# Beyond Charity: Social Class and Classism in Counselling
# Au-delà de la charité : classes sociales et préjugés de classe en counseling

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ABSTRACT

Counsellors must work more effectively with working-class and poor people by becoming better informed about social class. A review of current literature suggests that while the working classes represent a substantial proportion of the population, they are not effectively served in counselling. In particular, a lack of class awareness and lack of counsellor attention to the specific needs of working-class and poor clients can compromise the development of therapeutic trust and negatively impact the counselling alliance. Emerging scholarship highlights class-related attitudes and experiences and supports the existence of social class cultures. Implications of a systemic and cultural analysis of social class for counselling practice, training, and research are highlighted. Born to a poor family, the author illustrates some of the complexities of social class by weaving together her personal and professional experience, emphasizing that counsellors must move beyond a charitable desire to help disadvantaged individuals and develop a more nuanced understanding of class and classism.

RÉSUMÉ

Les conseillers doivent travailler plus efficacement auprès des personnes de la classe ouvrière et des personnes pauvres, en étant mieux renseignés au sujet des classes sociales. Une revue de la littérature actuelle suggère que malgré le fait que les classes ouvrières représentent une proportion importante de la population, elles sont mal desservies sur le plan du counseling. Plus précisément, un manque de connaissance du phénomène des classes et un manque d'attention de la part du conseiller à l'égard des besoins particuliers des clients des classes ouvrières et défavorisées peuvent compromettre l'établissement du lien de confiance thérapeutique et avoir des effets néfastes sur l'alliance de counseling. De récentes recherches soulignent les attitudes et les expériences liées à l'appartenance à une classe et soutiennent l'existence de cultures de classe sociale. On met en lumière les implications d'une analyse systémique et culturelle des classes sociales pour la pratique du counseling, la formation, et la recherche. Née dans une famille modeste, l'auteure illustre certains aspects complexes de la classe sociale en s'inspirant de sa propre expérience personnelle et professionnelle, soulignant le fait que les conseillers doivent aller au-delà d'une volonté charitable afin d'aider les personnes défavorisées et de développer une compréhension plus nuancée des classes et des préjugés qui y sont associés.

People who struggle with economic hardship and inequity should benefit from as much counselling and therapeutic support as anyone. Poor and working-class people are routinely subjected to oppressive conditions and difficult experiences,

resulting in ongoing high levels of stress (Abrams & Ceballos, 2012; Leondar-Wright, 2005; Sherry, Adelman, Farwell, & Linton, 2013; Smith, 2005, 2008), and low income is associated with a host of psychological and mental health problems (Sheperis & Sheperis, 2012; Smith, 2008; Wang et al., 2005; Wurster, Rinaldi, Woods, & Liu, 2013). Yet, as a group, low-income people, along with the elderly and racial-ethnic minorities, were among the 80% of Americans found to be underserved by psychology (Wang et al., 2005). In fact, psychotherapy seems to have limited effectiveness with poor clients, poverty being related to recidivism and lack of counselling success (Liu & Arguello, 2006; McCarthy, Reese, Schueneman, & Reese, 1991).

Social justice proponents have begun to promote a focus on poverty, and there have been some encouraging developments. In 2000, the American Psychological Association adopted a "Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status" that affirmed the psychological needs of people living in poverty and the responsibilities of the profession to them (Lott, 2012; Pope & Arthur, 2009). Psychological research on poverty has begun, with scholarship often focusing on the need for compassionate understanding of, and more effective practice with, poor people (cf. Ali, Liu, Mahmood, & Arguello, 2008; Arthur & Collins, 2010; Smith, 2008; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Systemic and cultural aspects of race and ethnicity are rightly a focus of social justice and multicultural approaches to counselling. Likewise, an analysis that acknowledges systemic sexism and heterosexism is basic to working effectively with gender (Lalande & Laverty, 2010). However, although often referenced as one of the big three cultural dimensions—race, class, and gender—social class has not received the same rigorous and sustained attention within psychology (Liu, 2006; Liu, Ali, et al., 2004; Smith, Foley, & Chaney, 2008). A class analysis has not been substantially incorporated into social justice counselling perspectives (Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007). Smith (2008) said, "specifically, what is missing from counseling psychology's social justice agenda is the naming and explication of a form of oppression that operates so that poor and working-class people are systematically disadvantaged" (p. 809).

This article addresses the need for counsellors to work more effectively with working-class people by becoming better informed about social class. In the next section, I will briefly illustrate some of the complexities of class membership by sharing a little of my own class background and experience. I will then look more closely at the sometimes-slippery concept of social class, exploring how it is defined, how people are situated in the different classes, and the interplay of social class with classism—discrimination based on perceived social class. I will sample the research, particularly focusing on measures of social class and effects of classism, class-related experiences and attitudes, class and the counselling alliance, and scholarship on working-class families and communication that supports an emerging understanding of class cultures. Finally, I will consider the implications for counselling practice, training, and research of an awareness of social class as systemic and cultural. My thesis is that counselling working-class people must

move beyond a charitable desire to help disadvantaged individuals and incorporate a more nuanced understanding of class and classism, both our clients' and our own.

