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Abstract

College students face stressors that impact their mental health (Liu et al., 2019), and college students with financial constraints experience additional challenges (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2019). This phenomenological study explored mental health and counseling experiences of eleven college students who identified as being from low-income backgrounds. Five major themes emerged related to participants' felt sense of social class and engagement in mental health counseling. Clinical and research implications are discussed.

Keywords: Social class, college students, mental health, counseling

College represents a unique developmental time for students, and many students experience a variety of mental health stressors (Hurst et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2019). It is estimated that 20% (Auerback et al., 2016) to 48% (Blanco et al., 2008) of college students have a mental health diagnosis, and students from low-income backgrounds may be at particular risk. Research indicates a relationship between economic variables and negative mental health outcomes (Sareen et al., 2011), as individuals from low-income backgrounds can experience financial pressure, inequality, and other stressors (Fong et al., 2019; Reiss, 2013; Wahlbeck et al., 2017). A study by Rodríguez-Planas (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, recipients of Pell grants were more likely to consider dropping classes or modifying their graduation plans compared to their non-Pell grant recipient peers. Other vulnerable student populations such

as first-generation students were also found to be hit harder by the pandemic due to the loss of income from employment that was necessary to maintain their student status.

Students from low-income backgrounds may experience mental health challenges negatively impacting academic and social experiences. Common struggles include financial stress, classism, and fitting in (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Pearce et al., 2008). Responsibilities outside of academics, such as work and childcare, may result in students from low-income backgrounds having less time and energy to be engaged in campus life (Nguyen & Herron, 2020; Rubin, et al., 2019; Rubin & Kelly, 2015). Add on the cognitive load required for these students to navigate the varied campus resources necessary to their success, and this can be overwhelming (Kezar et al., 2023).

Students from low-income backgrounds are required to navigate class-based structures and classism in college (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2019), two factors that negatively impact to mental health and wellbeing. For instance, students who are used to the value of interdependence, which is often found within lower and working-class cultures, may struggle to adapt to the middle-class culture on campuses that promotes the value of independence (Rubin et al., 2019). Classism and stigma lead to decreased help-seeking behaviors for students from low-income backgrounds (Choi & Miller, 2018; Frost et al., 2020), although limited research suggests students who receive counseling have positive experiences (Sabaner & Arnold, 2021). Despite this, additional research is needed to better understand the relationship between social class and mental health for this population, particularly regarding the role of social class in counseling.

Defining Social Class

Social class is often ill-defined or not discussed. Social class is often incorrectly reduced to an individual's income level, yet it is a lived experience that goes beyond financial status. Social class relates to an individual's social location or positionality related to income level, education, worldview, economic identity, beliefs, and more (Clark et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2020). The Social Class Worldview Model (SCWM; Liu, 2011) emphasizes how individuals understand themselves, others, and make sense of their place in the world based on social class. The model suggests there are expectations and demands based on social class, and an individual's social class worldview is a way of making meaning and sense of these experiences. Worldview is also influenced by socialization and class consciousness, further shaping behaviors and attitudes. Individuals experience classism, or discrimination based on

class, and classism can be directed at individuals in "higher" or "lower" social classes as well as internally or laterally. The SCWM acknowledges that individuals can have a range of awareness of social class, including no awareness to high awareness, despite all individuals having a social class.

Social class is "one of the most important multicultural variables for helping professionals" and can "greatly impact life changes and opportunities" (Liu, 2011, p.3). Social class, in concert with other elements of identity, impacts views of self and others. Based on this understanding of social class, it is imperative that counselors attend to the social class location of clients. Despite this, counselors often lack social class awareness (Cook & Lawson, 2016), disproportionality deny access to services for clients from lower class backgrounds (Kugelmass, 2016), or are less effective at building the therapeutic alliance with clients from low-income backgrounds (Wolgast et al., 2021).

The Present Study

Connecting the discussion of social class with college students from low-income backgrounds, there is limited research from the perspective of clients on the interplay between social class, mental health, and counseling experiences. College students from low-income backgrounds navigate class differences on college campuses (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2019), and strengths they bring may be undervalued. Students from low-income backgrounds face barriers to receiving services (Choi & Miller, 2018; Frost et al., 2020), yet if they do seek counseling, they may experience counselors who lack social class competency (Cook & Lawson, 2016; Wolgast et al., 2021). As such, this study explored the social class worldview and counseling experiences of eleven

college students from self-identified low-income backgrounds.

