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An Emerging Theory of The Persistence of Social Class Microaggressions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Eleven counselor education doctoral students participated in an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis study aimed to understand their social class microaggressions (SCMs) experiences. A tentative theory emerged from the data that SCMs persist to preserve homeostasis. The super-ordinate theme, Unequal, Embedded, Societal Structures is corroborated by the subordinate themes, Social Class Invisibility, Intersecting Identities, Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class, Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class, and SCM Manifestations. Together, the superordinate theme and subsequent subordinate themes culminate in the preservation of homeostasis. We offer a data driven

model to depict the theory, present participant data with extensive quotes, counseling implications, future research, and a call to the profession to resist the pull of homeostasis so SCMs no longer serve a socio-cultural purpose to oppress others.

Keywords

Social class, microaggressions, counseling, socioeconomic status, IPA

You just need to work harder, pull yourself up by your bootstraps! You made it to a PhD program, so there's no way you grew up poor. Why don't you get a different job or maybe move to another neighborhood – that's what's holding you back. You should be proud that you "made it out" – everyone should be like you. What do these phrases bring to mind? Some counseling professionals may feel dismayed, disgusted, or angry, while others might feel little, possibly even nod their heads in agreement. These statements are examples of social class microaggressions (SCMs), statements that denigrate, insult, or disrespect people with nondominant social class identities, even though they may not be intended to do so (Sue, [37]). Many counselors and counseling psychologists may not hear these statements as problematic because myths purporting the United States (US) is a *classless society* in which all opportunities are open to all people are ubiquitous and mostly go unchallenged (Cook, [11]; Smith & Redington, [33]). Even in countries where citizens acknowledge social class groups and social class inequality exist (e.g. Australia and the United Kingdom), many are reticent to identify with a social class group outside the dominant or normative group (Andersen & Curtis, [6]; Divine, [13]; Martin & Wajcman, [22]). This reticence demonstrates a predilection for an identification in which persons share identities rather than highlighting differences.

Unchallenged myths and a desire for shared identities are two likely foundations why SCMs persist. Based on the findings of the study presented here, we contend SCMs may endure because they preserve homeostasis, or work to maintain the social class status quo. The social class status quo in US culture is defined as middle social class because it is considered the dominant culture, meaning middle social class is the group that holds cultural power (McDowell, Brown, Cullen, & Duyn, [23]; Smith, [32]). Social class group dominance is not confined to US culture and is defined differently based on country (Divine, [13]; Martin & Wajcman, [22]); however, the present study was conducted with US individuals, which is contextually important to understanding the study findings.

Within the paradigm of preserving homeostasis, people rarely seek to understand their privilege, power, and status, and how these factors might be used to oppress others, particularly via the systems of which people are a part, because to do so would keep them from maintaining homeostasis. Accordingly, individuals may perpetuate class bias, classism, and participate in systemic inequality, many without knowing it. In this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research study, we sought to understand counselor education doctoral students' experiences with SCMs. We selected a counselor education doctoral student sample for several reasons. Initially, our interest in doctoral students began several years ago when we were students ourselves and perceived troublesome incidents, seemingly related to social class/SES differences between students and their faculty and supervisors. When searching the literature for answers, we found little at the time and later found social class microaggressions research that focused on graduate students generally (Smith, Mao, & Deshpande, [35]) and undergraduate students (Sarcedo, Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, [30]). We believe

counselor education doctoral students occupy a unique position: They have substantial educational experience because they have earned undergraduate and masters degrees, giving them more experience in higher education than undergraduate or masters students; they have received training to raise their awareness and develop knowledge about their own cultural identities and the identities of others, particularly individuals and groups who are marginalized; they are trained professional counselors who have served a myriad of client populations; and almost all are training to become graduate level educators. We believed doctoral students' unique combination of experiences and perspectives could add to the limited research about SCMs, and that they had the capacity to articulate the phenomenon under investigation cogently due to their experiences in higher education and as counseling professionals (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, [31]).

Through the analysis process, a tentative theory emerged regarding why SCMs may persist: To preserve homeostasis. We present data to corroborate the emerging theory, offer implications for the counseling profession, and avenues for future research.

Literature review

Social class and social class microaggressions

Social class is a subjective, socially constructed concept that integrates individuals' socioeconomic status (SES) with their social location, resources, relative power, and individual and group experiences, all of which impact individuals' attitudes, beliefs, values, worldviews, perceptions, and behaviors (Cook & Lawson, [12]). Social class is subjective and socially constructed because (a) it is not discrete and easily measured like SES factors of income, education, and occupation; (b) in-group variances are common due to persons' intersecting cultural identities (e.g. race, gender, and religion), social location (e.g. geographic region, in and out-group experiences and opportunities), and relative power within their group/community; and (c) social class definitions can vary based on cultural context, academic discipline, and individual researchers' conceptualizations. However, simply put, researchers agree social class includes SES factors and individuals' lived experiences of their SES (Brown, Fukunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, [8]; McDowell et al., [23]). Consequently, individual's reported social class experiences can vary widely within similar cultural contexts (e.g. neighborhood, school, work place, race, ethnicity, and gender), so differences certainly exist between individuals living in different cultural contexts and countries around the globe. And although social class is rich and complex, it is often reduced to income only, likely because income is easily understood and measured, and the large role income plays in individuals' lived experiences (e.g. access to resources, family of origin ways of being; Brown et al., 1996).

Microaggressions are verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights, both intentional and unintentional, that serve to insult, denigrate, or disrespect individuals with nondominant cultural identities (Sue et al., [38]). Microaggressions were identified first in terms of race and ethnicity, and authors have expanded microaggression domains greatly over the past decade to include identities such as social class, ability, gender, and sexual orientation, (Sue, [37]), and even the different jobs people hold in work places (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, [41]). Although microaggression research has expanded consistently, authors continue to call for additional microaggression research (Lui & Quezada, [21]; Sue, [37])

Young et al. ([41]) introduced the term, *hierarchical microaggressions* to capture "systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person in the institution" (p. 61). Hierarchical microaggressions (Young et al., [41]) is a helpful term for understanding SCMs because hierarchical microaggressions are rooted in occupational roles, a component of SES, and additionally, because social class tends to be understood from a hierarchical perspective, that is, social class groups are ranked on a continuum from low social class to high social class (Smith, [32]). This ranked continuum is based on discrete SES factors (i.e. education, occupation, and income) rather than social class, often highlighting income most strongly due to the opportunities and resources, or lack thereof, income can provide. Because social class is socially constructed, it does not lend itself to rankings in and of itself; therefore, social class is readily tied to and understood in terms of the SES factors that serve as the basis for social class.

SCMs are verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that serve to denigrate, insult, or disrespect people with nondominant social class identities (Cook et al., [9]). Although social class cannot be defined or understood solely based on income, SCMs often arise based on perceived or actual factors that are both linked to income and are beyond income (Liu, [20]). For example, verbal SCMs like, "You don't look like you grew up poor," or "You must be so proud of what you've overcome," initially appear to be about income with use of the term *poor*; however, they point to social class concurrently. Consider the phrase *look like* in the first example. This phrase points to the notion people who are poor present in a particular way, which is seemingly different from individuals in other social class groups. Similarly, the vague phrase, *what you've overcome* in the second example may imply earnings, though it may point to environment, education, occupation, or status as well.

