

# Reflections on Race and Gender Throughout the Career of a Senior Human Service Manager

ANTOINETTE HARRIS

## The Early Years

My name is Antoinette Harris and I grew up in South-Central Los Angeles (sometimes known as Watts) and similar to predominantly low-income neighborhoods in East and West Oakland. I remember very clearly being in elementary school and thinking that it is so wonderful to have such a variety of women of color teaching me with the exception of one white male who was German. They were women who spoke different languages and they were African-American, Latinas, and Asian-Americans. In my mind these women were very powerful because they could impart knowledge and I received it. They made things clear and made sure that the classrooms reflected their culture. So my first thought about a future career was that I wanted to be a teacher and make sure that people understand who I am as a person and not just as a teacher. Those teachers demonstrated a way of being: you can have a career, not just a job, but have a career, without losing a sense of who you are as a person. I have carried that lesson throughout my career.

After high school, I moved out of LA to attend to UC Davis in the mid-70s and experienced major culture shock. I had just turned 17 and the summer after graduating high school I attended the Upward Bound program at UC Davis that was established primarily for people of color and foreign students where English was their second language. Almost everyone, including teachers and students, that I saw during my first summer on campus were people of color. It was very international; so many people from different countries with major exposure to different cultures. I loved it.

After it was over and I had spent a few weeks in August at home, I returned to campus in middle of September and I was shocked and wondered where did all these white people come from? I didn't get it. I was mad because I didn't appreciate the fact that all of a sudden I was immersed in this culture that was totally different from where I grew up. I had experienced instructors during the summer who were all people of color, a mixture of women and men, all very prominent and acknowledging of their culture. They made sure that we were not only aware and confident of who we

were but also able to appreciate the differences in other people by getting to know them. I wanted that experience back.

One of the things that I noticed when I had to speak with the Director of the Home Economics Department, the home of my major (I wanted to go into counseling which included psychology or sociology and cultural experiences as well as my interests in textiles and clothing), I discovered that he was a man and I was kind of thrown off about that. As I looked at the wall of pictures of former department heads, they were all men and I just kept thinking, all my instructors are female but the people who are in charge of home economics are men. Similarly, when I went to talk to the Director of Admissions, I encountered another man but also noticed that he was surrounded by women doing most of the work. Although there were a lot of women in various positions, the people who had the top roles were men. I actually spent time talking about all these observations with the Director of the Student Counseling Center (an African-American man) where my work-study job was located.

At that point in my life, I was a rebel who really wanted to change things. I kept asking questions about why I saw females having really good jobs, but when it comes down to who makes the final decision and who signs the check it is a man who nobody really sees and no one can really engage. The Counseling Center Director said to me: "What is your mission? Is it to become the first woman of whatever?" and I said no, "I just want to gain an understanding of what my role is going to be, what impact can I have so that I'm not just the only person that's saying "how come" and not doing something about it". I was very purposeful in wanting to make sure that no matter what I did, I wasn't going to be at a lower level. I was very intentional in wanting to move my way up to a certain level in an organization so that I can make an impact but more importantly so that the folks that we work with can see somebody who looks like them. That was and is very critical to me because I didn't want to necessarily to work in all African-American communities or all

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African-American agencies but I wanted to make sure that people could see that there are people of color.

At that early point in my career, all I saw was White men in power and I kept wondering about this. I saw that there were other people in leadership roles, but they would only reach a certain level and then not move further up. Around that time there was a lot of discussion around women hitting the glass ceiling and I was really beginning to question and wanting to make sure that if I was going to hit a glass ceiling that I would hit it with something that was powerful enough to break through.

### **My First Social Work Job**

So I'll fast-forward. After I graduated from UC Davis, I worked for a runaway shelter and it just so happened that the shelter director was an African-American woman. Over time, I recognized that she was taking direction from the associate director of the agency who was a White male. I made the mistake of questioning her one time, (not in a public setting but in her office privately) and wondered why she agreed with everything that the Associate Director said and I wanted to know where she got her power. The biggest question was how does she exert her own leadership?

She said a few things to me that kind of implied that my questions could get me fired and she questioned my need to ask such questions. Within five months of our conversation, the agency closed but before it closed I actually went to another agency. That conversation stuck in my mind because over time I actually saw her "shrinking", not presenting her true self to the staff, being a mouthpiece and kind of feeling defeated. I didn't know that there were other things happening in her life but I saw her kind of dethroning herself and that bothered me that a woman of color who was making a difference in the community could act such a way.

