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Social Class Bias: A Phenomenological Study

Abstract
Nine licensed professional counselors participated in semi-structured interviews about social class and socioeconomic status, including their experiences with classism. Phenomenological analysis revealed both participant classism experiences and use of language that expressed social class bias. Implications and recommendations for future research for counselor educators and supervisors are provided.

Keywords
Social class, SES, classism, microaggressions

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Counseling professionals and scholars have acknowledged the disparity between those in the dominant, privileged ranks and those at the margins, and have focused on discrimination perpetrated by the those of the dominant culture with particular attention to how these dynamics have occurred in counseling (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). Although there has been a response to cultural disparities between those with privileged and oppressed statuses (Sue et al., 1992), it was not until the early 2000's that social class received any serious attention from researchers (e.g., Fouad & Brown, 2000; Liu, 2001). To date, the majority of social class and counseling literature has been theoretical in nature, and few researchers have examined counselors' social class awareness, knowledge, and skills. Further, few authors have discussed how counselors can examine their biases related to social class, or how social class bias might manifest in the therapeutic relationship (Vontress, 2011). What the sparse literature does reveal is social class significantly impacts clients' worldviews, including how they perceive themselves, and that middle class privilege pervades US culture (Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007).

Terms Defined

Defining socioeconomic status (SES), social class, social class designations, privilege, classism, and social class bias is germane to understanding the purpose of this study and for providing a framework for how social class and SES bias may intentionally and unintentionally manifest. *Socioeconomic status* is determined and defined objectively by one's income, education, and occupation (Santiago, Kaltman, & Miranda, 2013). *Social class* is a multidimensional, subjective concept that includes SES, as well as beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors based on experiences within one's social class group affiliation(s) (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Smith, 2006; Smith, Li, Dykema, Hamlet, & Shellman, 2013).

In capitalist countries like the US, social class group designations are linked to social stratification, which is the hierarchical, layered structure determined by how valued resources are distributed within the structure (Beeghley, 2000). *Social class designations* then, cluster individuals based on their accumulation of and access to valued resources, and can encompass the multidimensional layers listed in the above definition for social class. Many schemas exist (e.g., Thompson & Hickey, 2005; Warner, Meeker, & Eells, 1960), and there are benefits and limitations to each. In this article, the social class designations used, low social class (LSC), middle social class (MSC), and high social class (HSC), are a modified schema based on the categorizations established by Warner, Meeker, and Eells (1960) and are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Social Class Designations

Overarching Term Used in Article	**Class Designations Included in Each Overarching Term (adapted from Warner et al., 1960)**
Low Social Class (LSC)	Poverty, “Nonworking poverty,” Lower-Lower, Low, Upper-Lower, Working
Middle Social Class (MSC)	Lower-Middle, Middle, Upper Middle
High Social Class (HSC)	Lower-Upper, Upper, Upper-Upper

Privilege is an unearned benefit based on qualities determined to be valued by the dominant culture. People who are male, White, heterosexual, able-bodied (Johnson, 2006), Christian, and/or middle class (Liu et al., 2007) are privileged in US culture. To determine who holds privilege with regard to social class, social class groups are ranked according to SES factors. SES factors and social class groups are influenced significantly by social stratification and cultural narratives about which social class values, beliefs, and behaviors are most desirable, which leads to which group holds privilege culturally. In the US, people who are MSC are considered the privileged group based on these factors. Privilege and the power associated with privilege, are foundational to all forms of oppression and discrimination, including class-related bias, oppression, discrimination, and classism.

