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Introduction

On many Saturday mornings, my wife, 2-year-old daughter, and I visit a small boutique bakery. The bakery is in a historic part of town, and if you did not know of the bakery, you might easily miss it. It is a source of pride for most middle- and upper-class people to know about it, talk about it, and on occasion, refer people to it. The bakery is not large, and the owner has placed a small table and chairs to accommodate the many children visiting the bakery.

One Saturday, my daughter was sitting at the table eating a cookie when a mother and daughter came in. The girl was probably 4 or 5 years old and was carrying a doll. When the girl sat down at the children's table, she placed the doll on the table as well. My daughter noticed the doll and started to reach for it. In reaction, the other girl snatched the doll out of reach. Apparently, the mother was shocked by her daughter's behavior and she turned to me (figuring I was the father since we were the only Asian American couple in the bakery that morning) and apologetically said, "She's in Montessori, so she knows how to share."

I was strolling through an upscale shopping mall in Northern Virginia, pushing my daughter in our Bugaboo stroller. The Bugaboo stroller is supposed to be a distinctively designed stroller, so it stands apart in terms of color and aesthetics.

To that end, we fit into the expectations of upscale parents at this mall. A lone woman walked out of a store carrying some shopping bags and stopped to ask how we liked our Bugaboo stroller. After a very quick conversation about the stroller, the woman added, "Yes, I have a Bugaboo as well and it is at home," smiled and walked away.

These two experiences remind me that social class and classism are all around us and are constantly part of our conversations. We only need to be sensitive to how social class is communicated and the subtle—and at times not-so-subtle—ways in which people jockey for position along the social class hierarchy. In these two experiences, "Montessori" and "Bugaboo" become indicators of social class and status and are used to demonstrate familiarity but also to suggest that "we are all of a kind, we are peers, and we are part of the same cohort." Dropping these hints, like an eye-wink or a nod, is a subtle gesture of communality—of knowing something others do not. It is a way of establishing social class and status without having to talk about how much one makes, educational level, or one's occupation. It is akin to the ways we get to know people and the light social conversations that occur over wine or cocktails and how people probe, mostly through seemingly innocuous questions, about where one went to school (private, public, ivy league), where one works (white-collar, salaried), and where one lives (rent, own, high-rise, single-home, good neighborhood). The questions, in this case, are used to investigate and to establish potential likeness of social class.

I believe for most of us, there is likely to be an incident or experience that vividly exemplified social class and classism in our lives. When I teach social class, most students recall some incident or series of events that consolidated for them the meaning of social class in their lives at the time. Remarkably, for many of these students as they think about that particular incident or event, they recognize the reverberations that it caused across their lives. For instance, some students recall traumatic incidents that made them feel shameful about being poor and in turn initiated a drive toward status and upward mobility that they believed could shield them from feeling that way again. This commonality in experiences reveals to me that social class and classism are pervasive throughout our lives, and how imperative it is that helping professionals understand its impact and use social class and classism to inform their work.

At the risk of sounding clichéd, I think it is fair to say that social class and classism are all around us. Before we are even born, the social classes of our parents, families, and neighborhoods are already making an impact

on our lives. The foods we eat, the air we breathe, and the prenatal health care we receive all influence our developing babies. Once born, we are socialized by our parents and families to relate to people through social class, and through the media, we are bombarded by images and messages about how and what to consume (Schor, 2008). In our home life, the environment and its levels of chaos or serenity, violence or safety, and toxicity or nontoxicity start to influence our physical makeup, both body and brain. In school, some of us experience bullying and teasing because of our clothes, lunches, or even how we get to school (bus versus car). And for some, this bullying can be relentless and can become the basis of traumatic classism (which I discuss later in the book). For others, material possessions are easy to come by, but the psychological stress, anxiety, and depression related to growing up in affluence and wealth, and expectations for perfection and excellence become difficult to manage and understand. In other educational experiences and jobs, we are exposed to social roles and expectations and constantly reminded that social status is important. And over our lifetime, social class has helped to shape our choices, opportunities, and relationships. To say that social class has an impact on people's lives is an understatement. But social class and classism also interact with other forms of identity and diversity such as race, gender, ability, age, and sexual orientation to form unique opportunities, barriers, and choices.

Like race and gender, two other frequently studied multicultural constructs, social class is one of the most important multicultural variables for helping professionals, counselors, and psychologists (Liu, 2001). Social class is important because, on a material level, one's resources (income, for instance) greatly impact life chances and opportunities. It is that income, as one indicator, that provides access to wealth, privilege, and status. But also, the higher one is on the social hierarchy, the better one is able to withstand crises and life problems. On an experiential and subjective level, social class shapes the way we perceive and interact with others but more importantly, how we see ourselves. Reality is distorted regardless of whether one grows up rich or poor; our self-perceptions and our interactions with others are colored by our experiences, socialization, expectations, and aspirations. Now overlay social class with race, gender, ability, or sexual orientation, for instance, and humans become clearly more complex. But whereas other cultural aspects have been plumbed and explored, social class has not been equally discovered at the individual level.

But social class is distinctly different from race and gender in the most basic way. Social class is virtually invisible and is only recognizable through the materials and behaviors that mark us and are associated or stereotyped with particular social class groups. Perhaps the lack of a specific indelible and expressible marker or the absence of a social class physicality is what makes

social class one of the most elusive and difficult constructs to understand and integrate into the mental health professions. The challenge, though, should not make us hesitant about using social class and classism as helping professionals but instead should compel us to be more thoughtful about the ways we employ these constructs. Given this difficulty, how do social class and classism work in our lives? And just as important, how do helping professionals understand and use social class in practice? The purpose of this book is to define the psychological meaning of social class and classism and to provide guidance on how to best integrate social class and classism into mental health practice and research.

