

Experiences of social class: Learning from occupational therapy students

doi:10.2182/cjot.06.012. This paper was published in the CJOT early electronic edition in Fall 2006.

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Key words

■ Social class ■ Socioeconomic factors ■ Education ■ Occupational therapy

Mots clés

■ Classe sociale ■ Facteurs sociaux économiques ■ Formation ■ Ergothérapie

Abstract

Background and Purpose. *Despite the potential in occupational therapy models, there has been little investigation of the ways social class may affect occupations or occupational therapy. This paper explores the occupational impacts of poverty.* **Methods.** *Essays by 17 occupational therapy students, who identify as lower class, were coded and analyzed inductively.* **Results.** *Class-based shame and stigma led to attempts to “pass” as middle class—an occupation consuming time and energy. Exclusion from middle-class leisure occupations left students with gaps in their adult knowledge. Family was a site of both shame and safety, as well as pressure to succeed. Educational occupations embody marginalization.* **Practice Implications.** *Class is not only about money, but also having the right norms, values, and experiences to fit easily in middle-class society. Educational and health care institutions epitomize middle-class assumptions. The experiences of these students may help therapists to examine where they unwittingly enact middle-class norms in practice.*

Résumé

Description. *Malgré toutes les possibilités des modèles ergothérapiques, peu d'études ont été menées sur les façons dont la classe sociale peut influencer sur les occupations ou sur l'ergothérapie. Cet article examine les effets de la pauvreté sur les occupations.* **Méthodologie.** *Des essais rédigés par 17 étudiants en ergothérapie se décrivant comme étant issus d'une classe sociale inférieure ont été codés et analysés de manière inductive.* **Résultats.** *la honte et les préjugés face à la classe sociale ont poussé les étudiants à “se faire passer” pour des personnes de la classe moyenne, une occupation qui exige du temps et de l'énergie. Le fait que ces étudiants aient été exclus des occupations de loisirs réservées à la classe moyenne a entraîné des lacunes dans leurs connaissances adultes. La famille était un lieu où ils éprouaient de la honte, un sentiment de sécurité, de même que l'obligation de réussir. Les occupations éducatives étaient étroitement liées à la marginalisation.* **Conséquences pour la pratique.** *La classe ne représentait pas uniquement l'argent, mais les normes, les valeurs et les expériences qu'il faut avoir pour se conformer aisément à la société de classe moyenne. Les établissements d'enseignement et de santé incarnent les suppositions liées à la classe moyenne. Les expériences de ces étudiants peuvent aider les thérapeutes à examiner les situations où ils adoptent inconsciemment les normes de la classe moyenne dans leur pratique.*

Social justice has been identified as a core value of occupational therapy (Townsend, 1993), yet little has been written in the field about a key aspect of social inequalities: the impact of social class differences. Theoretically, the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance can accommodate the effects of social class on occupations and occupational therapy (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists [CAOT], 2002). Poverty is named as one of the demographic contexts for occupational therapy practice, and the physical, cultural, institutional and social environments are all important components of the model. Similarly, the Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner, 2002) addresses the effects of social environments on how available opportunities shape

occupations, as well as how expectations affect individuals' engagement in particular occupations.

Despite the potential of both models, however, there has been very little exploration of the relationship between social class and occupations. Moreover, despite arguments more than 15 years ago (Robinson, 1987) calling upon occupational therapists to examine the impact of their own social class on their work with clients, there is almost no published literature investigating how occupational therapists experience social class, or how occupational therapy as a profession is shaped by social class. This paper analyses the personal accounts of occupational therapy students on the ways their own occupational lives have been affected by growing up in working-class or impoverished families and communities.

The student accounts provide a unique blending of profession-specific understanding of occupation and experiential understanding of social class.

Literature review

The working class includes about a third of the Canadian population, men and women usually working at manual (blue-collar), clerical (pink-collar) or retail jobs (MacIonis, Clarke, & Gerber, 1997). They generally have a high school education, but not post-secondary. The lower class, about 20 percent of Canadians, live in poverty; some rely on social assistance for their only source of income, some work at low-prestige, minimum-wage jobs. They may or may not have a high school education (MacIonis, Clarke, & Gerber, 1997). With universal access to basic health care, the impact of poverty on health is not as dramatic as in the United States. Nevertheless, lower-income Canadians die earlier and suffer more illnesses than Canadians with higher incomes, regardless of age, sex, race and geographic location (Health Canada, 2004; Raphael et al., 2005).