Classism is bias, discrimination, prejudice, or oppression toward a person or group based on social class or SES (Smith, 2005). Liu (2011) identified four forms of classism: *downward, upward, lateral,* and *internalized*. The concept most relevant to this investigation is that of downward classism. Downward classism occurs when people in higher social class groups (i.e., MSC or HSC) discriminate against (explicitly or implicitly) or marginalize people whom they perceive are in LSC (Liu, 2011). Such behaviors are the most common and obvious form of classism (Brown, Riepe, & Coffey, 2005). Brown et al. (2005) stated, “classism results from the unequal and unearned privilege of those who have the power to discriminate” (p. 79). Such classism occurs frequently when people in a higher social class group prefer a *higher* social class group’s resources, values, or worldviews over the resources, values, or worldviews over those of a lower social class group. Particular emphasis is placed here on *higher* social class group’s preferences rather than that of lower social class groups because in US society, individuals who are MSC and higher have the power and the privilege to discriminate against individuals who are in LSC.

Downward classist behaviors often take the form of microaggressions, that is, everyday, brief interactions that intentionally or unintentionally degrade, insult, or diminish the humanity, customs, or values of people in non-dominant groups (Sue, 2010). These interactions can manifest as behaviors, verbalizations, or environmental factors (Sue, 2010). Class-denying statements or behaviors (e.g., class does not matter, The US is a “classless” society) (Johnson, 2006) are examples of social class-based microaggressions. Other social class microaggressions can serve to make people who are in poverty invisible (e.g., relocation of people who are homeless to another town) (Lott, 2002), and can include belief systems that place blame on people in LSC (e.g., people are poor because they do not work hard enough). Social class microaggressions can be rooted in *social class bias* as well as classism. Biases can be outside of persons' awareness, yet can convey messages that diminish non-dominant groups' (i.e., LSC groups) experiences, worldviews, and values (Sue, 2010). *Social class bias* is distinguished from *classism* in this article to point to the unawareness that can surround social class and result in social class microaggressions.

Literature Review

To date, few authors have explored counselors' attitudes and beliefs about social class, counselors' social class bias, and the potential negative ramifications for clients from LSC. To date, the vast majority of literature related to classism is either theoretical or examines college students' experiences with classism (e.g., Ostrove, Stewart, and Curtin, 2011; Thompson, Her, & Nitzarim, 2014). The studies presented represent the current literature with regard to this phenomenon.

Smith, Mao, Perkins, and Ampuero (2011) investigated whether clients' social class presentation influenced counselors' therapeutic impressions, and whether counselors' just-world beliefs impacted their opinions about their clients. Participants (N = 193) were clinical and counseling psychology graduate students, 82% of whom reported being from MSC or higher. Using four written case vignettes, each representing a client in HSC, MSC, working class, or poverty, participants assessed the clients in multiple ways, including the Belief in a Just World Scale (BJW) (Dalbert, 1999). Researchers found when participants had high BJW scores, which indicated strong belief that the world is just (i.e., people get what they deserve), they believed clients who were working class or living in poverty were lower functioning, had more mental health symptoms, had unfavorable clinical outcomes, and believed there was a higher probability of “less meaningful” (Smith et al., 2011, p. 22) work with these populations.

Smith et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the lived experiences of psychotherapists who worked with people in poverty. Researchers completed one-hour interviews with 10 participants, 9 of whom reported being from MSC or higher. Twelve domains were identified. They found some participants, prior to working with people in poverty, avoided and/or held stereotypes about people from LSC. Common stereotypes participants reported were people who are poor are “dirty, lazy, or violent” (Smith et al., 2013, p.141), and poverty causes mental illness. Even after participants were invested in their work with people in poverty, some participants continued to have difficulty distinguishing clients’ psychological symptoms from symptoms related to how poverty might be affecting clients. Further, some participants held biases such as the belief that people in poverty cannot hold a job, cannot meet their basic needs, have mental health issues, and do not have the ability to make good decisions.

Clients who identified a social class difference between themselves and their counselors have perceived such negative beliefs about people in low social class, and they reported negative impacts on the counseling relationship. Balmforth (2009) conducted a qualitative study to understand how social class difference between client and counselor impact the counseling relationship from the client’s perspective. Of the seven client participants, six identified as working class and perceived their counselor to be middle class. Balmforth found that participants felt misunderstood by their counselor, they regarded the counselor as an authority figure, and perceived the counselor had both a lack of awareness about social class and negative responses toward them. This led clients to feel discomfort and feelings of inferiority, and that they could not be themselves, thereby impacting the counseling relationship negatively (Balmforth, 2009).