Definitions and Focus

Before starting a discussion on social class and classism, I think it is important to establish some definitions and parameters. First, the focus of this book is to discuss and connect social class and classism to the work of helping professionals (practice, research, training, and education), especially those in the mental health professions and those who work in some capacity with mental health concerns. Therefore, the constructs, theories, and research discussed will all be made relevant for work with clients, patients, trainees, and supervisees in the helping fields such as nursing, social work, counselor training and education, school counseling and psychology, rehabilitation counseling and psychology, clinical psychology, and counseling psychology. Second, the theories, assumptions, and implications are mostly meant for social class and classism within the United States. The research reviewed, cited, and integrated into theories is mostly from the United States or European countries, so there may be a privileging of some experiences in modernized, industrialized, and postindustrialized societies. I do not make any claim that the theories and ideas presented in this book can be applied to international contexts without careful consideration and potential alteration. Social class and classism may take on varying definitions in different contexts and locales, and because context is so important in understanding social class and classism, only the experiences within the United States are implicated in this book.

Third, the preferred terminology I use in this book is *social class* and *classism*. Although I cite and use research from different countries, I attempt to make the research I integrate relevant for understanding social class and classism in the United States. I will elaborate on why I choose certain terms later in the book. But occasionally, the reader will find that I may use the terms *social status*, *social position*, and *socioeconomic status*. I use

these terms either (a) to refer to a person's subjective impression of his or her place within the perceived social class hierarchy (i.e., position or status), or (b) to reflect the terminology that is likely used in the literature being cited. Because there is much disagreement and confusion about the terms *social class* and *socioeconomic status* (Brown, Fukunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, 1996; Frable, 1997; Liu, 2001, in press; Liu & Ali, 2008; Liu, Ali, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004; Liu & Arguello, 2006; Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004; Oakes & Rossi, 2003), at times when I refer to specific literature, the terminology may vary.

As part of this first chapter, my intent is to address the reason why social class and classism are important sociocultural considerations. Moreover, I will provide a rationale for why there is such a poor understanding of social class and classism and operationalize the terms *social class*, *socioeconomic status (SES)*, *social status*, and *classism*. Finally, I will address how social class is an important multicultural competency and what it means to appreciate social class diversity.

The Importance of Social Class in the Helping Professions

In my writing, I have consistently argued that social class, SES, social status, and classism are implicated in many areas of interest to helping professionals: practice, research, education, training, self-awareness, and social justice (Liu, 2002, 2006; Liu & Ali, 2005; Liu, Corkery, & Thome, 2010; Liu, Fridman, & Hall, 2008; Liu, Sheu, & Hall, 2004). With regard to specific mental health issues, social class and socioeconomic status constructs have been associated with psychological variables such as poor mental health, depression and suicide, increased psychopathology, and poorer psychological services (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Amato & Zuo, 1992; Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003; Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005). Usually, the research suggests that being poor puts one at the most risk for deleterious physical and mental health. Additionally, social class has been found to impact physical health in ways that include increased substance use, cardiovascular disease, and obesity (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). In the psychology of work, the research often suggests that social class is related to increased stress related to job insecurity, authoritarian occupations, and poor work satisfaction (Gutman, McLoyd, & Tokoyawa, 2005). Context and environment also affect and are influenced by social class. For instance, those from poor social class environments are likely to live in situations with increased rates of violence, increased exposure

to environmental toxins such as lead, and limited availability of supermarkets (Evans 2004, 2006; Huie, Krueger, Rogers, & Hummer, 2003; Lee & Marlay, 2007; McLoyd, 1998). From study to study, the effect sizes are different in terms of the magnitude and impact of poverty, inequality, and social class on all of these variables. Additionally, there is a host of mediating and moderating factors as well such as race, gender, and age, to name a few. But even with all of these considerations, I believe it is safe to say that, for the most part, all of these aspects come together and impact the development of the infant and child through young and middle adulthood and are likely to impact the development of the individual over the lifespan (Benzeval & Judge, 2001).

Reading through this list of social class-related effects, it may be simple to see that many of these problems are especially pronounced for those in lower social class situations and environments and for those who are economically poor and impoverished. Contributing to this perception is that much of the research is focused on those who are poor; consequently, one might conclude that social class and classism are relevant only for the poor. Part of the reason for this conclusion is that much of the research is premised on addressing the ills and deleterious situations of those who are poor. This focus is needed and important because those who are poor are differentially and severely impacted by many of the conditions identified above. They usually have fewer resources and reserves upon which to draw, so economic setbacks often have much more severe consequences than for the affluent, rich, and wealthy (Chen, Martin, & Matthews, 2006, 2007). Additionally, those at the bottom of our social class hierarchy also have less agency and power to effect change for their benefit (Hopps & Liu, 2006; Liu, 2008, in press; Liu & Hernandez, 2010; Liu, Hernandez, Mahmood, & Stinson, 2006; Liu, Pickett, & Ivey, 2007; Liu & Pope-Davis, 2003; Lott, 2002). Therefore, there is a substantial and important need to focus on those in lower, poor, and impoverished conditions.

