

Class & Counselling

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Abstract

Social class is a neglected aspect in counselling research, practice and training. For the person-centred counsellor working in low cost counselling settings, challenges can arise when they are perceived as experts by the client. This research will explore social class in the context of society as well as the counselling room. Where the therapeutic relationship is based on the foundations of the person-centred philosophy, what are the implications when the dynamics of power within the therapeutic relationship are realised? How does it impact the client? How does it impact the counsellor? The aim of this research is to highlight the deficit of social class within the profession and how it is affecting the therapeutic relationship and therapeutic outcome and how it is limiting the profession itself by overlooking social class in counselling training.

Introduction

Counsellors working in low cost counselling can be perceived as experts by clients. This can be particularly challenging for counsellors whose approach is primarily based in the person-centred theory. Although research and training within the counselling profession explore issues of gender, race, sexuality and culture, social class is rarely discussed. This research paper will explore the implications a discrepancy in the acknowledgement of social class has in person-centred therapy. This will be conducted by discussing the underpinnings of the person centred approach in relation to the therapeutic relationship and the power dynamics which reside within it, examining social class and the impacts it has in Irish society today and will focus on the implications of ignoring social class for both the counsellor and the client. For the purpose of this paper, I refer to counsellor, middle class counsellor and counsellor in training, all terms inferring that the counsellor maintains a middle class position in society. I also refer to the client, working class client and client from a lower socio-economic background, inferring that the client maintains a working class position in society or a class position lower than that of the middle class counsellor.

It is intended that this research will bring the issue of social class into the counsellors awareness, underlining the significant impact that neglecting social class can have on the therapeutic relationship and therapy outcome. This research will also demonstrate how social class, social class bias and classism also impact the counsellor. By highlighting the lack of reference to social class in training, the aim of this research is to prompt the facilitators of counselling training courses to question why social class is overlooked on the training syllabus and how it can be integrated into current teaching models. It also begs the question to the administration of counselling training courses as to how or why the profession has

become predominantly a middle class one and how can they make the course more accessible.

Chapter 1: Social Class & Social Class Bias

The Person-Centred Philosophy

The fundamental principle of the Person-Centred Approach is the actualising tendency. This is a characteristic of all living organisms, an inherent, constant trait within us all to grow and strive in a positive direction (Rogers 2004). Rogers (1979) illustrates the tendency by using the analogy of the potato bin, where despite adverse conditions, the living organism, the potato, still developed sprouts and continued to grow towards the light. The tendency for growth and fulfilment was ever-present within the organism despite the limitations of its environment. In the context of Counselling and Psychotherapy, this analogy of the actualising tendency relates to clients who experience adverse conditions in their own lives which tainted their own growth and development, leading them to cope and behave through maladaptive ways in order to survive and function within their circumstances.

It is the task of the Person-Centred Counsellor to create an environment where a facilitative relationship can take place between counsellor and client, where the client feels safe and confident to explore their inner world and concept of their being. In order for a positive therapeutic outcome to be achieved, the core conditions of Congruence, Empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard must be present to a sufficient standard and must consistently continue to be present over time (Rogers, 1957). These conditions aren't a skill that the counsellor applies, but an attitude or attribute that the counsellor holds within themselves. By offering themselves these conditions, the counsellor is effectively able to offer these to the client as a separate entity. "Without self-acceptance, the person-centred counsellor will gradually find her work impossible (Mearns, Thorne & McLeod, 2013, p.41).

With regards to clients who identify as working class, to accept such a non-judgemental attitude from another can be an unfamiliar experience. By the time a client enters therapy their own self-concept has already been established through the judgements and expectations of others “The client who has been reared under oppressive conditions of worth will have learned that he has value only in so far as he behaves in accordance with the expectations of significant others” (Mearns, Thorne & McLeod, 2013, p.81). However, oppressive conditions of worth extend beyond the realms of the opinions of our significant others. An individual’s place in society, or where an individual perceives their place in society to be, impact who they become and how they are in the world. Where any client can experience oppression, for the working class client, their social class position can influence their life choices more heavily (Kearney, 2003). Where the core conditions were created to remove inequality from the therapeutic relationship, it is Kearney’s (1996) belief that due to the mainstream acceptance of the humanistic values of the Person-Centred approach, the revolutionary removal of marginalisation and oppression within the counselling space has been somewhat overlooked in counselling practice.