I am going to fast-forward again and reflect on my move to another agency; namely, FamiliesFirst where I have worked for the past 32 years. One of the first things that I noticed was that there was a female who was in charge. While she was the executive director, I reported to a man and I still consult with him even though he is working elsewhere. One of the things that he asked when he conducted the initial interview was "where do you see yourself in five years?". I said, well I do not want to be just a residential counselor as I wanted to learn counseling skills and understand the inner workings of an agency. He goes, "Wait a minute, are you saying that you want to be able to have your own agency?" and I said, probably some day, but in the meantime I want to know how to run an organization and make it work (the financials and the organizational

structure). It's not just about what happens on the ground but I want to understand the workings of it so that I can promote change. I felt that if things remain the same we are going to get swept away and I wanted to be one of those persons who explores all kinds of options.

Within the process of advancing up the ranks within FamiliesFirst, I was very intentional in watching the leadership team and it took me a long time before I finally agreed to become a supervisor and then continued to observe management and executive leadership, and not only within my own agency but in other agencies and really wanting to see how people did things, especially in relationship to the role of women in leadership positions.

While the executive director was a female, the other executive leadership team members were men who reported to her and supervised my work. I wasn't happy about that but at exactly the same time I needed to figure out how do I impact it and then I observed other agencies. I was trying to understand if there was something culturally different among the agencies that are headed by people who are White? I was also trying to understand how a person of color could move up in an organization. With the exception of having an advance degree and clinical license, what did I need to do differently?

As an African-American female, I kept wondering if I needed to work harder to advance. I concluded that I needed to do the very best and work smarter. Based on conversations with women of color in my position we all have come to the same conclusion that as females we need to work doubly as hard as men to be recognized because we experience a double disadvantage; namely, being a person of color and being female.

I needed to pay attention to agency policies and procedures as well as current service delivery trends. I needed to not only learn the craft but also learn about some of the advances in the field; namely, what are people thinking about in relationship to listening to families, the community, and interests. All of these sources of information have given me a big advantage. For example, many years ago I could see that foster care would no longer be a big ticket item in the agency's array of services. I could see the emerging shift in foster care and moving kids out of residential care and back to living with their families. This shift would occur by establishing the therapeutic safeguards needed so that families who are having difficulties can actually have the tools to help them stay together as a family. However, there will always be a need for foster care for kids whose needs can not be addressed at home. I knew that if we continued to put all the agency's resources into foster and

residential care, we would be going out of business since government contracts would no longer support the high-end costly foster care and residential services. By promoting family-based services we're working in the family's home and community and that would be our road to continued business. So I was able to get a team of folks (including several members of the executive team) to agree with me on the focus of the business direction. We continue to provide foster and residential care and we shifted our focus to provide home, community and school-based services, as well as mental health-based services.

As I reflect on my elementary school years, my mom was a social worker but I did not really think of her as a traditional social worker; although she was a unit supervisor, I remember her going to people's homes to observe her workers. As she described some of her work, I figured out it's not just about counseling, but it's about understanding the whole person. I was raised with the understanding that if you meet a person's basic needs, ensure that they are comfortable, pay attention to the social environment that can explain the precipitating events, you can gain the understanding needed to learn about the needs and wants of an individual. The counseling piece really becomes much easier when you are meeting clients with a full understanding of their situation and not imposing your views or service upon them but rather actively listening to what they want and need.

When I was doing direct services and providing family preservation services that cross cultures, I sought to be very impactful. I viewed service delivery from the standpoint that everyone has different stories to share and they want to be heard. I grew up in a family of individuals and my parents really drew upon our strengths and helped us to mature in the areas where we were having difficulties. It was a natural fit for me to have that same strengths perspective to bring to my work.

Several months before completing my Bachelor's degree, I had a child and soon thereafter recognized that I wanted to go on and get my MSW. My supervisor encouraged me to build upon my knowledge and skills by pursuing further studies in order to put a framework around my practice. I entered the three-year part-time MSW program at San Francisco State University because I was working full-time and could not afford not to work. I had been in the field for so long that I felt that some of my instructors were out of touch with practice realities. I was one of the older students (in my 30s) and my cohort included five African-Americans people and other people of color but the majority of the students were White and young. So I brought to

the table what I felt were experiences that were not in the course readings and that was a challenge for some of my instructors because they wanted to stick to the book and I wanted to focus on current practice issues. I had to learn not to be disruptive but to be instructive and I had to learn how to present cases that were relevant without countering the instructors but adding to what they had to say (80% males). For me that took a lot because I just wanted to discuss current realities in the community. I learned how to raise questions that were not offensive yet challenging. I had to learn how to temper and frame things in such a way where people could receive the message. I learned that in order to get my ideas heard, I needed to learn how to communicate without the need to learn a different language to gain acceptance.

