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Introduction

I chose to research social class as it relates to the family life cycle because of my family of origin’s personal history with poverty and because of my parent’s relative upward mobility. My parents both experienced working class and impoverished conditions in their childhood, at least for a time. Furthermore, my parents, along with my mother’s siblings, have each transitioned into a middle or upper middle-class position in adulthood. By the time my sister and I began to attend elementary school, my family of origin had achieved a middle-class position. This achievement, though well earned, represented a chasm over which my sister and I related to our parents. Because my sister and I were raised as middle-class children, we were unable to relate to the perceptions and schemas that our parents carried from their working class upbringing. Thus, my sister and I have consistently been at odds with our parents over the tasks and meanings associated with each life cycle stage. In addition, my sister and I have taken a less collectivist mindset in regard to family life, whereas our parents continue to hold to collectivist ideas learned from early social class position. Thus, social class and its influence upon the family life cycle was an appealing topic that I was happy to engage with.

Literature Review

Social Class Operationalized

In the United States of America, social class is a multifaceted concept that holds organizational influence for all individuals, their family systems, and their life cycle trajectories. Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, and Keltner (2012) defined social class to be “a form of social hierarchy that arises from the amount of material resources an individual possesses and one’s perceived social rank in society relative to others” (p. 449). Additionally, Kliman (2011) suggested that access to immaterial resources such as “information, education, [and] privilege” also contribute
to one’s class position (p. 77). For the purposes of this paper, social class will be broken into three general categories: working class or impoverished, middle-class, and upper class or affluent.

**Social Class As An Organizing Principle**

As an organizing principle, social class, combined with other concepts that contribute to power and privilege (such as ethnicity and sexual orientation), influences the individuals in each class and each family uniquely. This is particularly true of the way in which social class impacts the cultural perceptions of members of each social class. Indeed, whereas social class, as a perceptual lens, often marginalizes members of the lower classes, class position favors those in power and, according to Lott (2002), was socially constructed by the powerful for the purpose of maintaining power:

Categorization of groups of people into upper and lower strata, into superior and inferior, is done by those who require such categorization to maintain their power, prevent others from obtaining an equal share of resources, and sustain the myth of superiority. (p. 101)

In this way, social class impacts each family differently. Those in lower social classes experience marginalization at the hands of their middle and upper class counterparts because of the way in which social class determination is perceived.

**Social Class Myths**

Because access to resources such as money and education are the foundation upon which social class is built and because social class, as a social construct, exists to reinforce the power of the powerful (upper-class individuals or the affluent), it follows that the common perception of upward mobility would favor and protect the powerful. Thus, several myths or perceptions exist within American culture that favors those in positions of power.
The myth of meritocracy. Firstly, “because we equate our system of political equality with equality of economic opportunity” it is difficult for American people to recognize and confront the presence of economic inequality (Adams, 2000, p. 379). Thus, we shift our focus away from the structures that perpetuate such an inequitable system and fixate upon our cultural belief in meritocracy, or the notion that individuals determine their own social class position by personal merit and that each person has an equal opportunity to advance (Laszloffy, 2008). However, the reality is that, the same resources and processes that middle and upper class individuals utilize to achieve upward mobility are often unavailable or unattainable for those who are impoverished or from a lower social class.

The inequality of education. For example, the American education system exists as a two-tiered system: the first tier serves mainly middle-class students, whereas the second tier serves high-poverty communities and students (Lott, 2002). These tiers stand in stark contrast to one another in terms of resources allocated, qualification of educators employed, and quality of facilities (Lott, 2002). In fact, Lott (2002) reported:

…In schools with the most disadvantaged students, teachers aides rather than qualified teachers were being hired and paid with the federal money. Half of the instructors supported by special programs designed to help poor children were teachers aids, among whom only 19% had a bachelor’s degree; this figure was 10% in the schools with the highest poverty rate. (p. 104)

Thus, social class has an enormous influence upon the educational trajectory of impoverished students throughout their academic careers.