## MY SOCIAL CLASS LOCALE: IDENTITY AS COMPLEX AND FLUID

I want to contextualize my interest in this topic by situating myself in terms of social class. I was born into a very poor home in small-town Manitoba and raised among a large extended family of poor and Indigenous mixed-blood relatives. Of my 100-plus cousins, I was one of a handful to graduate from high school, the second to ever attend university, and, today, the only one with a graduate degree. My life path illustrates many of the complexities of class membership, as I moved in and out of experiences, simultaneously holding attachments to differing aspects of class.

Sent off to university, high school scholarships in hand, I was overwhelmed by many of the kinds of situations social class theory describes as class-related: lack of middle-class personal networks, lack of social capital, lack of money, and bound to working-class peers who did not relate to, or support, my university aspirations. At the end of first year, I had one A and 4 Bs, which to me meant I had failed and was not meant to go to university. *I had failed*, I thought, not *the educational system had failed me*.

I spent the next several years in working-class jobs; waitress, receptionist, office help, and long-distance operator. I socialized with friends, I travelled a bit. Though disappointing, this was not a horrible fate, and it was only when I became a single mother that I decided I had to try again to "make something of myself" so that I could give my children a better life. I financed my first degree with student loans, thriving in what Jensen (2012) referred to as "the amazing world of the mind," coming to believe once again that I was smart, I was special, I could *be* somebody. I wasn't just another waitress, to be looked down upon by every businessman out for lunch. I financed my Master's degree with fellowships and scholarships, by then married and living in a nice middle-class neighbourhood where I hoped that our upward mobility would give my children access to better schools and more personal safety.

Attending university, interacting with students and teachers, and getting to know many middle-class friends and colleagues, I also began to develop a class awareness and to refine my dawning identity as a working-class woman. Repeatedly, I was confronted with experiences of being different from my peers: different in my life experiences and career trajectory, my family's values and beliefs, even different in how I expressed myself and what kind of communication felt natural to me. It was only when I began my counselling career on a northern reserve, working with Native people, most of whom lived in poverty, that I once again felt that I was in my own element. Over the years, I have worked extensively with poor, working-class, and Indigenous clients, their families and communities, and I have continued to hone my understanding of the place of class in their worlds and mine.

This kind of life trajectory seems to be typical for those identified by Lubrano (2004), Leondar-Wright (2005), and Jensen (2004) as class "crossovers" or "straddlers," people from the working class who move into dominant classes. Even though I now possess professional middle-class education, income, and career credentials, I still identify as working class, and the people to whom I am closest—those with whom I can be myself—are almost always other working-class folks. The working class is where I come from and where I'm proud to be. While the focus of this article is on theory and research, I believe that my view is also that of a cultural informant, having consciously retained, and at times recovered, key understandings from my working-class cultural origins, and being able to offer guidance and interpretation to the uninitiated.

The title of this article invites counsellors to go "beyond charity" in understanding social class. When I was a kid, people on our side of the tracks sometimes did receive charity, and we appreciated it. From time to time, usually when we were away grocery shopping, a package would appear politely on our doorstep; a small, clean cardboard box or a brown shopping bag, with items freshly laundered and folded neatly inside. "But where did they come from?" I would ask my mother. "Like, who gave them to us?" I was a curious little girl. Only later, in my teenage years, did it begin to occur to me that some girl in my high school must be sitting quietly watching as I traipsed down the halls in something she no longer cared for. She would know me but I would never know her.

Social justice orientations to counselling offer encouragement that the relative disadvantages and privileges of class membership will be recognized and taken seriously in our field. But I will tell you plainly that there is a difference between a charitable yet distant view of poor people as unfortunate "others," and true engagement with social class as a site of oppression. I believe that we can only move beyond charity by working at becoming class aware in all areas of experience, struggling with class privilege and power differentials, and working in a sustained way to become more effective in counselling working-class people.

## SOCIAL CLASS STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

Social class can be a complex concept to define and understand. For the purposes of this article, I will be using the definitions and analyses of Ehrenreich (1989), Smith (2008), Collins (2012), and Zweig (2012). According to these authors, the middle class are university-educated people working in the professions or in management, who, although not wealthy, tend to be comfortable financially. The working class are people without university degrees who work for wages, may be skilled or semiskilled, may or may not own homes, and often lack sufficient financial resources to be economically secure. Poor people usually have not completed high school, may work in low-wage jobs or may move in and out of employment or may not work at all, some living on public assistance. The upper class is the 5% of the population who have no need to work, and their top fifth compose the ruling or owning class. This recently highly publicized 1% is

possessed of such vast power that they alone can influence the course and directions of society.

Zweig (2012) observed that class is experienced through differential lifestyles, economic prospects, and treatment by others. Acknowledging complex changes in economic and vocational realities, he said that social class membership today should be seen as "in large part based on the power and authority people have at work" (p. 3). By this measure, he described the working class as having "a common place in production, where they have little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss," and the middle class as "professional people, small business owners, and managers and supervisors who have authority over others at work" (p. 3).

