

LOOKING UP: A SHORT WOMAN'S VIEW OF A HEIGHTIST SOCIETY

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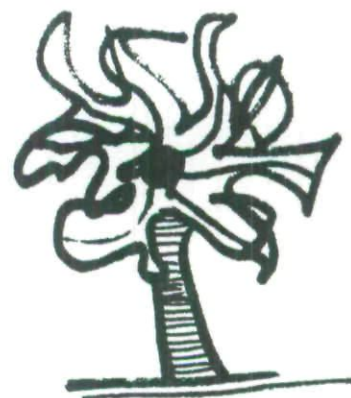
This narrative describes an MSW student's experiences with heightism as an Asian American female in the social work arena. While at some point in their educational career social workers are made aware of discrimination as it pertains to age, gender, class, race, religion, disability, and sexual orientation, awareness is not present about discrimination as it pertains specifically to height. The exploration of heightism in the social work field catalyzes the narrator to reflect on her past experiences with discrimination, her realization of the ways heightism continues to be largely ignored, and her reasons for entering the profession. The oppressive mechanism of silencing target populations is explored as it pertains to height discrimination, as well as the intersection of heightism and racial discrimination towards Asian American.

I am Asian American. I am female. I stand four feet eight inches. The preceding three sentences are the main reasons why I am now a social work student. As a minority with these social identities, I have been allowed the privilege to experience discrimination first hand. I use the word privilege and discrimination together because without my experiences of oppression, I may not have had the opportunity to develop the amount of compassion for underserved populations that would eventually lead me to the social work profession. As an Asian American female of short stature, I have come to expect discrimination on a variety of levels. I have become accustomed to stereotypes that are propagated through media and reinforced by the dominant culture. But as a social work student, I always expected that the political awareness and cultural sensitivity that was so emphasized by the profession would somehow magically eliminate these stereotypes from the classroom arena. What I came to find was that although there was a strong presence of cultural awareness at the racial and gender levels, there was a huge absence of sensitivity toward physical difference, particularly in terms of height. Although I have experienced the effects of gender oppression, for the purposes of this

narrative I will focus on the intersection of heightism and racial discrimination as an Asian American.

On September 17, 2004, during a direct intervention class in my MSW program, the professor made a comment that reinforced heightism as a prevalent yet widely unrecognized form of discrimination. In discussing the composition of groups for the purposes of group therapy, she stated that there were individual characteristics that did not matter in the structural design of groups, such as height. She went on to state that it would not affect a group if you had three short people and one tall person, adding with a smile and in a joking tone "unless it's a group of midgets; that would be different." The comment took me off guard, not because I had never heard anything like that said, but because it was so unexpected considering the context.

Sitting in a social work classroom, a safe environment where there was always a conscious awareness of prejudiced views, it further upset me that the use of the derogatory comment "midget" was coming from a professor with a Ph.D. who had always emphasized diversity and was very conscious about multicultural issues. Although the comment immediately sparked emotion in me,



I did not speak up. I first looked around the room to see the reactions of other students. Their lack of reaction temporarily immobilized me from saying anything at the moment. I felt that my feelings were unjustified because I was the only one affected by the comment. It was a familiar and lonely feeling. I remember clearly feeling embarrassed to speak up, while simultaneously feeling frustration knowing that I should.

Where did this embarrassment come from? Was I afraid that my speaking up would associate me with a dwarf? Did I hold the same prejudicial views directed towards dwarfs and people of short stature? Was I afraid that my past experiences with the trivialization of heightism would resurface? I was not able to deal with trivialization at that moment. The lack of recognition of heightism as an active form of discrimination prevented me at that moment from contesting the comment. Looking back, I know that if the comment had been directed toward a racial identity group, I would have spoken up immediately. Cultural acceptability had largely affected my empowerment to speak up against prejudice and discrimination. For the remainder of the first half of class, I remained silent, tuned out to what the professor was teaching, and immediately began to recall one of my most pivotal experiences with heightism as a working professional.