### **Moving Up in the Organization**

My advancement within the organization has been exciting but it has also been somewhat challenging. I have declined central office senior executive positions because it would take me away from my community-based focus. It has also been challenging when I attend our senior leadership and executive leadership meetings and look around the table where I do not see a lot of diversity in terms of socio-economic status, race or gender. Sometimes I find it is difficult to understand how they do not understand the clients we serve who come from impoverished backgrounds. If I get too far removed from community-based services, I'll become cynical and forget the reason I entered this field. To make a difference as a female African-American in my regional director role, I can be both a voice for the concerns of senior management and a voice from the bottom that goes back to the top to reflect the changing needs of vulnerable populations and the staff members who serve them. Sometimes my voice is the only voice that is heard and sometimes I don't even think it is heard but it is the only voice that is bringing colleagues back to the reality of those we serve. If we forget who we serve, then I think we have lost the reason for why we do the work. If our clients and staff feel that I am unreachable or insensitive or not connected, then you can lose your connection with the clients and thereby lose your impact.

For some time, I had to talk with my mom about this because she was a manager before she retired. I had to ask her what it was like to have to think before you speak or have to think about the audience because sometimes people refuse to accept the ideas of a woman of color. My biggest challenges came from a couple of males who were my managers and they never really listened to what I had to say and that frustrated me. I actually went to the Human Resources

department (HR) regarding one of my managers because I said to him, “I feel like you are really being sexist and racist”. He was a white male and he said, “What? I married an African-American woman,” and I said yeah, but you’re divorced”. While I know it was wrong for me to say that, I said, “What does one have to do with the other? You are my supervisor and when you say certain things to me it feels as if you’re being very sexist and racist and that feels very uncomfortable.” So my next step was to talk to HR.

My frustration with my supervisor could be traced to several examples. When we were talking about folks who live in a particular community that was predominantly African-American, his response would be, “That’s just how those people are and you know, you should never go there because you never know what they are going to do and don’t go there at night.” I responded that I feel safe and our clients want us to come to their home and this is the time we can visit. We feel safe.” The whole team that he was supervising indicated that they felt safe and his response was, “You never know what they are going to do. I bet they can attack you, I bet they can steal from you. You need to watch your purse.”

The thing that was interesting for me was the reactions of our team members who never said much in staff meetings when they heard racist comments. However, after the meetings, they would share with others comments like “How can he say something like that?” They could not understand with all the cultural competency training that we have had and with all the opportunities that we have had to be work with people of different cultures, how he could make those statements? We would talk to each other and check in because we did not feel safe in those meetings and we needed to own our feelings by openly talking about racial, ethnic and cultural differences and even differences within cultures. We also wanted to make sure that the families we served felt comfortable and if we had an issue around safety, we would bring it up in our meetings and make plans accordingly. We would raise questions like, what is it like to be a black female or what is like to be a white female working in the black community? How do you feel about it? Do you stick out? We would talk openly about what it is like for a White female to work with an African-American family where you’re working with the father and there is no female and what that feels like and so we would have some very intimate and intense conversations to make sure that staff had opportunities to share their concerns.

Other examples include females working with male clients and feeling intimidated or White males working with an African-American or a woman of color where there is no man in the house. We would talk openly about the impact

of gender differences. For example, how does a male staff member who is 6’5” sit in the room with the female who has no husband but has experienced violence perpetrated by a male. It is so important to consider how one’s presence can impact the delivery of services. In our supervisory sessions, we talked about how he could sit smaller by bending over at the waist or sitting sideways without being sexually suggestive. He understood how important it was for his presence not to overwhelm this mom who was newly out of a domestic violence relationship with a tall man.

As a senior manager, I continuously raise the question, “Am I creating an environment where people who need services will feel comfortable?” Throughout the years, I have really worked on diversity issues and oversee our agency’s local diversity initiatives to make sure they are functioning and that we’re constantly doing and focusing on cultural humility. Cultural competency and humility are a driving factor in how we do business. It is part of our agency service delivery principles not just in terms of it’s appearance in training programs but rather how the staff act towards our customer base and towards each other. We are asking questions and making acknowledgments about what we do or do not know and how open are we to hearing and learning, and receiving information to improve our services.

When our two large agencies (\$45 million/year) came together to form EMQ FamiliesFirst (\$90 million/year), both agencies were perceived in the community as white agencies and I strive to ensure that is not the perception of those we serve.

When you look at our executive team and board of directors, you see a lot of White people. To address these issues, we have incorporated into our staff performance measures dimensions of cultural competency and how it is demonstrated.

As I reflect back over my career with respect to the issues of gender and race, I have reached a set of conclusions that work for me. This includes:

1. Be true to yourself, your culture, and value system
2. Education, knowledge and understanding is key to integrating gender and race into the work force without using gender and race as an excuse for poor performance.
3. The desire to be the most effective provider/director of services should be a motivator rather than the lack of gender and race representation within the organization.