Toporek and Pope-Davis (2005) sought to understand how counselors reduced their biases and became more multiculturally competent. They surveyed 158 graduate students from 10 US counseling master's programs. Using forced-entry hierarchical regression analyses, they found the more multicultural training students had, and the more sensitive their racial attitudes, the more likely they were to explain poverty in terms of structural inequality; the students who had less sensitive racial attitudes were more likely to explain poverty in terms of how individuals caused or contributed to their poverty.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that social class and SES bias and classism can manifest in multiple ways (Smith et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2011), and that counselor belief systems about social class can contain inherent biases, many of which the counselor may be unaware and can impact the counseling relationship negatively (Balmforth, 2009). Multicultural training can have a positive impact on counselors, yet many do not receive significant training about social class and SES (Toporek & Pope-Davis, 2005), which may be due to a dearth of research in counselor education about counselors' understanding and awareness about social class (Cook & Lawson, 2016). The purpose of the study associated with the findings reported in this article was to describe counselors' social class and SES understanding and awareness. To date, one study exists on this topic (Cook & Lawson, 2016). Substantial findings emerged during the course of the study, specifically the ways in which participants described social class and SES and how they operationalized these terms (Cook & Lawson, 2016), and the findings related to classism reported in this article. Thus, the purpose of this article was two-fold: (1) to report participants' experiences of classism, and (2) to highlight participants' own social class bias that emerged in the interviews.

Method

Results were drawn from a qualitative study that explored how licensed professional counselors (LPCs) understood SES and social class (Cook & Lawson, 2016). Because of the limited research regarding counselors' understanding of these constructs, and the goal to unearth participants' lived experiences related to social class, a phenomenological, qualitative design was selected for this exploratory study (Hays & Wood, 2011). Phenomenological studies, rooted in constructivism, aim to understand both the lived experiences and the multiple realities participants have with the construct under investigation (Hays & Wood, 2011). With this design, semi-structured interview questions allowed participants to describe how they understood an array of issues related to social class and SES. There are two categories reported: *Participant Classism Experiences* and *Participant Language that Expressed Social Class Bias*. Three themes emerged related to participant language that expressed social class bias: *Social Class Microaggressions, Misconceptions about Social Class,* and *Social Class Privilege*.

Participants and Location

Participants were identified via purposeful sampling in order to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) current, practicing counselors in a clinical mental health or private practice setting in one designated state in the southern US, (b) LPC in the designated state, and (c) graduate counselor training program completed no more than 10 years prior to participation. Participants were excluded if they earned their counseling master's degree from either of the two universities with which the researcher had a relationship. LPCs were recruited to ensure clinical experience, and having completed graduate training no more than 10 years prior increased the likelihood that participants would have received multicultural training during their graduate programs.

Participants were recruited using the state LPC database in addition to the state's professional counseling association member database and various public, Internet information sources (e.g., private practice websites and "find a therapist" websites). The researcher contacted participants via email or telephone and asked screening questions to ensure they met recruitment criteria.

Criterion sampling was employed for this study. Nine counselors participated in this study, which is within the acceptable range of 5-25 participants for phenomenological studies (Hays & Wood, 2011). Participants' ages ranged from 32 to 59 years old (M = 42.4 years), three identified as African American/Black and six identified as White, and all participants self-identified as female and as currently part of the MSC spectrum. Participants' counseling master's programs were completed between 2004 and 2009, and eight graduated from programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP). Participants had between 5 and 11 years of clinical experience (M = 8.1 years). Seven participants worked in clinical mental health settings and two in private practice; three participants worked in rural environments, two in urban, two in suburban, one participant worked in both rural and urban environments, and one in a town.