Zweig (2012) critiqued popular perceptions of the ease of upward mobility, observing there is still limited movement across class lines. Collins and Yeskel (2005) confirmed that although a few individuals are able to shift into a "higher" class while others "drop down," the class to which one is born is still the best predictor of adult social class. North Americans commonly believe in the existence of a vast middle class, sandwiched between a thin dusting of the wealthy above them and a small, troubled group of the poor beneath (Lee & Dean, 2004). But, although this perception is accurate regarding the upper class, the proportion of middle-class people is much lower. Zweig (2012) determined that, as of 2010, when the degree of authority and power a person has over their own work is taken into account, middle-class people made up only 35% of the American work force, while working-class people comprised 63% (p. 31); thus his title, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret.*

In 2009, 14.3% of the American population was living in poverty. Collins and Yeskel (2005) and Leondar-Wright (2005) suggested that people living in poverty are really a subset of the working class, sharing with others of that class a lack of privilege, while shouldering an even heavier load of difficulties. Smith (2005) agreed, challenging the stereotype of the poor as a static "underclass" of society. She noted that many members of the working class, especially the working poor and the underemployed, move in and out of a state of poverty. Millions of welfare recipients are on assistance for only a few months at a time, and many of the working poor are only one pay cheque, or one lost job, away from financial ruin (Jensen, 2012; Smith, 2008; Zweig, 2012). As Zweig (2012) said, "poverty is something that happens to the working class" (p. 79).

Canadian authors Macionis and Gerber (2010) echoed this interpretation, saying that "the popular perception of Canada as a society with a bulging middle class and a uniformly high standard of living does not square with many important facts" (p. 246). The authors estimated that 3–5% of Canadians belonged to the upper class, 33% were working class, and members of the "lower class" (living below the poverty line) made up 20% of our population (pp. 256–257). They wrote that members of the "upper-middle" and "average middle" classes constituted between 20% and 25% each. However, the group these authors named "average middles" were described as making modest though secure incomes, having only

a high school education, and working in positions such as bank tellers and sales clerks, and in skilled blue-collar jobs such as electricians and carpenters. As such, this group, having no university education and typically lacking autonomy and control over the conditions of their work, would meet Zweig's (2012) criteria for membership in the working class. At any rate, one thing that is clear is that the vast majority of Canadians do not belong to the professional middle class.

Jensen (2012), Zweig (2012), and others also commented on people's tendency to conflate race and class, wrongly equating poverty with nondominant race and Whiteness with class privilege. But the relationship between race and class is not linear. For example, while the majority of Canadian Indigenous people are poor (Statistics Canada, 2011) and members of visible minorities are well represented among Canadian poor people, the majority of poor Canadians are White (Macionis & Gerber, 2010). Similarly, in the United States, "Black people currently make up about 13.8% of the U.S. population, and about 27% of these Americans fall below the poverty line" (Ross, 2012). Zweig (2012) concurred that a substantial group of Black people are working class. Nevertheless, in 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau's breakdown showed that, of those living in poverty, 4.3% were Asian American, 25.4% were Black, 28.6% were Hispanic, and 41.5% were White (Ross, 2012). In the United States, as in Canada, White people are the majority of those living in poverty (Zweig, 2012). Most poor people are White.

## CLASSISM AND THE POLITICS OF CLASS MEMBERSHIP

Class Action (2013) defines classism as "the systematic assignment of characteristics of worth and ability based on social class, and differential treatment based on social class or perceived social class" (para. 2). Classism includes individual attitudes and behaviours as well as systems of policy and practice that are set up to benefit the upper classes at the expense of the lower classes, resulting in extreme wealth and income inequality (Collins, 2012). Classism can be internalized by poor and working-class people, leading to negative self-esteem and self-worth, depression, anxiety, and intrapsychic conflicts (Pope & Arthur, 2009). Classism also works to obscure the systemic and political determinants of economic and other class disadvantage (Zweig, 2012).

Negative attitudes toward people based on social class abound. Working-class North Americans are popularly stereotyped as unmannerly and lacking in taste (Jensen, 2012) and lazy and loud in public (Zweig, 2012), with working-class Whites stereotyped as rednecks, hillbillies, and white trash (Jensen, 2012; Leondar-Wright, 2005). Jensen (2012) wrote that a common classist assumption is that dominant-group members (middle and upper class) are smarter and more articulate than working-class people.

Another typical bias was illustrated in a study of class associations to bad behaviour by Smith, Allen, and Bowen (2010). Participants received a list of 174 infractions and crimes and were asked with which social class category (poor, working class, middle class, or wealthy) they most associated each. Some of the infractions

were logically tagged to specific classes. For example, questions referring to welfare fraud or food stamps would be logically related to being poor, questions involving punching a time clock or being a union member would be working-class tagged, and references to insider trading or embezzling money from one's company would be specific to the middle or upper class. With infractions ranging from minor misdeeds to serious crimes, the study found that the low-income category alone was associated with bad behaviour that did not contain class references, while the middle class was not associated highly with any infractions, including those that were logically tagged to middle-class people.