Additionally, it is also imperative that helping professionals consider the salience of social class across the social class hierarchy and spectrum. In fact, there is burgeoning research on social class and the affluent, rich, and wealthy (Levine, 2006; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar & Sexton, 2005; Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006; Sherman, 2006; Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). The research does not usually compare indicators of mental and physical health between groups because comparing the two groups on these criteria would only highlight the great and increasing disparity between the rich and poor. Instead, this nascent and scattered research investigates the within-group variations and issues specifically linked to those of wealth and affluence. For instance, researchers have found

surprising levels of anxiety, depression, and substance use among children and adolescents of the wealthy (Levine, 2006; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999). Some of these findings are linked to issues such as a drive for perfectionism, difficulty in receiving critical feedback, and the absence of parents and healthy role models (Levine, 2006; Luthar & Becker, 2002). Mostly, the research focuses on children and adolescents who grow up in affluence and discusses how entitlement, narcissism, and consumerism interact to create young adults who have high aspirations but potentially have poor intra- and interpersonal skills that would allow them to cope with life stressors (Levine, 2006; Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

For me, this research on affluent children and adolescents is interesting because it suggests that social class pressures and potentially classism also may affect those of privilege. This is not in any way to say that mental health concerns are the same or similar among those in poverty and those in wealth. Instead, I believe that helping professionals should recognize that it may be important to understand the social class context and relevant problems specific to particular contexts. In this case, for those of privilege and wealth, there may be enormous pressure to succeed and excel. These expectations, coupled with the entitlement and narcissistic attitudes, may combine to form their own toxicity born from social class privilege and wealth. Thus, helping professionals need to be aware of the ways in which social class may create diagnostically similar syndromes from distinctly different situations.

Research

For helping professionals, the importance of social class and classism extends beyond therapy and counseling and also affects the ways in which we approach and pursue research and science. Social class, as an important dimension of our society and of our human experience, is simply not well understood from a counseling and psychology research framework. At the most basic level of understanding social class and classism, most psychologists and counseling researchers cannot agree on a specific operational definition of social class (Brown et al., 1996; Liu, 2001; Liu & Ali, 2008). I would posit that if any one of us walked around and asked 10 people to define social class and classism, it is quite possible to get 20 different answers. Most people draw on their own experiences of social class and classism, refer to how they grew up, the messages and socialization they received from parents, peers, and friends, and intermix it all with their current circumstances, both economic and social.

This was exactly the problem I encountered when I was a doctoral student in my counseling practicum. At my university counseling service, the intake form asked students to report their income or parents' income, what high school they attended, where they currently live, and where they grew up. My supervisors would scan the sheet and derive a social class category for the client (e.g., middle-class). At one point, I inquired about how one supervisor arrived at her conclusion about a client's social class, and she elaborated on how a certain level of income was regarded in a particular neighborhood and the assumptions one could make about personal and familial resources. She discussed how certain high schools and neighborhoods were regarded as affluent, working class, or poor. I was not from the area, so my unfamiliarity with specific neighborhoods, especially as it pertained to affluence and wealth, were very limited. The "socialization" I was undergoing on social class was from information and perceptions from a long-term resident of the area and from her aggregate understanding of social class based on the meaningful indicators of social class for that geographic area. But, more importantly, the composite description of a client as middle-class was also subtly inflected with her own biases, personal experiences, and perceptions about people from a particular neighborhood. In her case, she would talk about her perceptions as an outsider. Interspersed throughout her assumptions of the client were her experiences and perceptions of driving through those neighborhoods.

I wondered then, what does it mean to be middle class? Or more precisely, what does it mean for people when they describe someone as middle class or any social class category? I thought the extant psychological and counseling literature, both theoretical and empirical, could provide some grounding and direction for a simple question. Instead, the extant literature at the time was opaque and vague about social class and classism. I could not even find an agreed-on definition of what constituted the boundaries for "middle-class" (Liu, Pickett, et al. 2007). The most common definition for middle class seemed to be based on income calculations (Pew Research Center, 2008). Using only income, for instance, the Pew Research Center used Census Bureau data from 2006 and divided Americans into three tiers. For the middle tier or middle class, they calculated annual incomes that were between 75% and 150% of the median income, which came out to be a range between $45,000 and $90,000. I thought this seemed reasonable, but I was aware of my own social class background and upbringing, and I wondered if people from poorer situations or even much wealthier contexts would perceive this income range as middle class. I began speculating about the possibility of a subjective aspect to how people regarded social class and how they perceived others.

Even a conceptualization of wealth was difficult. Wealth was usually defined as assets and resources and as more permanent than income and more likely to have more impact in the life of the individual (Huie, Krueger, Rogers, & Hummer, 2003). With so many indicators for wealth, there was bound to be some methodological confusion and inconsistency, which there was from the available literature. From my review of the extant literature at the time, I began to understand one of the factors contributing to the confusion around social class. It seemed that often in the literature, social class appeared as a parenthetical comment, something to the effect of "counselors should pay attention to diversity issues (e.g., race, ethnicity, and class)." There was simply a significant absence of a coherent and cogent approach that defined, elaborated, discussed, and integrated social class and classism into research and practice. Helping professionals understood the importance of social class and classism but had not constructed any framework with which to understand and integrate it into science and practice.

The Helping Profession's Poor Understanding of Social Class and Classism

In discussing how the helping professions have had a poor grasp on social class and classism, I do not mean to imply that helping professionals and researchers have been negligent. It is important to acknowledge that there is and has been a long and vibrant history of counselors, psychologists, and helping professionals active in working and advocating for the poor and impoverished and active in social justice efforts against inequality. It is important to distinguish the point I am making about having a better and clear understanding of social class and classism in our practice and research and the current work and advocacy many are doing.

