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# A Mixed-Methods Examination of Counselors' Social Class and Socioeconomic Status Perceptions

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## Abstract

We investigated how counselors (N = 157) perceived social class and socioeconomic status (SES) via a mixed-methods design. Among other findings, the results revealed participants provided limited or SES-only responses when they defined social class. We describe counseling practice and training implications from a culturally informed, humanistic perspective.

## Keywords

social class, socioeconomic status, multicultural, counselor practice, counselor training

## Introduction

Genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathetic understanding (Rogers, 1980) have been foundational to a person-centered, humanistic approach to counseling for over 60 years. In fact, these humanistic qualities, among others, have become synonymous with foundational counseling skills and are a central focus in counselor training programs (Hansen et al., 2014). Similarly, for more than 25 years, counselors have been called to culturally relevant training and practice through obtaining cultural knowledge, developing cultural awareness, intentionally integrating culturally relevant and appropriate skills, and enacting social justice advocacy actions (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2002; Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 1992).

Culturally aware and responsive counseling practices are integral to humanistic counseling. When counselors acknowledge clients' cultural realities, they become attuned to the oppression, prejudice, and discrimination that clients with nondominant identities experience (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Crethar et al., 2008). Contextualizing clients' experiences from a cultural perspective not only fosters counselors' genuineness, empathetic understanding, and unconditional positive regard, it validates clients and may help to explain struggles they may have experienced related to their wellness (Brady-Amoon, 2011). As a result, counselors demonstrate the highest regard and respect for clients' dignity in the context of their cultural milieu, while seizing opportunities to engage in advocacy actions (Hansen et al., 2014; Ratts et al., 2016).

Social class and socioeconomic status (SES) are components of clients' cultural realities; attending to clients' social class and SES identities is central to providing a culturally relevant, humanistic climate in which to address clients' concerns. It is important for counselors to understand the rich layers of cultural experiences that shape the notion of social class into a reality much greater than the factors associated with SES alone, so they have a stronger capacity to connect more fully with their clients' experiences. However, to date, social class and SES are underrepresented topics in counseling research (Clark et al., 2018) and counselor training programs (Priester et al., 2008), and researchers have found counselors hold social class bias (Cook, 2017; Smith et al., 2013), suggesting that counseling professionals need additional social class awareness, knowledge, and skills to attend to this rich component of clients' identities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Socioeconomic status contains three discrete factors—education, occupation, and income—that are the core concepts on which social class is built (Cook & Lawson, 2016). Necessarily, social class includes SES, yet social class is marked by how individuals and groups *enact* SES—social class is an expression of SES and is therefore more complex, textured, and nuanced than SES. Individuals and groups who identify with specific social class groups (e.g., low social class, middle social class) have different understandings and relationships with education, occupation, and income, including access to and use of resources, attitudes, beliefs, values, expectations, behaviors, systemic power and privilege, social capital, and experiences of oppression or dominance (Cook & O'Hara, 2019). Because of the complexity inherent to social class compared with SES, frequently, social class is consolidated or conflated with SES or reduced to income-only definitions (Cook & Lawson, 2016; Liu et al., 2004). Researchers have found

that practicing counselors and counseling researchers alike struggle with term reduction and conflation (Cook & Lawson, 2016; Cook et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2004), thereby losing the depth and nuance of what social class fully conveys. Authors have suggested that this pragmatic approach to understanding social class as SES factors only may be rooted in U.S. cultural messages such as the belief in meritocracy and that the United States is a "classless" society. Many of these ideas have gone unchallenged, causing counselors to misunderstand what people's lives are like outside of the dominant group (i.e., middle social class; Cook, 2017; West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012), which is an obvious threat to humanistic counseling approaches.

SES and social class group labels are determined based on a hierarchical, ranked system grounded in social stratification (Beeghley, 2000). The number of groups and labels used to distinguish social class and SES groups have varied widely in the United States for decades. Beginning in the 1940s, Warner identified six social class groups: lower-lower class, upper-lower class, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, lower-upper class, and upper-upper class (Gilbert, 2018). Since that time, four or five designations are more typical, with varied terms to label each group. For example, Gallup, a longstanding and influential U.S. analytics firm, used five designations—lower, working, middle, upper middle, and upper—when analyzing individuals' self-identified social class by demographic variables such as income and education (Bird & Newport, 2017). Similarly, Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research firm, has used the Gallup designations at times but has employed rankings with either more or less nuance as well. For example, when describing aggregate U.S. socioeconomic data, Pew Research Center used three designations: lower, middle, and upper (Kochhar, 2018). Alternatively, Pew Research Center (2008) utilized the top of the class, the anxious middle, the struggling middle, and the satisfied middle to describe nuances within the middle social class. Although social class is regularly overidentified by SES constructs (Cook & Lawson, 2016), Pew Research Center and Gallup have also begun to integrate factors such as geographic location, race, and marital status to define individuals' social class ranking, although not consistently.

