

# Speaking Rich People's Words: Implications of a Feminist Class Analysis and Psychotherapy

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**SUMMARY.** In this article the author reviews some of the literature on class, including the recent feminist work and then applies it to how class matters play themselves out in psychotherapy. By looking at how therapists hold negatively biased attitudes toward those of the lower classes and generally favorable attitudes towards those of the upper classes, the article confronts some of the myths and stereotypes held by the public, and professionals, about people in classes other than one's own. Then the reader is challenged to think about how class attitudes are reflected in the helping relationship and what might be some implications for those engaged in feminist practice in overcoming class bias. [Article copies available from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678.*]

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She came to therapy seeking help for problems with her relationship. The therapist asked her occupation and was told that the client "worked in a factory." The therapy then began to focus on use of drugs, alcohol and addictions. Later the client came to an appointment dressed in a business suit and the therapist discovered that the client had worked herself up in the factory and was now in a staff position, with status and power. The focus and content of the therapy then shifted to job related stress. The frequency of the appointments increased because the therapist now knew that the client had excellent insurance and benefits. The style of the interactions shifted to a more equal and less condescending communication pattern. The client soon left therapy because she felt that she had been treated poorly and thought less of because of her background. She said: "People don't treat us well if they think we don't have minds." (personal experience as told to the author)

### INTRODUCTION

As a woman of working class, immigrant origins, I have always been aware of my class background. However, also being the product of my culture, I have been upwardly mobile and a success story in terms of what I have been able to achieve as a result of education, marriage and determination to overcome my background. Now at mid-life I find myself returning to an awareness of class and beginning to realize the implications that class has on my own work as an academic and therapist. I have also, as a result of teaching in a sociology department, been able to immerse myself in thinking about class and realize the importance that it plays in all of our interactions, in the classroom, in interpersonal relations and in therapy.

The purpose of this paper is to review some of the literature on class, including the recent feminist work and then apply it most specifically to how class matters play themselves out in psychotherapy. Sociologists have long been concerned with class issues. Unfortunately, for all too long therapists have been using the "middle class assumptions" and ignored thinking about class in psychotherapy. Therapists, like others in our society, carry prejudicial attitudes

towards those of classes beneath them, as well as carrying positive attitudes towards those of the upper classes. In this paper I will define class, see how class has been dealt with by sociologists and feminists and then look at some of the attitudes that therapists carry into the psychotherapy they do. Finally, I will attempt to provide guidelines as to how one might engage in a less class-biased form of psychotherapy.

### ***REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE***

Any analysis of class must begin with a discussion of Marx who formulated the clearest and earliest ways of thinking about it. Marx (Marx & Engels, 1955) focused on the phenomenon of social power and argued that the system of stratification is based on people's relationship to the economic process. It is class conflict that drives all social relations. For him, a materialistic determinism based on the relationship to the means of production shapes all material and nonmaterial aspects of life. According to Marx, because the fundamental interests of the two classes—the owners and the workers—are inherently incompatible and because the owners possess great social, political and economic power, eventually the workers' conditions would deteriorate to bring about collective, conscious, revolutionary action to end exploitation. Needless to say, the predictions have proven untrue and a worldwide proletarian revolution ending in the destruction of private property and the elimination of social stratification has not occurred.

Another important thinker on the issue of class was Max Weber (1946) who critiqued Marx's class conflict theory. He argued that social stratification is based on more factors than economics. He said that it was not ownership of private property, but life chances—access to basic opportunities and resources in the marketplace—that defines one's class position in society. In social hierarchy individuals are ranked according to the level of prestige or honor accorded them. People occupy a level or stratum in the hierarchy and have a certain lifestyle, or distinctive orientation or relationship to the social world. These lifestyles are reflected in artistic tastes, leisure pursuits, fashion styles and the company that one keeps. This con-

sciousness of the strata is grounded in considerations of prestige and reputation and is flexible and changes over time.

What is noteworthy about Marx and Weber and some of the earlier sociological analysis of class is that most of them were gender blind in their analysis. Women were tacked on to their husbands and fathers as they related to social class. The gender blind nature of class analysis led to narrow and biased conclusions about the experience and placed women at the margins of the class debate.

Later theorists built on the thinking of Marx and Weber, continuing the discussion about class into the current scholarly arena. Two important pieces of work of note, using a subjective approach on social mobility, are by Sennett and Cobb (1973), *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and Lillian Rubin's work (1976), *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family*.

