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From Exploration of Classism to Anticlassist Counseling: Implications for Counselors and Counselor Educators

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From Exploration of Classism to Anticlassist Counseling: Implications for Counselors and Counselor Educators

Abstract

Classism is a recently studied, but historically present, form of oppression. Despite much attention to inclusion of underrepresented clients in counseling literature, there has been little focus on the presence of classism in academic settings. In an effort to close this gap, a study of 202 individuals, aged 18 to 38, was conducted to explore the relationships among perceived classism, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Only 4.5% of the participants had never experienced any incidents of classism. African American individuals were more likely to experience interpersonal classism and working class/poor individuals were more likely to experience interpersonal and systemic classism. Recommendations for counselors, specifically, college counselors working with young adult students, facing classism are also discussed.

Keywords

classism, multicultural counseling, advocacy, counseling young adults

Author's Notes

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The United States is well known for its encouragement of autonomy, individualism, and pursuit of the increasingly elusive American Dream (Hagan, 2017). The American Dream is based on systems justification theory, which states that awards, accomplishments, and capital come to people if they work hard enough (Diestelmann, 2017). Despite its cultural pervasiveness and instillation of hope, the American Dream fails to consider the intersecting challenges that many individuals in America still face (Hagan, 2017; Liu et al., 2007). Classism and related isms challenge the feasibility of the American Dream (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Chan et al., 2018; Eshelman & Rottinghaus, 2015; Hau, 2012; Liu et al., 2007). Consequently, many of our clients and students face everyday classism in multiple settings, including the college campus (East et al., 2016; Langhout, et al., 2009; Shepard et al., 2022). Because of this, it is imperative that counselors possess an understanding of the classism that clients may face so that they are able to facilitate client empowerment to cope with the everyday discrimination of classism (Clark et al., 2017; East et al., 2016; Foss et. al., 2011; Liu et al., 2007; Shepard et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2008). One specific type of classism, *perceived classism*, is the focus of this study (Simons et al., 2017; Thompson & Subich, 2011). Through assessment of perceived classism among undergraduate students, the authors hope to provide new knowledge to guide counselors working with college students.

Understanding Classism

Classism is defined as discrimination based on an individual's identified social class standing (Collins & Yeskel, 2005; Thompson & Subich, 2011). There are multiple forms of classism that have been identified by Liu (2013). These include overall classism, downward classism, lateral classism, upward classism, perceived classism, and internalized classism. Thus, individuals from any social class, including lower, middle, or upper-class statuses, may be the target of classism.

There are two types of internalized classism that will be explored in this study, interpersonal classism and systemic classism. Interpersonal classism reflects action at the micro-level and institutional classism reflects macro-level discrimination (Thompson & Subich, 2011). Interpersonal classism involves class-related discrimination between two or more individuals based on the victim's perceived social status. Systemic classism involves classism toward individuals through intentional or unintentional behaviors, policies, and procedures at an institutional level (Liu, 2013; Thompson & Subich, 2007). Both interpersonal and systemic classism have the potential to result in unfair treatment of students.

There are multiple negative outcomes for individuals who experience classism. Reflecting the focus of the current study, the damage that perceived classism can yield includes damage to both physical and emotional well-being. Individuals who experience higher levels of perceived classism are more likely to report increased health problems and feelings of inferiority (Thompson & Subich, 2011). Other studies reported that perceived classism was correlated with students experiencing the fear of rejection, a sense of inadequacy, and a lack of belonging (Granfield, 1991; Liu, 2013). Classism is not typically an isolated form of marginalization; other forms of marginalization which are often conflated or associated with perceived classism include racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; Garriott et al., 2021; Jordan et al., 2021; Liu, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Subich, 2011). Marginalization of any type can create unnecessary hardships in striving to reach one's goals.