A former high school Spanish teacher, I vividly remembered the anxiety I experienced during my first year evaluation. After an intense hour-long observation by the assistant principal of curriculum, I entered his office expecting to receive a balance of praise and constructive criticism. Instead, I received a detailed evaluation summary in which only one comment stood out: "Youth and size make classroom management a challenge." Although I had felt that my job performance was often judged in relation to my height, this was the first example where that theory was clearly and straightforwardly supported. The

assistant principal's comment not only demonstrated a heightist viewpoint, but an ageist one as well. Although the assistant principal was later reprimanded for the discriminatory comment, it was reinforcement that certain forms of discrimination are more acceptable than others. If the assistant principal had put, for example, "Race and gender make classroom management a challenge," I am sure much harsher measures would have been taken against him. Although I received support from co-workers who condemned the assistant principal's comment, they identified it as an isolated incident unrelated to a larger discriminatory system, because they themselves had never experienced heightism, they did not recognize its prevalence, nor did they realize that the comment was a representation of a cultural value that associates height with competence.

My feeling of loneliness after experiencing this discrimination was compounded by the fact that there was no shared "height culture" within my work environment. As an Asian American in a predominantly Asian suburb, I was part of a majority. As a woman, I felt the strong bonds of sisterhood among my friends, classmates, and co-workers. As a member of both identity groups, there was a shared culture, a sense of similarity, and a sense of safety in numbers. I knew that there were those who were continuing to fight for our cause, continually bringing awareness to the injustices of society. But as a short person, who was my spokesperson? I had no one near me who could understand what I was experiencing. Those to whom I mentioned my feelings dismissed them as trivial, while others thought it cute and amusing.

This is when I soon became familiar with what I later understood to be a hierarchy of oppression. Whereas oppression is culturally legitimized inequality as a result of systematically enforced discrimination practices through the use of social, political, or economic power, hierarchy is a system of

oppression between at least two strata: the privileged and the oppressed (McDonald & Coleman, 1999). Within a complex hierarchy, a multitude of social roles and identities exist that create varying degrees of socio-economic inequality (McDonald & Coleman, 1999). As a teacher in a multiethnic community, I found a continuous emphasis on cultural sensitivity as it applied to race and ethnicity. Our staff focused a great deal on multicultural awareness, yet we failed to address social identities beyond race. As an ethnic minority, I would have felt justified in bringing forth any racial discrimination issues. Yet, as a short person, I did not feel the same. I felt not only that racial discrimination took precedence over other forms of discrimination, but that non-racial discrimination was largely ignored. Although this experience was the catalyst that led me to reexamine my professional role as an educator, as well as the reasons for entering the teaching profession, it also served to bring to the surface many of my past painful moments with discrimination.

I stopped growing by the 6th grade. I remember the day I found out that I would remain the height I was for the rest of my life. I went to the doctor with my mom for a routine physical. After the nurse weighed and measured me, we waited in the examining room for the doctor. As the doctor entered, reviewing my charts, she specifically focused on the growth history. As she looked up with a saddened expression, she stated that I had probably stopped growing. Partly because of the doctor's grave look, and partly because I had already internalized heightist ideologies, I looked at my mom and began to cry. My mom became tearful too, not because she had hoped for a tall daughter, but more because she knew the pain I was feeling and anticipated the hardships I would face as an adult of four feet eight inches. The doctor said that Growth Hormone (GH) would no longer be an option because I had already passed the time frame in which it could be administered. I now know

that the idea of administering GH to a healthy child is extremely controversial. It represents the dominant culture's view that short is not okay. The strong reactions of both my mom and my doctor reinforced that dominant culture's perception of height. But at that moment, I did not recognize that. I only recognized their sad reactions and the doctor's final comment, "I'm sorry. It's too late." I was devastated because, to me, and apparently to the doctor, the GH was my only solution: a magic potion that would make me normal and acceptable.