My curiosity has led me to conclude that there are likely two major factors that have hindered mental health's understanding of social class and classism. First, it is my belief that in the United States, social class is generally regarded as a taboo subject and is not well regarded as a topic for discussion. Inhibiting a full dialogue about social class may be the myth of meritocracy or that only hard and diligent work will lead to economic success for everyone. Certainly there is nothing wrong with hard work, diligence, and aspirations for success. But the myth of meritocracy focuses on internal dispositional attributes and suggests that everyone has equal access to upward mobility, wealth, and opportunities. External hurdles and hindrances such as poor schools, dilapidated neighborhoods and transportation, and poor job prospects, for instance, are contextual and

situational problems that may be conquered through sheer force of will. Of course, there are individuals who subscribe to this meritocratic ideology and there are even some whose success exemplifies this meritocratic social class mobility, and they are to be commended for their success. But the singular achievements by individuals do not address the larger systemic inequalities that likely make these rags-to-riches stories exceptions rather than the rule.

The taboo element of social class discourse is likely related to the problems inherent in the myth of meritocracy. How would our cultural fables and lore (e.g., Horatio Alger) fare if people were to discuss their aspirations and motivations for social mobility alongside a discussion of income disparities, economic resources, the glass ceiling, or red-lining (i.e., denying or restricting racial minorities on where they may live)? Furthermore, the taboo in our society may stem from not only an unwillingness to confront and dialogue about social class but also an inability to start and continue such a discourse. Like any other difficult dialogue, finding the correct and best ways to articulate one's feelings and thoughts about a subject starts with understanding and framing personal experiences, impressions, and cognitions.

But people will struggle at first with this new dialogue on social class and classism. In other words, "How might a person articulate and discuss something for which he or she has no words?" Imagine the alexithymic (i.e., no words for feelings) male client sitting in front of a counselor who has just asked him how he feels. If he has never been taught or given an opportunity to put words to his feelings, the client is likely to become frustrated at the counselor for such a simple question. So, at some point, we (the helping professionals) must venture into the discussion and help to frame the discourse. In doing so, as helping professionals, we should look to develop a developmental approach to this new understanding and language of social class. That is to say, we should understand that as people start and learn this new discourse, complexity develops, and we should empathize and nurture this new understanding.

But it is also my belief that people in our society are not at a complete loss for how to talk about social class and classism. Rather, individuals are likely using terms and words that are approximations for social class (e.g., *snobbiness*, *White trash*, *welfare*, *affirmative action*), yet these words and terms fail to provide individuals with a full framework to engage deeply and meaningfully on social class and classism. But the cognitive development and intellectual understanding of social class and classism needs to be understood within the context of the self-learning, emotions, and feelings that arise from new information and knowledge. Thus, I would suggest that the language people use often reflects their level of consciousness

about social class and classism. To better understand the individual's social class and classism consciousness, I proffer a theoretical framework called the Social Class and Classism Consciousness Model (SCCC) (Liu, in press; Liu & Hernandez, 2010). I discuss and elaborate on the SCCC later in this book.

The social prohibition against talking about social class is uneven, though. Social class talk may appear among the poor and the rich, but what is discussed is probably vastly different. For example, I would posit that some racial and ethnic minority groups and some people who are poor and impoverished may likely socialize children and adolescents about working hard but also about being aware of and vigilant to potential environmental hindrances that they must negotiate to be successful (Carter, 2003). So for these individuals, there may be some discussion of social class and classism, and these discussions may be instrumental in helping the individual learn how to best navigate a potentially hostile and barrier-filled environment. These discussions are pertinent and relevant because, for many of these community members, these barriers and economic problems are daily hassles and stressors and thus highly meaningful (Fouad & Brown, 2001; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006; Liu, Stinson, Hernandez, Shepard, & Haag, 2009).

A parallel illustration may come from race-related research. For racial and ethnic minority individuals, most contexts are constant reminders of the person's minority position. These reminders are not necessarily always negative and racist, but racial and ethnic individuals are likely to understand that they live in an environment in which they are numerically inferior or in less powerful, lower-status positions. Consequently, to live and succeed, these individuals are likely always negotiating their race and ethnicity and so they may have some familiarity with interacting with people who are racially and ethnically dissimilar to them (Carter, 2003). Thus, socialization within these contexts is a matter of survival and thriving, and so these individuals are constantly reminded and reinforced for their vigilance around race and racism.

The second problem contributing to mental health's poor understanding of social class is linked to poor theoretical and methodological clarity (Liu, Ali et al., 2004). Like other concepts in psychology that have undergone specification and clarification (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) (Beutler, Brown, Crothers, Booker, & Seabrook, 1996), social class has remained relatively undistinguished (Liu, 2001, in press). In my previous suggestion of asking individuals to describe a middle-class person, it is likely also that most answers will fall into the categories of the person's income, educational level, and occupation level, type, and/or prestige. Many people will use these indices to informally conclude a person's social class category

(e.g., lower, middle, or upper class). Some common measures also use the method of identifying certain indices as a means to conclude a person's social class category or position (Hollingshead, 1975; Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). From the extant research using social class, I have come to consider income, education, and occupation to be the putative and the most commonly found objective indices of social class. In other words, I mean "objective" in that income, education, and occupation are supposed to be clear and discrete ratio-level (i.e., absolute zero, ordered, equal distances between levels) indices that should be answered accurately, have levels that represent reality (veridical), be equally meaningful for anyone responding to the levels, and be connected to social class groups (e.g., lower, middle, and upper class). These indices are considered objective as well because researchers generally assume that people will answer accurately, without any distortion or error, on these questions.