Additionally, verbal SCMs can include use of terms such as, *trailer trash*, *ghetto*, or *rednecks*, referring to people in low social class as *the poor* or *those people* (Author, ; Smith et al., [35]), or may involve using *politically correct* terms that have hidden meanings such as *at risk* or *urban*. Behavioral SCMs may include planning a department or work party at an expensive restaurant, displaying shocked or uncomfortable body language when a person describes her/his/their social class background, or silently *scanning* what a person is wearing, eating, or possessing (e.g. electronics and purse) (Smith et al., [35]). Environmental SCMs may include systemic *unwritten rules* everyone is expected to know regarding behavior, speech, interactional norms, or how to present oneself. How one should dress for particular events, how one should speak or behave when networking with professionals, or acceptable conversation topics in professional environments are all example of unwritten rules. Additionally, environmental SCMs may include knowledge expectations about procedures within systems such as retirement, health insurance, or financial aid, all of which may be seemingly cryptic to people who have limited or no working knowledge of these concepts that are necessary in order to navigate and maintain membership in such systems (Smith et al., [35]).

With all SCMs, assumptions about what people know, how they make sense of situations, and how they should dress, act, or respond are common and stem from the reference point of middle social class (Smith et al., [35]). Within higher education, middle social class as the reference point is exacerbated because higher education has historical been dominated by individuals who are middle social class and higher (Sarcedo et al., [30]; Smith et al., [35]). Often, this dominance results in assuming everyone within the system is middle social class and if not, should assimilate to middle

social class norms (McDowell et al., [23]; Sarcedo et al., [30]). For example, graduate level family therapy students from low social class ($N = 45$) revealed they felt they needed to hide their social class background from professors and peers because acts of classism were ubiquitous in classroom and supervision settings (McDowell et al., [23]). Miller, Miller, and Stull ([25]) found only a few years earlier that counselor educators ($N = 154$) held significantly more social class bias than they did gender or racial bias. The researchers posited this may be due to social class remaining in the cultural periphery, both in higher education and US society as a whole (Miller et al., [25]), which may be partly due to the ubiquitous belief the US is a *classless society* (Author, ; Smith & Redington, [33]).

Although similarities exist among members of the same social class group, differences are common. Identity intersectionality, particularly gender and race, impacts how individuals experience social class and subsequent bias and/or oppression when they have multiple nondominant identities (Sarcedo et al., [30]; Smith & Redington, [33]). Liu (2011) posited one's race and ethnicity impact how one experiences and interprets social class and classism, including the concept of success: what success is, how it is measured, and what barriers stymie success. Connectedly, Sarcedo et al. ([30]) highlighted how people may hold implicit beliefs about people with intersecting identities, such as the belief that students with nondominant racial identities do not belong in college or have not *earned their place*. Such notions may be connected to the societal assumption that people with nondominant racial identities are economically poor, while people who are racially dominant (i.e. White in US) are not (Smith et al., [35]). These beliefs and connected biases can lead to further assumptions that may result in SCMs, classism, racism, or a combination coined, "raceclassist microaggressions" (Sarcedo et al., [30], p. 2).

Similarly, gender influences economic realities and increases the likelihood individuals may experience SCMs. Smith and Redington ([33]) emphasized the wage gap between women and men, and how families headed by single-parent mothers are twice as likely to live in poverty than single-parent father families, while Liegghio and Caragata ([19]) found single mothers ($N = 92$) who engaged with the social welfare system experienced microaggressions from their social workers. These microaggressive experiences consisted of dismissive comments, attitudes, and vocal tone from their social workers that caused participants to feel they did not have sincere need and were causing problems simply by being involved in the welfare system.

Power, privilege, homeostasis, and social class myths

In the US, social stratification exists whereby people with dominant cultural identities (e.g. male, White, heterosexual, and middle social class) enjoy higher status, power, and benefits associated with socio-cultural privilege than people with nondominant cultural identities (Black & Stone, [7]; Johnson, [16]). Individuals with nondominant identities frequently experience marginalization, discrimination, and disenfranchisement because people in the dominant culture want to retain their privilege and power (Johnson, [16]). Power is "an intricate network of relationships rather than a binary system" (Liu, 2011, p. 63), and people in such networks operate covertly and overtly to preserve their power and position. SCMs and other forms of classism serve to retain such power and can result in oppression, discrimination, and structural inequality (Liu, 2011; Smith & Redington, [33]).

Further, privilege may cause people to believe they are not individuals who engage in actions that could be considered biased, prejudiced, or discriminatory, and they may employ "defensive

maneuvers" (Sue, [37], p. 5) to avoid such topics. For example, a person might state, "Class doesn't matter," or "We are all in the same graduate program, so we're more similar than different." When dominant culture individuals make statements like these, they employ a defensive maneuver that allows them to avoid conversations that may highlight differences or experiences outside their own, resulting in centering the dialogue around their own experience with minimal regard for the lived experiences and realities of others. The experiences of people with non-dominant identities are decentered as they are silenced; their experiences of oppression and marginalization are ignored and continue to occur. Such silence allows people in the dominant culture to maintain their image as people who do not oppress others and more importantly, they retain their privilege, power, and status, thereby reinforcing the behavior. Social class bias, classism, and SCMs can result when individuals work covertly or overtly to retain their power, privilege, and status (Sue, [37]).

The natural inclination humans have to maintain homeostasis can contextualize the insidious nature of power and privilege. Jackson ([15]) introduced the term *homeostasis* to family therapy to describe the equilibrium or sense of stability or normalcy families work to maintain. Therapists have postulated families will utilize even the most maladaptive coping skills and interactional patterns to avoid adaptation and to retain homeostasis (Colapinto, [10]). The pull toward homeostasis begins in the brain; people are biologically predisposed to seek cognitive harmony and create patterns that represent harmony and balance to them (Albieri, Hue, & Gleason, [1]). This desire for harmony is replicated in families and other systems, including social systems (Mihaylov, [24]; Minuchin, [27]). For example, family members may lie or diminish another family member's drinking or drug abuse or deny abuse allegations when questioned by people outside the family system. In educational settings, students may protect a dishonest cohort member who holds power when questioned by faculty or conversely, faculty members may avoid confronting or reporting a colleague who displays worrisome or unethical behavior if that colleague holds power within the group. In social systems, individuals may deny that members of their group are enacting classism or racism towards others, or they may make excuses or rationalize members' behaviors. The goal of any of the aforementioned behaviors is to maintain harmony and avoid conflict, even when individuals are aware problems exist.

Homeostasis is disrupted when people and systems are confronted with stimuli (e.g. people, events) that are not in line with their preestablished patterns of balance or harmony (Albieri et al., [1]). In US culture, established homeostatic, societal patterns are connected with dominant culture values, beliefs, ways of being, etc. Nondominant values, beliefs, and ways of being, coupled with cross-cultural interactions, can cause people from the dominant culture to become cognitively dysregulated, so they work to regain homeostasis, often by using their cultural power and privilege (Albieri et al., [1]; Mihaylov, [24]). Applying this to social class, this means individuals will seek to secure and protect middle social class systems and values when they feel their homeostasis is threatened by individuals from nondominant social class groups. Often, this is done unknowingly and unintentionally, much like SCMs.

