Hearing the Silent, Seeing the Invisible

A Review of

Working With Issues of Social Class in Psychotherapy
with William Ming Liu

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Reviewed by

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As a young therapist some 30 years ago, I was asked to do a home visit to a local family. Their 13-year-old son, the school reported to me, had been coming to school dressed in dirty clothing, with his head consistently bowed, withdrawn, sullen, and silent. A local counselor had opined that the young man was evidencing the prodromal phase of schizophrenia and stated that the whole family was “mentally ill.”

When I arrived at the home during a snowstorm, the elderly father ushered me into their two-room house, where the water pipes had frozen and the family sat in kitchen chairs in a semicircle around an open gas stove in order to stay warm. After spending time with them, I concluded that there was no evidence of psychological disorders among any family member, and certainly no schizophrenia. Their poverty not only explained the son’s clothing and behavior at school but also likely informed the dim view of the counselor, who saw them as “other.”

More recently, my wife and I were in a restaurant when we struck up a conversation with our waiter, who shared that he had recently moved to the States from Malaysia. When we asked him what most impressed him after his arrival here, he paused and then said, “I enjoy spending time with family and friends. Americans enjoy spending their time buying things to show them to each other.” He then gave me a playful punch to the shoulder, as if to say, “You poor souls.” His view of the typical American social class clearly shaped his view of all Americans (although his observation was beautifully stated and perhaps contained at least a speck of painful truth).

Although social class is at least marginally recognized as an important factor to consider when one is understanding psychotherapy clients, typically it is considered from a more sociological, categorical perspective. For example, in the excellent book Addressing Cultural Complexities in Practice (Hays, 2008), social-class-based minority groups are listed as including “People of lower status because of class, education, income, or rural habitat” (p. 18), and a total of only four pages refer to socioeconomic status.

This level of awareness—that social class is generally important in understanding the context of a human being’s life—has rarely extended into a consequential exploration of the powerful ways that this dimension of diversity shapes a human being’s experience and sense of identity. Appreciation of this fact inspired William Ming Liu—the featured psychologist in this video presentation—to mine the literature and to push its overly restrictive boundaries, leading him to develop a worldview model of social class and a fresh perspective on the quiet, mostly invisible classism that inhabits us and sculpts central aspects of our life experience.

The heart of this presentation is a 45-minute session with Beatta, a Polish immigrant. Liu’s work with her in this, their second session, allows Liu to clearly model his approach to assisting clients to gain insight into the roles class and classism have played in their lives. Although it is unclear what Beatta’s presenting problem may have been, through
Liu’s work, viewers (and Beatta herself) come to intriguing and important understandings regarding how her childhood and relationships with her parents and peers were suffused with messages and directives regarding class and classism, thus revealing how the client has dealt with internalized classism, which includes—according to Liu—“the frustration of not fitting in the social class you want to be a part of.”

The session is by turns fascinating and poignant, offering viewers intriguing and valuable insights into the interplay of social class and subjective experience, perhaps more than any other available training video. At the same time, the frank limitations of our typical categorical approach to understanding social class is revealed when Liu asks Beatta what social class she considers herself a part of; she responds in a very realistic way, stating that she is “upper lower class” in many ways but has both middle-class and professional attitudes. Clearly, the individual experience of class cannot be meaningfully confined by a category.

Jon Carlson gracefully hosts the program, interviewing Liu both prior to and after the featured psychotherapy session. Carlson (to whom the American Psychological Association bestowed the Award for Distinguished Career Contributions to Education and Training in Psychology in 2011), as always, conducts the interviews masterfully, with just the right combination of profundity and innocence, posing the questions that most viewers would likely ask. Through the introductory interview, Liu is able to describe how the worldview model of social class assists both therapists and clients to better recognize how social class represents a lens through which we perceive our world, other people, and ourselves; like all lenses, it provides those perceptions through distortion. Moreover, the fact that social class is rarely discussed expands its potential influence as we fail to examine its power in our lives, and whatever gifts and curses it may have left us.

Through Liu’s approach to therapy, clients gain an appreciation through exploring class issues that they likely have never given voice to, for example, how classism has led to their marginalization and shaped their expectations of themselves and others, and how perhaps they have been agents of classism. Liu elucidates how this approach “focuses on how clients deal with internalized classism” and explains that insight into class and its psychological influences is the ultimate goal of this approach to therapy. Equally fascinating are Liu’s brief comments regarding the upward mobility bias and the myth of meritocracy, especially how they can affect both therapist and client.

Although the interviews are illuminating, despite Carlson’s best efforts to tease out more details about the approach, Liu’s responses remain at a level of generality that would leave many viewers unclear about how his focus upon class and classism translates to the relationship between client and therapist, and how or when the issue may be most important to address in therapy. Some deepening of Liu’s perspectives can be found in the feature that allows viewers to watch the session (with subtitles, if so chosen) and listen to the therapist’s narration of the session. The addition of subtitles and therapist narration represents a valuable addition to this presentation, and one that deserves to be included in future releases.

Because the issue of the impact of social class on human psychological functioning has been only indistinctly addressed in the psychological literature, this video is valuable and highly recommended for students, trainees, and practitioners, all of whom will benefit from gaining insight into the roles social class has played in their lives, how it can influence our perceptions of our clients and ourselves, and how a client’s finally visualizing some of the roadblocks class has placed in their ways can lead to their successfully traversing them. However, because of the level of generality in Liu’s explanation and description of his approach, I strongly suggest that the viewing of this video be accompanied by relevant reading, most notably Liu’s own work (e.g., Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, & Pickett, 2004).

References