Researchers have used various contortions of these indices to effect a particular social class category, yet no research to date has shown this to be an effective or efficacious method of identifying a person's social class position (Brown et al., 1996). At present, there is no research that shows how an individual expresses social class vis-à-vis being categorized into a social class group. On the contrary, a problematic result of these categorization attempts has been the confusing creation of elaborately imprecise social class striations such as lower working class, middle upper working class, and upper elite class (Liu & Ali, 2008). And while these striations may be meaningful for any single study, results are not often replicated or meaningful from study to study.

But a problem would still persist even if one were to create a strategy by which these indices could effectively categorize an individual into certain social class groups. Would all individuals in a particular social class group (e.g., middle class) have the same worldview, attitudes, and thoughts about being middle class? The easy answer is probably no. One basic assumption in the categorization strategy is that all the indices and each level have equal salience and meaning across all contexts and individuals. That is, if the assumption held true, there is one homogenous middle-class entity in the United States. And although politicians appeal to the middle class in the United States, and many people may believe they are in the middle class (Liu, Pickett, et al., 2007), this ascription and subscription to being middle class does not necessarily translate to a uniform or homogenous objectively identified middle class. It is my belief that when politicians appeal to the middle class, they are tapping into people's ascription to "middle classhood" or "middle classness." Note that politicians will refer to the middle class but provide no indicators as to how they define it—not even suggesting some income level. It is not an objective reality but a perceived

identity and relationship to others in the middle class. And rather than focus just on income as an indicator of middle classhood, there may be multiple variables contributing to one's sense of being in any social class, including the middle class. Moreover, depending on one's context, geographic region, neighborhood, or social context, being in a particular social class is comprised of different variables of varying salience. For some, income may be an important hallmark of one's social class, and for others, one's occupation or educational level may be meaningful indices of social class, and still for others, it may be material possessions that indelibly reflect a social class.

Furthermore, if we categorize individuals and find that some groups are poor, categorization does not account for the various ways people are poor (e.g., poor neighborhoods, toxic environments, violence, educational opportunities, police relationships, aggression) (Marmot, 2006). Additionally, categorization does not account for the various ways individuals live within their social class groups. That is, once you categorize someone, there is no discussion of how the person entered the group, exists in that group, and stays in that group. Rather than perhaps seeing people's social class position as dynamic and potentially transitory, using a categorical framework promulgates a tendency to believe that one's social class position or status is constant, or at least constant enough to develop a social class consciousness for that group. For example, what might we conclude about some African American families from a study by Heflin and Pattillo (2006) and their findings that poor African Americans are less likely to have siblings in the middle class in comparison to Whites; similarly, being a middle-class African American means you are more likely to have poor siblings. According to Heflin's study, African Americans are less likely to have siblings that cross important social class divides (i.e., siblings in upper social class groups) in beneficial ways. African Americans may have fewer people to turn to when they need assistance, and therefore their risk of downward mobility is higher than that of Whites. It may be that social class position is less an individual issue and more related to relationships such as one's group and family. Additionally, researchers may need to consider a level of potential anxiety for some African American families who may regard their social class position as tenuous. Thus, in this situation, how might a middle-class family's or individual's social class consciousness vary from that of Whites who may not need to consider their social class position as tenuous? All of these questions and possibilities are difficult to explore from a strictly categorical social class framework.

Also, if we were interested in, for instance, psychological distress related to social class, measuring income would be insufficient. Instead, researchers would need to investigate issues such as debt and other indicators of financial distress. For example, Brown, Taylor, and Price (2005) found

that individual (not household) credit card debt was significantly related to psychological distress. Additionally, Drentea and Lavraka (2000) also found support for the relationship between psychological distress and credit card debt. It may also be important to recognize that people in wealth and affluence and people who are poor may have different thresholds for what they may consider to be in debt and financially distressing. For people who are poor and without many resources, financial distress may be a constant and real threat and may be related to fears of losing a home or not being able to afford food. Alternatively, people in wealth may have other holdings and resources, and financial distress may be related to the loss of an expected lifestyle.

If income were the most important variable reflecting one's social class, it would make sense that people would behave in ways that would allow them to show their income in a purely monetary sense. This may be absurd, but consider people walking around in suits and clothes of money, some in coins, some in dollar bill suits, and others in suits made of hundred dollar denominations. In these situations, one could clearly determine other people's social class just by their income. We would also see that each of these dollars means something different depending on how much each person has at his or her disposal. That is, a single dollar does not have the same meaning for someone who is poor as it does for someone who has millions or even billions of dollars. Instead, if we were to measure meaningfulness by dollar amounts across the income spectrum, I would argue that we would likely see a steep ascent in meaningfulness for each dollar among the poor and certain middle classes and an eventual plateau for those whose income and money are no longer handled in a physical sense but can only be reviewed in electronic forms, balance sheets, and banking statements. But since we do not have money suits, people look for other ways to show their monetary worth. Typically this demonstration is through material objects and possessions, and sometimes it is through the ways people spend their time, such as increasing schedule flexibility or free and luxury time.

