

# The Counseling Psychologist

<http://tcp.sagepub.com>

---

## **From Whence We Came: The Role of Social Class in Our Families of Origin**

Mary J. Heppner and Anne B. Scott  
*The Counseling Psychologist* 2004; 32; 596  
DOI: 10.1177/0011000004265670

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/32/4/596>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association](#)

**Additional services and information for *The Counseling Psychologist* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tcp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** (this article cites 14 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):  
<http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/32/4/596>

## **From Whence We Came: The Role of Social Class in Our Families of Origin**

Mary J. Heppner

Anne B. Scott

*University of Missouri–Columbia*

*As Whiston and Keller's integrative review illuminates, several contextual factors (e.g., particularly sex and race) have begun to receive attention in the past 20 years in the career development literature. Their review also demonstrates that social class and socioeconomic status (SES), as contextual variables, have not. Authors of this reaction hypothesize about why this may be the case. They also argue for the importance of investigating the entire spectrum of social class—lower, middle, and upper. In addition, recent methodological advances, such as the social class worldview model and instrumentation, which emphasize the potential power of subjective perceptions of class, are also highlighted. The authors urge us to go beyond merely acknowledging our lack of understanding of this potentially critical variable to developing a rigorous research agenda that places social class and SES variables at the core.*

The two authors of this reaction grew up in families of origin with marked differences in social class and socioeconomic status. Although we are not from the richest of the rich or the poorest of the poor, neither of us would fit the standard economic designation of middle class. Mary's parents were farmers with less than high school educations. Money was always tight, and few luxuries like books were present in the home. It was assumed she would finish high school but certainly not college. An emphasis was put on "knowing one's place," and that place was neither the academy nor a professional career. On the other hand, Anne grew up never having to worry about money. Dad was the breadwinner, and Mom stayed home with Anne and her sister. After graduating from a private high school, there was no question Anne would go to college; the only question was where. College was expected, as almost everyone in the family (including all four grandparents) had college degrees. The extended family was composed of engineers, doctors, businessmen, and journalists. A professional career was therefore expected, and college was a time to explore what would be the most fulfilling path.

How our different class backgrounds influence each of us on our career paths and how those backgrounds influence the aspirations, expectations, and vocational roles we choose in adulthood is critically important for counseling psychologists to understand. As Whiston and Keller (2004 [this issue]) indicate, social class has been largely overlooked in the counseling psychology literature as it has in the broader psychology literature (Lott,

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST, Vol. 32 No. 4, July 2004 596-602

DOI: 10.1177/0011000004265670

© 2004 by the Society of Counseling Psychology.

596

2002). When social class has been examined, there is often a focus on how it leads to occupational choices. A more critical question is, How does class affect the process of career development and what are critical events or triggers along the way? After all, Mary and Anne both became (or are becoming) counseling psychologists, so in some respects, one might say that the social classes of the families of origin had no effect on occupational outcome. But the complex mechanisms involved in the process of career choice and adjustment are what probably hold the most salience and richness for our field. These mechanisms may be role models, verbal reinforcements of choices, experiential learning activities that help clarify promising paths, success in basic courses in the first year of college, or a host of other critical life experiences. But we are proposing that these mechanisms may contribute most to the variance in outcome for individuals of different class backgrounds. For example, did Mary's role models have to be substantially stronger (more salient, more like her) than Anne's for Mary to believe in herself and her possibilities in the world? Did the worldview of Anne's social class rule out a host of careers open to Mary, careers that Anne may have found meaningful and fulfilling but were perhaps viewed as inappropriate for her social position?

Whiston and Keller's (2004) excellent review served as an important springboard to our thinking about issues of the role of the family of origin's social class in the career development process mostly because their review highlights the scope of the omission. What becomes very clear in reading their review is that social class and socioeconomic status (SES), with rare exceptions, have not been variables of interest in the career development literature in the past 20 years.

