Counselling psychologists’ perceptions of social class within the therapeutic dyad. A grounded theory exploration.

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**BACKGROUND**

Liu (2011, 2012) proposes that an individual’s social class is formed by variables such as income, education, occupation and area of residence; in turn, this is associated with language, ethnicity and lifestyle considerations, which together form a certain worldview or understanding of the world.

They define social class as ‘the beliefs and attitudes that help the individual understand the demands of one’s economic culture, develop the behaviours necessary to meet the economic culture demands, and recognise how classism functions in one’s life’ (p. 9).

**Existing research**

Research has largely focused on the identification of class indicators such as income, education and occupation with many studies conducted in the US (e.g. Howell & Howell, 2008; Day & Newburger, 2002; Oakes & Rossi, 2003; Cohen et al, 2008).

Studies that have explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of social class in therapy, from both client and therapist perspectives, suggest that class matters do not necessarily impede therapy but demands for therapist sensitivity. Findings also suggest class is not always noticed or adequately addressed by therapists (e.g. Levy & O’Hara, 2010; Lott, 2002; Thompson, Cole, Nitzarin, 2012; Cormack, 2009; Balmforth, 2009; Chalifoux, 1998; Ballingir & Wright, 2007).

In the UK, within the field of counselling psychology, there is a lack of studies that specifically explore social class. As it is frequently noted, counselling psychology is well positioned to consider social justice matters, there is a demand for studies in order to deepen understanding and to add to the current literature. (Vera and Speight, 2003; Priletensky, Dokecki, Frieden & Wong, 2007).

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**Aim**

This study aims to explore how counselling psychologists perceive, experience and negotiate social class within the therapeutic dyad.

**Research questions**

What does social class mean for counselling psychologists?

How do counselling psychologists experience social class in the therapeutic relationship?

How do counselling psychologists manage and/or negotiate social class within the therapeutic dyad?

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

How do you define and understand social class and how does this fit with your own life experiences?

Thinking about social class, could you describe the type of clients you work with and what your experience is when working with them?

In relation to social class, can you talk about a particular situation/moment/interaction with a client that stood out for you?

**THOUGHTS?**

Imagine this client is seeking advice from you regarding training as a counselling psychologist.

She is an Asian woman in her late 20s. Her parents have a rural upbringing and are migrants. They speak very little English, and their highest level of education is at college level. They are home owners in one of the most deprived areas of London. The client attended a state school in the area and has a degree in Psychology.

What initial thoughts do you have about this client?

How do you feel about working with this client?

How would you approach the situation given age, race, ethnicity, class etc.?

How do you think the client feels about working with you?

If you changed the clients demographics how might your perceptions change and why?

**INITIAL THEMES**

- "I notice the client's accent makes me feel uncomfortable, but I don't know how to address it."

- "I have noticed that I change the way I speak, I might speak more clearly, more posh than I would normally, it wasn’t a conscious thing.

- "I don’t often think about class, it’s not in the forefront of my mind…there is definitely a stark difference between my private work and my NHS work."

- "It’s a myriad of factors...

**IMPLICATIONS**

- It would encourage counselling psychologists to challenge their own potential biases and think about how that may affect their clients.

- Greater understanding in the relevance of social class & social justice issues in therapeutic practice within the UK.

- Besides contribution to the field of counselling psychology, findings could be used in related fields and areas.

- Integrate these ideas into training and practice as a basis for a coherent and informed approach to working constructively in counselling with issues of social class and classism.

**REFERENCES**


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**METHODOLOGY**

Participants

8-12 Counselling psychologists with at least 1 year of experience post qualification. They could self-identify of any or no class.

Recruitment

The British Psychological Society website and social media sites and the recruitment process will also be opened to a snowball effect through participant referrals.

Data Collection

A demographic questionnaire (5 minutes) & a semi-structured interview (60-90 minutes) face-to-face or via Skype.

Data Analysis

Interviews are transcribed and analysed using a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006).

**CONCLUSION**

**REFERENCES**