What the aforementioned terms do not capture are commonplace, colloquial designations that are tied to occupation, such as blue collar and white collar, and those that are seemingly rooted in income yet have social class implications, such as the poor, the underclass, the upper crust, or the 1%. Furthermore, how individuals' SES and/or social class are perceived or labeled is linked often to persons' additional cultural identities, such as race and ethnicity (Cohen et al., 2017). Combinations of social class or SES with race or ethnicity have resulted in colloquial terms such as "White trash," "bougie" (or "boujee"), and "trailer trash," and there is an assumption that people who are Black are economically poor, whereas the inverse is presumed for people who are White (Cook & O'Hara, 2019; Durante & Fiske, 2017; Smith et al., 2013).

Counseling researchers have struggled with definitional inconsistencies by conflating SES and social class in both empirical and conceptual articles, and additionally, they have demonstrated methodological problems when social class or SES are research variables. Cook et al. (2019) conducted a systematic content analysis of articles ( $N = 636$ ) from two counseling journals and found that of the empirical subsample ( $n = 104$ ; 16.35% of the entire sample), 61.54% ( $n = 64$ ) utilized social class or SES as part of their methodology. Of those 64 articles, 45 collected social class or SES data and 86.67% ( $n = 39$ ) had issues related to data analysis, collection, reporting, or term operationalization. These findings

highlight two important issues: Social class and SES data are collected infrequently, and when they are collected, methodological concerns occur at a high rate. This study extended prior research that found only 37 articles focused on social class or SES were published in the 22 ACA journals between 2000 and 2016, demonstrating that social class and SES are underexamined (Clark et al., 2018).

In addition to being significantly underrepresented in counseling research (Clark et al., 2018), social class and SES have been underrepresented in counselor education pedagogy (Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008). Despite foundational humanistic values and repeated calls to integrate a range of cultural identities into counselor education pedagogy, Priester et al.'s (2008) analysis of 64 course syllabi revealed that only four included SES as a topic, compared with 46 that included sexual orientation. Similarly, Pieterse et al. (2009) reviewed 54 multicultural course syllabi and only 12 included social class issues compared with 47 that incorporated racial identity and 39 that contained sexual orientation topics. Recent qualitative findings corroborate counseling professionals' social class and SES knowledge and awareness gaps. Cook and Lawson (2016) found professional counselors demonstrated limited social class and SES awareness and understanding, whereas Smith et al. (2013) and Cook (2017) found counseling professionals held biases about individuals from low social class. Durante and Fiske (2017) explained that biases about people from low social class begin as early as elementary school, at which time children from low social class and middle social class alike believe that people from low social class are not as intelligent or capable as people who are middle social class and higher. Additionally, they asserted that stereotype threats are common in testing and teacher-student interactions, resulting in lower test scores and lower self-esteem in students from low social class. These results extended to the college years in which students who were working class self-rated their creativity, IQ, and overall intelligence lower than their middle social class peers, suggesting that social class was salient and had a negative impact on individuals from low social class (Durante & Fiske, 2017). Given that the majority of counselors are middle social class and may have little awareness and knowledge about low social class (Vontress, 2011), combined with how infrequently social class and SES are covered in multicultural counseling courses (Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008) and the general U.S. cultural reluctance to examine social class beliefs (Cook, 2017; West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012), social class bias findings are worrisome and problematic, though contextually understandable.

## STUDY PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study was to expand prior qualitative findings (i.e., Cook, 2017; Cook & Lawson, 2016; Smith et al., 2013) by garnering a broader, larger, and more diverse sample, and by investigating specific aspects of professional counselors' social class and SES perceptions. We sought to answer (a) How do counselors define social class based on their knowledge and experience? (b) What social class groups do counselors believe exist in the United States? and (c) What social class and SES preparation have counselors received?

## METHOD

### Research Design

We chose a mixed-methods design. Mixed methods was an appropriate research design choice because we sought (a) to comprehend inductively how counselors understand and perceive social class, (b) to compare deductively counselors' responses with established and accepted U.S. social class

group designations and social class and SES definitions, and (c) to use a larger sample. Additionally, a mixed-methods design was a logical next step given that the empirical literature that stimulated our research questions were all qualitative studies, none of which have been extended into quantitative studies that provided generalizable results.

We used a sequential design in which qualitative data were used to drive quantitative methodology, while integrating quantitative data that were not derived qualitatively (Morse, 2003). We utilized intramethod mixing for data collection. Intramethod mixing is marked by using a single data collection strategy with both quantitative and qualitative components (Johnson & Turner, 2003). In this study, the single data collection strategy was a questionnaire with closed- and open-ended questions.