Why this omission of what seems to be such a critical variable in understanding career development processes? Heppner and O'Brien (in press), drawing on diverse literatures, provide three possible explanations: a reluctance to study those we view as different from ourselves, the lack of congruence between the tenets of career development and individuals who are not in the middle class, and the proposition that classism may still be an acceptable "ism."

In her seminal article in the *American Psychologist*, Lott (2002) cogently argued that psychologists have consistently operated under the assumption that the United States is a classless society, an assumption that makes anyone who is not in the middle class invisible in our research and professional attention. She further suggests that it appears psychologists have little interest in studying lives different from our own. Although psychologists experience sexism, racism, ageism, and heterosexism, class is not a salient feature in our lives, and thus, we may be ignoring it as a critical variable in those we study (Lott, 2002).

In the specific subspecialty of career psychology, Heppner and O'Brien (in press) argue that the basic tenets of the field may be most relevant or salient to the middle class. The democratic, pluralistic, and individualistic values that were critical to the birth of the field of career development (Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 2003), which emphasized "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps" and self-actualization through occupation, are clearly most salient to the middle class and may hold less usefulness for those at either end of the economic spectrum. Thus, as vocational psychologists, we tend to focus on the lives of middle-class individuals in our schools, colleges, and labor market, with rare attention either to those living at or below the poverty level or those in the upper class.

Finally, it seems that although "isms" related to race and gender are no longer acceptable in our society, classism remains socially acceptable in many venues. Lott and Bullock (2001) argue this is certainly true for the poor, and they present numerous examples of the media and public officials conveying negative stereotypes of the poor with seemingly no awareness or sensitivity. It seems that unlike other contextual variables such as race, gender, disability, or sexual orientation, class is generally perceived as something we choose. A wealth of social psychology research demonstrates that Americans generally believe that individuals are in the socioeconomic class they deserve, largely as a result of their own efforts or lack thereof (Hill, 1996). Thus, both downward classism and upward classism (Liu et al., 2004) continue to be seen as acceptable "isms" (Heppner & O'Brien, in press).

Whiston and Keller (2004) consistently acknowledge the extent to which the social class of the family of origin can affect the individual's career development and the degree to which social class has been ignored in the counseling psychology literature. However, the lack of empirical literature dedicated to social class and SES needs attention beyond mere acknowledgement. Social class and SES are significant, and they influence multiple phases of the career development process (Brown, Fukunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, 1996). Indeed, Schulenberg, Vondracek, and Crouter (1984) describe the significance of SES, stating, "If one were permitted only a single variable with which to predict an individual's occupational status, it would surely be the SES of the individual's family" (p. 130). Individuals often choose occupations based on parents' occupations (Heaven, 2001; Mannheim & Seger, 1993), and even the careers an individual perceives as options are limited to some extent by social class (Gottfredson, 1981). One apparent theme across the literature is the collection of data on social class or SES as a variable but with little follow-up attention to the results. Many empirical articles report SES or social class information as a demographic variable but then largely ignore the information in the subsequent data analysis and discussion. Or social class is measured but then mentioned simply as a "control variable"

(Brown et al., 1996; Evans, 2004; Liu et al., 2004). Yet, even measuring (but then ignoring) social class occurs infrequently if one looks solely at the literature outlined in this review. In Whiston and Keller's (2004) table outlining recent research on family of origin and career, social class rarely appears. Again, although the authors call attention to this oversight, it is a void in the literature that warrants even more attention.

