Exploring Social Class from a Psychological Perspective: Relations to Identity, Mental Health, and Psychotherapy

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Overview

- Psychology & Social class
  - Identity
  - Relations to outcomes
- Classism
- Social class, SES, and social status in relation to mental health and treatment
Psychology & Social Class

- Understudied within profession
  - Control Variable
- Social structures – familial, neighborhood, societal levels
  - Discrimination, oppression, privilege
- Societal messages – meritocracy, class jumping/economic mobility (Hochschild, 1995; Lee & Dean, 2004)
- Is Social Class...
  - Achieved (under a person’s control)
  - Ascribed (similar to sex/race/ethnicity)
  - or both? (Williams, 2009)
Talking about Social Class/SES

- How do you describe your social class or SES?
Definitions & Problems with Measurement

- In 3 top journals, 448 different words used (Liu et al., 2004)
  - Objective vs subjective; individual vs systems perspective; present vs past; self vs. other labeling

- APA (2007) Taskforce on SES: 3 approaches
  - Focus on material inequality and access to resources
  - Relational approach that examines inequality and status as a gradient
  - Class-based analysis of the reproduction of power and prestige

- Psychologists most concerned with social class as an element of identity and worldview (e.g., Liu, 2001)
Social Class: Identity & Worldview

- Socialization experiences contribute to identity formation
- Identity is internalized & perception shape reality
- Identity relates to beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors
  - Career development, mental health
  
  (e.g., Fouad & Brown, 2000; Liu, 2001)
Social Status Identity  (Fouad & Brown, 2000)

- Access to: Economic Resources, Social Prestige, & Social Power
- Captures person & contextual inputs shaped by one’s cultural context & socialization experiences
  - Accounts for interrelations among racial/ethnic group membership, gender, & social class
- Sharing same income bracket does not mean that individuals share experiences (Rossides, 1990; 1997)
  - Individuals from similar groups may perceive & internalize their membership & experiences quite differently
Social Status Identity

- There are social & psychological consequences of occupying particular positions
  - Salience increased in particular contexts (i.e., higher education, mental health treatment)
- Components of social status related to a number of psychological constructs
Social Status and Educational/Vocational Outcomes

- Status identity scale differentiates among race/ethnicity and social class category as expected (Thompson & Subich, 2007)
- Status identity predicted higher levels of career-decision self efficacy, career choice certainty, and comfort with career decision (above and beyond traditional indices of social class) (Thompson & Subich, 2006)
- Individuals who perceived themselves to have higher status identity reported fewer differences between their career aspirations and expectations than their counterparts with lower levels of status identity (Metz et al., 2009)
\( \chi^2 = 17.22, \text{ df} = 11, p = .10; \text{ CFI} = .97; \text{ SRMR} = .031; \text{ RMSEA} = .04 \)

Thompson & Subich (in press)
Classism

- Experience of oppression based on social class position & identity (Lott, 2002; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Smith, 2005)
  - institutional or interpersonal distancing
  - Everyday experiences (Feagin, 1991; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998)
- Includes both cognitive (schema) & affective (feelings of shame, guilt, depression, & anxiety) components (Liu, 2001)
Findings: Educational Outcomes

- Transition time; internalize identity, & interact with others (Frable, 1997; Jones, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007)

- Social class and/or experiences with classism related to: feelings of alienation & social segregation, stress, academic unpreparedness; “belongingness” (Ostrove & Long, 2007; Stewart & Ostrove, 1994)

- Classism occurs on everyday basis and in a variety of forms (Ritz & Hyers, 2005)

  - middle-class assumptions
  - insensitive/classist comments
  - bureaucratic hassles
  - flaunting
  - excluded/avoided
Findings: Mental Health Outcomes

- Classism relates negatively to psychological well-being and positively to life stress (Langhout et al., 2007)

- Classism relates positively to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress and negatively to perceived wellness and self-esteem (Thompson & Subich, in preparation)
Social Class & Psychotherapy

- Multicultural competence & Social Class

- Most psychotherapy techniques have been developed for, and used with, middle class individuals (Sue & Sue, 1990)

- Low social class related to depression, anxiety, & substance abuse or dependence (e.g., Diala et al., 2004; Lorant et al., 2003; Lynch et al., 1997; Poulton et al., 2002)

- Low income individuals less likely to attain treatment and underrepresented in research (e.g., Isaacs & Schroeder, 2004; Pope & Arthur, 2009)
Barriers to Treatment

- Access to care (transportation, insurance, costs)
- Cultural barriers (language incongruities, stigma, lack of culturally sensitive practices)
- Fear of documentation for future employment
  (DHHS, 2001; Glied & Kofman, 1995; Lennon et al., 2001; Link, Cullen, Mitrotznik, & Struening 1992; McGrath et al. 1990)
- Biases & assumptions among profession
Treatment Experiences: Findings

- Literature limited (e.g., Dimmer & Ali, 2009; Pope & Arthur, 2009; Smith, 2009)
  - Most definitive conclusion: higher attrition rates for low income clients (Smith, 2005; Wierzbicki & Peary, 1993)

- “Clients from low income backgrounds may be experiencing a host of environmental and personal factors that impact their presenting concerns as well as the ability of some therapeutic techniques to effectively meet those concerns” (Thompson & Dvorscek, in review)
Lower SES associated with less improvement across 3 treatments (IPT, CBT, & pharmacotherapy) for individuals with depression (Falconnier, 2009)

Lower SES clients were perceived by therapists as less successful in therapy and as having “resolved less psychic conflict” than their middle and upper SES counterparts (Hillerbrand, p. 253).

- 2 current research directions: Psychotherapist perspectives and client’s perspectives
Psychotherapist’s Attitudes

- Attitudes that psychologists have toward clients from low-income backgrounds
- Vignette-based experimental design
- Goal: assess psychotherapists’ reactions to different clients (e.g., empathy, willingness to work with a client, attitudes, conceptualization of presenting concerns)
Experiences in psychotherapy for individuals who identify as poor, low social class, or working class

Emerging themes (preliminary!):

- Social class identity
  - Integrated into personality & life experiences
  - Diverse ways of understanding identity (education, work ethic, distribution of wealth, circumstantial)

- Social class is relevant to experiences in psychotherapy; differences noticed
  - Subtle versus obvious
  - Emotional reactions elicited

- Experiences with mental health system & professionals
  - Notion of going beyond “professional capacity”
  - Appreciation of MH services
Thank you very much!

Any Questions?