Also, the research has not been clear in untangling what "income" means to an individual. When asked about income, what other items come to mind that are related to income but not necessarily just what one is paid? For instance, what about a person's wealth, holdings, savings, debts, credit card balances, bills to be paid, and future and anticipated income? Also, when people think about their income, is it before or after taxes? That is, a total salary before taxes and benefits sounds much greater than one's actual take-home pay. Is the income sufficient and livable? Is the income level relatively stable for the scale of life in which the individual is engaged? Income as an objective matter is relative to some extent; there

may be some discrepancy between what a person believes a particular income means and the actual meaning in that person's life. The meaningfulness of income is also geographically determined. The salary of a person living in Iowa is perceived differently than that of someone who makes the same salary and lives in San Francisco. Simply, the cost of living from housing to food is vastly different, so the amount of income that may mark someone as middle-class in one geographic context may not be as salient for another.

Also, the meaningfulness of one's income is dependent on how an individual compares to those around him or her. Social comparison and the peer-based evaluation of the income amount seem to contribute to how one self-evaluates his or her position in a social class hierarchy. Also, the issue of income assumes a constant salary and income stream but does not necessarily account for the stress felt by hourly workers who live from paycheck to paycheck, with each paycheck potentially varying in amount. And what about those who live on tips? What does income tell us then? Thus, even when asking about income, it is incredibly important to understand the population or community that is being researched and ask questions that are relevant to better understanding that particular community.

One final problem with using these objective indices is the implication that only those who can report on or have these indices affect and effect social class and classism. For the most part, then, based on these indices alone, it would appear that adults are the only ones who are impacted by social class and classism. And yet, some research suggests that if social class is considered a socially constructed hierarchy into which people are ascribed a particular position based on certain criteria and then treated by others to reinforce and perpetuate the hierarchy, then social class and classism may start among young children (Miech & Hauser, 2001; Tudor, 1971; Tulkin & Kagan, 1972). Young children and adolescents are keenly aware of social class differences in material possessions and are able to categorize individuals based on a rudimentary social class hierarchy. We also know that children and adolescents treat and marginalize others based on social class criteria such as shoes, clothes, transportation, and even meals.

I remember as a middle-school child when I started to see my friends bring lunches to school in brown paper bags and their sandwiches in plastic bags. I thought that participating in the school lunch program was marginalizing, so I envied their brown paper bags. I wanted to be similar to my friends because I started to see the differences between the poorer children in the lunch program and those among whom I wanted to be. I had none of the adult indices that would have given me a social class, but nevertheless I was aware of social class and classism.

Sociology's Impact on the Helping Profession

Along with the methodological problems related to measuring and assessing social class and classism is an equally important problem of the construct. The construct of social class as it has been largely understood and examined in psychology and counseling has been a product of disciplinary importation. I argue strongly that the discipline mostly responsible for mental health's approach to social class is sociology. Sociology is interested in the macro-level issues that impact groups and communities. It would make sense that sociology's interest in social class and socioeconomic status (SES) is focused on the "social" or "macro" of class and status. But since the term *socioeconomic-status (SES)* was first used in 1883 by Lester Ward to nominally connect the social and economic aspects of people's lives (Jones & McMillan, 2001), *SES* and *social class* have been inconsistently and mostly atheoretically used, even in the sociological literature (Oakes & Rossi, 2003). While this inconsistent and atheoretical use of *social class* and *SES* is a problem for sociology, this problem is additive for helping professionals.

In making this critique of disciplinary importation, I do not intend to demean and diminish the scholarship and practice of sociology. Sociological research is critically important to me and frames parts of how I approach an understanding of social class at the individual level. I implicate sociology (writ large) and its influence on the helping professions to note specifically that the helping professions' scholarship and science have not addressed social class and classism. And even though these are incredibly important issues and problems for people, rather than develop a framework to understand social class and classism, the helping professions have largely relied on sociology's perspective. Finally, to a large extent, the helping professions have mostly distilled what sociology has researched into mostly incoherent and inconsistent variables. Therefore, in this brief discussion of problems related to helping professions and social class, I discuss some of the problems helping professionals have encountered in becoming more aware and knowledgeable about social class and classism.

The first problem is related to confusion and inconsistencies related to methodology and terminology, which have been addressed. The second problem is related to the use of a macro-level paradigm and strategy to understand micro-level and individual-based experiences and phenomena. A parallel to our understanding of social class and classism comes from psychology and counseling's exploration of race and racism. If psychology and counseling were to study race and racism in the same manner they have approached social class and classism, the research methods would have been focused on gradients of skin color and other phenotypical

features within and between "racial" groups. Moreover, these various racial features would have been examined to determine the combinations that would effect a particular racial category. Finally, individuals within each of these "racial" categories would be ascribed some racial attitudes, identity, similarity in experiences (i.e., racism), and worldview.

But the research on race and racism for helping professionals has not focused on or used this paradigm. Helping professionals recognize that skin color and other "racial" features may be related to how an individual is treated and the ways in which the individual may perceive him- or herself. For instance, in general there tends to be a prejudice toward racial and ethnic minority members whose physical features are darker and more indigenous than toward those with lighter skin and more European features (Fuertes & Gelso, 2000; Fuertes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). But even though there is some acknowledgment that racial features have some impact, these physical elements are likely insufficient in fully determining or organizing the individual's racial attitudes, identity, or worldview.

Helping professionals, then, do not study race and racism, but instead they focus on a psychological construct related to race and racism. Helping professionals explore an individual's racial identity but not specifically race, and the focus is on experiences or attitudes about racism, but not specifically racism. Therefore, the construct "race" modifies the psychological phenomena under investigation. In framing a larger social issue such as racism in terms of a psychological or intra- and interpersonal construct, it becomes possible to use this "racial" knowledge for the benefit of the client. Also, psychologists may use this research and theory to better tackle societal racism.