The lack of recent attention to social class stands in sharp contrast to other contextual factors (particularly race, ethnicity, and gender), which have been studied extensively with regard to their effect on career. The tables provided by Whiston and Keller (2004) include specific columns reporting gender and race information for each study. Of course, these are critical variables to examine, and our knowledge of career development has been strengthened as a result of several important studies that have focused on the relationships between race, ethnicity, gender, and career (Church, Teresa, Rosebrook, & Szendre, 1992; Flores & O'Brien, 2002; Hackett, Betz, Casas, & Rocha-Singh, 1992; Hackett & Byers, 1996; Lauver & Jones, 1991). Furthermore, some attention has been given to the issue of race, ethnicity, and gender when studying social class and how these different constructs are very much intertwined. Fouad and Brown (2000) differentiate between social class and social standing, with social standing incorporating other personal characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and physical appearance, creating an integrative view of where an individual is "placed" in society. These additional variables are, admittedly, potential confounds to the study of social class and are definitely important to acknowledge when examining career development as well. Yet, although these are crucial issues to consider, they do not provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how social class alone affects career development. Thus, it is crucial that the field of counseling psychology adopt social class and SES as important subjects for future research. It is clear that any empirical research conducted on this underresearched topic would be a very worthwhile contribution to the literature in counseling psychology. What is less clear is how to accomplish this with such a challenging and often ambiguous variable. In what follows are some potential directions for career and social class research.

Although Whiston and Keller (2004) acknowledge the need for more class diversity in samples, they do not identify the need to enhance diversity in samples at both ends of the spectrum. In future social class and career research, all social classes merit attention. To gain a thorough understanding of the effects of social class and SES on career development, it is important to examine both extremes of social class and not just the middle class. Throughout this review, the authors critique homogenous samples and cite the use of "privileged" samples as a weakness or limitation of a study. It is indeed problematic if a sample lacks class diversity when class is not intended as an inde-

pendent variable. Yet, what this suggests is that there is something about privileged students and schools that makes them unique and separate from other individuals and educational environments. While students with these backgrounds have a number of privileges and supports, their experiences are also important to study and examine. If we, as counseling psychologists, have a genuine interest in the effects of social class on career development, then all social classes deserve to be the object of research and scholarly work. Let us not succumb to either downward or upward classism in our pursuit of the mechanisms of class that potentially influence career development.

For the purposes of future social class research, one important methodological issue is the inclusion of subjective as well objective measures of social class and SES. As noted by Liu and his colleagues (2004), the traditional indices of SES and social class can tell us only so much about the effects of social class. A much more complex process is at work, with class both hindering and supporting individuals throughout a lifetime of career and other development. Yet, the magnitude of these effects depends partly on the perceptions of the individual. Social class and SES are often ingrained in an individual's identity, and identity, in turn, affects numerous life choices and actions. It therefore seems important to consider not just how societal supports and barriers are acting on the individual but also how the individual perceives himself or herself within society's class and economic hierarchy. The social class worldview model (Liu et al., 2004) gives researchers a systematic method of looking at those subjective perceptions and serves as an important and potentially groundbreaking way of examining the complexity of social class on identity and development. Future research would benefit from using social class worldview as a critical construct of interest.

In addition to how we assess social class, it is important to consider in which periods of development we are examining career and social class. As Whiston and Keller (2004) point out, adolescence is frequently the subject of career development research. This is indeed appropriate when researching perceptions of social class and career. Children form ideas about class and ideas about career far earlier than when they become adults (Gottfredson, 1981; West, Sweeting, & Speed, 2001), so it makes sense to begin examining the interaction of these two factors when it begins. Rather than looking at the long-term effects of social class, our knowledge base of career issues would benefit from data on the process by which children and adolescents decide which careers they can pursue. One potential answer may lie in the internal process by which an adolescent constructs a mental list of available career options (Gottfredson, 1981). As our society limits the number of career options that are "appropriate" for a given social class, so too do we limit the options adolescents perceive. Furthermore, each and every adolescent has his or her own perception of available and unavailable careers. Thus, it is neces-

sary but not sufficient to look at society's views of upper class and lower class careers. Again, we must also examine the adolescent's particular worldview and how this shapes his or her perceived career options.

