, including offering mentoring and networking programs, still hold true. For EdD programs, creating communities and networks so that faculty and students do not feel like guests in the academic house (Turner, 2021) can help. These networks can consist of alumni who can be invited as guest speakers and mentors. I feel that it is important that EdD program curricula also cover the issues of Critical Race Theory and the imposter syndrome.

For women of color leaders and administrators, acknowledge the experiences you have, reaching out to your mentors and support networks to decide upon further actions when you experience racism, sexism, and other issues.

CONCLUSION

At the time of writing this reflective essay, my dissertation is almost 15 years old. I have experienced many personal and professional challenges—and possess the knowledge that I am still recovering from racism, sexism, and imposter syndrome (as I define it). My identities have evolved as I have gotten older, and my children are college-aged. My mother’s Alzheimer’s disease continues to decline. I am still a part of the sandwich generation. But now that I have reconceptualized the imposter syndrome for myself, this has provided a sense of relief for me. I have moved onto a different space, acknowledged past issues, and am still processing things. We need to give ourselves and others grace and patience when things do not go the way we want. Trust your mentors and support networks to help you when things get tough. More often than not, your mentors and colleagues have experienced similar issues and can share their experiences with you.

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