Role of the Researcher

In phenomenological research, the researcher must define her position and potential biases so the study is conducted rigorously, biases are acknowledged, and research consumers can analyze findings comprehensively (Hays & Wood, 2011). I identify my membership in the dominant culture and my privilege as a White person with advanced education who has become

MSC, and I recognize my non-dominant identities as a woman raised in an upper-LSC context (Warner, Meeker, & Eells, 1960). Through this lens, my LSC group membership allowed me to name perceived social class bias that occurred during the interview process. A researcher without an emic or *insider perspective* (Ponterotto, 2005) of LSC may not have been able to identify such statements as biased, because s/he might lack LSC knowledge and experience.

Data Collection

Prior to any participant contact, I obtained Institutional Review Board approval. Preceding interview commencement, participants provided written consent, were given a copy of the consent forms, and chose a pseudonym. Moreover, because of the sensitivity of this topic, although participants chose pseudonyms, no names are used in this article to provide an additional layer of participant anonymity. Because of the social class bias findings, participants could have adverse reactions to the study's results; however, I believe participants were unaware of how their language regarding social class could be perceived as biased. Thus, the findings are not meant to dishonor or punish participants, but rather are intended as a charge to counselor educators, counselors, and supervisors to increase social class awareness, knowledge, and skills so clients might be better served.

I conducted two pilot interviews, and final interview questions were adjusted based on these interviews. Pilot interview data were not included in the data analysis for this study. In the initial phase of the interview, I talked with participants about their demographic information. Next, participants were asked questions such as, "What comes to mind when you hear the term, *social class*?" "What comes to mind when you hear the term, *socioeconomic status*?" "What strengths and limitations do you have that come from your social class group?" "Tell me how you've felt advantaged/disadvantaged because of your social class," and, "What have been your experiences with classism?" Participants were not asked explicitly what biases they held about different social class or SES groups. I audio recorded interviews for transcription, and video recorded them for review. Interviews averaged 60-90 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

As a single coder with peer reviewers, I coded the data in multiple phases. Initially, all data, including transcribed interviews, observational data recorded in field notes, and the reflexive journal, were organized and coded in three phases via Corbin and Strauss's (2008) model of open, axial, and selective coding. Coding commenced once two interviews were completed.

During the first phase, open coding, I performed a line-by-line analysis of each transcript, field notes, and the reflexive journal, and assigned *in vivo* codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Codes were labeled and color-coded to differentiate codes. In the second phase, axial coding, I used the *in vivo* codes identified during open coding to form categories. During selective coding, the final phase, I identified multiple salient categories that emerged from the data. The categories illuminated the phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2006).

Trustworthiness

I implemented procedures to ensure trustworthiness throughout the course of this study. Multiple strategies were employed: consistent and detailed documentation, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I documented all research activities using a comprehensive audit trail. After I completed each interview, I recorded field notes to capture contextual variables, insights, and reflections. The field notes added depth to the interview interactions and data, and aided me in data analysis. In order to increase transcript clarity and accuracy, I invited participants to amend and add to their transcripts using a member check; six out of nine participants chose to member check their transcripts. Within one week of the interview, I emailed transcripts to participants, allowing two weeks for edits.

To further enhance confidence and reduce bias, I recruited two auditors with qualitative research experience. The auditors reviewed transcripts and ensured coding accuracy, coded two transcripts, and discussed emerging themes and research findings with me. Similarly, I utilized two peer debriefers who processed potential bias in interview proceedings and data analysis, and offered alternative insights into the data. Finally, I triangulated all reported data employing multiple data points.

Findings

Two overarching categories are presented with regard to classism: *Participant Classism Experiences* and *Participant Language that Expressed Social Class Bias*. I asked participants directly about their experiences with classism, that is, if they had ever felt disadvantaged or discriminated against as a result of their social class membership. Seven participants reported experiences related to classism. These reported experiences formed the category, *Participant Classism Experiences.* Participants experienced and responded to classism in different ways, and the tangible theme was participants' recognition that their class membership affected how they were treated. The second category, *Participant Language that Expressed Social Class Bias*, emerged from the data. Three themes surfaced: *Social Class Microaggressions*, *Misconceptions about Social Class*, and *Social Class Privilege*.