Institutional Classism in Academia

Though many students potentially face class-related barriers in higher education, students who are from lower levels of socioeconomic status, are especially vulnerable to various internal and external academic barriers to the acquisition of resources for success (East et al., 2016; Foss & Generali, 2012; Reiman & Leighton, 2015; Smith, 2009). Physical resources include money, technology, professional contacts, and proximity to higher education (Liu, 2013). Psychological resources include confidence, eagerness, and self-efficacy (Liu, 2013; Mau & Bikos, 2011; Thompson & Subich, 2011). Systemically related, the schools, community colleges, and universities where students of lower social statuses matriculate, are often poorly funded. While social class is affected by factors beyond physical and psychological resources, these resources create a significant component of a person's self-identified class status.

Before facing the barriers inherent in the higher education system, poverty-stricken students also were likely to have scored lower on high stakes standardized tests and assessments, have been more likely to drop out of high school, and once on campus, they will be earning fewer postsecondary degrees than students from more affluent schools (Bartlett et al., 2016; Fouad & Brown, 2000). Historically, many students from less affluent public schools were also encouraged to pursue vocational degrees rather than four-year universities, even when they desired a four-year university degree (Colclough & Beck, 1986). Clearly, disadvantaged students face significant barriers in their efforts to access higher education.

Once students from lower socioeconomic levels do enter college, their battle is far from over. Although a small percentage of these students do successfully earn their degrees, these students' graduation rates are staggeringly low in comparison to their peers of higher social classes (US Census Bureau, 2015). Specifically, students from households earning up to $96,000 have a

50% graduation rate from college by the age of 24 (US Census Bureau, 2015). Comparatively, students in households who earned up to $36,000 as of 2018, had only a 6% graduation rate from college by the age of 24 years old. Lack of access to education, as well as the stark discrepancy in graduation rates from higher education institutions for poorer students is macro-level classism; this is also termed institutional classism (Liu, 2013; Thompson & Subich, 2007). Although there is still a need for more research related to institutional classism, such marginalization is speculated to also exist in counseling settings as researchers have found that middle-class bias often permeates the mindsets and practices of existing and new counselors (Shepard et al., 2022; Vontress, 2011).

Classism and Intersectionality

Classism is highly associated with being in a lower-class status, in poverty, and having financial instability (Shepard et al., 2022; Thompson & Subich, 2007). Classism and class-related barriers inhibit individuals, including college students, from pursuing their own American Dreams (Hagan, 2017). For example, in addition to lower representation in higher education, students who identify as racial, ethnic, gender, or financial minorities also disproportionately make up the population of first-generation college students. Additionally, students who grow up poor have access to fewer financial resources to attend or participate as fully in school than their wealthier peers. Relatedly, researchers have also found that many students from low socioeconomic status (SES) groups also often do not pursue their desired academic or career paths because of increased self-doubt, feelings of inferiority, and increased fear of rejection in social situations (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; Kraus et al., 2012; Liu, 2013). Much as intersectional identities exist, so, too, do intersectional “isms.” These different “isms” may each or all be interrelated with classism and may affect the way people think about themselves, the way they work, and the way they perform (Miller, 2018).

When considering class within an intersectional framework, students in poverty or working-class statuses may also be marginalized for their additional minority statuses, such as their age, racial identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation (East et al., 2016; Gilmore & Harris, 2008; Lee & Waithaka, 2017; Liu, 2013; Milan-Tyner, 2018; Thompson & Subich, 2007; Thompson et al., 2017). Shepard et al. (2022) emphasized that many clients and students with presenting social class related issues also identify with experiencing other isms including sexism, homophobia, ageism, and racism. It is important that counselors and higher education personnel are aware of the multiple intersecting identities that these individuals possess and the ways in which these intersecting identities can result in intersecting forms of marginalization.

The purpose of this study was to explore the prevalence of perceived classism among a diverse sample of undergraduate students. The following five hypotheses were examined:

1. There is a relationship between college students' ethnicity and their levels of perceived interpersonal classism.
2. There is a relationship between college students' socioeconomic status and their levels of perceived interpersonal classism.
3. There is a relationship between college students' ethnicity and their levels of perceived systemic classism.
4. There is a relationship between college students' socioeconomic status and their levels of perceived systemic classism.
5. The variance in overall perceived classism can be accounted for by ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status.