Social Class

Social class is neglected as a distinct aspect of diversity in counselling and psychotherapy, instead being entwined within other characteristics of a person’s identity such as race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Balmforth, 2009; Kim & Cardemil, 2012). There is limited explicit research or acknowledgement of social class in relation to counselling and psychotherapy (Kearney, 1996; Ryan, 2006; Ballinger & Wright, 2007; Liu, Pickett Jr. & Ivey, 2007). Research in the context of social class in counselling, is predominantly conducted with counsellors or counsellors in training assuming the role of the client (Balmforth 2009; Thompson, Cole & Nitzarim, 2012) or is conducted from the perspective of

the counsellor or counsellor in training (Smith, Mao, Perkins & Ampuero, 2001; Cook & Lawson, 2016). This limitation with research participants is a hindrance to a true reflection of the perceived differences experienced by working class clients within the therapeutic relationship. The consequence of this lack of emphasis on social class, is the absence of an operational definition, as it is deemed as subjective, depending much on the impact of an individual's economic and environmental factors as their own lived experience. Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston and Pickett Jr. (2004) created a 'Social Class Worldview Model' to enable counselling professionals to understand how clients view themselves, their environments and others in terms of social class. The model offers a methodical illustration of the schema people use to make sense of their social class perceptions, feelings, economic environments and cultures.

Classism is defined as "negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors directed toward those with less power, who are socially devalued" (Lott, 2012, p.654). Classism functions in all directions – upward, downward, amongst classes and can be internalised. Internalised classism can provoke anger, frustration and depression within a person when they perceive that they are not fulfilling the expectations of their economic culture (Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston & Pickett Jr., 2004). This in turn creates an incongruence for the person. For the working class client, it is imperative that the person-centred counsellor recognises the oppressive societal conditions which have been imposed upon them and which they have internalised resulting in or contributing to their psychological distress in order to prevent feelings of oppression being mirrored in the counselling room. "Person-centred theory theorizes distress as incongruence or internalized conditions of worth, clearly placing the problem as internal. Thus therapy tries to change the individual whilst leaving society and the inequalities in society unchanged" (Proctor, 2006, p.70).

Social Class Bias

Research has determined that without adequate social class awareness, the counsellor has the potential to unintentionally discriminate against working class clients (Lee & Temerlin 1970; Lorion, 1974; Smith et al., 2011). Lee & Temerlin (1970) found that when a client displaying no significant characteristics of psychological distress was depicted as being from a low socio-economic background, they were more likely to be diagnosed as mentally ill. This outcome was also echoed by Lorion (1974) who examined the difficulties counsellors experience in understanding working class values and how a lack of understanding contributes to a negative bias. Smith, Mao, Perkins & Ampuero (2011) also concluded that a client's social class influenced early diagnostic impressions with counsellors in training. They found that working class clients near the bottom of the socio-economic scale were perceived as lower functioning and more highly symptomatic. Although these research pieces are decades apart, the conclusions are similar, highlighting that social class in relation to working class clients continues to be overlooked in the counselling profession and in counselling training. "When therapists ignore the links between social inequalities and psychological distress, they serve the interests of privileged social groups rather than those of the client" (Proctor, 2006, p.71).

Society in Ireland Today

Most recent figures in Ireland show that there has been an increase of 50,000 people being prescribed anti-depressants on the public General Medical Card Scheme since 2011 (The Journal.ie, 2017). The overall figure now represents 8% of Ireland's population. These statistics however, aren't a true reflection of the actual number of people being prescribed anti-depressant medication as there is no public database for private prescriptions. In the documentary 'Medication Nation' (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 2017), the issue of the over-prescription of anti-depressant medication was considered the only alternative as access to

public counselling services is limited and medication is the only immediate solution to relieve a person who is experiencing a mental health crisis and cannot afford private counselling services. This is a prime example of institutional classism – “the maintenance and reinforcement of low status by social institutions that present barriers to increase the difficulty of accessing resources” (Lott, 2012). Many clients that approach low-cost counselling centres have been subject to institutional classism despite being under the care of our community mental health schemes.