Yet the impact of poverty has been largely unexplored in occupational therapy. In examining patient compliance with home health care, Robinson (1987) noted that therapists from middle-class backgrounds are in danger of acting on unexamined assumptions when working with patients whose economic and cultural experiences are very different from their own. A therapist from Chile (Blanche, 1996) found her middle-class background thwarted communication and effective therapy, despite having language and culture in common with a Salvadoran client. She concluded that therapists need to consider how all aspects of their culture intervene in therapist-client encounters, not just their race or ethnicity.

Based on her work with families living in chronic poverty, Humphry (1995) suggested that on five major dimensions of value orientations differences between middle-class therapists and impoverished clients may directly affect therapy. For example, a middle-class time orientation emphasizes the future, where work toward anticipated goals and benefits is highly valued. Clients living in poverty, however, may have a decreased sense of efficacy due to the fact that the future really is not under their control. A time orientation emphasizing the present makes more sense when goals and plans rarely result in desired outcomes. Moreover, therapists "may be viewed as the opposition who come from a different world" simply due to their status as professionals (Humphry, p. 688), regardless of their own intentions or backgrounds.

In the social sciences researchers and theorists have suggested that professionals, as well as clients and patients, unwittingly act out of the assumptions, predispositions and expectations that they internalize through their cultural and social class experiences (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986; Bellamy, 1994); equally important, institutions take on the characteristics of the dominant social class. For example, educational institu-

tions (Olson, 1995), health care systems (McGibbon, 2000) and social services (Kiefer, 2000) may come to embody the class-based assumptions and ways of being that "fit" for those of the middle and upper classes, leaving those from working-class or lower-class backgrounds feeling a distinct sense that they do not fully belong.

Despite Humphry's work a decade ago that suggested fundamentally different worldviews between middle-class therapists and clients living in poverty, there have been no empirical studies of the ways poverty or class affects occupations or occupational therapy. Humphry (1995) noted that her conclusions were speculative, requiring systematic studies detailing the experiences of those who live in poverty.

Methods

This paper is based on student assignments submitted for an undergraduate occupational therapy course in which the impact of social factors on occupational engagement and opportunities were explored. The class occurred in the second term of the first year of the program. In one exercise, students were asked to write an occupational autobiography in which they analysed the ways their own membership in particular social groups had shaped their occupational lives. In these essays, several students explored the ways growing up in working-class or impoverished families affected their occupations in profound and ongoing ways.

With written permission from these students, this paper drew on parts of their essays as qualitative data. When a student identified as coming from a lower-income family, or living in poverty for at least part of his or her life prior to university, all essay sections that pertained to the impact of class status on past or present occupations were copied. Each text passage was labelled with the author's initials. After a Word file of text passages was created (72 pages), all text was coded inductively (Patton, 2002), to notice themes that cropped up repeatedly in reading and re-reading the data. Each such recurrent theme was labelled with codes such as stigma, schooling, hunger, leisure, responsibility, and family. When all text passages were collated by initial code, narrower or broader themes became apparent. For example, the code schooling was eventually subdivided into themes such as fitting in, hidden knowledge, and money pressures. The data were coded repeatedly as the analysis was conducted (Patton). The most pervasive themes are discussed below, ordered in a manner that presents a coherent argument about the experiences of class.

Results

The participants

The 17 students (3 male and 14 female) whose essays were used as data all self-identified as coming from working-class, lower-class or impoverished family backgrounds, for at least part of their lives. Three were raised by single moth-

ers; three students had parents with chronic illnesses or disabilities; four had at least one parent struggling with alcoholism. Five students experienced significant periods of time when social assistance or employment insurance was the main source of family income. In general, however, these students grew up in families that were considered among the working poor, where one or both parents were employed yet wages were insufficient to bring the family above the poverty line. Their parents worked in a range of positions including: childcare, homecare, manual labour, farming, fishing, factory work, manual trades, clerical work and retail.