Social class is a complex subject, with many of the popular presumptions about class being incorrect. What is clear is that poor and working-class people are not an exotic "new" population, and certainly not a numerical minority. They are a substantial group. Social class affects lifestyle, resources, and attitudes, with folks from nondominant classes suffering classist stigma and stereotyping. Smith (2008), recognizing that "classism constitutes a parallel to the other forms of oppression that are addressed as dimensions of social justice practice, such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism" (p. 919), called for acknowledgement within our profession of the systemic nature of class inequity. It is with this background on the importance of social class that I now want to consider the relevant scholarship.

<div align="center">A BRIEF FORAY INTO CLASS AND CLASSISM</div>

My survey of the literature is purposeful, not exhaustive, aiming only to highlight the main directions being taken in theory and practice, research and training. A first note about the literature is the inconsistency of attention to specific social class status. Although some studies are scrupulous about defining social class and determining the class status of participants, the literature on practice, in particular, tends to focus only on work with "the poor" and rarely defines or assesses social class further. Second, I note that a great deal of this literature is American, and, although there would seem to be many similarities between the Canadian and American systems, there may also be important differences to how social class is experienced in Canada. In-depth exploration of the implications of these differences is beyond the scope of this article. What we can learn is what the current research says about class-based attitudes and experiences and what members of our profession need to know in order to address the therapeutic needs of working-class and poor people.

*Class Assessment and Use in Counselling College Students*

Social class and classism are complex phenomena, and their conception and study can be difficult (Smith, 2006, 2008). Liu (2006) and his colleagues at the University of Iowa have focused on increasing awareness of the importance of social class and classism in counselling, illuminating some of the myriad ways in which class and classism interact with experience. Liu operationalized social class as "beliefs and attitudes that help the individual to understand the demands of his

or her economic culture" (p. 338). Liu, Ali, et al. (2004) showed that psychological research ignores social class as a cultural construct, controlling for, or factoring out, social class effects. Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunstan, and Pickett (2004) provided models with which to assess clients' class attitudes and experiences and to gain a better understanding of the ways social class may influence clients' therapeutic needs.

Liu, Soleck, et al. (2004), positing that people's social class worldviews, though complex, are amenable to assessment, developed the social class worldview model. Wurster et al. (2013) described the revised version of the model as having four aspects. The first aspect is economic cultures, environments that may place more value on human, social, or cultural capitals. The second and third aspects are lenses through which people see their world (e.g., based on materialism, class behaviours, or lifestyles) and factors that shape how people see through the lenses (e.g., socialization or social class consciousness). The fourth aspect is classism, which the authors said may be directed upward, downward, or laterally, or it can be internalized.

Use of these models in assessing effects of class and classism have allowed practitioners to develop effective responses to client concerns, particularly in work with members of minority and nontraditional college student groups. For instance, Liu (2002) used analysis of the interplay of intrapsychic class pressures, gender expectations, and cultural mores in counselling a 43-year-old Chinese man enrolled in a college engineering program. Liu et al. (2007) applied an understanding of the negative influence of middle-class privilege in the case study of a white, middle-class, male college senior whose lifestyle of "parties, bars, and 'going out'" (p. 200) was resulting in failing grades.

Sanchez, Liu, Leathers, Goins, and Vilain (2011) studied the subjective experience of social class and upward mobility among African American men in graduate school, concluding that "a man's social class is a measure of his masculinity" (p. 370). Wurster et al. (2013) described the situation of student veterans who were the first generation in their families to go to college, suggesting that, in part because of social class factors, this group faces greater challenges matriculating into college, adjusting to the academic environment, and financing their education.

*Effects of Social Class and Classism*

Tokarczyk (2004) delineated some of the academic and other disadvantages typically faced by working-class first-generation college students. She pointed out that, although the role of universities is increasingly seen as combatting socioeconomic inequities, the needs of working-class and other nontraditional students are largely ignored. Keen to attract students from diverse backgrounds, universities nevertheless function as though all students arrive with the personal and academic capabilities of the privileged few. Facing cutbacks and resource shortages, universities continue to increase staff workloads so there is little time to develop techniques, strategies, and programs that would better support first-generation students. Tokarczyk said that although faculty generally recognize the

structural challenges and cultural differences of visible minorities, they tend not to do so with working-class students, especially if they are nonvisible minorities. In fact, in a societal context that is blind to the existence of social class, students themselves often do not realize the classed nature of their experience.

A disconnect between the working-class self and fields of professional study can also be experienced by college teachers. Long, Jenkins, and Bracken (2000) used ethnographic narrative to mine their own experiences as working-class women professors. The women experienced intrapsychic conflict with the idea of intellectual work *as* work, struggling with an unsubstantiated sense of themselves as "impostors," feeling more drawn to other working-class people on campus than to their teaching colleagues. Similar experiences have been echoed by other working-class academics (cf. Lubrano, 2004; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993).