Social Class Mobility

Social class bias focuses on upward mobility based on the principle that people should be striving to improve their class position. Upward mobility is seen as the norm and anyone who doesn't strive towards this improvement is considered abnormal, creating an upward mobility bias (Liu et al., 2004). Where class mobility is generally perceived as an upward progression, it is also just as conceivable that class mobility can also regress (Cook & Lawson, 2016). The Central Statistics Office (2017) has confirmed that homelessness in Ireland has increased by 81% since 2011. This issue is a prime example of how the downward mobility of a person's class position is a relevant and possibly more common issue in today's society than initially realised.

The transition from one economic culture to another without prior warning can evoke feelings of frustration or anxiety within a person as they try to adjust to a new environment and its expectations (Liu et al., 2004). The concept of the actualising tendency can also contribute to an upward mobility bias. Harrison (2013) questions if the actualising tendency predetermines the direction of therapy before the client has even entered the room, as by making the assumption about what the client wants, the counsellor is putting the client under

undue pressure to change when they may not be ready to do so. Counsellors require an awareness of upward mobility bias as by assuming that the client is always interested in upward social mobility, the counsellor could categorize clients who don't conform to this ideology as unmotivated or lazy (Liu et al., 2007). Kearney (2003) uses the term 'class-blindness', inferring that the higher an individual's social status, the less conscious they are of social class disparities. As the counselling profession is a middle-class one (Totton, 2009), the potential for 'class blindness' to occur is likely unless the counsellor has explored their own values, beliefs and social class position.

Chapter 2: The Therapeutic Relationship

Power in the Therapeutic Relationship

It is widely recognised that the therapeutic relationship is the most important aspect of counselling (Mearns & Thorne, 2002; Mearns & Cooper, 2005, Rogers, 1957; 1979; 2004; 2012). Proctor (2006; 2017), hypothesises that there are three characteristics which exist within the therapeutic relationship – role power, societal power and historical power. All three dynamics of power which are identified within the therapeutic relationship are interrelated and apply to both the counsellor and client.

Role Power

Role power is defined as the role of the counsellor as it is perceived by the client. Each client will have a different perception of the role power of the counsellor and consequently, this impacts the perception of themselves as client. Proctor (2006) argues that all counsellors are given authority by society and the organisations in which they practice. Liu, Pickett Jr & Ivey (2007) and Totton (2009) concur with Proctors argument, stating that therapists are potentially classist, as therapy is based on white, societal norms and that therapists are middle class by their choice of profession alone.

The non-directive approach to Person-Centred counselling promoted by Rogers (2012), encourages the counsellor to trust in the clients own resources and capabilities to facilitate their own personal growth and development. By addressing the autonomy of the client, Rogers was highlighting the possibility of an exploitation of power by the counsellor and thus removing the position of expert from the counsellor. “It began to occur to me that unless I had a need to demonstrate my own cleverness and learning, I would do better to rely upon the

client for the direction of movement in the process” (Rogers, 2004, p.12). Where the decision to work in a non-directive way with clients is grounded in the belief of the autonomy of the client as a moral principle, the counsellor is using the role and authority of their position in making their choice (Proctor, 2017, p.112). Where the reduction of the dynamics of power is central to the person-centred approach, the role power of the counsellor can cause clients to assume their social role within therapy, strengthening the role power dynamic and perceiving themselves as a victim or problem that needs to be fixed (Harrison, 2013).

Societal Power

Societal power relates to the structural positions of both the client and the counsellor and its interaction within the therapeutic relationship (Proctor, 2017, p.9). There is an instant structural imbalance within the therapeutic relationship with a middle class counsellor and a working class client as working class clients or clients from a lower socio-economic background are generally poorer, more likely to experience mental health difficulties, suffer from more physical illnesses, are more dependant and are less socially supported (Proctor, 2006; 2017). This can be detrimental to the working class clients experience of counselling and on the therapeutic outcome, mirroring the oppression they experience in society, provoking the client’s anxiety and psychological distress. Anxiety and psychological distress can be related to a client’s fear surrounding the uncertainty or lack of control over their environment, relating to a subjective feeling of powerlessness (Proctor, 2017, p.3).