I now see the harm that the situation caused. The doctor never told me I would be fine the way I was. She immediately began to discuss medical solutions. The moment the doctor told me I missed the opportunity to take the GH, I felt sad for a "missed opportunity." But now I know that it would not have helped. For one, I would always be a short person culturally because I experienced first hand the ways in which height differences can change people's treatment of others. Second, I would feel in a way that I was a "sell out" for changing a part of me that I was born with, similar to changing my ethnicity. Third, if people were to make heightist comments to me, even if GH made me taller, I would still be affected knowing that that is who I am naturally. The issue then is not that I was short, but rather that I was seen as "different."

I eventually came to accept that I would no longer grow to be five feet two inches, the original height prediction of my pediatrician. I eventually graduated from elementary school and completed high school, luckily feeling minimal psychological effects of my short stature. Because I grew up in a predominantly Asian suburb, my high school friends did not tower over me as I would later experience in other arenas of my life. My height at the time was not a focus of much outside attention. I was able to maintain a feeling of normalcy.

It was not until I entered college that I began to really take notice of my height and its psychological impact. Although there was a lot of diversity at the university, I was no longer an ethnic majority. Mixing with other ethnicities, height distinctions became more apparent. I began to experience how my height would catalyze head-patting and other condescending behavior. I consistently felt that I was not being taken seriously. Soon I began to feel like a young child in an adult world where I constantly had to look up.

It was during college that I also began to realize the subtleties of heightism in everyday comments and the unintentional insensitivity that people had in regards to short stature. Now much more part of the dating and social scene that came with being in my late teens, I heard many of my friends comment on how they would not go out with a guy if he was "too short." When they would describe their ideal man, "tall" would always be a characteristic. One of the first questions girls would often ask about dating prospects was, "How tall is he?" The mainstream American belief that attractive men are "tall, dark, and handsome" is continually reinforced through media representations and casual dialog. Therefore, to be outside of that ideal has the potential to create a sense of inadequacy in men who do not surpass the national average height. Height standards for women were never expressed as being quite as crucial as for men, although in the fashion and entertainment world there largely existed a glamorization of tall women that linked height with beauty. Regardless, I absorbed any heightist remark as deeply personal. After all, I came from a family of short stature, with a father and a brother both under five feet four inches. Comments directed toward short men as unappealing and inadequate were indirectly aimed at my family members.

Not only was I aware of heightism as it affected males in the dating scene, but the ways in which it was linked strongly to the

stereotype of the Asian American male. As an Asian American female, I would remember feeling a lot of resentment towards my Asian female friends who claimed proudly, "I only date White men because Asian men are too short." What creates this sense of aversion to males of our own race? Is it because so many of us buy into the media representations of the feminization of the Asian male? The concept of orientalism creates a contrasting image of the Eastern and Western worlds. Within the dominant Western culture, Europeans and European Americans usually represent conquest, power, and masculinity, while Asians, both male and female, represent femininity and subservience. The feminization of the Asian male is not a stereotype directed solely toward Asian males, but Asian American males as well (Parikh, 2002). It is another form of psychological colonization that justifies and perpetuates the dominant culture's value system.

A hallmark of my college experience was turning 21. It was the beginning of my experience with the club and bar scene. Although I felt excited about moving more into the "adult world," it also created anxiety in terms of representing myself as an adult. For the first time, I felt that I was often looked at in a way that suggested, "Do you belong?" Walking into clubs or bars, there were handfuls of incidents where men would look at me and smirk, sometimes gesturing to their friends how small I was. I remember a laughing comment made to me by a club bouncer as he checked our I.D.s: "Where's the rest of you?" Feeling hurt and embarrassed, I just laughed it off, knowing that to him height was probably not a big deal.

I do not know when the transition took place, but I eventually noticed that my self-consciousness regarding my height guided what I wore. Throughout high school and even through part of college, I felt free to wear any type of shoe I wanted, regardless of the heel. By my senior year in college, due to my



growing awareness of heightism, I began wearing only shoes that increased my height by at least a few inches. The tallest pair of black boots that I had, which I still have and wear to this day, helped me feel more secure when entering new social arenas where I would meet people for the first time.