The inequality of housing. Another way in which impoverished people are structurally disadvantaged in relation to those from affluent or middle-class families are the ways in which
impoverished families are subjected to harsh and hazardous living conditions. Lott (2002) reported that the neighborhoods and communities in which impoverished and families of color live are much more likely to “be selected as the location for polluting industries as well as for hazardous waste sites” (p. 105) since the operational costs are significantly lower for such industries in these communities. Because impoverished families are usually unable to move and because of their miniscule amount of political influence, they are forced to endure the inequality dealt to them. This inequality can result in health issues that may hold serious ramifications for the impoverished family.

_The inequality of health care._ The United States ranks 37th in the world in its overall quality of health care, a statistic that pays homage to the significant percentage of the American populace that remains uninsured and to the inequitable treatment of the impoverished and lower-class individuals at the hands of medical professionals (Lott, 2002). Indeed, according to Mirowsky and Ross (2000), the decline in physical functioning with age occurs at twice the rate it does for the most affluent. Furthermore, Mirowsky and Ross (2000) reported that the “gap in mortality between the economically advantaged and disadvantaged is larger than that between smokers and nonsmokers” (p. 135). Moreover, American medical patients from impoverished contexts are much more likely to be scrutinized, treated as though they are incapable of understanding the details of their health care, disregarded, and denied treatment by medical professional than are middle-class or affluent patients (Lott, 2002). In addition, mental health professionals are more likely to perceive lower-class clients to be “inarticulate and suspicious…resistant, apathetic and passive” (Leeder, 1996, p. 52). Furthermore, impoverished clients of mental health services are much more likely to receive brief and drug-centered treatments (Lott, 2002). These clients are also more likely to be treated by student therapists-in-
training (Lott, 2002). As a result, Lott (2002) attributed the healthiness and longevity of any given nation’s citizens not to its wealth, but to its commitment to egalitarianism.

*The inequality of the legal system and of politics.* According to Lott (2002), “less than a third of low-income people who need an attorney can get one” (p. 106). Furthermore, low-income defendants of color are much more likely to be convicted of crimes. Indeed, “Eighty percent of the 682 defendants who have faced capital charges in the federal courts since 1995 have been minorities, and U.S. attorneys recommended the death penalty for 183 of these defendants, 74% of whom were minorities and poor” (Lott, 2002, p. 107). In addition, affluent or middle-class families are much more able to access the governmental tax benefits, such as federal tax credits for child care and home ownership, that are out of reach for impoverished families because they do not earn enough to qualify for them.

Thus, individuals and families from lower social classes do not have access to the same resources and opportunities, as do individuals and families from middle or upper social classes. The notion that our nation exists as an economic meritocracy is unfounded and untrue for those who are unable to become upwardly mobile as a result of structural inequality. Indeed, according to Adams (2000), “social class is a largely self-perpetuating category marked by persistent and pervasive inequalities of income, wealth, status, and social power” (p. 380). Furthermore, Adams (2000) posits that “economic exploitation in the workplace; marginalization of people of color, women, the very young and the very old from useful participation in the nation’s economic life; and the relative powerlessness of the nonprofessional, menial, service workforce and of those outside the labor force” structurally contribute to the inequitable nature of social class mobility.

Thus, the myth of meritocracy exists to protect those in power from responsibility for such an
inequitable culture and to reinforce their entitlement to the status they have “earned” (Laszloffy, 2008).

**The myth of classless culture.** Additionally, an assumption exists within the United States that our culture is classless (Lott, 2002; Kliman, 2011; Laszloffy, 2008). Because we are unwilling to confront the class-based divisions in our idealized culture, we ignore the segregation perpetuated by social class and declare instead that we are a classless culture while also, paradoxically, maintaining that each person has equal opportunity to advance in social class (Laszloffy, 2008). As Laszloffy (2008) mused:

> Although it is obvious that some people have a lot of money and some have very little, as a society we resist public acknowledgement or discourse about class stratification and inequality. This is ironic given that another one of our popular myths is that we all have an equal opportunity for upward mobility, raising the question, “if we are a classless society, how can there be an upper place to move to?” (p. 48)

