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Professor Serena Chen: Turning Difference into a Catalyst

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150 Years of Women at Berkeley - History of Asian American Women on the UC Berkeley Campus

In the Big Apple that is New York City, known as the epicenter of American livelihood, a lot was happening in the late-1900s. A near bankruptcy in the city government was followed by the rapid expansion of Wall Street. Crime rates were at an all-time high while neighborhood restoration projects worked to rebuild the city's social and economic well-being. In the midst of it all, Serena Chen was being raised by immigrant parents from Taiwan who sought to make a living in one of the busiest parts of the world.

Growing up, Serena's childhood was comfortable, but not privileged. It brought financial struggles in her teen years for her parents, requiring her to learn financial independence earlier than many of her peers. "It wasn't always easy financially, but looking back, I appreciate those experiences," she reflected, "It gave me a greater understanding of different life circumstances." Money was something that Serena never took for granted, and was an influential factor in the career decisions she'd make later on. While her father went in between jobs, her family had to learn to adapt, and this brought new perspectives into her approach to life. Outside of the house, Serena attended a competitive public high school. "It was a norm to try to get into an Ivy League college," Serena recalled about the school's culture. Meanwhile at home, Serena's dinner table served up discussions about cousins and relatives; it was rare to engage in topics related to academia, politics, or anything beyond the narrow scope of family affairs. "My parents didn't read literature or talk about the news," Serena remembered, which helped explain the hands-off approach her parents took to Serena's academic journey as well. "My studies were up to me — no explicit pressure from my parents, but no guidance either," Serena said, "Even today, my parents are still unsure of what I do. We joke that even after twenty-plus years, they still think that I just teach and have summers off."

It was the inspiration of two history teachers in high school and the daily hard work that Serena cited as the puzzle pieces that formed a launchpad for her early academic success. As someone intrinsically interested in understanding people, relationships, and thought processes, she enrolled in the introductory two-thousand-student Psych 101 course at Cornell University during her first year. During her sophomore year, she fell in love with social psychology and met the influential Professor Tom Gilovich, who she'd later cross paths with again in the co-authoring of the textbook, [Social Psychology](#), along with two others. That textbook would also end up serving as the core course material for the [Social Psychology class](#) (Psych 160) here at UC Berkeley. One of those co-authors is Professor Dacher Keltner, founder of UC Berkeley's [Greater Good Science Center](#) and teacher of one of the most popular classes on campus, [Human Happiness](#). "Academia can be a small world... Dacher is like my big brother," Serena said.

It wasn't until Serena's junior year of college, though, when she learned what it even meant to get a Ph.D. "I wasn't someone who grew up knowing what it meant to do research, what it took to become a professor, or what the job entailed," she told me. It was the peers around her preparing for graduate school exams that led to Serena considering post-undergraduate education as well for the first time. But, with financial implications in the back of her mind, she knew that certain grad school options simply weren't as readily available as others. Serena reflected back on the elimination of law school as a viable career path because of the steep monetary cost of attending one. What she did have, though, was the resolute goal to somehow continue her studies in the field by which she became fascinated just the prior year. Serena remembered her thought process at the time: "I was a good student and I liked psychology, so how can I go on studying it and afford it?"

It was a golden moment for Serena when she learned that Ph.D. programs typically have graduate students serve as teaching assistants in exchange for tuition, and that there were opportunities to obtain fellowships and research positions in order to earn enough money to cover living expenses. "That was a revelation for me, that tuition was not an issue in most Ph.D. programs," she said, "and I knew I liked psychology, so I just kept going." Serena applied and went to New York University for grad school directly from Cornell for a Ph.D. in Social Psychology. Without any previous exposure to the world of academia that many of her graduate school peers had growing up, though, Serena didn't know the scope of potential career paths that would follow. "I went straight to school to get a Ph.D., but not with any clear understanding or vision about what I was going to do with that." Serena focused on the present moment: studying the topics that captivated her, doing well in her classes and research, and simply working hard.

While working toward her graduate degree at NYU, Serena learned more about what career options were lying ahead. Even then, she still had hesitations, saying, "I wasn't fully sure about academia because it was so foreign to me... but I kept moving forward because I was interested in what I was studying and was taught to work hard." This drive and work ethic helped Serena land her first job immediately following the completion of her Ph.D. Despite her lack of foreknowledge about the academic world, she managed to secure an extremely competitive professorship position at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. With her relative newness to the space, though, she reflected, "It took me some time, even then [at the University of Michigan], to really identify with my profession."

As with many other fields in the working world, positions in academia are still largely held by white males. This made salient the Asian roots that she held deeply and provided her a distinct perspective from her peers and co-workers. She would sometimes feel that dissimilarity illuminated in her field, beginning even with her grad school years at NYU. Serena vouches that though present-day political correctness and awareness would have made this situation

unheard of now, she recalled one of her first exams in graduate school wherein a joke question was written by her mentors that read, “Which of the following images reflects Serena’s parents when they found out she wanted to be a psychologist?” Even in a field of study where biases and prejudices are heavily emphasized and studied, moments that perpetuated stereotypes – such as the notion that all Asian families value careers in medicine, law, or others, but certainly not in psychology – still existed. This was one of the earliest moments that Serena experienced preconceptions associated with her ethnic background emerge in relation to her own pursuit after an academic career in psychology.