I remember one situation where someone commented to me: "Wow, you're short," immediately followed by another person interjecting, "How sad, don't say that." At that moment I felt anger, created not by the initial comment, but by the feeble attempt to somehow "protect" me from the reality of my stature. It was a judgment on what it meant to be short, that it was something shameful; something that should not be discussed, something taboo. What we associate with "good" and "bad" are often cultural perceptions created by influences of the dominant culture, media, and established norms. Because these dominant cultural perceptions are so skillfully perpetuated, we often accept our own position within created societal hierarchies as given truths.

After graduating from college, I was apprehensive about entering the real world. Increasingly, the more exposed I was to the world outside of my home suburb, the more like a child I felt. A short time after graduation, three friends and I celebrated with a week long trip to Hawaii. On our flight there, we struck up a conversation with a flight attendant who talked to us about her job and suggested that we consider a career with the airline. I was completely discouraged when I heard that one of the job requirements was height of at least five feet two inches. I found it difficult to discover that, due to my short stature, there were certain professions that I would never have the opportunity to experience. Regardless of the justifications for the height requirement, it reminded me that I was not part of the majority, further stripping me of normalcy.

Heightism as a Social Worker

As a social work intern in my current agency, I remember the first day that I met my fellow social work student interns. Before the end of the day, we were all having a discussion about my height, something with which I am familiar. After expressing shock that I was 28 years old, they asked me how tall I was. Before I could tell them, one of the interns guessed as she laughed condescendingly, "Four feet five?" After their fascination dwindled, the day continued as normal. Inside, I felt increasingly silenced and misunderstood.

Because the fax machine at my internship is located above my sight range, I use a stepstool to see the numbers. One of the support staff members laughs hysterically whenever she sees me on the stool. At one point, two of the support staff told me endearingly that I was the agency's "official child" because I was so small. At the time I did not take offense because I knew they meant no harm, but I do feel sad that it is representative of how the larger society places such an emphasis on height. It is a physical attribute or characteristic that can easily and safely be made fun of without worrying about political correctness.

For a recent class assignment, I had an interview with the agency director, who is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW). She explained to me how she arrived at the position she currently holds by telling me the story of the first job she turned down. The program director who interviewed her was a tall, mysterious lady whose office was like a dungeon and who had a dwarf as an assistant. She later explained that the situation was too "bizarre" for her. I wondered where the "bizarre" part came from. Had the program director not had a dwarf for an assistant, would her room still be described as a dungeon? Or was the tall, mysterious lady the one who gave the bizarre impression? Maybe it was my heightened awareness of the

stereotypes of dwarfs that led me to believe that her reference to the scene's "bizarre" quality was due to the dwarf. Because I was too embarrassed to ask, I will never know the answer to those questions. But what I discovered was that my personal experience with heightism has created in me a sense of heightened awareness and suspicion of any comments that may appear to attack the very core of my sensitivity.

Heightism and the Media

As the dominant view of normalcy is largely shaped by television, movie, print, and radio representations, the media have contributed to my negative self-perceptions and experiences as a short woman. What I have seen in media is that height is connected with elite ranking, from entertainers to politicians to royalty. There is a sense of competency and attractiveness that is associated with being tall, and a sense of ineptness associated with being short. From television shows to commercials to movies, people of short stature are often depicted as less sexy, less competent, less intelligent, and more childlike. Characters of short stature are usually used as comic relief. Usually the counterpart of a taller more handsomely depicted main character, the shorter character is the brunt of all jokes, often centering around height.

One of my favorite shows growing up was *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Will Smith's character, Will, was the funny, charming, and most importantly, tall main character of this sitcom. His male counterpart, cousin Carlton, who was much shorter than Will, was depicted as uptight, nerdy, and socially inept. He served as the comic relief, often taunted by Will over his short stature. He was always outwitted by the more clever Will and was often seen storming away in frustration. Supporting the dominant belief that short men are less appealing, he was usually rejected by women.

The movie *Twins*, starring Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger, tells the tale of fraternal twin brothers separated at birth. For comedic purposes, the film relies on the polar opposite qualities of the brothers. Arnold Schwarzenegger is portrayed as the "good" brother, possessing intelligence, strength, and physical attractiveness. Danny DeVito, on the other hand, is portrayed as incompetent, weak, and physically undesirable. One of the main physical differentiations of the two is height, as Arnold Schwarzenegger's character stands a foot taller than the character of Danny DeVito.