Multiple social class myths may serve to reinforce social class power, privilege, bias, and maintain homeostasis. Authors have exposed the myth that many believe the US is a *classless society* (Author, ; Johnson, [16]; Smith & Redington, [33]). In fact, Smith and Redington ([33]) purported SCMs are largely connected to this myth because it causes individuals who are in low social class to

be *invisible* or *nonexistent* to people in middle social class and higher, removing the possibility that oppression based on social class can occur. Such invisibility as a result of believing the US is a classless society allows people who are middle social class to maintain homeostasis because if they do not believe low social class group exist, they do not have to grapple with the realities of these groups' lived experiences, which are often quite different from their own. *Class blindness*, similar to *color blindness*, perpetuates beliefs that social class does not matter and the focus should be on our shared humanity only, not our differences (Author, ; Smith & Redington, [33]). Class blindness is an extension of the classless society belief and can similarly allow individuals who are middle social class to center themselves within their own experiences without confronting or resolving the dissonance of their experiences compared to those of people in low social class, thereby maintaining homeostasis.

Another common social class myth is the belief in meritocracy: Hard work leads to success (Author). Coupled with this myth is the belief that upward class mobility is viable for all people. Pew Charitable Trusts ([29]) found that 40% of Americans believe if one works hard, one can become *rich*, while their data revealed that 70% of Americans who are born into the bottom two economic quintiles remain there. Of the 30% who move out of the bottom two economic quintiles, 17% move to the middle quintile, 9% to the fourth quintile, and 4% to the fifth quintile. They noted people who are White are twice as likely as people who are Black to move out of the bottom quintile, and college graduates were 5.3 times more likely. The belief *anyone* can achieve economic mobility is not substantiated by data and can contribute to maintaining homeostasis. If persons believe anyone can achieve economic mobility, it can be fairly simple to dismiss those who have not been upwardly mobile as lazy, unmotivated, etc. and maintain homeostasis. To confront the economic and systemic realities would disrupt homeostasis.

In sum, SCMs and other forms of classism serve as mechanisms for people to retain power, privilege, and status, and to maintain homeostasis. Social class myths, particularly that the US is a *classless society*, allow SCMs to operate unchallenged, reinforcing the dominant culture at the expense of others (Smith & Redington, [33]). To date, several authors in counseling and counseling psychology have discussed SCMs conceptually or peripherally, yet only two have investigated SCMs empirically (Author, ; Smith et al., [35]), and none have empirically postulated what mechanisms allow SCMs to persist. With our current study, we sought to understand doctoral students' SCM experiences, whereby a tentative theory emerged from the data revealing an explanation for why SCMs persist: Preservation of homeostasis.

Method

The researchers sought to answer the research question, *How do counseling doctoral students understand and define their experiences of SCMs?* As mentioned earlier, we chose counselor education doctoral students because of the lack of specific research on counseling graduate students and SCMs, their extended experiences in higher education, and the unique set of experiences and perspectives counselor education doctoral students bring to articulating the phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., [31]). Additionally, counselor education doctoral students are counselors who are training to become counselor educators, yet they have limited power and privilege because of their student role; however, they will become counselor educators and will acquire such power and privilege when they enter the professoriate. It is important to note the primary reason individuals seek counselor

education doctoral degrees in US is to become graduate level educators. A doctoral degree is not required to practice and become licensed as a counselor as it is to practice and obtain licensure as a psychologist, or to practice counseling psychology in its many forms around the world. Finally, because of the limited research, discourse, and general public knowledge of SCMs, we did not believe clients would be the best fit to investigate this phenomenon at this juncture.

Because we endeavored to understand individuals' experiences with a particular phenomenon (i.e. SCMs), we chose a qualitative research design, specifically, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a research approach grounded in philosophy, namely, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., [31]). Corresponding with phenomenology, IPA seeks to give voice to how individuals "make sense" (Larkin & Thompson, [17], p. 101) of their experiences, while its hermeneutic underpinnings allow participants and researchers alike to interpret the meaning making process in which participants engage (Smith et al., [31]). Idiography, which seeks to understand the particular rather than the general, gives insight into individuals' unique experiences of phenomena, and these unique experiences can be used to develop an interpretive account that can lead to a tentative hypothesis or theory about a phenomenon (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, [18]; Smith et al., [31]). In this way, researchers balance *first-order analysis* to report participants' accounts with *second-order analysis*, which conceptualizes and interprets participants' accounts (Larkin et al., [18]). Thus, we chose IPA so participants could share and interpret their SCM experiences, and so their accounts could be interpreted and understood conceptually within the cultural context (Larkin et al., [18]); both were priorities due to limited existing research and understanding about SCMs.

It is important to note we did not undertake this study with the intent to develop theory. Instead, the theory we present arose from the data and second-order analysis consistent with IPA. Second order analysis is characterized by the researchers making sense of how the participants made sense of their experiences (Miller, Chan, & Farmer, [26]). It is not uncommon in IPA for the interviews and analysis to take researchers into "new and unanticipated territory" and to reveal interpretations "not anticipated by your interview schedule" (Smith et al., [31], p. 113). The theory developed and reported in this article represents IPA process and our engagement with second order analysis.

Our data analysis generated findings in two distinct domains: The lived experience of SCMs (Author) and an emergent theory about why SCMs persist. Because findings fell in two distinct domains, two manuscripts were warranted (American Psychological Association, [4]; Hunt, [14]); only the emergent theory data are reported in this manuscript.

Participants

We employed criterion-based, purposeful sampling to create a homogenous sample (Smith et al., [31]). Criteria were: (a) enrolled currently in a Counseling for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP)-accredited counselor education doctoral program, and (b) have experienced a situation(s) in which the person felt slighted, challenged, put down, etc. based on social class/SES group affiliation and/or identity. We recruited participants by emailing recruitment information to faculty housed in CACREP-accredited counselor education doctoral programs. Additionally, participants were asked to refer any individuals who might have been a fit for the study. Of the 26 people who expressed interest to participate, 13 qualified and 11 were interviewed. Eleven

participants is an acceptable sample size for IPA studies, with 3–10 participants being most common and some IPA studies having as few as one participant (Larkin & Thompson, [17]).

Ten females and one male participated, and all identified their gender as congruent with their biological sex. Participant ages ranged from 28 to 54 years ($M = 35.63$). Six participants identified as African American/Black, four as European American/White, and one as Latino/Hispanic, and of these primary identifications, two participants identified as multiracial. Two participants identified as bisexual, eight as heterosexual, five reported being single, four married, and two divorced. Participants reported their family of origin social class identity and their current social class identity (see Table 1). The amount of time since participants graduated from their masters programs ranged from 7 months to 139 months ($M = 57.72$). Participants resided in the Southern ($n = 9$), North Atlantic ($n = 1$), and Rocky Mountain ($n = 1$) US regions.