Experiences of poverty differed among the students. None of the students described ever being homeless, but several remembered shortages of food when they were young: "I can remember a very empty fridge at times." All of the students described times when money was limited and they had to do without. Treats and luxuries were rare: "My mother couldn't even spare me a quarter when I asked her for money to buy penny candies at the store." Students described restricted or non-existent leisure opportunities, having no telephone, wearing hand-me-down clothing, using food banks, and living in sub-standard housing: "Our apartment was clean but always cold." The broad themes that emerged from their essays included shame and stigma, "passing" as middle class, leisure and responsibilities, experiences of family and schooling, and positive qualities.

The shame and stigma of poverty

Students identified marginalization and stigma as central to their experience of living in poverty. They argued that people who are not middle-class are "regularly discriminated against because these individuals are seen as lazy or intellectually inferior." Stigma attaches a powerful, negative social label that diminishes a person's self concept. Many students wrote about housing or neighbourhoods that were stigmatized, causing them tremendous shame and embarrassment.

I never invited friends over to my house. . . I did not want my friends to see how shabby and ugly my home was. I thought they would see that I was poor and not like me anymore.

Some students noted that the shame accompanying social stigma is not easily overcome. One student is still too embarrassed to bring his girlfriend to the house where he grew up. Another was not particularly ashamed of her home while she was growing up, but since entering occupational therapy school has made friends with people "from higher social classes":

People talk about coming and visiting in the summer time to my home town but I am embarrassed about the condition of my parents' house and that people will think my family is dirty or lazy based on what they see.

Students also described particular shame and stigma

concerning clothing and physical appearance. Especially in junior high and high school they were teased, judged and ridiculed when they wore clothes identifiable as inexpensive or not brand-name.

I got picked on, stigmatized, labelled and left out due to the fact that we had little money and I wore second hand clothing. The worst was going to school in what was a new article of clothing for me, unaware that the same article was one a classmate of mine gave to the second hand store last week.

One student described a direct impact on her daily occupations. She could never afford to have the right sneakers to avoid ridicule, so she stopped participating in gym class: "I would bring 'dress' shoes and pretend I'd forgotten my sneakers."

The relentless mockery and derision had profound effects on some students' sense of self-worth. Several described learning to hate themselves, and learning to loathe going to school: "I was constantly made fun of and picked on because I did not have the latest style clothes, or the coolest sneakers. . . I felt like dirt." Not surprisingly, messages so hurtful can have lasting effects. A few students described a pervasive belief that they were not good enough. As one said, "I believe that it is a mistake that I was accepted into the [occupational therapy] program. I feel that I am not smart enough or good enough."

Occupied with "passing"

In response to shame and stigma, almost all of the students at some point engaged in activities that could be defined as attempts to "pass" as middle class. "Passing" occurs when members of social groups, who face discrimination, attempt to be identified as members of a higher-status social group (e.g., Ginsberg, 1996). Students tried to pass as middle class to avoid or lessen the stigma attached to a lower-class status: "I put all my energy into having middle-class friends and 'appearing' to be of middle-class descent. . . I always felt that I was an impostor." One student described herself as extremely self-conscious: "I lived in fear that others would come to the realization that I was poor."

Students employed multiple strategies in their efforts to pass. Some found involvement in particular leisure occupations, such as teams or sports, that allowed them to fit in or pass, at least in that venue. For example, one student had a mentor who sponsored her involvement in figure skating. Many friends then assumed she belonged to the middle class because of her engagement in skating: "When I was at the arena I felt as though I could hide who I really was and pretend to be who I wished I was." More commonly, however, students described how they invested considerable energy in lying and hiding, and in devising strategies to avoid risky situations that might blow their cover and prevent them from passing as middle class.

One night after a party when a group of friends was driving me home, they saw the trailer court and began making redneck jokes. I then directed them to a house that was not mine and was dropped off there so I would not hear them make more jokes about where I lived.

One student had a simple strategy for hiding her lack of money from university friends: "When we went out to eat, I had water or tea and told them I had already eaten."