In a *Seinfeld* episode, George Costanza, the shortest of three main male characters, meets a woman whom he later begins to date. As George had met this woman when he was wearing a pair of shoes with a two-inch sole, the entire episode focuses on his efforts to continually wear those shoes at all future social occasions so as not to lose those extra inches. He soon has to figure out a way to wear the same shoes to a wedding to prevent his date from noticing the loss in height. The episode made light of the common pressure to live up to male height expectations.

Although height is used often as a way to create comedy in the entertainment industry, heightism is also seen through news media. The most recent example of this was seen in the 2004 Presidential Debates. According to the many news programs, certain regulations were to be enforced before both candidates would be willing to participate in the national debates. One of the main criterion for the incumbent, President George W. Bush, was that the televising of the debates would depict both candidates as equal in height. This way, no one candidate would appear taller than the other. President Bush felt that, due to John Kerry's obvious height "advantage," the debates would ultimately be unfair. Height as a criterion for competence and power was largely emphasized to the nation during the debates.

These types of media representations have had two effects on me. First, they have served as a constant reminder of the dominant perspective that tall is better. Second, they have served as examples for the ways men are discriminated against on the basis of height. Therefore, in voicing my personal experiences with heightism, individuals usually respond with, "I don't think height really matters for women. At least you're not a short man." While I wanted to fight height discrimination toward both men and women, I found it increasingly difficult to justify my own oppression in such a hierarchical context.

Silence

In looking at the levels of discrimination I faced having multiple identity roles, I began to recognize an underlying theme: the role of silence as an oppressive mechanism. As a fourth generation Japanese American, I possessed a good deal of guilt that came from knowing the sacrifices of my family, particularly the internment of all of my grandparents during World War II. A life-altering experience that would eventually last for more than two years, my grandparents, along with other Japanese and Japanese American citizens, mainly Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans), were transported like cattle to the Santa Anita Race Track Stables where they awaited their final transport to one of ten internment camp sites throughout the country. This dehumanization took away any remaining voice that they possessed, being minorities in a time and place when racial diversity was not embraced.

As the granddaughter of internees, I felt like I had more anger and resentment toward the United States and its government than those who actually experienced the internment. The internment was a piece of history that was hardly discussed openly by those who lived through it. Growing up, I felt that the entire generation dealt with their emotions in silence, ashamed of how they were

treated but also afraid to remember their own painful past. I only began to learn of the internment camps through my parents and small sections of U.S. textbooks. I first sat down and talked with my grandparents about their experience in 8th grade for a school report. I realize now that those were the only moments when they were able to articulate any feelings associated with the internment. Unless they were asked, they kept it to themselves. And hardly anyone ever asked. As I grew older, I became more interested in the experiences of my grandparents and other Japanese Americans of that generation. As I began to ask more questions, not only to my grandparents but to other Nisei, I began to see similar patterns of responses. I began to hear a familiar sense of sadness in their voices, though their words remained positive. They always emphasized that they were loyal and proud American citizens despite what had happened. I always felt that there was a communal need to prove their loyalty more so than other citizens. In proving their loyalty, they remained silent, valiantly accepting their country's decision to "protect" its citizens.

Knowing that my grandparents had been American-born citizens betrayed by the U.S. government contributed to my decreased sense of entitlement as an American as well as to my enormous respect for their courage and strength. To lose their homes, belongings, and lives as they once knew them, and to continue to work hard and provide for their family, was something that was difficult for me to conceptualize. How does one overcome such an injustice in silence, the way most of that generation had done? How does one not speak out after experiencing such hostility? How does one maintain a consistent positive outlook? Now, as an Asian American in an era of new perspectives, I look back at the racial discrimination they faced and find it difficult to understand how easily it was accepted. But I now understand that I live in different circumstances that allow me to have

more voice as an Asian American than they ever had. For one, I live in a much more culturally diverse population where racial diversity is praised. For another, I live in a city where I am an ethnic majority. Lastly, increased education of racial discrimination has set the path for access to multiple Asian American activist organizations that did not exist during the 1940s.