Throughout her time in graduate school, and over her over twenty years as a professor, Serena has periodically struggled with rules implicitly set by the American, individualistic culture in which we live. As an Asian American woman, she has felt pressure to be more assertive and outspoken in the work environment in order to make her voice heard. Serena noticed differences in the way that she and other female colleagues were treated, and this was true even when she held leadership roles. It’s “not news to anyone,” according to Serena, “that norms and expectations in American society, including at the workplace, reflect masculine and majority-race defaults. This puts pressure on people with different backgrounds to ‘act the part.’” Even today, work cultures often favor extroverted and individualistic personas – attributes that are not necessarily the default for some, including Serena. Her inner circle knows that her natural state is one that is introverted and deeply collectivistic, carrying closely the roots of her Asian heritage. In American society today, subtle tendencies exist to commend certain personality traits over others – traits that individuals born and raised in Western culture are on average more adept at exemplifying. “It’s harder for those who don’t play by the rules by default,” Serena mentioned, in reference to those American norms, “there were times periodically throughout my career where I felt behind because I didn’t have a certain upbringing or suite of personal attributes and skills.”

Instead of allowing her difference to become a discouragement, though, Serena turned what could have been a deterrent to her career pursuits into a catalyst for more: the competing voices of two distinct cultures inside Serena’s own mind helped ignite within her a passion for understanding the self and the pursuit of authenticity. Today, this passion emanates in both her teaching and research, as well as through her various external consulting engagements. Serena has been invited to share her insights on projects with Johnson & Johnson, Aveeno, and many other large-scale organizations who see tie-ins between their goals and her research on identity, authenticity, and self-compassion. Serena’s partnership with TJ Maxx in “[The Maxx You Project](#)” is an especially relevant example. Serena worked with the team at TJ Maxx to build a campaign on empowering women in their self-expression, which closely related to the research she’d done previously on developing a strong and authentic sense of self in women. “It’s a message I cared about,” Serena asserted. The project applied her research to the creation of pop-up booths at Herald Square that encouraged passer-bys to engage in

self-awareness and self-understanding exercises without any ulterior motives of trying to sell them anything. This project illuminated one of the most exciting aspects of working in the field of social psychology: its direct applications to daily well-being. “Our field is very applicable to people’s everyday lives,” Serena said about social psychology. This truth has enabled her to collaborate across industries and work with businesses to drive tangible impact in areas that matter to her.

Today, Serena is known better as “Professor Chen.” Her day is filled to the brim working as the Lab Director for the [Self, Identity, and Relationships \(SIR\) Laboratory](#), mentoring graduate students in one-on-one relationships, teaching the widely-popular Social Psychology class to hundreds of undergraduate students, and serving as the Marian E. and Daniel E. Koshland, Jr. Distinguished Chair for Innovative Teaching and Research in the Psychology Department at UC Berkeley. This year, she celebrates 20 years of being a professor at UC Berkeley, and is actively conducting research in her lab around two main areas: the psychological consequences of income inequality and the nature of the self and identity (which includes her work on authenticity, self-compassion, and so forth.) Professor Chen explained that the former topic was inspired by listening to Barack Obama speaking on the rising problem of income inequality, putting in full display her emphasis on listening to current events in order to determine valuable next steps in her research. She stated, “I do research driven by what’s going on in the world,” and pointed to the drastic wealth inequality both in her current home in the Bay Area and her previous roots in New York City as prime examples of the urgency of this issue. In every way, her work in this area is reflective of the UC Berkeley changemaker mentality, where students and faculty alike never rest living inside a world with constant and desperate need of improvement. The latter topic — on the self and identity — has been a staple to Professor Chen’s research ever since her interest was first sparked in the field during her graduate school years. A fundamental purpose that has driven Professor Chen’s work in the past 20 years has been in promoting authenticity and studying the downstream positive consequences it has.

In more recent years, Professor Chen has taken on more administrative roles at UC Berkeley (e.g., former Director of the Berkeley Collegium and current chair of the Psychology department,) providing the opportunity to meet faculty from other departments across campus. Through this exposure, Professor Chen has found herself able to influence the lives of Berkeley students beyond just teaching within her own department. Whether this is through helping to develop new initiatives — like the Discovery Program that connects students to research — or contributing to conversations about first-generation student support, Professor Chen referred to these opportunities as a “chance to try to implement things that matter to you that aren’t just about your own research.”

Despite the length of her time at UC Berkeley, Professor Chen's experiences of studying and teaching on the east coast and midwest region still remain top-of-mind, and help to inform the uniqueness of working at and being a part of the UC Berkeley community. "I like teaching so much," she beams, and then goes on:

"I like connecting with students, especially at Berkeley. It's such a different undergraduate population than you get at some of the east coast institutions. It's so much more diverse in terms of immigrants, transfer students, community students. It's just a really different phenomenon back east, where [being in one of these groups] is stigmatized... Here, a quarter to a third of our undergraduates are transfer students; it's great and it adds a whole new level of diversity here."

As someone who cares about mentorship and teaching just as much as her research, Professor Chen recognizes the value that having such a diverse student body brings to the learning environment. She cares wholeheartedly about the growth of rising scholars, and this is exemplified through the open invitations to her office hours and willingness to take time for curious students to ask questions about research and career journeys. It is evident that Professor Chen's work ethic didn't cease with the attainment of her first faculty position or of tenure, but is motivated by an unstoppable drive and innate desire to do good for the students she mentors as well as for the broader communities that her research impacts. As we celebrate 150 Years of Women at Berkeley, we proudly share the story of Professor Chen, who embodies the true UC Berkeley spirit through her approach to research, her mindset to teaching, and her heart behind it all. "I'm so grateful for my position," Professor Chen told me, "it's such a great vehicle to try to make a difference while also getting to study things that matter."



Professor Serena Chen



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