## Measures

Because this was a descriptive study designed to understand counselors' perceptions and understanding of social class and SES, we created a survey with open- and closed-ended questions to achieve our study aim, rather than using preestablished measures. Our survey design allowed us to investigate whether prior, regionally bound, small sample qualitative findings (i.e., Cook, 2017; Cook & Lawson, 2016; Smith et al., 2013) were consistent among a larger, national sample. The survey was divided into three sections. In the first section, participants responded to closed-ended professional background questions on subjects such as their licenses and certifications, highest educational degree earned, and degree type. For the second section, we utilized open-ended questions developed to understand participants' social class and SES perspectives. These questions included the following: (a) "Based on your knowledge and experiences, how do you define social class?" (b) "From your perspective, what do you think differentiates social class from socioeconomic status? Please write as little or as much as you would like. If you do not think there are any differences, please type, 'I think they are the same.'" and (c) "What social class groups do you believe exist in the United States? Please name as many or as few as you would like." We did not provide a definition for social class or SES before participants answered these questions; rather, we provided definitions later in the survey (e.g., "Social class is defined as a person's attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, worldviews, and interactions rooted in her/his socioeconomic factors (i.e., income, occupation, and education), and influenced by location, resources, and experiences both inside and outside her/his social class affiliation(s).") so participants were able to designate their current and family-of-origin social classes more accurately. Finally, we used closed-ended questions in the third section to garner information about participants' cultural identities (e.g., race, social class, sexual orientation, gender, sex) and training experiences (e.g., whether the participant had taken a multicultural course, how often social class and/or SES were integrated into other courses, confidence level working with people from different social class backgrounds).

## Procedure

We used Qualtrics, an online survey portal (<https://www.qualtrics.com>), and divided the survey into six parts: informed consent, consent questions, screening questions, professional background, social class and SES perceptions questions, and finally, cultural and training demographics. Other than the informed consent and screening questions, participants were permitted to skip questions, though they were not allowed to return to earlier survey questions to ensure they did not edit their answers based on information we provided later in the survey. We used this approach because we asked participants

to define social class and SES in their own words initially, then provided them with definitions later so they were able to answer subsequent questions with specific construct definitions. In order to ensure question clarity and time expectations, we piloted the survey ( $N = 10$ ) and utilized participants' feedback to make minor changes (i.e., reordered questions, made two questions clearer, and eliminated three questions); pilot data were not included in analysis. We gained university institutional review board approval prior to any participant contact.

We recruited participants nationally through state counseling association listservs, other counseling-related electronic mailing lists (e.g., CESNET, AMCD Connect), and social media pages. We used these methods because of the lack of accessible electronic contact with professional counselors nationally. Participants were eligible to participate in the study if they were 21 years of age or older, had completed their master's-level counselor training, were currently employed, and were employed in the United States. We used the three final criteria because we wanted to understand practicing counselors' perceptions of social class and SES, and we deemed it important that counselors were employed in the United States because social class structures are unique based on the societal structures in which individuals are embedded (Cook & O'Hara, 2019). At the end of the survey, participants were invited to enter an optional raffle using a link separate from the survey for the chance to win one of twenty-four \$25 gift cards. Response data were anonymized so survey responses were not linked to raffle entries.

## Participants

One hundred sixty-nine individuals from 26 states responded to our nationally distributed survey. Twelve participants were excluded because of incomplete or unusable data, resulting in a final sample of 157. We used the mean substitution method to account for a few missing values in demographic variables, such as age and years of practice, which we calculated and replaced before analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). Participant demographics included age, type of community in which they lived, chronic health conditions, religious or spiritual background, gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnic background. The majority of participants were between 21 and 50 years of age, with 28% in their 30s, 21% in their 40s, and 18% in their 20s. Almost all were female (87.3%), and 85% identified as heterosexual. The majority identified as European American/White/Caucasian (71.3%), and the second largest group identified as African American/Black (13.4%). Roughly 78% of the participants were fourth generation or more living in the United States, and approximately 80% lived either in a suburban area or a town/village for the majority of their life.

Participants selected the social class groups to which they belonged currently and in their family of origin. Participants selected their social class identities from nine categories ranging from poverty to upper-upper social class; however, our sample size was not substantial enough for analysis with nine social class categories. To meet the assumption of the chi-square test that the expected frequency in each cell is greater than 5, we collapsed the nine social class categories into three range categories (i.e., low social class range, middle social class range, and upper social class range). For family of origin social class, 38.9% self-identified in the low social class range, 46.5% as middle social class range, and 14.6% in the upper social class range. In terms of current social class, 17.2% self-identified in the low social class range, 62.4% as middle social class, and 20.4% in the upper social class. When asked about family educational background, about 45% of participants reported having two to three family

members who attended college, and about 46% of those participants stated they had two to three family members who completed college.