If an occupation can be understood as an activity invested with meaning, cultural significance, and power (Christiansen & Townsend, 2004), these students accurately point out that passing as middle class can become an occupation in and of itself. They invest time, energy, thought, care, skill, and effort into producing an appearance of middle-class membership.

It is an occupation to produce one's class identity, or in my case to mask or cover-up my class identity. In my youth I spent a lot of my time pretending that I was in a higher social class than I actually belonged to.

Finally, it is clear that the desire to pass, and the habits and strategies developed in the service of that goal, are not easily abandoned upon entry to university or to occupational therapy school. A few students described the direct impact on their self-care occupations with implications for time use.

My dress and self-care began to consume a large part of my daily routine. As I wrote this paper I came to realize why I cannot leave the house in old clothes and I have to shower every day, wear make up and feel good about the outfit I choose for the day. I worry about who will see me and what they will think, and this is a result of being paranoid as a child about how people felt about how I looked and whether they could tell I was poor.

Another student noted that she has to wash her hair daily, "even when it is not dirty."

Not only clothing, cleanliness and appearance are loaded with potential for revealing a student's true class status, but also manners and etiquette. One student described a particularly powerful way her childhood poverty, and her desire to pass as middle class, continue to affect her daily in the self-care occupation of eating.

In elementary school I would pretend that I had forgotten my lunch because I did not want to eat in front of people. I was sure my eating habits and etiquette were less than those of my friends. I was so hungry that I had difficulties retaining information and therefore learning. Even in university, I go to the library in another building to eat lunch because I am not comfortable eating in front of others.

This student, who already feels marginalized, further isolates herself everyday by eating on her own where no one she knows will see her, lest they detect lower-class manners.

Absence of "normal" leisure occupations

Almost all of the students wrote about lacking leisure occupations that everyone around them seemed to take for granted. Here social class subtly marginalizes; students from working-class and impoverished backgrounds do not easily fit in because they lack the experiences shared by others and tacitly defined as normal. For example, one student described her low-rent neighbourhood as unsafe; consequently, "I was not allowed to go outside after supper and I was not allowed to go to the playground without a parent."

Many of the students enjoyed numerous leisure occupations as children, especially activities they could engage in for free. However, they also longed for involvement in art, dance, music, drama, figure skating, badminton, curling, soccer and hockey-but there was no money: "I always dreamed of being a figure skater. I was never able to take lessons because my parents could not afford it." One young man whose mother always managed to scrape together enough money to enrol him in hockey, and who withstood humiliation for his second hand equipment, was blocked from moving on to higher levels: "I was good enough to play competitive hockey, however, my mom could not afford the extra expenses."

In some cases the impact of class status went deeper. Some parents were unsupportive when their children wanted to explore activities that were seen as outside the norms for their social class. For example, one young woman's enthusiasm for curling and dance was not supported by her family because they saw these as the preserve of the well-to-do. Added to this, some students had considerable responsibilities doing chores at home and/or summer and after-school jobs that prevented engagement in leisure occupations.

Students argued that non-participation in typical leisure occupations heightened their exclusion from friendship networks. For example, those whose families did not have video-cassette recorders or cable television often felt excluded from daily conversations at school that centred on shows they had never seen. In addition, many of the simple social activities that friends took for granted were beyond the financial means of these students.

Many times, as I did not have any money, I would make up excuses to my friends as to why I could not go out with them. I felt left out of the group, but I would rather have felt left out than to have my friends know that I could not afford to hang out with them.

Similarly, in occupational therapy school, students who could not afford to attend organized class potlucks, dinners, movie nights, and pub crawls, felt excluded from the social networks built through such events.

Some students argued that gaps in their childhood experiences and the absence of common leisure occupations left them with related, developmental gaps as adults: "When people start to talk about places they have been with their families. . . I don't really have much to talk about because I never

had the chance to do anything like that.” In missing out on occupations others considered “normal”, the students felt they also missed out on opportunities to acquire skills in leadership, team work and so on.

My lack of leisure activities prohibited me from trying new things when I entered university, not just leisure but trying anything that was not familiar to me. I developed a fear of branching out [*italics added*] when I attended university. For my first two years of university and living in the city I never ventured off campus. . . Living with no money makes it easy for one to “stick to what we know” and not try anything new.