Classism Experiences

Seven participants discussed experiences with classism. They revealed they knew they were treated differently based on their social class membership and experienced a sense of social class based exclusion, yet all participants responded in different ways. One participant who identified as White, reared in a rural, working class family, talked about her first international travel experience during college. She shared, “I was traveling with kids who had been all over the world and of course they thought I was some dumb country girl and they all had to protect me, and like I didn't know how to get a cab.” Further, she reflected on the experience:

> That's the way they thought about it, which was sort of awkward and funny to me. I'm like, "Do you all think I'm an idiot?" It was like so funny, but it was endearing in a way too that they were like, "You're going to stay right with us."

While this participant noted classism in this incident, she interpreted the event as both “awkward” and “endearing,” indicating possible confusion connected to classism experiences.

Another participant, raised in an urban, LSC family, who identified as Black, described her experiences feeling judged by peers when she began to shop at more upscale stores after she left the inner city to attend a prestigious university. She explained why she believed her friends might have judged her choices:

> . . . I like Target . . . but a lot of people like Wal-Mart and they call Target "Tar Jay." Just different things like that. Oh I don't go to Target, Target's kind of expensive. I'm thinking, “I don't know,” or Harris Teeter, Kroger . . . I'm a vegetarian. They have the kinds of foods I get organic; some things I get organic . . . I think it's geographical sometimes in that usually people from the inner city are not really exposed to Harris Teeter or Kroger or some of those other stores or World Market, or Trader Joe's; they aren't [stores] in the inner city so it's not a store that they would even think about. You know they probably drive by it and wonder, “What's in there?” Or even if they went in there sometime they'd probably see the food [and say], "Who eats that?”

The participant reported later she felt judged by her peers from her LSC neighborhood about her food choices as a vegetarian. When asked about classism experiences, she stated initially, “I can’t really remember and I think because I blended in a lot. I blended in a lot, and I looked up a lot.” Yet, as she described what it is like to identify now as MSC instead of as LSC, she elaborated on social class differences and how her LSC peers’ perceptions of her have changed based on her MSC status.

A participant who identified as African American, raised in a suburban, middle class family described she never knew her family of origin was MSC until she left home.

> One of the reasons I never thought I was middle class is because the middle class that my father did hang with . . . had [etiquette training] programs. Jack and Jill, and several other type things, and I wasn’t good enough to be part of those programs . . . My father was pushing me this way, he wanted me in those type of things. [They told him,] “She’s not what we’re looking for.” And this was within the African American culture. I was never good enough because I was willing to play in the projects and it was okay with me. I wasn’t good enough for several things, and I noticed when I got older.

This participant stated how playing in the projects signaled to people who ran elite groups that she was not what they were looking for, even though her family identified as MSC and the groups were African American. The participant interpreted this exclusion as class-based not race-based. She added that, as an adult, she does not fit in with her friends from the projects either because of class worldview differences.

Participant Language that Expressed Social Class Bias

During the phenomenological coding process, I coded my field notes and reflexive journal in addition to interview transcripts. These data formed categories and themes and were integrated with the findings from the interview data. Interview questions for this study were not crafted to unearth the findings in this category, and thus, no interview questions were included to inquire about how participants believed they participate in class bias or classism. A single category emerged, *Participant Language that Expressed Social Class Bias*, and three themes surfaced: *Social Class Microaggressions*, *Misconceptions about Social Class*, and *Social Class Privilege*. This category and subsequent themes describe how participants spoke in ways that inadvertently expressed social class bias.

Social class microaggressions. The most common social class microaggression involved the ways in which participants referred to people in LSC. All participants with the exception of one, spoke about people in LSC with *otherizing* terms such as "SES challenged," coming from "troubled economic status families," "special circumstances," "poor people," and most frequently, "them" or "those people." Notably, the participant who did not use these terms also used person-first language the majority of the time (e.g., people who are poor).