To understand participants' employment background, we collected information about participants' work setting, years of clinical experience, educational background, including field of study, and counseling credentials. The majority of participants were licensed practitioners (87.3%) and were nationally certified counselors (56.1%). Most participants' master's degrees were in counselor education and supervision (77%), and 71% graduated from a program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. Approximately one third of participants had worked as a counselor for 3 to 8 years (35.1%), with the remaining participants having worked 9 to 14 years (23%), 21 or more years (15.3%), or 2 years or fewer (14.6%). Participants' primary work settings included clinical mental health (32.5%), private practice (17.8%), school (15.9%), counselor educator (12.1%), university or college (10.8%), school-based mental health counselor (2.5%), and other settings (8.2%). Whereas roughly 9% of participants reported they did not provide any counseling direct services, about a quarter provided counseling services from 1 to 10 hours per week (24.8%).

### Data Analysis

We calculated descriptive statistics to determine variable frequency distributions, particularly variables at the nominal level. Then, we performed chi-square analyses to examine the relationships between categorical variables. We conducted *t* tests to compare the group differences in participants' accuracy in identifying social groups.

We exported the original data from Qualtrics into an Excel file. Then, we transferred the data from Excel into SPSS (Version 25) software to conduct the descriptive statistics, chi-square, and *t* tests. We screened the data for outliers to confirm accurate data entry and we applied missing-value codes. We had approximately 5% or fewer missing data points in a random pattern; a code of 99 was assigned to indicate missing values when a participant failed to give a response (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). We assessed normality of variables using frequency histograms in SPSS FREQUENCIES (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018).

In order to identify patterns and interpret qualitative findings deductively and to have the capacity to analyze qualitative and quantitative data concurrently using quantitative analysis (Sandelowski et al., 2009), we transformed qualitative responses to numerical data for three open-ended questions using a priori magnitude coding frames (Saldaña, 2013). Magnitude coding is a method by which researchers set a predetermined coding structure aimed to measure "intensity, frequency, direction, presence, or evaluative content" (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 72–73) that can be used to transform qualitative data to quantitative data. We developed separate coding frames and subsequent codebooks for the three qualitative questions we transformed because each was aimed at eliciting different information. For the question "Based on your knowledge and experiences, how do you define social class?" the coding frame was set using the numerals 0–11 with each numeral representing information that was or was not present in each response based on the definition of social class we set (e.g., 0 = no factors listed, "unsure" was indicated, "don't know" was indicated, or skipped the question; 1 = income only; 2 = any combination of SES only factors; 3 = one social class factor listed; 4 = two social class factors listed). It is important to note how scores were assigned for the social class factors participants named beyond income or SES definitions only. If participants named factors independent of SES in their response (e.g.,



resources, access, privilege, values), they earned a point for each of these identifiers. If participants named any combination of SES factors (i.e., income, education, and occupation), whether one or up to three, they earned 1 point. Therefore, for example, a participant who scored a 4 may have noted four factors independent of SES or may have indicated three social class factors and any combination of SES factors.

We set the coding frame to understand depth and to evaluate content (Saldaña, 2013) for the question, "From your perspective, what do you think differentiates social class from socioeconomic status? Please write as little or as much as you would like. If you do not think there are any differences, please type, 'I think they are the same.'" We used codes ranging from 0 to 5. Zero was assigned if participants did not answer the question yet had responded to prior and subsequent questions; 1 indicated the respondent believed social class and SES were the same or did not answer the question in a substantive way (e.g., "this is very difficult to explain"); 2 reflected a SES or income-only explanation; 3 equaled *low knowledge*, defined as explaining some general similarities and/or differences though not fully capturing the meaning; 4 equaled *medium knowledge*, defined as capturing more nuances than those responses associated with low knowledge, though still not completely accurate; and 5 represented *high knowledge*, meaning participants captured the differences completely or almost completely.

For the question, "What social class groups do you believe exist in the United States? Please name as many or as few as you would like," we set two coding criteria aimed at presence and evaluation. First, we counted how many responses each participant gave without content evaluation, and second, we assigned each participant an accuracy rating—that is, how many of the responses coincided with recognized U.S. social class groups. For recognized U.S. social class groups, we counted both standardized labels (e.g., poverty, low social class) and colloquially phrased labels (e.g., the elite, white/blue collar). For both quantity and accuracy, we assigned a single score with a range of 1 to 10.

There were two coders for the qualitative data, each with substantial social class and SES knowledge and qualitative research experience, making them qualified coders. One coder (first author) is a counselor educator who holds a PhD and identifies as a 42-year-old, White, cisgender female who was raised in low social class and now identifies with both low social class and middle social class. The other coder (third author) is a practicing master's-level counselor who is Ukrainian American, 27 years of age, and a cisgender female. She identified as upper social class prior to emigrating to the United States as an adolescent, and then as lower social class once she was in the United States; currently, she identifies as working class. The coders identified their worldviews and potential biases prior to coding commencement and discussed regularly how their backgrounds and experiences could impact coding. The coders created a codebook with definitions grounded in the literature to guide the descriptive coding process. The team utilized an auditor to ensure the codebook was sound and that codes reflected codebook definitions.