Blustein et al. (2002) looked at the role of social class in the school-to-work transition. Noting that the strongest focus of school-leaving research is on the transition to college, they studied the experiences of students going directly into work. Findings were that social class influenced the decision not to pursue secondary education and were also related to quality of the work experience. The higher socioeconomic status (SES) group in the study experienced more job satisfaction and greater self-esteem, encountering more educational and relational resources and fewer barriers, and having more of a sense of career adaptability. The authors connected their findings to the fact that higher SES participants worked for reasons of personal satisfaction and meaning, whereas those with lower SES worked because they had to, for personal survival.

## Class, Families, and Culture

Over the years, a few theorists have noted the class biases of conceptions of "normal" families and "proper" parenting. Miller (1981) stressed that supposedly ideal family characteristics such as open and honest communication, the expression of emotions, and the use of democratic decision-making processes are strongly associated with the White middle class, and these conventional notions support negative judgements of poor and working-class parents. Gillies (2007) revealed classist attitudes toward working-class parents in Britain and their function in defining working-class mothers' responses to systemic pressures as dysfunctional. Skeggs (2005) explained how White working-class British women, often mothers, have been popularly vilified as immoral. Furthermore, Collins (1990) said that classic feminist critiques of motherhood were themselves biased by theorists' class and race positions and that mainstream models of "appropriate" parenting function to pathologize and blame Black mothers living in poverty.

The lack of critical analysis in assessing working-class parenting was underlined in an extensive review of the literature on attachment by Sherry et al. (2013). The authors found that working-class parents do tend to score lower on measures of warmth and attachment and that African American mothers who are poor are less attentive compared to other mothers. They also agreed that working-class parents were more likely to use authoritarian parenting styles (being more directive and less

likely to negotiate with children), and African Americans of any class were more likely to use punitive styles (relying upon physical and other punishment to obtain compliance). Sherry et al. emphasized, however, that research studies consistently confuse and/or collapse measures of class and race, thus overstating the degree to which negative behaviours can be attributed solely to class status and calling into question the validity of their findings. They said that the association between attachment behaviour and low SES is only indirect; poverty creates the conditions for unsatisfactory attachment, not parenting behaviours per se. Working-class parenting behaviours should be seen in the context of ongoing work-related stresses and the effects of classism with which these families often struggle.

Lareau's (2003) important book, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life,* described her in-depth, cross-cultural study of parenting and communication styles, comparing African American and White families that were poor, working class, and middle class. Lareau characterized the middle-class style for both African American and White parents as one of *concerted cultivation*. In this approach, parents orchestrate many structured activities for their children and communicate purposefully and strategically. Their talk is rationalistic and goal-oriented, encouraging negotiation of decisions and outcomes. This type of parenting develops a sense of *entitlement* in middle-class children and confers educational and other advantages.

Working-class and poverty-class parents, by contrast, rely upon the *accomplishment of natural growth*, believing that kids "just grow up" (Lareau, 2003, p. 2). These parents lack the time, the energy, and sometimes the will to constantly monitor and control their children, so the children's time is mostly unstructured, allowing them to pursue their own interests. Parents' language use is mostly directive. With interactional styles and expectations that differ markedly from teachers and others in authority, working-class children often become frustrated in their attempts to communicate, eventually developing a sense of constraint and feelings of resentment, distance, and distrust of institutions and professionals.

Lareau (2003) pointed out that school professionals are strongly and unconsciously biased to middle-class interaction styles. She also stressed that, although there were differences between White and African American poor families, class, not race, is the key association. Importantly, Lareau identified class-based differences in amount, prevalence, and style of talk, describing the middle-class family environment as "constant talk sometimes interrupted by silence" compared to the working-class "comfortable silence punctuated by talking." Taken together, these constellations of difference in interactional and communication styles support the existence of class cultures. In fact, emerging scholarship has illuminated ways that, beyond disadvantage and oppression, working-class people may share other aspects of culture such as personality traits, beliefs, and values (McCarthy et al., 1991; Miller, 1981), and trauma experiences, stressors, and coping responses (Brown, 2002; Smith, 2005).

Jensen (1997, 2004, 2012) has written convincingly about class communication and cultural differences. Jensen (1997) used semiotics and psycholinguistic

analysis to explore classed differences in speech, suggesting that "classes produce cultures and language is the medium of culture" (p. 3). She said that working-class talk gives access to a different kind of cultural consciousness that is valuable, but often ignored and disrespected by the dominant culture. Jensen (2004) addressed the emotional complexity of the experience of first-generation college students attempting to cross over to the middle class, suggesting that classism experiences in college can have the effect of separating working-class students from opportunities and privileges, and even from their internal lives. Middle-class students often find "familiar cultural rules, values, and privileges" (p. 169) in higher education, while class *crossovers*, stressed by cultural differences, may respond with masking behaviours such as depression and anxiety, relationship and anger issues, or addictions. Crossovers may experience a kind of survivor guilt, processing the cognitive dissonance of pursuing upward mobility in different ways. Some may *reject* the new (middle-class) culture—which is one of the reasons for the high college dropout rate for working-class students. Others may *eject* their former (working-class) culture, distancing from family and others of their class origins, thus complicating their sense of self and identity.