**Invisibility of the impoverished.** Furthermore, the amorphous nature of the American middle-class has contributed to the decreased visibility of those who occupy the fringe and marginalized classes in our society, such as the poor (Kliman, 2011). Because both upper class and lower-class individuals commonly identify with the middle-class in American culture (due to either misperception or shame, respectively), the perception has become that the United States of America is a nation with but one class, middle-class (Laszloffy, 2008). Thus, those who exist and operate from the fringes of social class become invisible even to behavioral researchers and mental health professionals who write the predominant bodies of literature and design mental health interventions (Lott, 2002). In this way, the humanity of poverty is diminished to those in positions of power, thus protecting their position of power. As Herbert (2001) stated “The poor
are pretty well hidden from everyone except each other. You won’t find them in the same neighborhoods…as the well-to-do. They’re not on television, except for local crime-casts. And they’re vanished from the nation’s political discussion” (para. 1).

**Classism**

As Smith (2005) argues, classism is a prejudiced approach to members of a different social class. Furthermore, Smith (2005) posits that classism also denotes oppression, which she operationally defines to mean “prejudice plus power: It is an interlocking system that involves domination and control of social ideology, institutions, and resources, resulting in a condition of privilege for one group relative to the disenfranchisement of another” (p. 688). Thus, only those in a position of power are capable of oppression. Furthermore, Adams (2000) argues that classism is perpetuated by a “that’s just the way it is” approach to functioning wherein those who have power enjoy “unearned advantage and conferred dominance” (Lott, 2002, p. 101). Thus, while social class is typically conferred and not earned, the perception of lower social classes by those who belong to middle or upper class has traditionally been negative in nature.

Consistently, poverty is perceived of in the United States as an individual problem that is directly related to the behaviors of poor people and not to the structural inequalities that are systematically enforced (Lott, 2002). Furthermore, “Poverty is seen as inevitable, necessary, and just” (Chafel, 1997, p. 434). Put simply, poor people are perceived to have received what they deserve. In addition, respondents to several surveys have consistently identified poor people with such words as “uneducated, unmotivated, lacy, unpleasant, angry, stupid, dirty, immoral, criminal, alcoholic, abusive…violent…messy, dirty, stupid, crazy, ugly, nasty, disgusting, not good people, doing drugs, not taking care of their family, mean, troublemakers, cruel, [and] unkind” (Lott, 2002, pp. 102-3). The respondents consisted of both adults and children (Lott,
2002). In addition to the cognitive distancing and classism that occurs when higher-class individuals attribute stereotypical labels to lower class individuals, Bullock (1995) posited, “poor people commonly experience face-to-face classist discrimination in their daily activities” (p. 142). Thus, in daily interaction, members of lower social classes are disregarded and treated as inferior.

**Impact Upon the Family Life Cycle**

Across the life cycle, social class impacts families in the way they ascribe meaning to life cycle stages and transitions, along with the trajectory of the entire life cycle, impacted by access to resources and by marginalization. Because individuals and families from lower social classes do not have access to the resources that others might, they also have less choice during life cycle transitions and development. For example, since many lower class families have less access to the resources with which to send children to college and because the need for additional income is intense, teenage children might get a job at the age of seventeen to help pay the family’s bills as opposed to applying for and attending college. Whereas a seventeen-year-old from an upper class family might attend college at such a time and take some time to “figure himself out,” such a person from an impoverished family, in all probability, has no choice but to begin work as an adult to help the family.

**Development.** Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, and Keltner (2011) suggested that, Because lower-class individuals develop in environments with greater threats and external obstacles (e.g. less-safe neighborhoods, poorly funded educational institutions), and are less able to use their limited resources to overcome these obstacles…lower-class individuals develop a heightened awareness of how their environment shapes and constrains their behavior. (p. 449-50)
As a result of the aforementioned heightened awareness, individuals from lower social classes may confront external threats by befriending those around them to help them against the perceived threat. Thus, individuals from a lower social class possess a greater attentiveness to and care for others. Furthermore, members of lower social classes also perceive of themselves as interdependent rather than independent (Stellar et al., 2011). Interestingly, according to Stellar, et al. (2011), this dynamic often results in increased amounts of compassion and empathy for those who are suffering. Additionally, it is often necessary in poor families to share resources, even financial resources, to survive (Kliman, 2011). Thus, an attitude of collectivism often arises within impoverished families that exalt the family over the individual. Therefore, a number of factors, including the suppression of choice, the unavailability of resources, and the spirit of collectivism and interdependence all contribute to altered life cycle trajectories for members of lower social classes.