Using the established codebook, the coders coded data independently and then met to establish consensus during both pilot and regular coding stages. In the pilot coding phase ( $n = 20$ ), coder agreement was 55% (Boyatzis, 1998). The coders met, discussed coding inconsistencies, and strengthened codebook definitions to improve coding agreement. Coder agreement prior to consensus during regular coding was 78%, and we reached full consensus for all coded data (Boyatzis, 1998).

## RESULTS

### Definitions and Differences Between Social Class and SES

Participants responded to an open-ended question in which they defined social class based on their knowledge and experience. After we transformed qualitative data to numerical values, frequency analysis revealed the majority of counselor participants (48.4%) chose two or three social class factors when they defined social class. For example, one participant who listed two social class factors stated, "Social class is based on economics and can affect the way a person sees the world and other people," whereas another participant in this group shared, "Levels decided by society based on socioeconomic status and beliefs." A participant who indicated three social class factors stated, "Social class refers to a group of people with similar levels of wealth, influence, and status." Another participant specified, "Social class is a subjective classification system of people based on their 'place' in society as determined by education, job, income, SES, and geographic location."

Participants who chose income only when they defined social class comprised 13.4% of the sample, whereas 15.3% chose a combination of SES factors only (i.e., education, income, and occupation). Those who chose one social class factor comprised 3.2%, and 12.1% of respondents did not answer the question. Twelve participants (7.5%) chose between four and nine social class factors as their social class definition (see Table 1). One participant who chose four to nine factors indicated:

I define social class as one's beliefs, customs, [and] practices that are based on cultures, traditions, and upbringings. I believe that some people tend to associate with those who are perceived to be in the same/similar social class as they are.

Table 1. Frequency of Social Class Definition Factors

| No. of Factors Included in Social Class Definition | n  | %    |
|--|----|------|
| Zero   | 19 | 12.1 |
| Income only  | 21 | 13.4 |
| Socioeconomic status only                          | 24 | 15.3 |
| One  | 5  | 3.2  |
| Two  | 45 | 28.7 |
| Three  | 31 | 19.7 |
| Four to nine                                       | 12 | 7.5  |

1 Note.  $N = 157$ . Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Another participant in this group shared,

"The term social class generally refers to a group of people within society, that broadly share norms and experiences of income, values, culture, lifestyle, education, opportunity and expectations, and worldview. The term social class tends to be associated with income and economic level but is actually broader than that."

We used chi-square tests to investigate the relationship between participants' social class identity of origin and their definition of social class. We found that 92.6% of participants who self-identified their family of origin in the low social class range included more factors when they defined social class,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 157) = 12.07, p = .017$ , compared with their middle social class and higher counterparts. No

additional statistically significant differences were found based on participants' cultural demographic variables and their definitions of social class.

We asked participants to describe what they believed differentiated social class and SES. Thirty-five percent stated that social class and SES were the same, approximately 54% provided SES-only indicators or low knowledge (see Data Analysis section for definitions), and 25.5% provided SES- or income-only explanations. In total, roughly 90% of participants indicated no knowledge to low knowledge regarding the differences between the two constructs. Only 3.8% of participants scored in the high knowledge group, as evidenced by being able to almost or fully capture the differences. The following examples illustrate the differences between how the low knowledge and high knowledge groups articulated their responses. A participant who scored in the low knowledge group shared, "SES is specific to economic data. Social class has to do with cultural and environmental variables." A participant who scored in the high knowledge group said,

"Socioeconomic status seems to relate mostly to how much money a person makes at a given time, but social class can be more cultural and enduring. Social class can also be based on people's perceptions of an individual. For instance, based on a person's finances, they can obtain a higher socioeconomic status, but they can still be perceived (i.e., by the way they talk or act in certain situations) as a "lower" class or culturally identify as the social class that they were raised in. Therefore, social class seems more culturally based and enduring."

No statistically significant differences were found based on participants' cultural demographic variables for this question.

### U.S. Social Class Groups

Participants identified an average of 5.45 social class groups ( $M = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ) they believed exist in the United States. The average accuracy of their responses was 3.99 ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 2.26$ ). The accuracy percentage was calculated by dividing the correct responses by the total responses. The average percentage of accuracy was 70% ( $M = 0.70$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). We used a paired-samples  $t$  test to compare the difference between what participants stated and what was accurate, and the difference between those two variables was significant:  $t(156) = 8.08$ ,  $p < .001$ . Responses labeled as correct included group identifiers such as low class, working class, white collar, high class, and middle social class, whereas incorrect responses contained labels such as religious, African American, urban, married, and LGBTQ.