Jensen (2012) further described some of the cultural complexities dealt with by class *straddlers* in trying to negotiate working-class identity in a classist society. She characterized the major themes of the two class cultures as middle-class *becoming*, focused on self, accomplishments, and actualization; and working-class *belonging*, grounded in intimacy, meaningful silences, and a sense of togetherness. Middle-class and working-class people have "fundamental differences in outlooks and approaches to life" (2012, p. 174), Jensen said, with different constellations of values, preferred styles of communication and meaning-making, and other key cultural differences. Working-class culture is more in the here-and-now and centred on a sense of belonging, community, and loyalty, while middle-class cultural values are more individualistic and focused on achievement of planned and publicly acknowledged goals.

*Counselling Alliance*

Counselling alliance is crucial to counselling effectiveness (Hubble, Duncan, Miller, & Wampold, 2010), but studies suggest that class can have problematic effects on the therapeutic relationship. Balmforth (2009) discovered that social class differences between therapist and client were negatively associated with development of the therapeutic alliance. Cline, Meija, Coles, Klein, and Cline (1984) found outcomes for middle-class versus lower-class couples in marital therapy were complex and differed by therapist social class. Moreover, Ballinger and Wright (2007) determined that counsellors who self-identified as working class experienced a lack of connection between their own knowledge and experiences and the expectations of their profession.

A recent study by Thompson, Cole, and Nitzarim (2012) used grounded theory methodology to explore subjective experiences of 16 low-income psychotherapy clients. Findings were that the therapeutic relationship was influenced by the

therapist's response to social class. Clients were sensitive to what they perceived as displays of therapist social status (expensive décor, clothing, and jewelry; personal attractiveness; exuding confidence). Positive therapist behaviours included explicit acknowledgement of social class, showing understanding of the class-related complexities of clients' situations, and integrating class issues into treatment. These class-responsive behaviours led to client feelings of safety and trust, a sense of connection with the therapist, and perceptions of positive counselling outcomes. When therapists failed to acknowledge class complexities and did not incorporate class into treatment, clients perceived that power differentials were exacerbated, and they felt judged by, and disconnected from, the therapist.

A study of aspiring therapists by Smith, Mao, Perkins, and Ampuero (2011) may have implications for therapy with working-class clients. Using a survey technique, they tested the possible influence of a hypothetical client's social class on early diagnostic impressions of graduate students in clinical and counselling psychology. Besides considering the interaction of therapist and "client" social class and the effects of client social class on therapist assessment of the client's mental health, the study also explored effects of the Belief in a Just World (BJW). BJW is the belief that people who are good and act right will do well in life; in other words, the world is a fair place and people "get what they deserve." The correlate of this view is that, if people don't do well in life—if they are poor, for instance—then they must deserve to be poor.

Findings were that, based only on a change to the one-sentence description of clients' social class background, therapists-in-training evaluated higher social-class clients more positively, assessing them with fewer mental health problems (Smith et al., 2011). Therapist expectations for future work with the hypothetical working-class client were even lower than for the poverty client, and both were less favourable than for the dominant groups. Therapists with a higher BJW had the most negative perceptions of nondominant clients.

These results are particularly interesting when juxtaposed with a study of low-SES students in family therapy education programs. McDowell, Brown, Cullen, and Duyn (2013) invited students from accredited American family therapy programs to fill out confidential online surveys. Participants, 33 of whom self-identified as working class and 12 of whom self-identified as lower class, often felt conflicted, as their graduate school experience provided resources and access to upward mobility but also a sense of disconnect from their families and friends. Although they felt that their graduate school learning benefitted from their class background, these students consistently described their programs as middle-class centred. Programs assumed that all students were middle class and took middle-class experience as the norm, causing low-SES students to often feel marginalized in their classes, although more so by peers than by professors. Many of the students acknowledged professors and advisors who had been personally supportive, but they also experienced classist statements, assumptions, and exclusionary behaviours in their classes, as well as unexpected financial and class-related barriers.

Current scholarship supports the relevance of social class to experience in several key settings, including within families, in postsecondary education, in work and graduate training, and in the therapy room. Working-class people often experience challenges and bias related to values, views, or situational complexities that differ from those of the middle class. Both class-cultural differences and experiences of classism are important considerations for counselling practice.

### CLASS RESPONSIVE PRACTICE, TRAINING, AND RESEARCH

The importance of communication to counselling cannot be overemphasized. Recognizing feelings, deducing meaning, and working with values are basic to our work, so class differences in ways of relating and communicating would be significant to counselling practice. In fact, recent scholarship on working effectively with working-class and poor people emphasizes communication style. Counsellors should engage authentically with poor clients in order to gain their trust, rather than talking down to them or talking at them (Appio, Chambers, & Mao, 2013; Foss & Generali, 2012). We should use direct and honest communication, listening carefully and respecting working-class clients' values, and be prepared to share advice or be directive when needed (Lavell, 2013; McCarthy et al., 1991). We must work at developing relationships that are nonhierarchical and therapeutic, emphasize empowerment of clients, and show respect for the collective focus and struggles of many (Brown, 2002). If counsellors allow clients time to talk freely, work at finding common ground, and give hope by avoiding a focus on deficiency, trusting relationships can be built (Foss & Generali, 2012).