Looking at the contrasting Asian American experiences of myself and my grandparents, I now understand why their silence was so prevalent. As a person of short stature, I am not part of a majority. I am not part of a height-focused group culture. Not only do I feel isolated as a short person, but I also feel the lack of pride that I associate with being an Asian American that only recently emerged with increased education and advocacy on the part of activist groups. Due to the limited amount of education on heightism, I do not have access to resources that address my needs. How can I speak out against the discrimination I experience as a person of short stature when it is not largely recognized as a form of discrimination?

Just as my grandparents had silently accepted racial discrimination, I too find myself accepting heightism in silence. Part of this silence comes from my own shame and hesitance to acknowledge my difference. Often referred to as psychological colonization, this phenomenon socializes individuals to internalize their oppression and conspire with the dominant culture's ideology and social system (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Just as my grandparents have experienced psychological colonization as Asian Americans, I too have experienced it as a person of short stature.

Further internalizing my oppression were my feelings of guilt. My family's hardships and triumphs made it difficult to think that my own problems were of any huge significance. Comparing my personal experience of oppression to the experiences of others had

eventually led me to minimize and silence my feelings. Instead of recognizing that my feelings of oppression were valid, I only saw them as insignificant in comparison to the experiences of my grandparents. What I was experiencing was a type of internalized oppression, a phenomenon in which members of oppressed groups support the hierarchical structures that the dominant culture has established (McDonald & Coleman, 1999). In some forms, internalized oppression can result in members of one oppressed group competing with members of other oppressed groups to determine who is higher on the hierarchy of oppression (McDonald & Coleman, 1999).

My Search for a Shared Culture

The silence that I experienced was due in large part to dominant cultural views, but also created from a lack of shared culture. Just as I felt isolated during my first-year teaching experience, I felt a subtle isolation in terms of physical difference throughout most of my life that intensified in college and continues today. My need to integrate into a height-centered culture led me to my first encounter with an organization called the Little People of America (LPA). Although I had heard of the organization, I had never thought to attend a meeting. Firstly, it seemed inaccessible since I did not know anyone personally involved in the organization. Secondly, most of what I had known about LPA revolved around issues of dwarfism and dwarf culture, issues that I had little knowledge about. Besides having little knowledge of dwarf culture, I was also fearful of the stigma attached to being labeled a "little person" as I was as much affected by the dominant culture's negative view of dwarfs as the majority of the population.

The day I decided to attend an LPA meeting was the day I met Diane. A friend of a friend, Diane was a little person. After casual conversation, she suggested to me that I attend an LPA meeting. She informed me that LPA

was not restricted to dwarfs and that the only requirement was height under five feet.

Within a few months I attended my first meeting. Apprehensive and vulnerable, I went with my friend Val for support. Not knowing what to expect (but remaining somewhat hopeful that I would see a few people like me), I pulled into the parking lot. The first man I saw was a dwarf. Before long, I entered the meeting hall and realized that I was the only non-dwarf present. I learned later that there are approximately 200 types of dwarfism, the most common being achondroplasia, which is "characterized by an average-size trunk, short arms and legs, and a slightly enlarged head and prominent forehead" (LPA, 2005). The majority of the members at this meeting were achondroplastic dwarfs. As I scanned the room for any eye contact to initiate conversation, I became increasingly disappointed that, as a new member, I was not welcomed as warmly as I had anticipated. That egocentric viewpoint was soon replaced by the acknowledgement of the vast amount of discrimination they face on a daily basis. Whereas I experience heightism in subtle forms, they experience it blatantly every day. Just as I was curious about them, they too were curious about me. Eventually, I was able to meet and talk with some people. Although I felt some commonalities with the other members, I definitely felt I did not belong. I felt that they belonged to a culture that I did not share and that they experienced discrimination far more intense than the subtle height discrimination I faced.