Another way social class microaggressions arose was in the context of describing counseling clients. Three participants revealed class-denying behaviors. With regard to counseling, one participant stated:

> I think you have to recognize where that person's coming from, but your skill set should be able to actually supersede that. It shouldn't be that this is my person that's from the projects and I'm from this upper middle class. It should be that there's no class in here.

Another participant shared her belief that economic issues are simply human issues:

> It's that part where trying to be able to be relatable to them because I've been in a lot of the socioeconomic classes just throughout my adult life and it's being able to say, "Yeah, I can remember that time," or, "I know how hard it is," and I still, I may make money

> now but I still don't like to give it to anybody. I want to keep it for myself. I would prefer to. I don't want to give it to bills. And it's that being able to relate to them and get them to see that yeah, we are all human. That's just the human experience type of thing.

With both of these examples, participants assert class is not a salient cultural factor, and thus is not relevant in the counseling context.

Misconceptions about social class. Eight out of nine participants stated hard work leads to success. One participant stated:

> People that work hard in school; that if they’re not provided for, they’re able to get there on their own . . . A lot of times, these kids [from LSC] don’t think they can go to college, and they can. They can go to college. They just got to work hard, and they’ll have to do it a different way, but they can get there.

Another participant stated, “I think with enough hard work and stick-to-itiveness you can, at least in America, you have the opportunity to be whatever you want to be.” A different participant shared:

> I don’t suss [*sic*] it out specifically on class but some of the values of if you work really hard, you can. You can live it. You can have a very good life, a comfortable life. That opportunity is there, you have to look for it.

These quotes reveal meritocracy, a markedly middle class belief that if people work hard enough, they can achieve their economic goals (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012).

Three participants spoke about how class awareness can affect people’s happiness. One participant stated, “It seems to me that people who are most aware of it (their class group affiliation) are the least happy because they are so focused on where they want to be versus where they are and being okay with that.” Another participant stated:

> I could relate better with those who had nothing and were happy. Not the whiners, who wanted to keep up with the Joneses but those who had nothing and were still happy. I can have nothing and be still happy.

These quotes illuminate that participants may have socially embedded messages related to social class such as the idea that people may be poor, but they are happy (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012).

Class privilege. Five participants made statements that revealed class privilege. When asked how she believed social class groups are delineated, one participant stated, “It’s just not something that it benefits me to think of. You could watch me think for much longer, but it’s just something I don’t think much about.” When asked what class group she affiliates with currently, another participant said, “. . . I had never really thought about what class I was in, but okay. I just hadn’t.” Another participant, raised in MSC, discussed an ongoing struggle she has had in her adult life with friends from her childhood who were raised in LSC: “I’ve never been on that level . . . I didn’t stand on line to get cheese . . . not that I’d want to.”

Another participant talked about the advantages of a counselor from MSC working with children and teenagers from LSC. She stated, “When you’re in therapy with them, they can see that this is not how everybody lives. There are different ways.” While discussing the strengths of working with clients from MSC, another participant stated clients from MSC have:

> . . . that expectation that anything is possible. “Yeah, okay, yeah, I can do that.” If I make a recommendation, “You might want to,” “What do you think about consulting with so and so,” “Yeah, sure, sure,” expecting they will go out [and do it]. As opposed to [clients from LSC], “Well, let me think, how do I do that?”

These quotes illustrate the privilege associated with being a member of MSC: One does not have to think about one's social class affiliation, one can be a model or example for those in LSC, and one has the knowledge and resources to enact counselor suggestions (Johnson, 2006).

Discussion and Implications for Counselor Education and Supervision

Classism was defined as bias, prejudice, oppression, or discrimination toward a person or group of people based on social class or SES, perpetrated by those who have the privilege and power to do so (Brown et al., 2005; Smith, 2005). While classism can be overt, often it takes the form of social class bias or microaggressions: Brief interactions that intentionally or unintentionally degrade, insult, or diminish the humanity, customs, or values of people in non-dominant social class/SES groups (Sue, 2010). Classism was a salient experience for the majority of participants in this study. They reported varied experiences and reactions, yet all conveyed a sense of being treated differently and described social class-based exclusionary experiences.