The importance of ordinary experiences as tools for fitting in should not be underestimated. A few students wrote about simply lacking common referents as adults, not having watched the “right” television shows and movies or had the “right” toys while growing up. Now they are often guarded or silent in social situations, risking embarrassment if they reveal deficiencies in commonplace knowledge. The risk, of course, is that they would fail to pass as middle class.

Experiences of family

Family was often experienced as another site of shame or stigma, especially when students were younger. One student avoided having her friends interact with her family lest they figure out her mother’s single-parent status. Another skipped her prom and graduation and noted, “I did not want my classmates to see my parents and make fun of them and judge me.” Others simply did the best they could to hide their parents from view, and saw their jobs, their possessions, and their actions as embarrassing. Families had the potential to reveal the true class status of someone successfully passing as middle class. For example, one student passed through involvement in figure skating until her peers met her mother.

My social class started to become evident when my mother began to attend my practices. I was so embarrassed of her and ashamed to admit that she was my mother. She did not dress like the other mothers; she was a little unkempt and very outspoken. . . She was supposed [*italics added*] to be well-kept, well-spoken, nice to look at and polite, like all the other kids’ mothers. I was not right, nor was my family, for the sport I was in.

Shame concerning family seemed particularly deep-rooted and powerful in dating relationships. Several students were still unwilling to let romantic partners meet their families.

A few students also wrote about having what they perceived to be unusual adult responsibilities or concerns. Some wrote about pervasive awareness of family financial pressures and parental sacrifices to provide for the family: “A child’s occupations should never be about money.” Others felt they had to somehow take care of their parents.

I would go to bed crying, wishing there was some way I

could help my parents out, feeling guilty because I had eaten too much that day and deprived another family member of having a full stomach.

Last, these students’ experiences of family were complicated by the fact that university—especially entering a professional school—represented upward class mobility for them. Several students wrote about feeling pressure from family members proud of their admission to a health professional program. These pressures were often complicated by conflicting messages and emotions. While students were expected to “do better” than their parents had, the parents were often proud of their working-class heritage, and did not want their successful, upwardly mobile offspring to forget where they came from, or start thinking that they were better than anyone else. A few students struggled with how to act around friends and family “from home”, not wanting to be seen as putting on airs.

Experiences of education

In general, schooling was experienced by most of these young men and women as a site of marginalization and exclusion, “dreaded” from the earliest grades onward. School was where their class status was on display, subject to relentless teasing, mockery, and derision.

Junior high school was a bad experience for me. I felt like I did not belong! . . . I was scared. I felt like an outsider trespassing on someone else’s land. . . I felt alone and quickly became a target for the popular [*italics added*] kids.

When this young man was twelve years old, school guidance counsellors encouraged him to abandon academic courses and take woodworking and shop classes instead. Luckily his mother recognized this as class-based streaming that would end his opportunities for higher education. On her insistence, he remained in the academic stream.

Many of the students, however, responded to the classism they faced at school by not attending or performing to the detriment of their own education.

I started missing a lot of school. I hated going. I felt like shit everyday. I couldn’t stand listening to one more joke at my expense. I would use every trick in the book not to go to school. . . By not attending school on a regular basis I was being deprived of the very education the children who were making fun of me were receiving.

Some rebelled by hanging out with other students who gave school low priority, again to the detriment of their own education.

As I entered high school I became quite rebellious and became friends with people of my class [*italics added*]. These individuals were seen as the losers of the school. . . [I] became involved in more destructive behaviour. My friends were deeply involved in drinking and mild drug abuse.

Eventually each of these students made the decision to attend university. For middle-class students, going to university is almost automatic; for students from working-class and impoverished families, it is often a far more difficult choice. One student grew up on the edges of a middle-class community and passed well enough to be part of middle-class friendship networks. After high school her friends all went to university, and now all “owning homes and working in careers” while she was back in school. Somehow they all seemed to have hidden information about the options and directions available to them after high school.

They were always holding some sort of invisible knowledge over me that I didn’t know how to get. Really that was the conversations they grew up around, the sophisticated conversations of lawyers and doctors that I would walk in on and not understand. It is a language of its own that can be understood with exposure, but only if you are privy to the accumulating knowledge.