Sennett and Cobb interviewed working men in Boston who had been upwardly mobile and experienced a sense of class conflict as they moved up and out of their class origins. Women were included in the study but were written about only in relation to their information on family life. These upwardly mobile working class men felt like imposters and experienced status incongruity in that they did not know the rules of the new positions and felt caught between two worlds. These men felt there was something wrong with this position but still wanted to become "educated," which was a term that meant more than receiving formal education. To be educated meant to experience a whole range of cultural and intellectual activities and most importantly meant the development of full capacities within a human being (Sennett & Cobb, 1973, p. 24).

For the working class members of Sennett and Cobb's study, to be educated meant to gain power and authority and it meant a chance to escape from being creatures of habit. They argue that class is a system for limiting freedom and that power, for those who stay in the working class, comes from each other, in the form of dignity that is derived from group belonging. Because workers want respect and dignity and can't find that in the workplace, it is found on an intimate level with friends and family. For Sennett and Cobb, class is equivalent to power, authority or legitimacy, which is the ability to control others. People of the working class do not have that legitimacy, which is considered crucial in our society to attain

status and privilege. Therefore those of the working class are facing a class prejudice which continues the inequality of 19th century industrial capitalism but now on a new terrain. This inequality leads to alienation and defensiveness for one's class position. For, to be worthy in our society, one is measured by one's productivity and prestige in the hierarchy.

Lillian Breslow Rubin's (1976) work takes off from Sennett and Cobb in a subjective look at how working class families operated. She took her work further than *The Hidden Injuries of Class* by interviewing women as well as men, and found that self-blame was inherent to a working class experience. For her, working class members felt isolated from society because of having fewer resources and because poverty limits and shatters aspirations. Rubin's work is most fascinating because of her descriptions of the "hard living" versus "settled living" families she met. The former were those who had chaotic homes, unstable family relations, violence, rootlessness and a sense of nonconformity. The latter were those with stable work histories, who got along well with each other, felt rooted and were cautious and conservative. All families in her study felt life to be precarious, had daily survival problems, were brooding and withdrawn and lacked education and vocational guidance. The experience of marriage differed by gender. The women in her study seemed to marry early in order to escape unhappy home lives, have children early and soon emulated the deprivation from which they came. The men felt that they were caught in marriage and expected the "services" of their wives, much like they were taken care of by their own mothers. All members of the working class in this study seemed to feel that society has contempt for them because they lack material possessions: money gives status and they have none. They also felt insecure, had low self-worth and felt the contempt of teachers and those of the larger society. In fact, many fathers became more controlling and rigid because they felt the need to enforce the authority that is undermined by the larger society (Rubin, 1976).

### ***FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF CLASS***

Just as one might say that the class literature has been gender blind, so too one might say that the feminist literature has been class

blind. Most of the literature is by middle class academics and speaks abstractly about class, while not actually addressing those who are other than middle class. There certainly seems to be a middle class assumption in the works of feminists and although the work of women of color on race has informed the feminist writing, we are just now bringing class into a feminist analysis. As a culture we have class blindness, assuming middle class values and upward mobility as a general cultural aspiration. The language of feminists is inaccessible to working class women and makes feminism inherently middle class and irrelevant to the daily struggles of working class women's lives. Women of the working class are marginal in our society and that marginality is a structural relationship that is reinforced by feminist analysis, just by the nature of the language and the discourse in which feminists engage.

In this society we have a dichotomy of thinking. We value academic learning and language and see that as intelligence. We devalue the world of common sense and use this distinction as a form of social control and power. As Dorothy Smith (1987) has argued, this dichotomy between intelligence and common sense reflects the disparity between the world the working class women know and experience directly and the dominant ideas and images that are fabricated externally. "In the end, the women accepted class stratification and relations of domination through the false dichotomy of common sense and intelligence and through class based notions of 'real intelligence' " (Luttrell, 1989, p. 39). With this distinction in place it has been hard to synthesize notions of class in a feminist framework.

Some of the most powerful work on class by feminists has been done by Marxist-feminists who argue that each person's life experience reflects, first, their class position and secondly, their gender. Class is defined socioeconomically as well as having access to power (or the lack thereof), consciousness of one's position in life, the ability to pass the status on to one's children, one's own education and the ability to control one's own life (Barker, personal communication). Certainly one's social origin plays an important role when determining class.

For women, class definition also might include their husband's earnings as well as their own ability to earn. Those who have a

Marxist-feminist analysis argue that class creates more commonalities than gender and that within any class, women are more disadvantaged than men. Middle class women are viewed as attractive commodities in an ongoing process of exchange between men and their role is to produce and train sons, as well as to provide emotional, social and sexual services for the men of their class. Working class women are seen as wage earners who are poorly paid, marginalized and isolated by society, an excellent source of profit making for an economic system as well as part of the reserve labor force who are easy to hire and fire based on the needs of the economy (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1992). Importantly, they also serve as consumers who keep capitalism alive and provide the men in their lives a semblance of power that they do not have in the rest of their lives.