Concurrently, I found participants also unknowingly spoke in ways that expressed social class bias, demonstrated by class microaggressions, misconceptions about social class/SES, and/or a privileged social class position. For example, some participants indicated those who worked hard could attain their goals. This MSC belief in meritocracy, coupled with a seeming unawareness of the systemic economic structures at work in US culture, meant participants failed to realize that many who work hard are not automatically or even eventually financially successful. Not one participant mentioned the notion of *privilege* that often tips the balance of economic success in favor of those who are born into groups with more power, privilege, and resources (Staton, Evans, & Lucey, 2012). Failure to acknowledge privilege is problematic because counselors can find themselves blaming individual clients for being from LSC and more commonly, for their life circumstances (Smith et al., 2011). A more balanced view would be to understand clients as individuals embedded in a complex societal structure. In order for counselors to take this perspective, counselor educators and supervisors must emphasize how social class functions. If counselors-in-training learn about social class and SES inequities and disparities, determine how they have social class privilege, and work through implicit biases they hold about social class, they will be better equipped to serve clients from all social class groups, especially clients from LSC (Smith et al, 2011; Balmforth, 2009).

Unlike members of other social class groups, people in LSC often have fewer choices when selecting counseling providers, and they are more likely to be blamed for their economic circumstances or made *invisible* by people in higher social class groups (Lott, 2002). Smith et al. (2011) uncovered biases counselors may hold about people from LSC such as they are lower functioning, have more mental health issues, and have less favorable clinical outcomes. Smith et al. (2013) revealed additional counselor social class biases, such as people in LSC cannot hold a job, they are unable to meet their basic needs, and they do not make good decisions. These biases are not held about people from MSC or HSC: They are held about people in LSC. Combined with the reported findings, it is reasonable to conclude there could be serious consequences for clients if counselors fail to become more culturally competent in the area of social class.

Some participants made comments suggesting social class differences were insignificant, and that the focus, rather, should be on the unifying concept of shared humanity. Denying social class difference is similar to the notion of being “colorblind” vis-à-vis racial difference (Hardy & Laszloffy, 1998). To deny aspects of clients’ culture denies clients’ worldviews, values, beliefs, and experiences, which can cause clients to feel blamed, invalidated, and wrong, all of which are the antithesis of culturally competent counseling (Balmforth, 2009; Day-Vines et al., 2007;

Vontress, 2011). It is striking to note that some participants who shared personal classism experiences expressed simultaneously a desire to focus on shared humanity rather than on social class experiences, thereby potentially denying their experiences as well as their clients' experiences. This demonstrates that class-denying beliefs can be both internalized and affect the counselor's sense of self, as well as expressed to clients with similar affects and additionally, the potential to erode the counseling relationship (Balmforth, 2009).

Moreover, some participants used terms such as *those people,* and, *them* when referring to people from LSC, which unintentionally can result in social class-related microaggressions (Sue, 2010). When counselors choose to *otherize* clients, they distance themselves from their clients, a move that can fracture the therapeutic relationship. Clients may interpret such distance as the counselor implying something is *wrong* with them, a perception that increases the likelihood they will not return to counseling (Vontress, 2011). One participant underscored her own class privilege by referring to the luxury and *benefit* of not having to think about social class (Johnson, 2006). Counselors are in a position of power and privilege in the counseling relationship, and when counselors do not address their power and privilege, at best they may struggle to understand clients' worldviews, and at worst, they risk harming clients (Balmforth, Day-Vines et al., 2007).