When no one else in your family has attended university, the processes for finding out about programs, choosing universities, and completing applications can be overwhelmingly mysterious.

Once in university, the most obvious effects of class concerned financial pressures: “Worry about how I am going to pay my rent, bills and feed myself—those thoughts kept me awake many nights.” Most of these students had maximum students loans; they could not turn to their parents for extra money, even for essentials; they may have lived in risky neighbourhoods; they had long since abandoned dental care; they had to borrow clothes to attend job interviews; they worried about having clothes suitable for fieldwork placements. Some developed astoundingly complex survival strategies.

[I] was living on Mr Noodles and toast most of the time. I went through one semester without purchasing one textbook. When exam time came I got a doctor’s note to allow myself a couple of days’ delay, enough time to borrow the textbook from a classmate and study. To pay my rent that was overdue, I even lied on a bursary application, stating that I was pregnant, in hopes that they would pity me and not ask me to prove it. It’s not something I am proud of, but it kept me from getting evicted.

While lack of money was one thing that set them apart from their classmates, the not-fitting-in often had much deeper roots. One student described not having the same knowledge base as the university students around her.

They knew so much more than me. Everyone seemed to have a much better vocabulary than me as well. When I asked where it came from they said they read a lot because their parents had encouraged them to and that they didn’t feel they were that advanced because they grew up around this language and behaviour. These kids learned stuff at home and had help when they needed it, which is assumed to be the case for all children.

While not all students felt marginalized at university, some certainly felt set apart by their manners, clothing, gaps in background knowledge, financial inability to attend class functions, and a sense of not belonging. As in public school, some responded by undermining their own educational efforts, by failing to attend classes or failing to perform as well as they could.

Now that I have become a student of occupational therapy and have the possibility of becoming middle class, I discern that I am trying to sabotage my attempts. . . I avoided a lot of my classes because I again felt as though I did not fit in with my classmates.

Personal qualities from class background

All of the students emphasized that growing up in poverty or in a working-class family was not an entirely negative experience. They identified ways in which important learning, positive characteristics or qualities, and specific values derived from their social class status. Several students spoke of their own determination, drive, strength, independence, compassion and work ethic as class-related.

I can stretch a dollar further than anybody I know; I can find a deal where nobody else can; I have learned to balance my time between work, play and school without a second to waste; but most of all, I have learned that I am a much more resilient person than I would have ever imagined.

Some developed work skills, leadership skills and time management strategies from years of job experience. Several students wrote about a fierce sense of pride that can be both an asset and a drawback. Some felt that they were quick to spot pity—which they resented—and slow to accept help, assistance, or gifts. Some described a compelling need for respect: “I desire to be respected and treated as though I am worth more than how much money I have.”

Lastly, many of the students detailed values, particularly relating to family, friends and possessions, which they attributed to their class backgrounds. They wrote about how their shame concerning family turned to admiration as they grew older, as they learned to recognize the strength, resourcefulness, skills and dependability their parents had displayed. A few students suggested that being raised with few material possessions allowed them to focus more on interpersonal relationships.

I learned to appreciate everything I have, especially the small things. . . I have learned that what makes life happy and worth living are the people who surround you everyday, not the material things that surround you or that you can buy.

Again, such values can be assets and drawbacks in occupational therapy school. If family and friends are priorities, why remove yourself from loved ones in the name of future success?

I often struggle with being away from friends and family to better myself. That is not how I was raised. . . I was raised to believe in the quality of time not the quantity of goods. . . Life was good for me as a kid, why don't I just go home and work the day to day and forget about putting myself in debt for the sake of school?

Discussion

Though we often think about social class as simply concerning financial resources, money is only one aspect of the ways class shapes occupations. Clearly, lack of money was an issue for these students. Their families could not afford the "right" homes or clothing, their limited leisure opportunities often meant exclusion from social circles, and they were preoccupied with worries about rent and food. While it is important to know that some occupational therapy students have struggled (and are still struggling) financially, the less obvious aspects of social class are more significant for effective education, as well as effective therapy with low-income clients.