Table 1. Participants' Self-identified Social Class Group Affiliations: Current and Family of Origin

	Family of Origin Social Class					Current Social Class		
	1 Identity	2 Identities	3 Identities	4 Identities	5 Identities	1 Identity	2 Identities	3 Identities
Lower	a	h	J		k			
Working	b	h	J		k	a, h		
Upper-lower		i	J		k			k
Lower-middle	c,d	i			k	f		k
Middle	e, f				k	c, d, e, g, t, J		k
Upper-middle	g							
Upper						b		
Totals :	7	2	1	0	1	10	0	1

Note: A letter was assigned to each participant and represents the same participant throughout the table. Participants selected as many identities as they believed represented them.

Data collection

We obtained university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to all recruitment activities. All research activities were conducted in compliance with IRB and *American Counseling Association Code of Ethics* ([3]) standards. We conducted two pilot interviews to determine whether amendments needed to be made to the interview protocol, and minor changes were made. Pilot interview data were not included in data analysis.

Participants provided verbal and written consent prior to interview commencement and were given an electronic copy of the consent form. Participants received a \$15 gift card as a *thank you* for their participation after they completed the first interview. Prior to the interview, participants completed an online demographic questionnaire via eSurv.org using a pseudonym. Researchers matched the pseudonym with the participant during the first interview. To bolster anonymity, we did not use participant pseudonyms to report findings. Instead, we refer to participants as P1, P2, etc. We invited participants to engage in two semistructured interviews, approximately two weeks apart. Ten interviews were conducted via phone and 1 via Skype. The first interview ranged 60–120 min; the second interview ranged 15–30 min. The goal of the first interview was to understand participants' experiences with SCMs, while the second interview was intended to allow participants to add information or provide reflections about SCMs and their interview experiences. The second interview was not required, and 5 out of 11 participants chose to participate.

We developed the semistructured interview protocol or *interview schedule* (Smith et al., [31]) as a flexible guide for the interviews (see Appendix). Because both authors interviewed participants, an interview schedule was essential. We developed open-ended questions congruent with IPA question formats, particularly narrative, descriptive, and evaluative questions combined with prompts and probes (Smith et al., [31]). Further, we structured the interview questions to build rapport and put participants at ease, with the intent to create an environment in which participants would feel comfortable disclosing their SCM experiences (Smith et al., [31]). Interviews were audio recorded; graduate students transcribed the recordings, and a second graduate student checked each transcript for accuracy. The researchers listened to the interviews multiple times during analysis, thereby checking transcripts again.

Data analysis

IPA data analysis is an iterative, interpretative process in which researchers immerse themselves in the data in multiple ways to determine findings (Smith et al., [31]). The IPA analysis process can be summarized in four basic steps. In step one, we read each transcript multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data, recording our initial impressions and interpretations (Larkin & Thompson, [17]). This process allowed us to become familiar with the transcript and contributed to identifying our thoughts and beliefs about the data. Next, in step two, we conducted line-by-line coding and identified *objects of concern* (OC) and *experiential claims* (EC) (Larkin & Thompson, [17]). OC are things that "matter to participants" (Larkin & Thompson, [17], p. 106), such as incidents, relationships, or beliefs, and EC are participants' interpretations or meaning related to OC. For example, a participant might describe a critical event with her supervisor (OC) and then share the impact it had on her development as a counselor (EC). EC can be complex because participants' tone, word choice, verbal fillers, and silences contribute to the content they share. This required us to listen to the interviews

again while coding and note these details. For this step, we alternated between primary and secondary coder roles. Each researcher coded independently, and the secondary coder was responsible for entering her codes into the primary coder's spreadsheet and noting any discrepancies or questions about the primary coder's interpretations.

After a transcript was coded, we began step three, developing emergent themes (Smith et al., [31]). We clustered OC with their EC and assigned thematic codes using a tabbed spreadsheet for each thematic code, much of which is the foundation for what later became super-ordinate or sub-ordinate themes reported in the findings. Thematic codes were assigned initially based on participants' words that captured the essence of theme and later, many were nuanced to articulate themes more clearly. For each thematic code, researchers worked independently to assign the clustered OCs and ECs with a thematic code; then, we reviewed each other's assignments and worked together to reach consensus. This was a highly iterative process we repeated dozens of times: working independently with the data, reviewing the other researcher's work, and coming together for consensus. If we struggled to reach consensus, we listened to the audio recordings again and reexamined one another's interpretations. We utilized steps 1–3 until all transcripts were completed before moving to step 4, searching for connections across emergent themes (Smith et al., [31]). In this step, we identified five IPA elements: (a) *abstraction*, the patterns among emergent themes (e.g. consistencies between participants), (b) *polarization*, dichotomies among emergent themes (e.g. differences between participants), (c) *contextualization*, cultural and narrative elements (e.g. where, when, or with whom reported incidents occurred), (d) *function*, the role narrative elements (e.g. tone, silences, and word choice) played, and (e) *numeration*, the frequency emergent themes occurred (i.e. number of times). Like steps 1–3, step four was a highly iterative process in which we moved regularly between particular cases and themes to the emergent themes. During this process, some themes remained consistent, some were not included because they did not fit, while others were combined (i.e. *subsumption* in APA; Smith et al., [31]). We examined the emergent themes as a whole to identify the salient interpretations and to create a thematic data structure (Larkin & Thompson, [17]). Salient interpretations were grounded in study data and represented how we made sense of how the participants made sense of their experiences (Miller et al., [26]). Within this process, we recorded and discussed multiple possible interpretations before arriving at the final interpretation (Smith et al., [31]). The thematic data structure is the *product* that displays how the super-ordinate and subordinate themes align and may be in the form of a table or figure. Our thematic data structure began as a table, and we transferred the table data to a figure to better represent how the data interacted with and informed each other. Aligned with IPA, data are reported as super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes in the findings section and in the figure (Smith et al., [31]).

Role of the researchers

The hermeneutical interpretative tradition inherent to IPA calls researchers to be active participants with the data, so researchers' identities and experiences play a different role in IPA than they do in descriptive phenomenological traditions. IPA acknowledges the researchers impact data interpretation because of the iterative, reflexive processes in which they engage. The researchers' prior experiences, knowledge, and worldviews cannot and should not be eradicated or bracketed completely in IPA, yet the researchers are responsible for determining how they impact findings (Smith et al., [31]).

The first author identifies as a White, cisgender woman who was raised in upper-lower social class (Warner, Meeker, & Eells, [40]) and identifies now as a member of upper-lower social class and middle social class. The second author identifies as a European American, cisgender woman who was raised in and identifies currently as middle social class. Both authors have experienced and witnessed SCMs in various life contexts, including higher education. Additionally, we are committed to cross-cultural engagement, cultural competence, and advocacy for underserved communities and nondominant populations, all of which were lenses through which we viewed the research process and worked with the participants and data.