Historical Power

Clients often attend therapy as they are experiencing psychological distress due to feelings of powerlessness in their lives (Proctor, 2006; Balmforth 2009). Personal histories of power or powerlessness affect how we think, feel and behave within our relationships. We have all been influenced by the messages we receive in society regarding inequality, stereotypes,

assumptions and assumed societal expectations. These messages are implicit and are internalised, influencing our conditions of worth (Proctor 2006; 2017). Balmforth (2009), found that working class clients perceived their experience with a middle class counsellor to have a disempowering influence on their therapy with a sense of imbalance of power at the core of their experience. For some, the encounter evoked overwhelming feelings of shame about their backgrounds. The counsellor's lack of understanding of different life experiences, access to opportunities and how a lack of financial resources limits life choices, were the most prevalent issues documented by working class clients.

Empathy within the Therapeutic Relationship

It has been well documented that a lack of understanding and empathy by the counsellor is the most common variable to negatively impact the therapeutic relationship between working class clients and middle class counsellors (Balmforth 2009; Thompson et al., 2012; Cook & Lawson, 2016). This lack of understanding with working class clients stems from the counsellors lack of awareness in the context of politics and societal structure (Proctor 2017). Class identity is generally overlooked until it encounters an Other (Kim & Cardemil, 2012). If the counsellor is unaware of the impact of social class, they run the risk of mis-hearing and/or misunderstanding the client, widening the distance between the counsellor and the client (Kearney, 2003).

Empathic understanding is defined as “to sense the clients private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the “as if” quality” (Rogers, Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1990, p.226). But it is the “as if” quality that seems to be lost in translation with working class clients, hindering their perception of being fully heard or understood. Mearns, Thorne & McLeod (2013) discuss blocks to empathy, where the counsellor is seeking fulfilment on their own theories of human behaviour within the therapeutic relationship (or in this case the

possibility of a social class bias). One of the most problematic blocks to empathy is the needs and fear of the counsellor. In relation to social class difference between the counsellor and client, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness can be evoked in the counsellor, causing the counsellor to question how successfully they can empathise with the clients life struggles. These overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and helplessness which may be evoked within the counsellor due to a lack of social awareness in relation to the traumatic events which may bring the working class client to therapy as

“poor families are far more likely than their nonpoor counterparts to experience a broad range of traumatic life events, including infant mortality, community violence, marital dissolution, imprisonment of self or spouse, intimate partner violence and other crimes” (Goodman, Pugach, Skolnik & Smith, 2012, p.184).

In order to overcome the perceived lack of understanding experienced by the client, the counsellor can explicitly address their limits of knowledge of the client’s social realities, offering the role of educator to the client and increasing authenticity within the relationship (Kim & Cardemil, 2012).

Chapter 3: Implications for Counselling Practice

Unspoken Influences in the Counselling Room

Consciously or unconsciously, people make judgements and assumptions about one another based on first impressions. From the moment contact is made with another, class differences, no matter how subtle, are evident and can provoke the clients or the counsellor's internalised classism (Thompson et al., 2012; Harrison, 2013; Holman, 2014). Counsellors passively disclose aspects of their life and social position when they first meet with a client through their attire, skin colour, the organisation they work for and how they speak (Harrison, 2013). Research shows how client's and counsellors initial impressions and assumptions of each other and of inferiority or superiority of rank, can have a considerable impact on establishing the therapeutic relationship, the effectiveness of therapy, and on the client's willingness to continue with therapy (Ryan, 2006; Smith et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2012). Jealousy, due to working class client's initial impressions of their middle class counsellors, was also an issue documented in research, leaving working class clients feeling judged and disconnected when these differences were ignored (Thompson et al., 2012). Working class clients stated that the onus was on the counsellor to bring up the subject of class within the counselling session as it was considered too sensitive an issue and too much of a risk for them to bring up the topic themselves. The consequence of not addressing social class and the experienced power imbalance of the client was that the client felt there was no psychological connection, which inevitably leads to a poor therapeutic outcome (Balmforth, 2009).