The student essays suggest that distinctive, class-based experiences shape people's ways of being in the world. The pervasive stigma and shame that accompany poverty caused them to restrict their own social occupations and avoid situations where friends would encounter their homes, their family members, or other aspects of their lives that might reveal class status. For some, mockery and ridicule of their clothing and appearance resulted in a lasting sense of low self-worth. For most, the clearest legacy of stigma was engagement in the occupation of passing. Numerous small strategies helped to conceal their own class backgrounds and accentuate attributes of the middle class. In the interest of passing, self-care occupations may become imbued with whole new levels of meaning.

Our experiences of the world lead to internalized predispositions to act in patterned ways that may become habits, or social roles with attached "scripts" and expectations (Kielhofner, 2002). At the same time, our sense of personal capacity and self-efficacy develop through experiencing the impact we are able to have on the world around us, in order to meet our goals or needs. Constant reminders that our efforts have little impact can result in a sense of powerlessness and reduced sense of capacity: "When shame or fear of failure governs a person's sense of capacity, there is disincentive to take risks, to learn new skills" (Kielhofner, p.48). Recall the student whose absence of childhood leisure occupations left her afraid to try anything new as an adult.

Beyond the individual, whole social groups (e.g., social classes, cultural groups, racialized groups) can internalize a diminished sense of capacity and efficacy (Bourdieu, 1977). This might be expressed in the notion, 'That's not for the likes of us,' or 'Our people don't do that,' concerning, for example, higher education (Bellamy, 1994). Thus invisible processes of

exclusion are implemented; members of marginalized groups, in effect, exclude themselves by perceiving occupations as beyond their reach, or not legitimately belonging to them.

This idea was profoundly expressed in student descriptions of education. One young man "felt like an outsider trespassing on someone else's land." Olson argues that educational institutions show "a systematic preference for middle-class values, language, and views of the world" (1995, p.201). The culture of education is middle class; students are evaluated not only on their academic merits, but also on their ability to display expected behaviours. Working-class students arrive without the right values, norms, skills, and commonplace understandings to move easily through the system. Feeling out of place, some disengage through poor attendance, poor performance, or more direct rebellion. One student detailed a deep sense of not belonging at the occupational therapy school leading to behaviours she interpreted as self-sabotage—an externalization of the belief, 'That's not for the likes of us.'

In part, students from low-income backgrounds feel marginalized in higher education because they do not have the right social capital: social networks and relationships that include the right kinds of people with the right kinds of connections and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). As one student wrote, her middle-class friends seemed to have "some sort of invisible knowledge" concerning options for university that she "didn't know how to get." That knowledge, which came from growing up around "the sophisticated conversations of lawyers and doctors," is middle-class social capital.

The students may also lack middle-class cultural capital: knowing how to operate smoothly in the midst of middle-class norms (Bourdieu, 1986). These norms are the intangibles that make someone a competent member of a particular culture. The absence of middle-class occupations leaves some students with perceived gaps in cultural knowledge—they have not been to the right places, watched the right television shows, or experienced the right activities. Recall that one student described middle-class university students as knowing so much more, such as having a wider vocabulary. One of the obvious strategies for concealing gaps and differences is silence, a common resort of working-class students in university settings (Olson, 1995).

Working-class students do not "lack" social and cultural capital, rather they possess the "wrong" social and cultural capital to benefit in (middle-class) educational settings. Their values, norms, knowledge, and priorities are based in their class experiences. From decades of work with impoverished communities, Kiefer (2000) argued that people living in poverty have cultural ways of being that arise directly from the realities of their lives. For example, when you live with low wages, unstable housing, or the whims of a welfare bureaucracy, your reality is one of constant insecurity. Only

friends and family can truly be depended upon: "While people of all classes value and cultivate their close social bonds, for the poor these bonds are fundamental to daily survival. Close relationships are capital and are often simply more important than other commitments" (Kiefer, p.35). Cultural values are rooted in class-based experiences.

Similarly, Kiefer (2000) suggested that people living in poverty have routine experiences of disrespect: "Although all middle-class people sometimes feel they do not get the respect due them from certain others, generally they get treated at least as equals by acquaintances and strangers alike. Most have little experience of what it is like to be viewed with contempt by society at large" (Kiefer, p.35). It is therefore hard to understand the intensity of the pride and need for respect that can dominate the motivations of those living in poverty. Again, the student essays rang with pride and a demand for respect: "I desire to be respected and treated as though I am worth more than how much money I have."