Trustworthiness

We employed several trustworthiness strategies to ensure sensitivity to context, rigor, transparency, and coherence of our study and findings (Smith et al., [31]). We invited all participants to review their transcripts and permitted them to make changes and additions. Five participants reviewed their transcripts and made minor grammatical changes if any changes at all. For each transcript, the researchers alternated between the primary coder and secondary coder roles to stimulate new ideas and rich conversation about the data and analysis processes. This action added to the iterative process because we posed questions about one another's interpretations and codes that often led us to return to the data in both written and recorded forms. Throughout the research process, we engaged in reflective journaling, maintained an audit trail, and sought peer researcher consultation. We utilized independent auditors who reviewed the thematic data structure, interpretations, and codebooks within the context of the research question (Larkin & Thompson, [17]; Smith et al., [31]). The auditors were both female counselor educators with extensive qualitative research experience, one of whom was in her late 20s and the other in her mid-30s, both identified as middle social class. The auditors provided feedback and posed questions to clarify and strengthen the thematic data structure and the emergent theoretical interpretation we present. Finally, we provide extended quotes in the findings section, so readers are able to contextualize and evaluate the research interpretations.

Findings

Our findings are presented as a developing theory based on critical interpretation and convergence of participants' particular SCM experiences as doctoral students within the US cultural context (Larkin et al., [18]). This interpretation resulted in *The Persistence of SCMs* (see Figure 1). *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures* is the singular superordinate theme and is represented in both large circles of the model as it is influenced by four subordinate themes (i.e. *Social Class Invisibility*, *Intersecting Identities*, *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class*, and *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class*), and perpetuated by three sub-ordinate themes: *SCM Manifestations*, *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class*, and *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class*. *Social Class Invisibility* and *Intersecting Identities* are linked by overlapping circles to represent the shared relationship between the two sub-ordinate themes. *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class* and *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class* are in an overlapping dotted circle in the middle of the figure to represent they both influence and result in *Unequal, Embedded, Societal Structures*. Together, the super-ordinate theme and subsequent subordinate themes culminate in *Preservation of Homeostasis*. The super-ordinate and subordinate themes are explained and substantiated with participant quotes. Congruent with IPA's aim to make sense of participants'

experiences and provide "a full narrative account which is comprehensible, systematic, and persuasive to the reader" (Smith et al., [31], p. 109), we offer substantial and often lengthy participant quotes to immerse readers in participants' experiences and to contextualize interpretations.

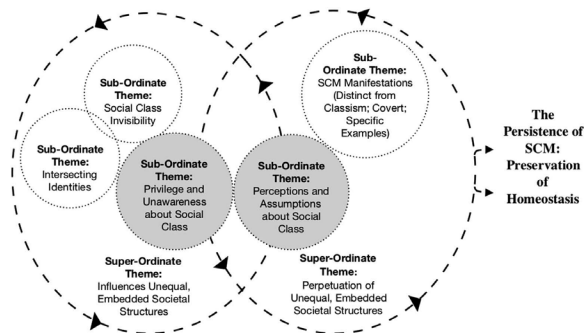


Figure 1. The persistence of SCM

Superordinate theme: unequal, embedded societal structures

SCMs persist in order to preserve homeostasis, which has a direct relationship with the superordinate theme, *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*. Participants reported the US societal structure is by nature an unequal and seemingly immutable system in which SCMs and classism are methods by which systems and structures stays in place (and influenced by the forthcoming subordinate themes). P6 stated:

Individuals may not necessarily have or feel that they have a classist attitude but because of how society is structured and the way things trickle back from different policies and you know, things that they hear. I think people develop those without realizing it. So even if people... may not be classist...they are exhibiting a symptom of the problem [with] microaggressions.

P9 added to this sentiment: "[It's] influenced by your upbringing and also by seeing what the media portrays as what is fair treatment or not fair treatment."

Two participants indicated unequal societal structures are maintained because people do not want to lose their power or security. P11 stated, "The reality is that there's so many systems in place, and the bigger picture that happens ... the microaggressions and the classism ... people are afraid ... of letting go of their security." P2 concurred:

I think ... people use all these different things they do – being rude, not hiring people, preventing people from being promoted, not giving people loans, all kinds of things – I think they do that because they are afraid of losing power.

Participants provided examples of how inequality is maintained in school systems, neighborhoods, and the criminal justice system. P8 shared:

...Access to services within school systems, school districting, just depending on where you live ... depends on the school that you go to, but then the housing market highly determines the amount of money that goes to various schools. So, if you live kind of in like, poor housing, then the schools have less funding for books and things like that.

P11 extended how education plays a role:

If you have the ability, you have the privilege or the socioeconomic status to send your child to the best school or to use these extra resources that will put you at an advantage... The lower economic status doesn't have that ability to navigate or have as many resources available and...once an individual is in that civil poverty, it's really hard to break that cycle. And there's institutional policies and procedures in place that contribute to that classism for it to continue on.

Finally, P2 spoke to the role of the judicial system:

Another place that I see so much of it is in the judicial system because I have worked in the judicial system for a long time. And I think that the people ... who have the most power realize that if we take our foot off their necks, if we allow too much access, then they will be as we are.

Sub-ordinate themes: social class invisibility and intersecting identities

Participants discussed two distinct, yet intertwined concepts, *Social Class Invisibility* and *Intersecting Identities*. These concepts are interconnected and reported together because the participants noted how social class can be ignored because it is seemingly *invisible* compared to other more visible or physically apparent identities (e.g. race and gender), and participants often discussed these concepts in tandem. Participants stated how more physically apparent identities may be discussed more frequently, they may influence individuals' social class views or experiences, or how people with multiple nondominant identities may experience social class differently. Ten of 11 participants specified additional identities when they discussed SCMs. These identities included race and ethnicity ($n = 8$), geographic location ($n = 4$), gender ($n = 3$), age ($n = 2$), marital status ($n = 2$), language ($n = 2$), religion ($n = 2$), and generational status in the US ($n = 1$).

In terms of social class invisibility, P1 stated, "No one [in my program] actually talks about it (social class) because they don't think it's relevant." She added, "They just assume, 'Oh you got this far you must have some money,' because it's not visual. You don't know how much money I have or debt I don't have." P5 shared, "I think that people are a little more aware of racism, homophobia, but classism is still something that isn't talked about or identified a lot." Further, P5 acknowledged the complexity of social class invisibility based on her experience of being from low social class: "It's hard to put your finger on because it's not like I was ever living in a shelter or that was ever a reality, it's not a really visible, distinctive thing."

P1 shared how her social class identity was ignored, while attention was paid to her nondominant racial identity in her doctoral program:

They just didn't talk about it (social class) and because I identify as a racial minority, that came up more in the conversation because they felt like they had to. So, they talk about "What's most salient to you?" so because one person that you see is brown, they're going to say, "Oh, okay so we have to acknowledge this and talk about it because we don't want her to feel uncomfortable." Well I already do because I'm going to see that you are [uncomfortable].

P10 acknowledged how she believes nondominant identities impact SCMs:

I think it (SCMs) varies from person to person, and it all really depends on the circumstances. I think that minorities experience it more because, I don't want to say that it's institutionalized, but it sort of is institutionalized to a certain extent ... When I say minority, I am meaning by that is not considered to be a part of the dominant culture which would be White, Anglo-Saxon males.

Additionally, participants noted how multiple nondominant identities may impact SCMs and how social class is perceived. P11 stated how SCMs are "just those little things that occur on a daily basis that ... I think it coincides not only with social class but ... [with] ethnic background." P2 concurred: "a form of disenfranchisement continues to occur because even though you may be qualified, because of your gender and your ethnicity, you're automatically not allowed access to a higher salary." She continued by sharing an experience from when she taught at a community college:

They didn't see Black instructors ... so some of my students will say, "I didn't even know you were a teacher." And I've been in the workroom and a student would walk in who was at work-study and treat me as if I were a student even though I'm dressed very professionally.