Using an independent-samples  $t$  test, counselor participants with a disability and those without a disability were compared in terms of their ability to identify existing social class groups. There was a statistically significant difference between counselors with and without a disability regarding their ability to accurately identify existing social class group  $t(154) = 2.00$ ,  $p = .047$ . Counselors with disability had a lower accuracy percentage (54%;  $M = 0.54$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) than counselors without disability (72%;  $M = 0.72$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). No significant differences were found with any other cultural demographic variables.

### Social Class and SES Preparation

Ninety-three percent of participants stated they took a multicultural course during their master's-level training program, yet only 57.3% stated SES and social class were covered in their multicultural course.

Regarding social class and SES being integrated into other courses, 43.9% indicated the topic was not discussed in other courses, whereas 13.4% and 16.6% stated it was covered in one or two courses or a few courses, respectively. Those who stated the topic was discussed in all other courses they took comprised 3.8%, with 13.4% stating it was covered in most courses, and 8.9% in some courses.

When asked how prepared participants felt to work with clients from social class groups different than their own, 10% reported feeling very prepared and 26% indicated feeling prepared. The remaining 64% reported less confidence with 37% identifying as somewhat prepared, 12% as somewhat unprepared, 9% unprepared, and 6% very unprepared. There were no statistically significant differences related to perceived preparedness and cultural demographic variables or whether participants took a multicultural course.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore professional counselors' perceptions of social class and SES. When asked to define social class, almost half of participants (48.4%) reported two to three factors to define social class, with a small percentage (7.5%) listing four to nine factors. More than a quarter of the sample (28.7%) defined social class as either income only (13.4%) or SES factors only (15.3%), and an additional 12.1% did not define the construct at all. Social class is a difficult construct to define, which may be compounded by unchallenged beliefs that the United States is a meritocracy and that the United States is a classless society (Cook, 2017; West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012). Coupled with references in the counseling literature of social class being defined as income or SES only (Cook et al., 2019; Cook & Lawson, 2016; Liu et al., 2004) and the scant attention social class and SES receive in multicultural counseling courses (Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008), it follows that participants might struggle to define social class fully and accurately. Although these challenges are real, they are not insurmountable; they are essential to overcome so counselors can conceptualize clients' humanity more fully and attend to their cultural contextual realities that may add to or inhibit their wellness (Brady-Amoon, 2011).

Given how little nuance participants were able to provide in their social class definitions, it is not surprising that 35% indicated they believed social class and SES were the same, while 54% gave SES or income-only explanations when asked to differentiate social class and SES. Fairly congruent with the 7.5% of participants who listed 4 to 9 factors to define social class, 3.8% demonstrated the ability to capture (almost or fully) the differences between social class and SES. These findings were expected for a few reasons. First, researchers have discovered social class and SES are not incorporated regularly into counselor education multicultural courses (Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008), and although just over half of study participants indicated social class and SES were included in their multicultural course, they did not recall it being integrated regularly into other coursework. Admittedly, we asked participants to rely on memory to answer questions related to training, and for some participants, their training occurred quite some time ago (i.e., 23% worked as a counselor for 9–14 years, 12% worked as a counselor for 15–20 years, and 15.3% worked for 21 or more years as a counselor). This length of time is a notable limitation. However, we suspect that if social class were included meaningfully and regularly in participants' training programs, they would be more likely to use what they learned in their practice regularly, suggesting they would likely recall it in their training. Second, social class and SES are woefully underrepresented topics in the counseling literature (Clark et

al., 2018). Third, counseling researchers have struggled to operationalize social class and SES terminology appropriately and have demonstrated methodological problems with social class and SES variables (Cook et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2004).

An interesting finding was that 92.6% of participants who identified their families of origin in the low social class range included more social class factors than their middle social class and higher counterparts. Participants who identified their families of origin as low social class represented a significant portion of the sample (38.9%;  $n = 61$ ), though middle social class was the majority (46.5%;  $n = 73$ ). We hypothesize that participants from low social class families of origin may be more sensitized to social class and what it entails because they identified with a nondominant social class group and may have experienced bias, prejudice, or discrimination, making the topic more salient for them (Durante & Fiske, 2017). The fact that there were no other statistically significant findings related to family-of-origin social class and other study variables is curious. This result may mean that although counselors reared in low social class have a stronger grasp of what social class is, they have not received education about what differentiates social class from SES or what U.S. social class groups exist. An important consideration is that although participants from low social class were able to define social class more fully, they require specific social class training just as all counselors do. They could benefit from increased awareness and knowledge, and they may have biases and misconceptions about social class similar to the biases and misconceptions of individuals from other social class groups, given how ubiquitous social class misconceptions and biases are in the United States (Durante & Fiske, 2017; West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012).