Effective communication is one of the largest barriers within the therapeutic relationship by the use of different languages and codes. Language is influenced by a variety of social factors and will be used differently by different social groups. Where there are many contexts in language where words are accentuated depending on what a person is saying or whom they

are speaking to, it is not the vocabulary, accent or the word itself that communicates a person's message but the way in which a person arranges their words and sentences. There is a fundamental difference between the speech patterns of the working class and middle class. The working class speak in a more restricted code using less vocabulary in comparison to middle class speech patterns which are an elaborate code, using more vocabulary and description (Kearney, 1996). The discrepancies between the two language codes being used in the context of a working class client and a middle class counsellor, can cause each participant to make assumptions about the other, assuming a shared context of each other's worldview, blocking the path to a collaborative working alliance.

Counsellors in Training

As professionals in training, a counsellor's first encounter working with clients as part of their clinical work placement occurs predominantly in low-cost counselling centres. Clients who avail of these services are most likely experiencing a difficulty in accessing support due to their financial status which can imply, in a large number of cases that they are of working class status. The counsellor, on the other hand, is almost certainly middle-class as access to counselling training itself is a political issue (Proctor, 2017). The type of training organisation, the level and duration of the training course, and the cost of training are all contributing factors in shaping the profession as middle class, creating an immediate power imbalance with clients (Totton, 2009; Proctor, 2017).

Education is a key class issue where both are intricately linked. Access to both counselling services and to counselling training courses is restricted for working class people (Ballinger & Wright, 2007). The decline in counsellors in training originating from a working class background hinders the learning within the classroom as the perspective, feedback or outlook

on theories and modules is limited by the lack of diversity with students in relation to their social class background. The opportunity for counsellors in training to explore their own awareness and values around social class is also limited as Kearney (1996) argues that issues of class are almost never referred to in training courses or in books or training manuals. Rogers (2012) recognised the requirement of counsellors in training to have an extensive knowledge of the person in their cultural setting. He acknowledged that training courses and literature alone are limited in the amount of experience they can provide to the student, suggesting that this experience would need to be enhanced by working or living with people from different cultural settings than our own. The institutes and organisations where we see clients, conduct research, teach and learn all influence our personal and professional development (Rupani, 2013). Regrettably, in this instance, that influence is a limiting one.

Addressing Social Class in the Counselling Room

For the counsellor to explicitly address social class disparities with a client, it is essential that the counsellor has a critical awareness of the social structure of the organisation that they are working in in order to keep oppression and discrimination out of the counselling room (Rupani, 2013). In the context of working with working class clients or in a low-cost or community centre, the counsellor familiarising themselves with the services available to clients for practical support, can make all the difference in bringing about positive change for the client within their current circumstances and enhance the therapeutic relationship. Chavez, Fernandez, Hipolito-Delgado and Rivera (2016) emphasise the neglect of the connection between the self and environment in counselling and how that influences a client's perception of their reality. They support using the social-justice counselling model (Crethar, Torres-Rivera & Nash, 2008) in order to promote social justice in counselling when working with marginalised and oppressed communities. The core conditions (Rogers, 1957) of person-centred therapy are upheld along with four guiding principles of equity, access,

participation and harmony. This is a unified approach where issues of social disparity are discussed explicitly, where the counsellor assists the client in accessing services and educates the client about how to advocate for their needs. Similarly, Goodman, Pugach, Skolnik and Smith (2012) echo the need for advocacy and support in relation to working with working class clients and favour the Relationship-Centred Advocacy model. They endorse the collaborative nature of working with the client by referring to the client as a partner and purposefully blurring the lines between counselling and advocacy as “psychological intervention sometimes requires collaboration on changing context just as collaboration on changing context sometimes requires psychological work” (Goodman, Pugach, Skolnik & Smith, 2012, p.188). Akin to the models described above, Kearney (1996) discusses effective choice, which the client actually has the power to implement. Where there are limitations to a client’s options depending on social circumstances, the differentiation between social and personal obstacles can enable the working class client to make effective choices in their life despite the social and political restrictions they face. Without acquiring an awareness of social and personal obstacles, the counsellor is at risk of becoming an obstacle themselves.