Implications for practice and education

The words of these students have important implications for occupational therapy practice and education. While most of us understand that clients and students may face financial pressures, recognizing the deeper effects of class is rare. We tend to think of culture as pertaining only to race and ethnicity. We grasp that clients and students of other ethnic origins may have values, norms, practices, and self-concepts different from ours, but it is harder to imagine this with a client or student from our own hometown, who grew up a few blocks away. Yet class is also about cultural differences (Humphry, 1995).

Both educational institutions and health care settings privilege middle-class values and norms. Assumptions about punctuality, deanliness, priorities, appropriate modes of communication, respect for authority, self-efficacy set up a 'code' that is inherently more familiar to members of the middle class (Kiefer, 2000; Olson, 1995). The very tools and assessments used in occupational therapy (and education) incorporate middle-class assumptions (Humphry, 1995). It is difficult to see the class biases in health care and education when they are shared by most professionals, taken for granted, and thus rendered invisible. But these biases are blatantly obvious to clients and students who come from lower-class backgrounds because they serve as markers that the client is "an outsider trespassing on someone else's land."

And clients are disproportionately likely to come from impoverished backgrounds; people living in poverty have more illnesses, more injuries and higher rates of disability than do those in the middle and upper classes (Raphael et al., 2005). It is critical that therapists not only understand their own class-based assumptions and worldviews, as well as those of their clients, but also how social class shapes lives and occupations (for the wealthy as well as the impover-

ished). As others (Iwama, 2003) have pointed out, the conceptual roots of occupational therapy in North America are grounded in the cultural assumptions of the West; it may be argued that they are also grounded in the cultural assumptions of the middle class (McGibbon, 2000). Both practitioners and educators need to better understand the ways that the occupational lives of those outside the middle class are shaped differently by class.

The students whose work is analyzed here provide therapists and educators a unique opportunity to hear the voices of those usually excluded from and within our institutions. Learning to challenge our own professional practices by reflecting critically on what class assumptions we enact is an important step toward more inclusive practice (Humphry, 1995). Whose class norms and assumptions are valued? If pride and respect are paramount to those living in poverty, when might we be unintentionally showing disrespect? If passing is habitual, how can we make it safe for clients and students to reveal their class status? How can we show clients and students from working-class and impoverished backgrounds that we understand the limits of our own class-based worldviews and recognize other equally valid social realities?

Some of the students in our programs bring with them invaluable experiences of life in working-class and impoverished communities. If we can create an environment in which they may thrive, they will bring that rich resource, that capital, to their clinical practice, benefiting their clients, their colleagues, and their profession. At the same time, we need to query the impact of decisions that continually raise the bar for gaining access to the profession, as tuition levels steadily rise, as we require costly travel for fieldwork education, as credentials for entry to practice climb ever higher. We may well be excluding potential therapists whose life experience would equip them admirably to understand the life experience of impoverished and working-class clients.

Limitations and future research

Obviously, this study is a very preliminary exploration. It is an examination of data that happened to be present in student assignments, from a small number of students in one course, in one occupational therapy program. If these same students had been participants in a formal research study, the rigorous application of qualitative interviewing methods would have elicited far greater depth and detail as well, perhaps, as contradictory evidence. The value of the data presented here lies primarily in the fact that the topic has been virtually unstudied in occupational therapy. The potential for future research is limitless. Properly designed studies documenting the experiences of students are necessary, as are studies exploring the following: 1) the effects of class on fieldwork experiences, 2) the impact of differing educational strategies on enhancing the class awareness of middle- and upper-class students, 3) the effect of master's-level entry on

the class backgrounds and experiences of occupational therapy students, 4) the practice patterns of therapists from working-class backgrounds, and 5) the experiences of clients working with therapists from different class backgrounds. As Humphry (1995) noted ten years ago, the field is ripe for more systematic studies detailing the relationships among class, occupation, occupational therapy, and education.

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This article was accepted for publication under the editorship of Fern Swedlove



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