Finally, participants acknowledged the link between race and social class. P4 offered an example of how social class can be just as apparent as race:

I think the (social) class thing is not based on money. You can still be socially accepted like Snoop Dogg, but there is (*sic*) still other things that I think will exclude him from certain circles. You know, definitely the way he talks, what you talk about, how you make people feel. You know whether you make people feel intelligent ... when you're having a conversation with someone and someone feels like they are able to use their intellect on you. I think that's really important in certain social classes in the Black community. If you're talking about you're rich, and talking about something people don't feel like is important that ... can separate you. The conversations you have with your children, how your children behave, the food you eat. You know Snoop Dogg came to a party and everybody's serving escargot and I don't know something exotic, and he's like, "Where's the barbecue and the corn bread?" They don't care how much money he has, that immediately puts him in a different social class.

P4 shared how she experienced race and social class during classroom discussions:

I found the White students to be so reluctant to talk about class, and the White students will often separate themselves from lower class White people especially at [my university]. Because nobody wants to be lower class. And White people, they would also say, "Oh they're rednecks." Or they wouldn't say rednecks, they would just, they would easily distance their experience from a lower class White person. ... It was like when there was a lower class Black situation, me and the other [Black] students would sometimes chime in regardless of whether or not we come from that situation. You know like I didn't grow up in the ghetto ... but I still can, I still didn't feel distance from what they were experiencing.

The quotes in this section illustrate the complexity associated with the seemingly invisible nature of social class and the connections social class has with other cultural identities.

Subordinate theme: privilege and unawareness about social class

Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class was identified as both influencing and resulting in *Unequal, Embedded, Societal Structures* because the key factors participants identified in this theme appeared to have a relationship with both. P3 shared, "We don't really think about the privileges that we have, and ... I think social [class] microaggressions often come up when we don't examine the privileges that go along with certain instances of being of different social classes." Similarly, P1 stated:

I think a lot of times people are well intended, but when you come from a place of privilege you are not always aware of what someone who doesn't have the same privileges experiences. So as good as your intentions are, you need to sometimes stop and sit back and [think], "What is it like for this person?" before I make this comment. Would this comment even be relevant for the person because their situation may not change?

P8 shared an example of how a classmate's response during a class discussion about Hurricane Katrina revealed unawareness and privilege, demonstrating unawareness about people with limited financial resources:

[My classmate shared,] "I don't understand why they didn't just like, go. They deserved to get everything that they're getting right now because when they were told to leave, they should have just left." And my response to her was, "Well in the article it says that they couldn't afford to leave." And she was like, "I don't even get that. My bank account is never under so many hundreds of dollars. They should have called someone. Somehow they should have been able to leave. If they didn't have enough money to leave then that doesn't make any sense." ... She really just doesn't (*sic*) have a concept of people [who] live very differently from her. The resources and support that some people have could be so little that the better choice for them was to stay in that situation because they couldn't afford to leave. ... There were other people kind of commenting to try to help her to think differently, and she just could not. It didn't click for her that people lived in a different way or couldn't even afford, you know, a hundred dollars for a bus ticket.

Finally, P11 offered an explanation specific to privilege:

[People might think,] "Oh, I won't want to give [it] away. I want to feel secure and my socioeconomic status makes me secure." So I can ... act on a microaggression like, "All people on welfare are lazy," or, "Oh, I pulled myself up on my boot straps," you know, "Why can't they?" Or that example that they give ... that one athlete or that one in a million that makes it, "Well, why can't you do that?" You know? And like that message then that, "Oh everyone, everyone can pull themselves up by their boot straps."

Subordinate theme: perceptions and assumptions about social class

Participant data illuminated how perceptions and assumptions influence *Unequal, Embedded, Societal Structures* and can result in SCMs. Perceptions and assumptions can begin with classifying individuals by which social class groups the person is believed to belong. For example, P1 shared, "I think society creates a certain image of what people look like, if they have money or if they don't have money." P4 added:

I also think of how people carry themselves. Like the one girl who I do think was upper middle class. I could tell by the way she sat in class, the jewelry, the way her hair was done, she did seem, she performed upper middle class more so than some of the other people.

P11 shared, "We're so quick to judge based on what, what our physical appearance is, what we wear. All of these different things, and we assign a social class..." Similarly, P2 discussed how occupation plays a role:

Where you work, people they label you in a certain class. If you say, "I work at the jail," they're going to ask you, "What do you do?" You say, "I work at the school," and they ask you, "What do you do?" so they can put you in a certain social class in their mind because if you're the janitorial staff, a lot of times people don't think too much of you. If you're the kitchen staff they don't think too much of you. If you say, "I am a teacher," oh, then you're smart. If you just say, "I'm a custodian," then they kind of, a lot of times and I've seen it happen, they just kind of overlook you, they're not real...they don't really engage you. And oftentimes they will treat them according to that box very quickly – it sounds like the categorization.

P8 acknowledged yet another layer: "Like different styles of speaking; that's something that may have given it away that she doesn't come from the same background that they do."

Participants noted how assumptions and perceptions can shift from social class or SES categorization to assumptions that can result in judgment. Such judgments can result in treating people differently. P2 discussed the importance of how people are perceived because it may indicate how a person will be treated:

And that's why people buy certain vehicles. So that when they're away from their home, they are perceived to be in a certain social class. They may live in an apartment with one bedroom, they may live in a mobile home, but you don't know where I live so when I leave my home I want you to see me as being in a certain social class. Because I know that's how you're going to treat me.

P11 highlighted assumptions made about her based on her identity as a single parent: "Being a single mom...a lot of times people make the assumption that I'm on assistance or that I need this or that...because of my status as a single parent." Finally, P10 shared an incident in which a department store clerk made assumptions about her and ignored her:

She didn't know that I had an American Express and that I could afford it. She took one look at me and judged me based on me having shorts on; you know me having some baggy shorts on and a t-shirt. That, "Oh, I'm not even going to bother with her." And I think that's what happens a lot of times, like on the surface level in terms of classism. People just look at a person and make a judgment.

Subordinate theme: SCM manifestations

In this theme, participants distinguished SCMs from classism and spoke to the covert nature of SCMs, giving examples of how SCMs may manifest. P1 defined SCMs and classism aptly:

...Classism is the definition of the oppression. So, within the oppression, people might act on it through a microaggression or through blatant prejudice to the person. So, classism would be the actual systematic oppression of it in that people kind of perpetuate it through a microaggression.

This definition is congruent with how we view SCMs and classism as distinct, yet connected concepts, which is germane as we report how participants understood SCM manifestations.

Participants acknowledged the covert and seemingly unintentional nature of SCMs. For example, P6 stated, "I think of things that are not necessarily intentionally insulting or showing a bias or prejudice but do." Similarly, P2 stated SCMs are "something that is not overt." P10 explained the difficulty with the covert nature of SCMs:

It takes generations to sort of, not necessarily learn the place, but just learn what's being said to you or what's being done to you when it's being done. Sometimes you may look at it and just say, "Oh well, they just might not like me," and not really put any thought into, "Oh well, this is why or it's the underlying reason this is going on as to why I am being treated different."