Method

Prior to the collection of data, approval for this research was received from a university's institutional review board. Utilizing convenience sampling, participants for this study were recruited from undergraduate counseling courses at a large, public midwestern university. Students who expressed interest in participating in the study were provided with a link to the online survey. Participation was incentivized through the opportunity to enter a random drawing for one of three $25 gift cards upon completion of the survey. The questionnaire was completed electronically using Qualtrics survey software and multiple responses from a single IP address were not allowed. Using G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009), the a priori sample size was calculated. With expected medium effect size and an alpha level of $p <= .05$, approximately 52 participants were calculated to be needed for the analyses. Of the 211 completed surveys, 202 responses were complete which was an adequate number for the planned analyses.

Participants

The sample was a diverse group in terms of demographics. Of the sample, 61.9% identified as female; 37.6% identified as male; and 1 participant identified as non-binary. Approximately one half, 49%, of the sample was Caucasian; 29.7% were African American; 8.4% were Latinx; 4.0% were Asian American; and 8.9% was Multiracial/Other. The majority of participants, 59.4%, identified as middle class; 22.8% identified as working class/poor; 10.9% identified as lower class; and 6.9% identified as upper class. The respondents' ages reflected the expected homogeneity to be found in undergraduate courses. The mean age of participants, aged 18 to 38, was 21.31 years (*SD* =2.75). Of the sample, 23.3% were 18-19; 54.9% were 20-22; and 21.9% were 23 or above.

Regarding class year, 20.3% were first-year students; 17.3% were sophomores; 33.2% were juniors; and 29.2% were seniors. Of the group, 38.6% were first-generation students.

Measures

Participants completed the Experiences with Classism Survey--Short Form (EWCS-SF; Thompson & Subich, 2013), an assessment that addresses perceived classism, and a brief demographic questionnaire. These assessments were completed online via Qualtrics.

The Experiences With Classism Scale--Short Form (EWCS-SF)

The EWCS-SF (Thompson & Subich, 2013) was designed to measure perceived classism. The EWCS-SF is a 25-item scale which assesses for a student's self-reported experiences of perceived classism. This instrument includes 18 items to assess interpersonal classism (e.g., *How many times have you been treated unfairly by people in service jobs (store clerks, waiters, bartenders, bank tellers, and others) in the past year because of your social class?*) and 7 items to assess perceived systemic classism (e.g., *How often in the past year have you been frustrated with all of the steps that you had to take with the financial aid office or banks in order to have access to money for school?*). The EWCS-SF uses a 6-point Likert scale, from 1=Never Happened to You, to 6=Happened Almost All the Time, to measure the construct of classism. This scale has been normed on a variety of populations and has shown high reliability, internal consistency, and validity ratings. In Thompson and Subich's (2013) original study, the Cronbach's alpha for the EWCS-SF, also called the EWCS or the EWCS-Final, was .97 for the personalized classism subscale and .83 for the systemic classism subscale. For the current study, Cronbach's alpha values for the personalized classism subscale was .92 and it was .83 for the systemic classism scale.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0, and an alpha of .05 was set for determining statistical significance. Cases with missing data were excluded from analysis. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic variables and for the Interpersonal Classism, Systemic Classism, and combined Classism scores on the EWCS-SF. Analyses of variance and regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses.

Results

In Table 1, the means and standard deviations for the scales of the EWCS-SF scores are presented by ethnicity and self-reported socioeconomic status. It is noted that only 4.5% of the participants had never experienced any form of interpersonal or systemic racism. When comparing data using means, standard deviations, sample size, skewness, and kurtosis, these data are overall within the acceptable ranges.

	EWCS		**Interpersonal Classism**		**Systemic Classism**	
Total (n=202)	44.75	17.32	30.01	11.97	14.73	6.78
Overall Range of Scores	Min=25	Max=114	Min=18	Max=81	Min=7	Max =37
Ethnicity						
African American/Black (n=60)	52.73	19.69	36.20	13.72	16.53	7.32
Asian American (n=8)	43.75	27.60	30.25	19.80	13.50	8.14
Caucasian (n=99)	40.05	13.87	26.41	9.00	13.64	6.18
Latinx (n=17)	42.59	13.12	27.29	8.59	15.29	7.13
Multiracial/Other (n=18)	46.44	15.97	31.67	11.10	14.78	6.52
Socioeconomic Status						
Working Class/Poor (n=46)	53.50	22.49	35.00	15.16	18.50	8.68
Lower Class (n=22)	42.45	9.51	27.50	6.74	14.95	5.23
Middle Class (n=120)	42.86	15.67	29.10	11.25	13.76	5.90
Upper Class (n=14)	35.36	10.10	25.14	8.07	10.21	2.94