All participants took at least one multicultural course in their graduate training programs, and most participants stated social class or SES was discussed in some way; however, five noted they did not remember anything specific about those discussions. These results suggest social class and SES have not been integrated consistently into counselor education and supervision, and some counselors may not have developed their social class awareness, knowledge, and skills in the same ways they have developed other areas of multicultural competence (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation), which may be due in part to counselor educators and supervisors not receiving education in this area. Toporek and Pope-Davis (2005) found that the more multicultural education and experiences counseling students had and the more sensitive their racial attitudes were, the more likely they are to explain poverty in terms of social inequality. These findings underscore the necessity of continual and thorough multicultural education so counselors-in-training can continue to reduce their biases, particularly with regard to social class and SES. Such training positions counselors well to build the therapeutic relationship more fully with their clients without judgment. For current counselors, continuing education regarding social class and SES is critical to fill awareness, knowledge, and skill gaps in this area. In order for this to occur, counselor educators and supervisors must increase their social class and SES competence.

In order for counselors-in-training and supervisees to develop social class and SES awareness, knowledge, and skills, counselor educators and supervisors must first increase their social class and SES awareness, knowledge, and skills, and prioritize multicultural competence in this area (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012). The findings revealed in this article indicate that some counselors do not have adequate awareness and understanding about how their language might express social class bias as evidenced by *otherizing* language, denying the role social class plays in clients' lives, and conveying misconceptions about social class. Further, these findings demonstrate that some counselors have limited understanding about meritocracy, and how hard work may or may not lead to success. Some participants seemed reluctant, or possibly unaware, of the need to examine their class privilege. In order for counselors to gain the awareness, knowledge, and skills to overcome these biases, again, counselor educators and supervisors must raise their awareness about their own social class experiences and the social class privilege they may hold (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012), so they have the tools to teach students and supervisees about social class. Without this, it may prove difficult for counselor educators and supervisors to assist their students and supervisees to develop social class awareness, knowledge, and skills.

The aforementioned topics are important springboards to begin to increase counselor educators' and supervisors' social class and SES awareness and knowledge so they are able to provide education and training experiences that include social class. Further, these areas give counselor educators and supervisors clues about where counselors-in-training and supervisees may need the most support. Counselor educators and supervisors are poised nicely to use their power and privilege to spearhead learning experiences that invite students and supervisees to grow in their social class and SES awareness, knowledge, and skills. Counseling faculty and supervisors have the opportunity and obligation to assist counselors-in-training and supervisees to examine their class privilege, debunk class misconceptions, and identify ways clients are marginalized by class microaggressions. Counselor educators and supervisors can rectify this oversight, and provide opportunities to increase trainees' social class and SES awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations associated with this study. First, the sample was confined to one state in the southern US. Therefore it is important to replicate this study in other geographic areas. Second, men were not represented, nor were racial groups other than African American/Black and White. Third, this study was not about classism per se, so studies designed to understand the breadth and specificity of classism are warranted. Fourth, even though measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness, semi-structured interviews with one interviewer/coder are vulnerable to this issue, and study replication with additional researchers and coders is indicated.

Additionally, it is important to conduct future research with counselor educators and supervisors to understand their social class and SES awareness, understanding, knowledge, skills, and subsequent training on the area, as well as how they integrate social class and SES into their courses and in supervision. Further, it would be applicable to understand counselor educators' and supervisors' experiences with social class bias and classism and how these experiences impacted them and their work with students and supervisees. Finally, specific studies about how counselors-in-training have experienced social class bias or classism during their counselor training could inform counselor educators and supervisors about particular behaviors, environments, and interactions that cause counselors-in-training to feel oppressed or discriminated against based on the social class.

Conclusion

Many people, including counselors, experience classism. However, it is paramount clients do not experience implicit or explicit social class bias or classism in the counseling relationship. Counselor educators and supervisors can assist students and supervisees in acknowledging and claiming their social class experiences, so they can examine and work through their social class biases, understand social class privilege, and dismantle language clients might perceive as reflecting social class bias. In addition, counselor educators can model ways of broaching (Day-Vines et al., 2007) social class, as well as take responsibility for providing didactic and experiential opportunities for students and supervisees to learn about social class and SES, the effects of classism, and how to empower clients from LSC groups. They can be intentional about training ethical, multiculturally competent counseling professionals to ensure clients receive the highest quality mental health services possible.

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