Additionally, participants gave examples of how they have seen SCMs manifest. P4 experienced SCMs occurring, "when people make comments about where you live, what your parents did, what your grandparents did, how you came to where you are today as far as school, housing, material wealth, influence, power, and access." P4 added that SCMs are exhibited with what is *not* said as well: "It's unspoken. I think for me it's unspoken, the pauses, and the silences. That's what I have experienced a lot of." P5 saw SCMs manifesting as:

A dismissive attitude toward people who are considered beneath you, like people who are rude to their waitresses or see people in service industries as just like, they're there because they're too stupid or they're not taking into account the whole picture or systems that could be keeping people in that level of poverty.

P7 concurred with P5:

It could happen, for instance, someone going into a movie theater or ... someone going to the opera or the theater and treating the person like selling the ticket or the person showing them to their seat or the person serving their refreshments as something less than they are ... because they are in the service industry.

P5 shared her experiences with how SCMs have occurred:

I think of things like people planning a get together and they pick a really expensive restaurant without keeping in mind that maybe somebody can't afford that or planning trips or maybe making statements about other people's clothes or the type of bags or phones or technology or things that people are using, and just making an offhand comment like, "Oh you don't have the new iPhone yet?"

P11 shared her experience:

I think that a lot of times, from my personal experience as being a single mom ... there [are] those little comments that are slipped in, in the workplace, at the school setting. "What would you need?" I've been asked a ton of times like, "You need free and reduced lunch?" And I'm like, "Is it ... something that is asked clear across the board? Or is it something that's because of my status as a single parent?"

Finally, participants shared how SCMs can serve as a tool to limit access. P8 stated, "I would say a lot of time it's ... opportunities or lack of opportunities. access to general stuff, medical care, mental health treatment, those are two that a lot of times I think is impacted by social class microaggressions." Finally, P2 stated, "When I hear microaggression I think of somehow it's something that people use to keep others out ... [to] prevent access."

Discussion

SCMs occur unintentionally and intentionally, covertly and overtly, and occur within a complex societal system. In the emergent theory that arose from the data (see Figure 1), *Social Class Invisibility*, *Intersecting Identities*, *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class*, and *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class* influence and seemingly perpetuate *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*. Concurrently, *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class*, *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class*, and *SCM Manifestations* perpetuate *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*. In the figure, the themes are diffuse as represented by the dotted lines, and the circles and arrows represent a cyclical and reciprocal process. Human interactional systems are not as linear or clearly delineated as the model might convey – both are far more complex and dynamic, which cannot be captured accurately in a two-dimensional representation. However, the figure, connected to the data we presented, begins to offer an explanation for why SCMs persist: To preserve homeostasis.

Participants identified how US societal structures (i.e. *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*) serve as a mechanism to perpetuate SCMs and inequality: Policies, stratified school systems and neighborhoods, and the criminal justice system. Not only did they identify these structures exist, they named unawareness, privilege, power, generational social class attitudes, and the media as reasons they go unchallenged, which are congruent with current literature (e.g. Black & Stone, [7]; Smith & Redington, [33]; Sue, [37]). These reasons preserve societal social class myths that the US is a *classless society* (Author), hard work ultimately leads to success (Pew Charitable Trust, [29]), and *class blindness* is preferable to acknowledging how social class impacts people's lives (Smith & Redington, [33]). Ironically, these myths reinforce hierarchical microaggressions (Young et al., [41]) and oppression rather than alleviate them.

Additionally, participants spoke specifically to the ubiquity of *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class* (Author, ; Smith, Li, Dykema, Hamlet, & Shellman, [34]; Smith, Mao, Perkins, Ampuero, [36]; Smith & Redington, [33]). The material items a person has, the way a person speaks, how a person *carries* herself, and the occupation a person holds all contribute to how others assess a person's social class group membership. Often, these assessments shift from seemingly benign categorization to judgment, and can contribute to how individuals are treated. This is demonstrated in the figure as *Perceptions and Assumptions about Social Class* identified as a subordinate theme that both influenced and perpetuated *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*. Notably, such assessments

and actions can be based on social class (e.g. the way a person speaks or carries himself) or SES factors alone (e.g. material wealth, occupation), which may be indicative of people in US being unaware of how social class functions and the role SES plays in social class (Author). Alternatively, these different assessments may indicate the complexity inherent to social class and SES, and the possibility that identifying different SCM taxonomies may prove helpful.

Undoubtedly, the aforementioned assessments are influenced by individuals' additional identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, and gender) discussed in *Intersecting Identities*. Liu (2011) noted power is not constructed or maintained in a simple, dichotomous way, based on only one cultural identity. This points to the complexity and possible multilayered experiences of oppression when one has multiple nondominant identities. Conversely, this may mean, for example, an individual who has a dominant racial identity combined with a nondominant social class identity, may receive more social privilege and encounter different SCMs than individuals who have a nondominant racial identity (O'Hara & Cook, [28]). Simply put, individuals who are White are often assumed to be middle social class, while people with nondominant racial identities are assumed to be from low social class (Smith et al., [35]). Some participants mentioned this as part of their experiences, and participants with nondominant racial identities highlighted that their race was more likely to be discussed as a salient part of their experiences than their social class. These experiences are inextricably linked to *Social Class Invisibility*. Not only do people tend to make assumptions about person's social class based on how they perceive the individual's race, participants stated social class is rarely discussed because it is not physically apparent or considered relevant.

Perceptions and Assumptions about people's social class identities and *Privilege and Unawareness about Social Class* are integral to *SCM Manifestations*. Study participants readily named how they have experienced and witnessed SCMs via specific examples. SCMs ranged from verbal statements to nonverbal behaviors such as palpable silences and the ways people visually assess others, to situations that may not be amenable or accessible to individuals of all social class groups (e.g. planning a class party at an expensive restaurant). Notably, participants recognized the power SCMs can have to limit access, thereby reinforcing beliefs that individuals with nondominant cultural identities who have traditionally been underrepresented in particular systems (e.g. education and careers) might do well to continue to remain outside these systems (Sarcedo et al., [30]; Smith et al., [35]). These manifestations serve a reciprocal function as they simultaneously influence and perpetuate the established social system.

The aforementioned themes and associated data culminate to explain why SCMs persist: To preserve homeostasis. When people and systems work to *keep people in their place* (Smith & Redington, [33]), they reinforce dominant culture values, beliefs, and *power*, and alleviate cognitive dissonance related to cross-cultural interactions (Albieri et al., [1]). These beliefs and subsequent behaviors restore balance and homeostasis, not only for the individual experiencing it, but also for the systems of which s/he/they is a part, preserving the middle social class status quo. Behaviors may be covert or overt, intentional or unintentional, yet power and privilege are retained (Sue, [37]). As the person and system reestablish homeostasis (Albieri et al., [1]), another person and cultural group is silenced, excluded, and made invisible (Author, ; Smith & Redington, [33]; Sue, [37]). As the model depicts, this is a vicious

cycle, as the subordinate themes identified in the theory are consistently influencing and perpetuating *Unequal, Embedded Societal Structures*.