Although it is clear that the Marxist-feminists have dealt with class in their writings, the literature is not based on the experiences of working class women but rather based on middle class women's conception of class and its experience. The writings have a middle class bias, or at the very least, do not begin with the everyday experiences or even the words or thoughts or perceptions of working class women. However, we are now seeing literature emerge from the working class experience. In a fascinating piece of work on working class women's ways of knowing, Luttrell (1989) has analyzed how black and white working class women define and claim their knowledge and experience. She speaks to the complex ways that gender, race and class relate to power and shape life's experience.

In this work the author argues that working class women have a "common sense" or real intelligence that comes from experience and is judged by people's ability to cope with everyday problems in the everyday world. Working class women know and learn from the "school of hard knocks" and believe that the more schooling one has, the less common sense one is likely to have. Working class women also view men's knowledge as more superior. Men learn "crafts" in the public sphere through some collective public experience while women acquire common sense naturally, as intuition. As Luttrell so aptly puts it, "As class relations shape attitudes toward schoolwise versus common sense knowledge, gender relations in-

fluence attitudes toward rational versus intuitive knowledge, thus constraining social expectations of women's intellectual capabilities" (1989, p. 40). For black women, intelligence is the "mother-wit" or the ability to settle family disputes all the way through to the ability to overcome natural disasters. Black women see themselves as having real intelligence because of their ability to work hard and get the material things they and their children need and want without the support of a man. They also collect and disseminate knowledge and information through extended-kin and community relationships which mitigate any sense of individual identity.

Luttrell's work is important to those of us who are therapists because she begins to look at the class experience through the eyes of the participants, rather than from the position of those in the middle class. The literature on therapists' views of those of the working class appears to have a bias that the implications of Luttrell's work challenges us to critically examine.

### ***CLASS AND THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC EXPERIENCE***

There is a body of literature that analyzes how the helping person's class attitudes reflect in the helping relationship. Client socioeconomic status appears to be very important to helping professionals. Therapists, as products and tools of the social order, are not exempt from the prejudices and stereotypes carried about the lower classes. Schofield (1964) found that helping professionals seem to prefer clients who are as successful. He defines them as YAVIS: young, attractive, verbal, intelligent and successful (middle or upper-class). Therapists are more favorably inclined to successful clients and assume health and good mental health, even when not evidenced. Non-YAVIS clients seemed to elicit negative reactions from the helper. In a literature review scanning 25 years, it was found that mental health workers have a sense of lack of rapport with low-income clients, perceive them as inarticulate and suspicious, find it difficult to be genuinely concerned with them, view them as interested merely in symptomatic relief, view them as resistant, apathetic and passive and see their values as incompatible with therapy and unable to benefit from treatment (Davis & Proctor, 1989).

The extent to which a therapist wants to work with a client is



influenced by the client's class status. The literature is clear that many therapists have negative attitudes toward and little desire to work with the poor. With upper income clients, too, some workers experience inhibitions and estrangements. When a therapist has negative expectations about treatment, invariably it can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Low income clients tend to be admitted to outpatient services and have longer delays between problem onset and beginning of treatment and tend to receive care through public agencies, rather than private services.

Davis and Proctor (1989) argue that low income clients are likely to receive brief, drug or group treatment with student workers and professionals with less status, and higher income clients are more likely to receive individual and more intense forms of help from professionals with higher status and more years of experience. I refer the reader back to the case with which I opened this article. When the client made it known that she had actually left the working class and was now a middle class professional, the kind and frequency of treatment changed. The worker's attitude toward her improved and the level of involvement and respect for the client took a significant turn. The client, noting the difference, chose to remove herself from that kind of disrespect, rather than subject herself to further discrimination based on class origins.

Davis and Proctor (1989) have noted that communication between helper and client is also affected by socioeconomic distance. They suggest that this may be due to the portrayals in therapy literature of the poor as concrete thinkers and unable to engage in abstract conversation. However, there is considerable literature to the contrary, which notes that "class differences need not impair the quality of communication in the helping relationship" (1989, p. 292). As implied by the title of this article, "speaking rich people's words," clients may not use the language of the middle or upper classes. Nonetheless, they are still able to engage in abstract communication without necessarily using "fancy language." The phrase "speaking rich people's words" comes from an interview that was done with a working class woman who was experiencing status incongruity as she worked her way toward becoming a college professor.