Similarly, the study of social class should also be connected to a psychological construct. Any number of mental health-related constructs could be studied such as social class acculturation, social class dissonance, social class trauma, or social class identity. By framing social class as a psychological construct, helping professionals are better positioned to explore, investigate, and integrate knowledge about the client and his or her context into counseling, therapy, and advocacy (Liu & Hernandez, 2010).

Social Class, Socioeconomic Status, Social Status, and Classism

Up to this point, I have intentionally avoided operationalizing social class or any other *social*-based economic term. In part, the operationalizing of terms too early would have created a number of questions for the reader,

most of which I have just addressed. But now that the argument has been laid forth for the importance of social class and classism in mental health practice and why there is a need to approach social class and classism from a psychological and counseling perspective, this foundation allows us to focus on what terms are used in this chapter and throughout the book.

In defining *social class*, *SES*, *social status* and other terms, one assumption I work from is that there has been no clear operationalization or definition of the terms in the helping professions. Various theorists and researchers have used an array of different indicators (e.g., income, wealth, education, occupation level, occupational prestige, access to power, resources) to define the similarities or differences between social class, SES, and social status. But as Liu, Ali et al. (2004) have shown, at least in the counseling psychology literature, the more than 400 terms (e.g., *poor*, *wealthy*, *after school lunch*, *affluent*, *middle class*) used to implicate social class or SES constructs have often been poorly operationalized or not defined at all. Consequently, to suggest that one term in the helping profession literature is superior to another or that one term is more meaningful is not a substantial argument (Liu, 2001; Liu, Ali et al. 2004). Rather than focus on the terms, it would be more important to focus on questions such as the following: (a) What is the intention of the theory or research to be carried out? (b) What is the clinician or researcher interested in about the client or participants? and (c) How is classism linked to the "socioeconomic" term being investigated? The specific terms should follow the research intention, but always, the terms should be defined for the purposes of the research study.

So, rather than attempting to establish discriminating criteria among the different terms, for the purposes of this book I will use and define *social class* and *classism*. These terms are intentionally selected because I believe they are theoretically useful and meaningful constructs. In my theory and research as a counseling psychologist, I posit that social class may be conceptualized as a psychological construct through the framework of a worldview. By worldview, I mean that social class is a type of lens through which the individual perceives the world around him or her, but also that the worldview (i.e., lens) filters the way information, experiences, and relationships are perceived by the individual. Because I am specifically interested in the "social class" worldview, I believe that individuals perceive themselves as part of an economic hierarchy and that there are in- and out-groups (Liu, in press). The out-group may be any person who does not belong to the same group, and because the person is an out-group member, he or she may be a target of marginalization and derision (i.e., classism). Being a member of a particular social class group means that the individual is also conscious of a hierarchy and his or her position and status in that hierarchy (Wright, 2002). Liu (in press) defines *class* as:

A "class" is an economic group within which an individual belongs, and the individual perceives material (i.e., types of belongings, neighborhood) and non-material (i.e., educational level) boundaries. The individual may observe other "classes" which are perceived to be, in subjective hierarchy, higher, lower, and at the same place (i.e., lateral) as the individual's own class. Class mobility is possible, but only through the comprehension of the other class's norms, values, and culture; that is, each class is perceived to have its own culture, and the further away the social class group is from the current position, the more dissonant or unfamiliar the culture is to the individual. Consequently, classism is an employed behavior and attitude, and an expected consequence as the individual attempts to navigate within and between classes. (p. 14)

With *socioeconomic status (SES)*, Liu, Ali, et al. (2004) argue that the term often implies that an individual's place in an economic hierarchy is temporary and in flux. The term *SES* may also imply that there is not necessarily any group consciousness, but instead the individual is an autonomous agent within a constantly dynamic economic environment (Liu, in press). Finally, in *SES*, because the individual is assumed by the researcher to be focused on social mobility, one issue may be the unequal distribution of resources as a factor in SES transitions. This inequality of resources is a result of classism exerted by other people and social forces, but because SES is focused on mobility rather than consciousness, investigating, understanding, and exploring the causes and consequences of classism may not be fully addressed. But even as I make these distinctions, I am aware that I am attempting to draw differences among terms that have been confusingly used in the past. So even here, some may argue that *SES* has different meanings and definitions. And I would agree. My focus here is not so much on operationalizing *SES* as on operationalizing *social class* and *classism*.

Because the focus of social class here is on the individual's worldview, I do not imply that social class becomes *idio class* (specific to individuals with no connection to context or history; Liu, in press). That is, a social class worldview does not negate the sociopolitical (e.g., unequal distribution of power), sociohistorical (e.g., biased and inaccurate histories of peoples), and sociostructural (e.g., legal, education, and economic systems) forces that marginalize, exploit, and oppress individuals (Liu & Ali, 2005). Social class, SES, or any of the other ways an individual understands and interacts with his or her economic context needs to be understood within various interdependent systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Liu & Ali, 2008). Thus, while helping professionals, psychologists, and counselors are interested in the idiosyncratic ways in which individuals perceive their social class contexts, social class is always dependent on multiple and simultaneous macro-level operations (some of which favor and some of which disadvantage the individual). These operations are typically not within the agency of the individual to impact or change *in toto*.