Limitations

The present study was a qualitative study ($N = 11$) and there are limits to the methodology we chose for this study (IPA), particularly that researchers engage rigorously yet subjectively with the data. Additionally, participants represented individuals who could identify and articulate a SCM experience, thereby eliminating participants who may not have been able to do so. At times, participants focused more heavily on economics/income than other facets of social class; however, this was expected given how little attention is paid to social class in US culture (Miller et al., [25]) and the resources, opportunities, and tangible goods income can provide (Brown et al., 1996). Finally, the sample may be considered a limitation in two ways. First, the sample represented counselor education doctoral students and does not represent other populations or groups, even within higher education. Second, although the sample was diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, only one male participated in this study and the vast majority of participants were from the southern region of the US, neglecting other US regions and countries outside the US.

Counseling psychology implications

The interpretation of this study's data was that one reason SCMs persist is to preserve homeostasis. The overall demographic representation of counselors and the counseling profession reflects the dominant culture, meaning the vast majority of US counseling professionals continue to be White and middle social class (American Psychological Association, [5]; Vontress, [39]). Further, researchers have found counselor educators continue to struggle with holding social class bias (McDowell et al., [23]; Miller et al., [25]). Based on our findings and these demographics, it seems plausible that counseling professionals may unintentionally limit access to individuals with non-dominant social class identities in counseling and education settings alike, possibly due to unawareness and the unwitting desire to retain privilege and power (Johnson, [16]; Liegghio & Caragata, [19]; Sue, [37]) as they seek to reestablish homeostasis (Albieri et al., [1]). Although the dominant culture demographics represented in the US may differ from those elsewhere in the world, we suggest it is important for counseling psychology practitioners and educators globally to (a) identify the dominant culture identities specific to their locations and (b) determine how the aforementioned information may apply in those contexts and contribute to social class bias.

Study data were collected from counselor education doctoral students. *Counselor education doctoral students* experienced and reported these phenomena, not individuals outside the counseling profession. They witnessed SCMs both inside and outside their educational contexts, which means SCMs are not occurring only outside the counseling profession, but also within it. Counseling psychology professionals must work to eliminate SCMs and associated class bias and classism so we can be a profession known globally who welcomes and competently serves people with nondominant social class identities. This can be challenging because of the societal context in which counseling professionals are embedded (Miller et al., [25]) and the magnetism toward homeostasis. Researchers (Albieri et al., [1]; Mihaylov, [24]; Minuchin, [27]) have noted human beings naturally gravitate toward what is familiar, what is considered *normal* to them: Homeostasis. Culturally speaking, homeostasis orients individuals toward the dominant culture, to individuals in positions of power and occupying the

most space in systems that are seemingly open to everyone yet are normative to the dominant culture. This means dominant culture individuals and systems must work to resist the pull of homeostasis in order to create systems that are truly open to people with nondominant identities. While this sample represented students enrolled in counselor education doctoral programs, we suggest the draw towards homeostasis is a natural, human phenomenon (Albieri et al., [2]), making the findings transferrable to counseling psychology contexts.

We reiterate calls from prior authors to begin by developing social class awareness and knowledge so we may develop social class affirmative skills (Author, ; Smith et al., [35]). Developing social class awareness, knowledge, and skills is a multilayered and long-term process similar to cultural development in other areas. For example, authors have suggested examining one's personal social class group identities and understanding one's positionality, engaging in opportunities that increase formal and experiential cultural knowledge, and determining how awareness and knowledge translate to clinical, educational, and supervisory settings (Author, , ; Smith et al., [35]). Further, we must be willing not only to examine our privilege and power, but also to use our privilege and power to transform and dismantle systems that seek to *keep people in their place* (Smith & Redington, [33]). To do this, we must resist the temptation to employ "defensive maneuvers" (Sue, [37], p. 5) to avoid such topics or our own responsibility as members of systems that exclude or oppress others (Miller et al., [25]). One reason SCMs persist is because they serve a function: To preserve homeostasis. Therefore, we must commit to multilevel advocacy – with and on behalf of clients, with other counseling psychology professionals, inside counselor education programs, and on a systemic level – in order to interrupt the status quo and to be a known as a professional haven for people with diverse social class backgrounds.

Future research

Social class, SCMs, and classism continue to be under-researched topics in counseling, counseling psychology, and counselor education (Author, ; Smith et al., [35]). Further investigation about these constructs, how they function, and their impact are merited, particularly with the clients whom we serve and the counselors who serve them. We encourage researchers to investigate the theory we presented to corroborate its viability and to discover other reasons why SCMs persist. Additional research is needed about social class barriers in counselor education programs that extend beyond monetary barriers to include how the culture and practices of higher education serve to dissuade individuals from low social class from becoming counselors, counseling psychologists, and counselor educators. Author () found professor/supervisor insensitivity and dismissing and ignoring social class differences within programs were common barriers students experienced. Moreover, most participants were from the southern US, so it is appropriate to research SCMs in other US geographic areas as well as extend such research in other countries, particularly those with similar social class structures (e.g. Australia and the United Kingdom). Additionally, investigating samples such as doctoral students in other disciplines and counseling professionals more broadly defined would undoubtedly add to and potentially corroborate study findings. Finally, it may be helpful to understand the perspectives of those who commit SCMs to determine strategies to stop SCMs. This study serves as a starting point for explaining why SCMs persist and further research is necessary to continue and expand this important exploration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Appendix

Initial Interview Questions

Part One: Social Class Microaggression Definitions

Introduction: To begin, I want to ask you questions to explore how you understand social class microaggressions in a general sense.

1. What comes to mind when you hear the term *social class microaggressions*?

- 2. What comes to mind when you hear the term *classism*?
- 3. What connection do you think exists, if any, between social class microaggressions and classism?

Part Two: Social Class Microaggression Experience(s)

Introduction: I want to shift now to discussing situation(s) in which you have experienced social class microaggression(s) during your doctoral training.

- 4. Think of some times during your counseling training program in which you felt uncomfortable because you perceived the experience to be a social class microaggression. Please describe and give as many details as possible.
- 5. What impact did the experience have on you?
- 6. Please describe how you dealt with the microaggression(s).
- 7. How do you/have you make sense of the experience(s)?
- 8. How might other aspects of your personhood or identity intersect with what you are sharing?
- 9. If you could, what would you say to all counselor educators and supervisors about SCM?

Part Three: Interview Wrap-Up

- 10. What was this interview process like for you?
- 11. We've covered a lot today. What else would you like to add?
- 12. Is there anyone you would like to recommend to participate in this study? If so, we encourage you to share our contact information.

Follow-Up Interview Questions

1. I would like to invite you to share any additional information that you have thought of regarding your experiences of feeling slighted, challenged, put down, etc., based on your social class/SES group affiliation and/or identity.

- 2. Please share any additional information that you have thought of regarding the terms *social class microaggressions* and *classism*.

- 3. What has your participation in this study been like for you?
- 4. What else would you like to add?

Is there anyone you would like to recommend to participate in this study? If so, we encourage you to share our contact information.

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