There is also evidence that presenting problems and diagnosis vary as a result of client socioeconomic status. Even the way that a

client and worker see the problems varies based on class background. For example, therapists are more likely to see a poorer client's problems as concrete and caused only by external circumstances and to even appear more severe in terms of mental health functioning, if a client is of a low income status (Davis & Proctor, 1989, p. 292). There is some reluctance on the part of therapists to see poorer people's problems as intrapsychic, as evidenced by the shorter duration of treatment and the nature of the interactions.

Certainly treatment effectiveness is also influenced by social class. As said earlier, access to services, how problems are perceived, chances for continuing in therapy, the type of help offered and the therapist's enthusiasm for helping are all determined by social status. Therefore it becomes more difficult for lower class clients to benefit from care (Davis & Proctor, 1989, p. 287). Weiss (1973) found that seeking help caused stress and more difficulty for women and that it also led to feeling less self-worth. The women also felt the social service workers were uninterested in them. Socioeconomic status (SES) influences workers' attitudes about the kind of help offered but the research also indicates that when a helper is trained to be more sensitive to class issues, individual help can be effective (Davis & Proctor, 1989).

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST PRACTICE***

It is clear from the literature that practitioners, and I would include many feminist therapists in this evaluation, have middle class biases toward clients of lower socioeconomic status. We also seem to carry more positive assumptions about those of higher economic status. This form of classism has a negative impact on clients and therapists alike. One should not assume that those who are poor are so because they choose to be. Nor are those who are rich that way because of some positive characteristic within. More often than not, it just happens to be where they were born.

In order to overcome these class biases one must first realize that the only real difference between rich and poor is the disparity in the amount of money one has. With that then comes differences in lifestyle, value system, company one keeps and the status and power accorded to one. Clients of poorer status are expected to act less

assertively and competently than are those of higher status. If they step out of line they are often accused of being rude or pushy. It is important to be aware of one's bias against poorer clients and try to overcome such perceptions.

Another way to overcome class bias is to understand that behavior is purposeful. If a client and therapist differ in world view based on class, then it becomes harder to understand why a client might engage in certain behaviors. It becomes necessary, as we often try to do as feminist therapists, to enter the client's world, view it from her perspective and understand that her behavior might not reflect poor judgement, lack of wisdom or inappropriate values.

Finally, it is imperative for those of us trying to develop a class awareness in our practices to learn more about those of classes other than our own. Even if we come from working class origins, the very nature of our education and upward mobility as a result of our professional status taints our understanding of our working class clients. We need to assess what role money plays in someone's problems. Often poverty is the root of most of the trouble. We must also be cognizant of what it is like to work with clients of classes higher than one's own. There are issues of privilege and power that we might well afford to such clients because of their higher social status. This too must be considered as we gain a class consciousness in our work.

The early part of treatment is most crucial in working with poorer clients. They may be in treatment a shorter amount of time, often due to money, and trust must be built quickly. It is true that with health insurance or barter, poorer clients might be able to seek help. Nonetheless, often work must be done quickly and with a goal orientation. A therapist should reflect an understanding of the client's social reality and early on convey a sense of respect for the knowledge and experience of that client. As Luttrell (1989) noted in her article, working class women have quite a bit of knowledge and common sense that has gotten them this far in life. Those are strengths to be honored and enhanced through the therapy. The goals of therapy must be realistic and the client may not be able to work on all of them, given limited means.

Flexibility is the rule in work with clients of other classes, especially the poor. Since therapy is often not sought until a crisis

situation has been reached, the therapist is forced to work in less than ideal circumstances and then for only a short time. One must be flexible about time, place, duration and frequency of the treatment. It is also best, from my experience, to work on active and concrete problems, with attainable ends so that the therapy is productive and goal oriented.

### CONCLUSION

Issues of class are prevalent in all interactions in the psychotherapeutic relationship. Often we are quite unaware of how every word, look and nuance is class related. Once again one might see oneself as a cross-cultural traveler, this time working with people with whom one might have once had much in common, or might have nothing in common at all. There are strengths, skills and abilities within such clients and to do such work challenges feminist therapists to overcome stereotypes and prejudices in order to mobilize and enhance that within the client. We are all products of our classist society and our political dedication makes it important for us to think about this form of discrimination in our very own practices. Work with a class consciousness challenges us to think beyond our definitions of self and begin to walk in a world that might be quite unlike our own. Remembering that having a class consciousness is more than being aware of how much money one earns can help us begin to think of the subtlety and complexity of class issues as they manifest themselves in feminist therapy.

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