Table 1: *Experiences With Classism Scale (EWCS), interpersonal classism, and systemic classism (SC) means and standard deviations by ethnicity and socioeconomic status*

Interpersonal and Systemic Classism and Ethnicity

Two separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) calculations were conducted to test the first two hypotheses related to the difference in levels of interpersonal and systemic classism between participants based on ethnicity. To test the first hypothesis, participant ethnicity served as the independent variable and the interpersonal classism scale score was utilized as the dependent variable. There was a significant relationship at the $p < .005$ level, $F(4, 197) = 7.380$, $p = .000$, supporting the first hypothesis. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .13, indicating that 13% of the variance in interpersonal classism was related to ethnicity. African American participants exhibited the highest level of perceived interpersonal classism. A Tukey's HSD test indicated that these students experienced levels significantly higher than Caucasian and Latinx students. To test the second hypothesis, participant ethnicity serviced as the independent variable and the systemic classism scale score was the dependent variable. There was no significant relationship found between ethnicity and perceived systemic classism.

Interpersonal and Systemic Classism and Socioeconomic Status

Two separate one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) calculations were conducted to test the next two hypotheses which were related to the difference in levels of interpersonal and systemic classism between participants based on socioeconomic status. To test the third hypothesis, socioeconomic status served as the independent variable and the interpersonal classism scale score was utilized as the dependent variable. There was a significant relationship at the $p < .005$ level, $F(3, 198) = 4.160$, $p = .007$, supporting the third hypothesis. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .06, indicating that 6% of the variance in interpersonal classism was related to socioeconomic status. A Tukey's HSD test indicated that individuals who identified as working class/poor experienced significantly higher levels of interpersonal classism than any other group. To test the fourth hypothesis, socioeconomic status served as the independent variable and the systemic classism scale score was the dependent variable. There was a significant relationship at the $p < .005$ level, $F(3, 198) = 8.462$, $p = .000$, supporting the fourth hypothesis. The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .11, indicating that 11% of the variance in systemic classism was related to socioeconomic status. Similar to the findings for the third hypothesis, individuals who identified as working class/poor experienced significantly higher levels of systemic classism than all other groups.

Predictors of Perceived Classism

According to the fifth hypothesis, a significant amount of the variance in total classism experienced would be accounted for by ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. To test this hypothesis, each of these variables was entered into a regression equation, and the standardized regression coefficients of the variables were analyzed to determine their predictive value regarding total classism. The results indicated that these variables together accounted for 7% of the variance in overall classism, $R^2 = .07$, $F(4, 197) = 4.488$, $p < .005$, supporting the fifth hypothesis. Examination of the beta weights of the regression coefficients revealed that only social class was a significant predictor of overall classism, ($\beta = -3.765$ $t(4, 197) = -4.028$, $p = .007$).

Discussion

A study of 202 college students, aged 18 to 38, was conducted to explore the relationships among perceived classism, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Out of this sample, only five hypotheses were put forth, and all but one of the hypotheses was supported by the findings. Individuals who identify as African American experienced the highest levels of interpersonal classism and their experiences with classism were significantly higher than Caucasian and Latinx students. This finding was in contrast to the finding that there was not a similar relationship between systemic racism and participant ethnicity. Individuals who identified as working class/poor experienced significantly higher levels of both interpersonal and systemic racism than students from any other socioeconomic status. It is important to note that approximately 37% of African American students reported their socioeconomic class as working class/poor compared to 17% of the other participants. They were potentially facing an intersection of isms, including racism and classism. However, when exploring predictors of overall classism, only socioeconomic status was a significant predictor of this variable.