Overall, Whiston and Keller (2004) do a superb job of using their review to demonstrate what is lacking in the literature and what should be the focus of future research. We argue that counseling psychologists need to acknowledge the critically important role of class in career development and not continue to think of class or SES as descriptive, unexplained, or confounding variables in our theories and models of vocational behavior. It seems important to place an even greater emphasis on the interaction between social class and career development and to attend more acutely to worldview, adolescent perceptions of career options, and the experiences of all social class groups. It would indeed be heartening in 2024, when the next 20-year review of the literature on family of origin influences may be published, that we see a rich and nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms of social class in the career development process. Our appreciation goes to Whiston and Keller (2004) for their rigorous and thorough review that both allows an integrative understanding of the accumulated knowledge we have about the effect of family of origin and also clearly acknowledges critical areas that are virtually untouched territory.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, M. T., Fukunaga, C., Umemoto, D., & Wicker, L. (1996). Annual review, 1990-1996: Social class, work, and retirement behavior. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 49*, 159-189.
- Church, A. T., Teresa, J. S., Rosebrook, R., & Szendre, D. (1992). Self-efficacy for careers and occupational consideration in minority high school equivalency students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 39*, 498-508.
- Evans, G. W. (2004). The environment of childhood poverty. *American Psychologist, 59*, 77-92.
- Flores, L. Y., & O'Brien, K. (2002). The career development of Mexican American adolescent women: A test of social cognitive career theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 49*, 14-27.
- Fouad, N. A., & Brown, M. T. (2000). Role of race and social class in development: Implications for counseling psychology. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Handbook of counseling psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 370-434). New York: Wiley.
- Gottfredson, L. S. (1981). Circumscription and compromise: A developmental theory of occupational aspirations (Monograph). *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 28*, 545-579.
- Gysbers, N. C., Heppner, M. J., & Johnston, J. A. (2003). *Career counseling: Process, issues and techniques*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hackett, G., Betz, N. E., Casas, J. M., & Rocha-Singh, I. A. (1992). Gender, ethnicity, and social cognitive factors predicting the academic achievement of students in engineering. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 39*, 527-538.
- Hackett, G., & Byers, A. M. (1996). Social cognitive theory and the career development of African-American women. *Career Development Quarterly, 44*, 322-340.

- Heaven, P. C. L. (2001). *The social psychology of adolescence*. London: Palgrave.
- Heppner, M. J., & O'Brien. (in press). Women and poverty: A holistic approach to vocational interventions. In B. Walsh & M. Heppner (Eds.), *The handbook of career counseling for women*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hill, M. (1996). We can't afford it: Confusions and silences on the topic of class. In M. Hill & E. D. Rothblum (Eds.), *Classism and feminist therapy: Counting costs* (pp. 1-6). New York: Harrington Park/Haworth.
- Lauver, P. J., & Jones, R. M. (1991). Factors associated with perceived career options in American Indian, White, and Hispanic rural high school students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 38*, 159-166.
- Liu, W. M., Ali, S. R., Soleck, G., Hopps, J., Dunston, K., & Pickett, T. P., Jr. (2004). Using social class in counseling psychology research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 51*(1), 3-18.
- Lott, B. (2002). Cognitive and behavioral distancing from the poor. *American Psychologist, 57*, 100-110.
- Lott, B. & Bullock, H. E. (2001) Who are the poor? *Journal of Social Issues, 57*(2), 189-206.
- Mannheim, B., & Seger, T. (1993). Mothers' occupational characteristics, family position, and sex role orientation as related to adolescents' work values. *Youth and Society, 24*, 276-298.
- Schulenberg, J. E., Vondracek, F. W., & Crouter, A. C. (1984). The influence of the family on vocational development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*, 129-143.
- West, P., Sweeting, H., & Speed, E. (2001). We really do know what you do: A comparison of reports from 11 year olds and their parents in respect of parental economic activity and occupation. *Sociology, 35*, 539-559.
- Whiston, S. C., & Keller, B. K. (2004). The influences of the family of origin on career development: A review and analysis. *The Counseling Psychologist, 32*(4), 493-568.