Participants had the opportunity to name up to 10 U.S. social class group designations. The average response rate was 5.45 ( $SD = 2.67$ ) groups and their response accuracy was 70% ( $M = .70$ ,  $SD = .37$ ), which was statistically significant. Correct responses included standardized group terms such as poverty, working class, and middle social class, congruent with those used by national research firms (e.g., Bird & Newport, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2008) and colloquial labels such as white collar, blue collar, and the poor. Incorrect responses were varied, though many were indicative of other cultural identities such as African American, LGBTQI, and married. Although social class certainly intersects with individuals' other cultural identities (Cohen et al., 2017), such identities are not social class groups in and of themselves. Naming racial or ethnic groups without a modifier (e.g., African Americans instead of middle social class African Americans) may suggest social class bias (e.g., a belief that African Americans are economically poor; Cook & O'Hara, 2019; Durante & Fiske, 2017; Smith et al., 2013). Such beliefs and potential biases reduce counselors' abilities to offer empathy and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1980) and to acknowledge the oppression and discrimination clients may face based on their social class (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Crethar et al., 2008), endangering the counseling relationship and threatening a humanistic approach to counseling.

Although representing only a small percentage of the sample (12.1%), participants with a disability had a lower accuracy rate naming social class groups than participants without a disability. Similar to our hypothesis pertaining to the higher number of social class factors named by participants who identified as low social class in their family of origin, we suspect this lower rate may be due to identity salience—that is, people with disabilities may connect more with, and have more awareness about, their identity as a person with a disability compared with their identity with a particular social class.

Despite 93% of the sample having taken a multicultural counseling course, only 57.3% reported that social class and/or SES were covered as part of their multicultural course. This percentage was higher than we expected given that Pieterse et al. (2009) found only 12 out of 54 multicultural course syllabi include social class issues, and Priester et al.'s (2008) study revealed that only four of 64 syllabi addressed SES. In addition to participants' multicultural course, we asked participants how often social class and SES were integrated throughout their master's coursework. Only 3.8% of participants indicated that social class and SES were incorporated into all other courses they took, and 13.4% indicated they were included in most other courses. When comparing these data to participants' perceived level of preparation, we discovered curious findings. The majority (49%) fell in the middle two categories, somewhat prepared (37%) and somewhat unprepared (12%), which is somewhat expected given that social class and SES were covered in participants' multicultural course just over half the time and not integrated frequently into other master's coursework. The second-largest group (36%) was in the top third of the spectrum with *very prepared* (10%) and *prepared* (26%), and 15% represented the bottom third (i.e., 9% *unprepared*, 6% *very unprepared*). Based on the low degree of nuance participants provided when they defined social class and how low participants' knowledge was when they differentiated social class and SES, we expected a much higher percentage of participants would report feeling unprepared or very unprepared. We suspect social desirability may have played a role in participants' responses to how prepared they felt; they may have stated a higher level of perceived preparation than was accurate to avoid disparaging their training programs or casting doubt on their clinical skills (Wendler & Nilsson, 2009). Alternatively, it is plausible that participants felt competent to apply their multicultural training in other domains to clients from social class/SES groups different from their own. Although there was no statistical significance related to participants' cultural identities and their perceived preparation level, this relationship still may account for some of the difference.

## Implications

The most significant and intertwined implications pertain to counselor training and practice. In sum, if counselors have inaccurate perceptions about social class, clients may be affected negatively, and strong training is necessary to increase counselors' social class awareness, knowledge, skills, and advocacy actions. Although master's-level counselor training is only one training component, it is the foundation on which professional practice and future training are built. If counselor educators are not integrating social class and SES consistently in master's-level training, it is unlikely counselors will be prepared adequately to address social class in their practice or be motivated to continue their social class training (e.g., continuing education) beyond their master's programs. We are not suggesting educators and supervisors focus more on social class and SES and neglect other cultural identities. Rather, we suggest educators integrate and attend to social class and SES more regularly than research results suggest they are currently (e.g., the current study; Pieterse et al., 2009; Priester et al., 2008), including how social class and SES intersect with other cultural identities. Although social class and SES were seemingly integrated more frequently in multicultural courses for participants in this study than Pieterse et al. (2009) and Priester et al. (2008) found in their syllabi reviews, the findings seem to indicate such integration was not sufficient as evidenced by participants' struggles to define social class, to distinguish social class from SES, and to identify U.S. social class groups accurately. From a humanistic counseling perspective, these findings are troubling. Social class experiences impact

individuals' worldviews, beliefs, and behaviors, and if counselors are unfamiliar with what social class is and how it functions, it may prove difficult for them to connect with and understand their clients (Crethar et al., 2008; Hansen et al., 2014). Moreover, it may be challenging for counselors to demonstrate accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and to develop authentic relationships with clients whose social class differs from their own (Brady-Amoon, 2011; Crethar et al., 2008).