In further exploration of the significant differences in item scores based on ethnicity, two items on the EWCS were notable for the high mean differences between participants who identified as African American and those who identified as Caucasian. These were items number 10, *How many times have you been accused or suspected of doing something wrong (such as stealing, cheating, not doing your share of the work, or breaking the law) in the past year because of your social class?*, and item number 15, *How many times were you forced to take drastic steps (such as filing a grievance, filing a lawsuit, quitting your job, moving away, or other actions) to deal with some classist thing that was done to you in the past year?* These items speak to the emotional and physical burden that individuals must carry when intersecting isms are applied to individuals who hold intersectional identities. It is imperative that counselors recognize and validate the suffering that these layers of oppression can generate for their clients.

While 4.5% of the sample reported that they had experienced no incidents of classism, that indicates that 95% of the participants had experienced at least once incident of classism at some point in time. While the majority of participants had experienced only minimal classism, this is still concerning. To further substantiate the need for addressing all of these data, please consider an analogous example. If a scale, which assessed for racism or homophobia, were administered to college students and students reported even occasional racism or homophobia, this would be concerning. The impacts of even one aggression of classism, may be detrimental for a student who may be battling other forms of oppression, as well. This study's findings that almost all students reported some level of perceived classism illustrates that even though the nation has grown more diverse, incidents of classism are still occurring even in spaces that seem most progressive, such as higher education arenas. Implications for researchers to study the latent effects of classism as well as, the support factors to foster resilience for students facing classism in college, are also needed.

Anticlassist Recommendations for Counselors

Many implications can be derived from this study. These include the need for a greater emphasis on social class issues in not only scholarship, but in clinical work as well. Scholarship, though important, is not sufficient for enacting change and dismantling discrimination. Putting new knowledge regarding classism into clinical action will foster anti-classist counseling practices. The following section will emphasize anti-classist counseling practices that are inferred from this study.

Two study-specific anti-classist interventions recommended include: 1) for college counselors to incorporate intentional questions on intake paperwork with queries related to a client's SES in addition to their identified social class status, and any client experiences with any form of classism; and 2) for counselors and counselor educators to incorporate open-ended questions for empathic inquiry regarding a client's social class in their clinical sessions. Additional research studies have reinforced the need for counselors to ask about class related issues (Allan et al., 2021; Diestelmann, 2017; East et al., 2016; Juntunen et al., 2020; Perry & Wallace, 2013; Shepard et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2013).

Another recommendation from this study includes for counselors to remember that clients identify within unique intersectional and phenomenological frameworks. Though classism and racism are often conflated (i.e. because people of color may often experience both classism and racism concurrently), these are each to be addressed in an intersectional way (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; Eshelman & Rottinghaus, 2015; Garriott et al., 2021; Hau, 2012; Juntunen et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2007; Liu, 2013). Oppression related to multiple identities is seen in this study, especially as students who identified as African American males and in the working class/poor class reported the most perceived classism experienced. An associated helpful recommendation from this study, which addresses clients' experiences of multilayered discrimination, includes for counselors to increase their culture humility with clients. One way to increase cultural humility includes for counselors to inquire about each "ism" separately, while not conflating varying forms of oppression, particularly race and class.

As referenced earlier, only a few practical models have been introduced as potential models for helping clients experiencing class related issues in mental health. Of these, there are two models that are currently deemed useful in working with clients specifically facing classism. These models are generated in psychological fields and less well-known in the counseling arena. These models include the I-CARE model and the Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM) (East et al., 2016; Foss-Kelly et al., 2017; Liu, 2013). The I-CARE model and SCW model both facilitate intentional and culturally inclusive inquiry, understanding, and additive empathy for clients with class related concerns. When using these models, helpers have been rated by clients to be more validating and inclusive as compared to various past clinical models generalized and not specialized to clients with class related issues. College counselors should familiarize themselves with the I-CARE and

SCWM models and also consider creations of new models in working with clients with classism and specifically, perceived classism.