Heretofore, I have attempted to link the terms *social class* and *classism*. I have surmised that the terms *hierarchy*, *status*, *class*, and *position* all tacitly imply that there exists a gradient of "more" and "less" and of those who are "higher" and those who are "lower." In our current economic system, and for the foreseeable future, it seems that inequality and stratification will continue if not increase in magnitude. These disparities are a cause and consequence of classism and inequality and I suggest that there are likely to be individuals within our social and economic spheres of life who are benefitting from and are committed to perpetuating these inequalities. Therefore, *social class* or any other socioeconomic term implies a hierarchy that can only exist with the presence of classism. It would be fair, then, to conclude that social class and classism are interdependent and coconstructed, that one cannot exist or persist without the other. Consider, for instance, that the meaningfulness of racial categories cannot exist independent of racism. Theoretically, it would be important to develop theories that illuminate and explain how both social class and classism operate in synthesis (i.e., the Social Class Worldview Model–Revised; Liu, in press). Based on these assumptions and the operationalization of social class and linking it with classism, I will present the Social Class Worldview Model–Revised (SCWM–R) later in the book and connect it to counseling and other helping professional interventions, training, and education.

Social Class and Classism Multicultural Competencies

Presenting social class and classism as multicultural competencies should be simple. Social class and classism are often mentioned as being among the three cultural constructs (race, social class, and gender) of which helping professionals need to be aware. To start, a basic premise is that helping professionals need to develop knowledge, awareness, and skills in social class and classism as well as in the areas of knowing the client, knowing one's own biases and worldview, and knowing how to effectively employ culturally based interventions (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992), therapy relationships, and multicultural research (Liu, Sheu, & Hall, 2004). But in developing multicultural competencies in this area, helping professionals should consider the wide array of social class worldviews and look for ways to address clients across the entire economic spectrum.

Developing one's multicultural competency in working with people who are poor or impoverished is likely supported by the extant theoretical and empirical literature. Vast amounts of research and theoretical literature exist, and rightly so. I will not reiterate here the psychological,

health-related, developmental, occupational, and systemic problems faced by people who are poor since (a) these issues are discussed throughout this book, and (b) most people may already have some sense that the disadvantages faced by people who are poor are significant and deleterious. But in understanding a wide array of social class worldviews, those who may be affluent or middle class (Liu et al. 2007) may warrant some consideration. In no way do I mean that those who are poor, middle class, and affluent are equal in any meaningful way, but I do believe helping professionals need to develop approaches and frameworks to understand and effectively work with clients from across the economic spectrum. For instance, the contingencies that may create and perpetuate substance use and abuse for those who are poor versus the affluent may be different (Luthar & D'Avanzo, 1999), and it would be necessary to understand these different contexts in developing culturally congruent interventions.

One other issue related to multicultural competencies and social class and classism relates to the appreciation of cultures. In most multicultural counseling training, one way to help students develop their interest in other cultures is to help them learn ways to appreciate, not just tolerate, cultures and cultural differences. Food fairs, cultural festivals, and invited speakers are ways in which this appreciation for cultures is developed. But how might one go about appreciating social class and classism? Is appreciating social class the same thing as appreciating disparities, stratification, and inequality?

In appreciating any cultural group or groups, one must understand the sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and sociostructural contexts within which these cultural groups exist. One could not appreciate Native American cultures if one did not understand well the genocide and cultural obliteration these nations faced since the first European explorers set foot in the Americas. Appreciating Native Americans and their cultures necessarily implies confronting this history and seeing the ways in which Native American cultures have persisted and in some cases flourished within this context. Racism is inherently, if not explicitly, a part of how an individual must appreciate cultures, and in many situations, racism is an issue in which one must understand his or her culpability and responsibility.

Social class and classism may be easily appreciated within this similar cultural framework, but because social class does not implicate one singular group but a cultural affect, one has to find ways in which social class and classism have impacted a particular group and the ways in which the group has coped, survived, and flourished. I mean cultural affect and effect because, unlike race and gender, there are no apparent physical features or markers for most people, and thus, social class as a cultural construct is much more difficult to identify. But that being said, appreciating the

cultural diversity related to social class is an imperative for multiculturally competent helping professionals.

Finally, understanding oneself as a culturally constructed and influenced being, especially a social-classed individual, is an important dimension of multicultural competency. I elaborate on this later in the book, but I think it is important to mention a few aspects related to this self-knowledge. The helping professional should understand his or her worldview, biases, expectations, and distortions. I believe one potential place to start is with a self-audit of sorts in which the helping professional explores the social class traumas that may have impacted and influenced his or her life. These might be personal traumas experienced by the individual such as bullying, teasing, or abuse related to social class. But these traumas may also be related to being in a situation such as violence and poverty and are certainly related to family dynamics and conflict. I do believe it is possible that individuals across the social class hierarchy (both poor and rich) may be able to report on these experiences. And I feel that supervisors and teachers should help their students and trainees articulate these histories as a means to develop multicultural competency.

Conclusion and Summary

Social class and classism are important constructs in the helping professions, but because of cultural taboos in discussing these topics, methodological inconsistencies, and theoretical confusion, these constructs have been not well integrated into research and clinical work. In part, there are cultural prohibitions against talking about social class and classism, but also, some individuals simply lack language and experience in talking about these constructs. For helping professionals who are interested in better understanding their clients and in looking for ways to integrate social class and classism into their practices, there is a need to shift from macro-level constructions of social class and toward more subjective and phenomenological approaches. We know that social class and classism are implicated across the lifespan, and children start early in discriminating among social class groups. Because classism starts early, it would be important for helping professionals to have a way of framing these problems and experiences and interventions to explore and understand these issues. Since there is a lack of theory and research on social class for the helping professions, the purpose of this book is to present and discuss the theoretical and empirical literature on social class and to present a theory that links a person's social class worldview and classism experiences.