The majority of counseling professionals identify with middle social class, the dominant culture. In turn, historically, the counseling profession has been aligned with middle social class values and norms and served people who are middle class, making counseling seem inaccessible to people from low social class (Vontress, 2011). Smith et al. (2013) and Cook (2017) found counselors hold bias about people from low social class, likely because of low social class knowledge, awareness, and skills. Although we did not examine bias specifically in this study, bias tends to be rooted in misinformation, low knowledge, and stereotypes about people and groups with whom individuals are unfamiliar; such low knowledge and misinformation was present in study results. Clients feel this bias even when it is implicit, restricting counselors' and clients' ability to engage genuinely, and counselors' ability to convey empathetic understanding and unconditional positive regard (Hansen et al., 2014; Rogers, 1980). Furthermore, counselors may miss opportunities to understand clients' worldviews, key aspects of their daily functioning, and how experiences of social class bias, prejudice, and discrimination may limit their growth and overall wellness (Brady-Amoon, 2011). Given the reluctance in the United States to acknowledge social class differences, it is understandable that counseling has followed suit, resulting in people from low social class feeling counseling is *not for them*. If people believe counseling is not for them, they may not engage in counseling to begin with or may not return after the first session if the counselor reinforces social class bias or misunderstanding (Cook, 2017; Smith et al., 2013; Vontress, 2011). As a profession, we have the capacity to welcome people with diverse social class identities into our practices and to convey empathy and unconditional positive regard; however, we must ameliorate the social class biases that threaten our ability to understand and connect deeply, be armed appropriately with social class knowledge and skills, and be ready to enact social justice advocacy.

Because social class and SES are not consistently integrated into training programs, counselors-in-training, practicing counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors likely need additional opportunities to grow in their social class awareness, knowledge, skills, and social justice actions (Ratts et al., 2016). It is probable that in their master's education, most counselors were not asked to examine their social class identities, identify their social class biases, or to increase their social class knowledge and skills (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012). Rogers (1980) suggested that in order for counselors to be present and to engage in genuine relationship with others, they must be keenly attuned with themselves and identify key elements that stymie their ability to form genuine relationship. Despite these strong sociocultural reasons, we offer that social class has been outside counselors' awareness for far too long. Because counselor educators and supervisors likely did not receive significant training in this area, they may not feel competent to integrate it with trainees, perpetuating the cycle despite a growing body of social class counseling research. Awareness is especially important, particularly for counselors who have identified as middle social class throughout their lives, because dominant culture membership involves social class privilege. Such privilege means middle class counselors are not required to consider their social class identities or how these identities and their corresponding perspectives may impact others (Ratts et al., 2016). Additionally, dominant

culture privilege means that middle class counselors are not likely to examine their social class bias and its potential impact unless prompted to do so. Although counselors from all social class groups are at risk for holding and demonstrating bias, it is particularly important for counselors from middle social class and higher to examine and ameliorate their biases. We recommend counselors, educators, and supervisors seek continuing education to build their social class awareness, knowledge, skill, and advocacy actions to benefit clients.

### Limitations and Future Research

Although the sample size was robust enough to determine significance and represented counselors in 26 states, it was still relatively small. We recommend replicating this study with a larger sample. An important missing question regarding participants' perceived preparation was how site supervisors during practicum and internship may have contributed to participants' preparation. We asked about coursework, but we did not ask specifically about on-site clinical experiences, and some participants may or may not have included this component in their responses. Correspondingly, we did not inquire about postgraduation continuing education related to social class. We recommend future research include the impact site supervisors, practicum and internship experiences, and continuing education have had on participants' social class development.

Additionally, there are limitations associated with asking participants to recall their training, particularly when their training was more than 10 years ago. To gain a stronger understanding of current social class pedagogical trends, we recommend future research with participants who have graduated in the past 5 to 10 years. Finally, we suggest researchers add to the literature about social class bias the pedagogical methods, supervision techniques, or experiences that have facilitated counselors' ability to eliminate their biases. There is a robust, developing literature base that social class bias exists in counseling and counselor education (e.g., Cook, 2017; Cook & O'Hara; 2019; Smith et al., 2013), though counselors, counselor educators, and supervisors require methods through which to eliminate social class biases.

## CONCLUSION

Social class and SES are underrepresented topics in counselor training and research, and a likely explanation is the pervasive reluctance in the United States to acknowledge and attend to these concepts (West-Olatunji & Gibson, 2012). As a result, the participants in this study revealed low knowledge of social class and SES when defining social class, differentiating social class from SES, and identifying U.S. social class groups. Because social class and SES are addressed infrequently in counselor education programs compared to the degree to which other cultural identities are addressed, we suggest integrating social class and SES more regularly and including them as salient variables that intersect with other cultural identities. We propose that increasing counselors' social class awareness, knowledge, skills, and social justice actions may result in counselors' ability to build genuine client relationships and to display empathetic understanding and unconditional positive regard, thereby welcoming and serving people from all social class backgrounds more competently, reducing attrition among clients from low social class, and increasing the impact of humanistic values in the counseling process.



## Footnotes

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