After the meeting on our way home, Val informed me that one of the members asked her what "type" I was. At that moment, I felt a sense of panic run through my body. The reason I felt awkward at the meeting was because I did not identify with the dwarf culture. I had made a mental distinction separating "them" from "me," and although I felt out of place, I was secretly grateful that I

was not "them." As I stood taller than all the other members, I felt a sense of superiority that completely supported the socio-political heightist hegemony. Once I recognized this feeling of superiority, I immediately felt like a hypocrite. This served to only further complicate my attempt to attack and address heightism as a valid source of discrimination. How could I fight heightism when I, too, was a perpetuator of its ideology? Only now do I realize the extent to which psychological colonization and internalized oppression can disempower and create self-doubt. At the time my shameful thoughts emerged, I felt that I lost any type of credibility to be a spokesperson for the heightist cause. Looking back, I now realize that the internalized oppression operating within me created such insecurity so as to use the very same oppressive ideology to give me comfort and reassurance. By allowing myself to feel more "normal" than the other members, I demonstrated the impact of our dominant cultural values and how it defines normalcy.

Reasons for Entering the Social Work Field

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. (NASW, 2005)

My constant and continual experience with heightism, along with a lack of universal acknowledgement of its existence, had led me

to feel silenced and powerless. Just as my grandparents had experienced a lack of voice and power, I too had experienced my own oppression as a person of short stature. During my first year teaching, the discriminatory comment made by the assistant principal and the experience surrounding it opened my eyes to the fact that I truly felt silenced. I needed to regain my voice. But how was I to do that? One of my realizations occurred after attending LPA. During that first meeting, I began to recognize that heightism had varying levels of oppression, most of which had been continually ignored by the majority of the population. Until then, I had never seen first-hand such extreme levels of marginalization. I began to feel angry with the social injustice that had continued to go unaddressed. I eventually decided that I could use my passion for change to build and strengthen my voice, while helping others in the process. I understood oppression and discrimination and began to develop a strong desire to help others who were oppressed and lacked voice. I decided that furthering my education in a field that emphasized diversity would be the beginning of my path to acquire a voice that had never been given a fair chance to develop.

Conclusion

At the beginning of break, I approached the professor. By this time, after much reflection, the emotions had begun to appear at the surface. Tearful, frustrated, and misunderstood, while at the same time fearing that my feelings would be dismissed as trivial, I informed her of how the comment made earlier had affected me and how the use of "midget" was derogatory. The professor looked me in the eyes and said, "I'm so sorry." I was relieved that my emotions were not merely dismissed but still frustrated and disappointed that these prejudiced views were present, not only in society in general, but especially in the social work field.

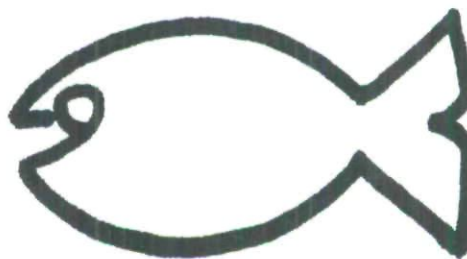
Looking back now, I realize that the expectations I had of my professor were unrealistic, as we are so affected by the dominant cultural perspective and norms. If we do not experience first hand, or we are not taught about specific forms of discrimination, how are we to understand that they exist? And even when we experience discrimination first hand, we often perpetuate the oppressive dominant ideology in the form of internalized oppression, just as I had done during my first LPA meeting. I understand that this rationalization acts as a double-edged sword, for it allows me forgiveness of hypocrisy of succumbing to the very dominant views I criticize, while simultaneously reinforcing my own silence by justifying individual comments as part of a larger cultural problem. But as members of an oppressed group, we must create our own personal ways of overcoming barriers and dealing with challenges within the oppressive context. For me, I will use this double-edged sword with caution, knowing that it may facilitate a loss in voice only if I allow it. But due to its existence, I must work harder at raising awareness on a larger scale rather than silently accepting heightist comments as belonging strictly to the individual who made them. I know that I must not allow heightist comments to diminish my voice, but rather to act as a catalyst to develop a stronger one, one, where I can speak on behalf of others who face the same type of discrimination. I can use my experiences to accomplish what I initially entered the social work field to do: educate and advocate.

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