Counsellors are advised to directly discuss, rather than avoid talk of, clients' economic stressors and to address clients' immediate and practical needs rather than focusing on psychological techniques and approaches (Foss & Generali, 2012). Waldegrave (2005) said that treating poor families without addressing their economic context gives the message that the families, not the circumstances of their poverty, are the problem. Wurster et al. (2013) stressed that, instead of vague and open-ended supportiveness, working-class college students often need direct advice and advocacy, and social and emotional support that are both immediate and overt. McCarthy et al. (1991) recommended that counsellors relinquish desires to set long-term goals for working-class women, and instead should continue to use crisis models and psychoeducation, as needs for intervention will likely be ongoing. Foss and Generali (2012) advised against trying to do mainstream therapy focused only on feelings.

On the other hand, working-class clients do still want "real" counselling, therapeutic talk that acknowledges feelings and emotional processes and helps to develop insights. Martin, McKeown, and Sturm (2012) emphasized the importance of empathy in working with the poor, as well as the development of safe and supportive relationships and the provision of a safe space to bring issues. They advised counsellors to be down-to-earth, practical, and nonideological, and to empower clients. Low-income people often experience having their choices taken

away, so it is crucial that this dynamic not be reproduced in therapy. Brown (2002) commented that poor families often only come for therapy either because they have been mandated to do so or as a last resort, and she too emphasized the need for a trusting therapeutic relationship, as well as respect for the collective focus and struggles of many families.

Social justice proponents promote advocacy on behalf of working-class clients who struggle with poverty. Ali et al. (2008) recommended that social justice in counselling include both learning about oppressed groups and advocating for them. Wurster et al. (2013) said counsellors could help first-generation college student veterans by providing supports and cultural connections with other first-generation students, but also by using the clinician's position and authority to advocate for them with college staff and with the offices of various veterans' services. Waldegrave (2005) said that therapists may be some of the few middle-class professionals to truly understand the situations of families struggling with poverty, challenging them not to let commitments to confidentiality hamper their being advocates on the important repeated themes (as opposed to the specific details) of poor people's lives. In fact, he maintained that for therapists not to do so was compounding the silencing of poor people's voices.

There is a growing emphasis on the need for therapist self-awareness regarding class and classism. Goodman, Pugach, Skolnik, and Smith (2013) said that therapists must develop class competence by working to become more aware of their own class biases and assumptions, better understanding the psychosocial impacts of poverty, and expanding their repertoire of effective interventions. Appio et al. (2013) pointed out the overwhelming middle-class membership of therapists, noting the tendency for this group to live segregated from the working class and hence to be out of touch with their challenges and concerns. Smith (2005) acknowledged that this work can be daunting, as poor people's lives are typically so full of difficulties that solving one problem simply opens space to reveal the next. Therapists are denied the sense of accomplishment they may feel when "everything works out" with middle-class clients. Smith (2008) counselled therapists to persevere in this important work.

### BEYOND CHARITY: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CLASS IN COUNSELLING

Beyond a focus on charity with the poor, I believe that a social justice approach must integrate social class analysis on every level. We must focus on practice, training, and research that recognizes, and is responsive to, working-class experiences and cultures. Class-based privileges and injustice, along with those of gender and race/ethnicity, organize our society, and focusing solely on "the poor" can help keep social class oppression invisible. We must expand our discussions on this issue.

I agree with McCarthy et al. (1991) that there is a grave lack of research regarding working-class people and that current counselling theories are inadequate in helping us understand and assist them. Many professionals, both because of a systemic lack of awareness of classism and understanding of the class structure,

and because of their own privileged position in the middle class, do not understand working-class realities. Research that explores and explains working-class experiences in social institutions such as families, therapy, schools, employment, and postsecondary education is essential. This research, instead of focusing on pathology and dysfunction, would aim to uncover subjective experiences and perspectives of working-class people, highlighting the functionality and deeper meanings of behaviours.

Empirical studies are needed that attend to social class and recognize the effects of class and classism in a variety of counselling issues (Liu, Ali, et al., 2004). We must also explore the interplay of class factors with other social justice loci—for instance, gender, race, sexuality, immigrant or disability experience, and so on (Smith, 2006)—while at the same time acknowledging that class worldviews and experiences will likely differ in various ethnic cultural contexts (Lee & Dean, 2004). Race does not equal class, but class and race interact and interweave in many and complex ways.