**Empirical Traditions of Social Class**

As a means by which to understand social class as a construct, several empirical traditions have been popularized. Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, and Keltner (2012) have labeled these traditions accordingly: a labor perspective on social class, a health psychology perspective on social class, the social class as culture perspective, and the social cognitive perspective.

**The labor perspective on social class.** The labor perspective on social class is highly influenced by Marx and Engels analysis of capitalism and class conflict. Kraus, et al. (2012) stated “Within this perspective, social classes are constituted by labor relations between individuals who control the means of production (e.g., factories and business) and those working within those means” (p. 546). In this tradition, access to figures of political power along with
access to elite social institutions reinforces the position of the powerful and creates a working class whose interests are contradictory to that of the upper classes (Kraus et al., 2012).

**The health psychology perspective on social class.** This tradition arose out of the discovery that lower-class individuals are generally less healthy and more susceptible to physical disease as well as psychological disturbance (Kraus et al., 2012). Indeed, lower-class individuals are more likely than their upper class counterparts to report negative affective mood states along with physical disease.

**The social class as culture perspective.** Within this empirical tradition, each social class is perceived of as a distinct culture, “as a set of shared social contexts that create class-specific repertoires of values and behavioral scripts” (Kraus et al., 2012, p. 547). Thus, this perspective promotes the existence of cultural rules or norms that are adhered to within each separate social class and that govern the way that individuals within such a system of interaction behave and function.

**The social cognitive perspective.** Kraus, et al. (2012) proposed “that the material conditions of the individual’s life, and how he or she experience rank in those conditions, creates social class contexts that elicit a coherent set of social cognitive tendencies and guide patterns of thought, feeling, and action” (p. 547). Thus, the social cognitive perspective incorporates and builds upon several of the other perspectives on social class.

**Application**

An impoverished or lower class family who presents for therapy is likely to have experienced multiple stressors in relation to the family life cycle before entering therapy. They are likely to have been marginalized and denied access to resources that others within higher social classes have access to. Furthermore, they are likely to have received discrimination at the
hands of people who occupy a position of power over them or who are members of a higher social class. However, the family is likely to have an increased awareness of the ways in which they relate to their environment and are likely to exhibit increased amounts of compassion and empathy for those they perceive to be suffering. In family therapy, these facets of any client family are much desired and very beneficial for the process of therapy. Thus, an impoverished family will have a much more systemic approach to problems than would a person or an individual from a higher social class.

With such a family it will be important not to slip into an individualistic approach to therapy. Indeed, Laszlof (2008) suggested “cautiously resisting interventions that locate problems and hence their solutions solely within individuals (e.g., drug therapy)” (p. 58). For such a family a narrative or solution-focused approach might help the family to identify and utilize their own strengths and resources, two concepts that are most likely foreign and unexplored for the family system. Thus, a family strengths list would be a very useful intervention to utilize with an impoverished family who presents for therapy. Because the dominant script in their lives has been that they are failures because of their poverty, a strengths-based treatment coupled with a narrative approach that seeks to externalize the problem would be extremely helpful for such a client system. Thus, it may be useful to write down the family story, to name each chapter and to destroy the parts of their story that are problem-saturated and undesired. In this way, whatever problem the family has presented with will be fully externalized and ultimately destroyed as a piece of the family’s life narrative. A strengths-based approach will reinforce the value of the family system and the systemic overlay will fit nicely with the family’s preferred method of functioning anyway, with increased interpersonal awareness and empathy.
Conclusion

Social class as a social construct is quite a harmful concept to those who live below the poverty line or in a lower social class. The existence of social class perpetuates the system in which those with power retain their power as well as the American myths associated with social class. As lower class and marginalized individuals and families develop, they become hyper vigilant to external threat and thus, become more interpersonally dependent and more collectivist in nature (due to their inability to access the resources they need). Over the life cycle these traits manifest in the choices that impoverished families are able to make and also manifest in the meaning lower class families ascribe to each life cycle stage that may be different than the meaning ascribed by middle or upper class individuals.
References