Anticlassist Recommendations for Counselor Educators

As continuing efforts are made to ensure college accessibility for diverse individuals, this means that counselors will work with increasingly diverse populations who may be facing significant levels of classism within the institution. A recommendation for counselor educators based on this study is to teach counselors-in-training to gain and maintain awareness of their own cognitive distancing and biases toward people of different social classes and intentionally working to eradicate any vestiges of these they hold. Hagan (2017) and Liu (2013) both shared about the unintentional cognitive distancing that may occur from helpers toward clients in lower class statuses. Shepard et al. (2022) also mentioned that a counselor's behavior may be shaped by an implicit middle-class bias. Thus, counselor educators should encourage their students to self-reflect on their own practice and determine if they need to take steps to address and move past this bias.

Along with training students to increase their self-awareness and encouraging them to confront various cognitive biases, another recommendation from this study is for counselor educators to increase the perceived humanity (i.e., versus perceived stereotypes portrayed in mainstream media) of people from all social classes, especially people who are homeless or in poverty, in their courses (Clark et al., 2017; Jordan, et al., 2021; Liu, 2013; Nickols & Nielsen, 2011; Perry & Wallace, 2013; Russell, 1996; Smith et al., 2013; Trent, 2021). Humanized and empathic representation of clients in varying social classes is imperative, in part, as currently little representation of people in different class statuses, including downward, lateral, upper, or internalized class statuses, is added into formal topics and textbooks used in helping profession programs, such as counselor education (Hagan, 2017; Liu, 2013). Also, though downward classism is the most prevalent form of classism experienced, other classism types do still occur. Although only around 7% of the current study's sample identified as upper-class, only one of these respondents acknowledged having experienced no classism whatsoever. Thus, these other forms of discrimination should be described and taught to new and practicing college counselors so that clients experiencing any type of classism (i.e. including the lesser known discrimination of upward classism) may be better understood and client care facilitated. College counselors will certainly encounter clients with issues related to both upward and downward classism related issues.

Counselor educators are also encouraged to intentionally add the intersection of social class into vignettes and course readings for counselors-in-training. Particularly useful vignettes may include less dramatized, tokened, or stereotyped vignettes of people in real life and likely in multiple intersections. Some less stereotypical and instead more realistically representative vignettes include a) the representation of clients of color in upper class statuses, b) vignettes of confident people who have jumped up *or* down social class statuses, and c) vignettes of people who are poor, but do not present with mental illness or addiction and who are employed. Teaching about confronting societal mainstream stereotypes and status quo oppression will not only better help college counselors, counselors, and counseling students, but will ultimately help clients who are facing not only classism, but also facing multiple "isms" (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; Trent, 2021).

Limitations and Future Research

This study's limitations include contextual and statistical limitations. The sample included selection bias in the form of self-selection, and the individuals who completed the assessment may be different in unknown ways from individuals who chose not to complete the study. The sample was not demographically representative of the overall population nor was it fully representative of the institution’s student body where it took place. Additional limitations may be inherent in the sample size and the unequal group sizes. Further, self-report measures present limitations for reasons related to social desirability, response biases, and lack of triangulation with other sources. Quantitative descriptive data, which guide the design of this study, do not capture the entire context (i.e., the why questions) of students’ descriptions of their perceived classism (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, this study’s findings generate primarily descriptive statistics about these data. Significance findings from continued inferential statistics and relational patterns about classism in higher education are also needed.

Recommendations from this study and for researchers include the further exploration of classism as related to gender, race, and SES further. Specifically, a recommendation from this study includes exploring the ways in which classism may affect underrepresented students in multiple settings beyond the classroom. Another idea catalyzed from this study includes for researchers to continue constructing and creating a comprehensive, multidimensional, succinct, and valid operational definition of social class. Due to the phenomenological nature of social class, increased qualitative measures and mixed methods studies are encouraged to be created about social class too.

Conclusion

This study contributes to knowledge about the experiencing of classism among college aged individuals. The study provided insight into the ways in which society penalizes individuals who are pursuing education in order to attain upward mobility. This study shed light on the challenges faced, especially, by those who identify as African American and as working class/poor social class status. This study also presented a deeper understanding about the frequency of classism that college students experience. Supporting students facing classism through research, improved clinical care, and advocacy, from an intersectional and cross-cultural paradigm, is a professional and ethical duty for all helpers.

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