Conclusion

There are widespread concerns within the counselling profession that the diversity and social awareness of counsellors is diminishing, with counsellors being ranked as middle class by virtue of the profession (Kearney, 1996; Totton, 1999; Proctor 2017). With the inherent trust and belief in the clients potential for positive growth and facilitated by the core conditions at the heart of the person centred philosophy (Rogers 1957; 1979), it seems that the eradication of oppression from the therapeutic relationship and the counselling room has been inhibited. Where a person's social class and impact of their social environment on their lives are an inherent characteristic of their identity, it is a neglected aspect of diversity within the counselling profession unless it is interlinked with other characteristics such as race, gender and identity (Balmforth, 2009; Kim & Cardemil, 2012). Research explicitly exploring social class in counselling and psychotherapy is also sparse (Ryan 2006; Ballinger & Wright, 2007; Liu et al., 2007) and fails to provide a true perspective of the working class clients experience in counselling as participants are predominantly counsellors in training assuming the role of the client (Kim & Cardemil, 2012; Thompson et al., 2012).

Classism operates in all directions in society and creates psychological distress when we feel that we are not conforming to society's expectations within our perceived social structure (Liu et al., 2004). For the person-centred counsellor, it is imperative that these oppressive experiences that are ingrained within the client as their conditions of worth, are not duplicated within the counselling space. In order to prevent this happening, the counsellor must have an adequate awareness of their own social class biases, as if these are ignored, they could contribute to the counsellor holding negative assumptions about clients from a working class background and not realise it. This social class bias could also unconsciously held by the person-centred counsellor in the endorsement of the actualising tendency where there is

an automatic assumption that the client wants positive change or to move forward in their lives.

The therapeutic relationship is the driving force of counselling and psychotherapy (Mearns & Thorne, 2002; Mearns & Cooper, 2005) where the core conditions are offered to clients, promoting their autonomy over their own lives in the process. Here, there are levels of power within the relationship that could obscure these intentions if they are not addressed or acknowledged by the counsellor. The characteristics of role power, societal power and historical power (Proctor 2006; 2017) apply to both the counsellor and the client and either can be impacted by their presence within the therapeutic relationship. However, the responsibility lies with the counsellor to be aware of these dynamics to maintain equality and collaboration within the therapeutic relationship with the client. For the working class client, or a client from a lower socio-economic background to the counsellor, a power imbalance will negatively impact the relationship and thus, the outcome for therapy. A power imbalance and lack of knowledge of societal factors can create a block to empathy, hindering its efficacy and leaving the client feeling misunderstood (Kearney, 1996). The power imbalance can also evoke a feeling of helplessness within the counsellor who may be unfamiliar with the traumatic life challenges that working class clients sometimes face in their daily lives (Goodman et al., 2012).

Whether consciously or unconsciously, people make assumptions about one another based on their first impressions. A counsellor can disclose a lot about themselves through their attire, accent, skin colour and the organisation they work for, to name but a few, where their internalised classism may be evoked and vice versa for the client (Harrison, 2013; Holman, 2014). These assumptions can reflect an inferiority or superiority of rank and in the case of a

middle class counsellor and a working class client, can impact negatively on the efficacy and outcome of therapy (Ryan, 2006; Smith et al., 2001).

As part of their clinical placement, counsellors are likely to encounter working class clients. Despite this likely scenario, social class awareness is sparsely acknowledged within training literature and courses. Awareness is key for the counsellor to be able to identify when social disparities are present within counselling. This awareness and exploration of their own values in relation to social class can empower the counsellor in addressing these issues with the client. By familiarising themselves with the organisation they are working with and with support networks available in the wider community, the counsellor can in turn empower the client to initiate positive change in their lives within the constricting circumstances they may find themselves in. A counsellors exploration of their own values and beliefs in relation to social class would enhance the therapeutic experience for themselves and their clients as “counsellors are themselves part of the society in which they operate and it would be surprising if they were not themselves subject to its uncertainties and prevailing trends” (Mearns & Thorne, 2002, p.14).

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