Pope and Arthur (2009) upheld the need for counsellor education that recognizes class as a cultural factor and also uses a social class analysis in critically examining assumptions that underlie current psychological theories. Counsellor training programs need to incorporate curricula that teach about social class and classism, not just a focus on "the poor" as a needy and disadvantaged population. Taking the advice of low-SES family therapy students in the study by McDowell et al. (2013), faculty must increase their awareness of social class, expecting that some students will be from nondominant classes and providing opportunities for students to share their backgrounds and process experiences of class and classism. Programs must challenge class-based biases, especially assumptions that middle-class experience is the norm, and ensure that class is included as an element of diversity rather than conflating class with race and assuming that all non-ethnic students come from privilege.

Communication is the bedrock of counselling. Words are our window on worldviews, our finger on the pulse of culture. Jensen (1997, 2004, 2012) and others argued that working-class people are culturally different and that communication attuned to middle-class realities, values, and preferred styles of interaction will fall short with working-class people. I think that unrecognized but real class-based differences in communication styles may in part account for therapy's generally poor success with working-class clients. Certainly, my own feeling in graduate counselling programs was that the standard counselling skills training always privileged middle-class ways of communicating. I think that research and theory on working-class communication and cultures must be studied and incorporated into counsellor training programs so that we can begin to generate more class-responsive skill-sets and practices.

We live in a world that denies the reality of class at the same time that it pathologizes those who fare badly in a class-based system. Clients may not recognize the effects of their social class background on presenting issues, but that doesn't mean that they do not feel the shame or vulnerability or ongoing frustrations inher-

ent to their classed experience. A social justice perspective acknowledging power and privilege based on class membership is essential to working more effectively with working-class people, as is incorporating insights about class cultures and communication. In other words, we need a multicultural counselling approach to social class.

Although membership in the professional middle class has its benefits, it also has the huge disadvantage of a worldview out of step with the experiences of a great many working-class people. The influences of gender expectations, gender roles, and sexism have been incorporated in standard psychological practice, and both multicultural and social justice proponents have pointed out the drawbacks of taking a race-blind stance to counselling clients of colour (Arthur & Collins, 2010; Smith, Constantine, Graham, & Dize, 2008). There is a growing understanding that even when therapists or clients are not members of racial minorities, systemic racism and racial attitudes may still hold sway. I argue, in a similar vein, that we cannot work effectively with working-class and poor clients while being blind to class and classism. In fact, Liu (2002) and others (cf. Liu et al., 2007) illustrated that awareness of class and classism can be relevant to success in working with clients of the middle class, too.

## Goodhope: Crossing the Threshold

What I have tried to share here is an understanding of the relevance of social class to counselling and the need to leave behind a worldview that places presumed-normal middle-class experience at the centre, with a decontextualized and needy "poor" at the margins. I have invited you to attend to class context and to cross the threshold into working-class experiential realities, better understanding working-class lives and responding more effectively to counselling needs.

I have spoken elsewhere about the advantage my poverty background gives me in working with poor and other working-class children and their families (Lavell & Jensen, 2011). Part of growing up in my working-class childhood world was immersion in an oral storytelling culture. Stories are so good at encapsulating meaning and speaking to the heart, and yet they can be ambiguous enough to leave room for personal interpretation. So let me leave you with a story …

I was turning 11 the year the new girl, Louise Goodhope, came early to my birthday party so that my mother and I could look through the parcel of beautiful clothing she had outgrown and was passing along to me. "I hope you don't mind," she said. She seemed a little hesitant. But my mother and I both encouraged her—I really needed clothes. My older sister and I were going through one of those periods when we were close to the same size, and I was running short on hand-me-downs. As mentioned above, our family had received "charity" before, recycled gifts from mysterious people—folks we never got the chance to know. But Louise Goodhope was different. She left behind the safety of anonymity, stepped lightly up our three wooden stairs, knocked on our door, and crossed the threshold into our home. Along with me, my sister, and a gaggle of cousins,

she played Musical Chairs and the Game of Telephone; she sat unassumingly on a cushion by the couch enjoying her hot dog—my birthday meal of choice; she sang along boisterously as my mother's homemade spice cake lit up the room; and she vied exuberantly for more peanuts in the Peanut Throw that was always the party finale.

Louise Goodhope was not my best friend. We didn't walk home together daily or talk on the phone or have sleepovers; I had my friends and she had hers. But while I knew her, she never once joined in when others teased me, never betrayed a confidence, never left me to be picked dead last for a team, and always had a smile and a word for me in passing. Though she moved away the following summer, I cherished the things she gave me for years; two skirts, two pairs of leotards, two blouses, and a baggy rust-coloured sweater that I was crazy about. I wore that sweater till it faded to gold and the elbows were literally thread-bare. I wore it on rainy days and sick days and lonesome days; nothing else would do. I'd say, "Mom, where's my golden sweater, the Goodhope one?"

What I liked about Louise at the age of 11, and what I still appreciate today, is that she took the steps all the way from polite, distant charity on our doorstep, across the threshold and through the doorway into our actual real lives. She joined us and joined with us. She was a real person giving a valuable gift and, with it, the opportunity for us to restore balance and equity to the relationship by welcoming that gift and being allowed, like all worthy people, to say thank you.

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