The study used Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological research method for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of social class, examining the nature and meaning of those experiences. Due to the emphasis on exploring participants’ experiences and social class worldview, Moustakas’ concept of epoche was of particular importance. Epoche, or when researchers “set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85), was used to manage the researchers’ experiences when engaging with the participants’ experiences. Information on the participants, analysis process, the researchers’ positionality, and the steps to promote trustworthiness are provided below.

Participants

After IRB approval, participants were recruited from two small, liberal arts colleges located in a major East Coast metropolitan area. The colleges represented study body populations with high financial need: at one institution, 62% of undergraduate students received grant aid and 33% of students received the Pell Grant, while at the second institution, 87% of undergraduate students were awarded grant aid and 41% of students received the Pell Grant (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, n.d). Participants were recruited via email from participating college staff members and flyers on campus. At one institution, the Vice President for Student Affairs sent the email to all students,

while the Dean of Students sent the email at the second institution. The emails sent made clear that participation in the study was voluntary and not required. Eligibility for the study included status as a “traditional” college student between the ages of 18-24, self-identification as from a low-income background, and either currently receiving mental health counseling or having received mental health counseling in the past year.

A total of 12 individuals between the ages of 18-22 were interviewed for the study; however, only 11 were included in the data analysis. The participant who was not included initially stated she met the participant criteria, but through the course of the interview reported she identified as “middle class.” Her reported family income was over \$100,000, whereas the average family income reported by other participants was just under \$36,600. In addition, her self-described experiences of social class, including the level of her financial dependance on her parents at the time of the study, was not similar to the other participants’ experiences.

Other individuals expressed interest in the study but did not participate. After potential participants reached out to the researchers, the researchers followed up by resharing the eligibility criteria and information on next steps for participating. Several potential participants did not respond to the researchers, but some shared that they did not meet the inclusion criteria of having received counseling services. Recruitment for the study was ongoing and

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant Number	Gender	Race	Estimated Family Income	Highest Educational Level of Parents
1	Gender Fluid	White	\$36,000	High school diploma

2	Female	White	\$60,000	High school diploma
3	Female	Asian	Unknown	Associate degree
4	Female	White	N/A	Associate degree
5	Female	Black or African American	Unknown	Trade School
6	Female	White	\$30,000	Associate degree
7	Female	White	\$35,000	Bachelor degree
8	Female	White	\$35,000	High school diploma
9	Female	White	<i>Left Blank</i>	High school diploma
10	Female	Black or African American	\$20,000	Associate degree
11	Cisgender Woman	Black or African American	\$40,000	Bachelor degree

stopped at the point of saturation, or when additional interviews introduced no new information related to the research questions. All individuals who were interviewed received a \$10 gift certificate to Amazon. See Table 1 for more information on participant demographics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were provided with informed consent and a brief demographic form prior to the interview. Participants were allowed to choose between online or in-person interviews. Seven participants were interviewed via a secure videoconferencing platform, and four were interviewed in-person. All interviews were recorded via the same secure videoconferencing platform with a built-in transcription service. Each participant was asked a list of semi-structured interview questions, such as “How would you define your social class?” and “How well do you feel your counselor understood your social class identity?” Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview, the researchers adjusted questions and elicited additional information from participants as necessary to gather robust data. Interviews ranged from 26 to 79 minutes,

with the average interview length of 41 minutes. After completing the interview, the researchers reviewed the automated transcription for accuracy and provided the participants with a written summary as the first member check.

The researchers engaged in Moustakas’ modification on van Kaam’s method (Moustakas, 1994). The individual transcripts were analyzed across multiple steps, including removal of irrelevant information and preliminary coding using descriptive and in vivo codes. Codes were clustered, and individual participant themes were identified. After individual participant themes were confirmed by examining the transcript, textual and structural descriptions were created based on the van Kamm method (Moustakas, 1994). Each participant was sent their participant themes and description of their interview, which included direct quotes and underlying meanings of experiences. Participants were also sent a preliminary document that identified commonalities in experiences across participants, which was created based on individual themes and descriptions. From the

codes and descriptions of the individual interviews, the authors reviewed and verified the codes across all interviews, resulting in three rounds of coding. After the final round of coding, the researchers engaged in two rounds of identifying preliminary themes across all participants. From this, five themes emerged, and the researchers built the composite description provided in the results section below.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality

The researchers engaged in several strategies to promote the components of trustworthiness in qualitative research as identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researchers used environmental triangulation of recruiting participants from two different institutions. The researchers provided feedback and context to each other on codes and descriptions created. The researchers also created a careful and detailed audit trail, reflecting the iterative process of discussion, recoding, and alternative perspectives. To ensure accuracy of participant experiences, the researchers conducted two separate member checks, which were described above. Participants were invited to share corrections, additions, or additional feedback. No participant provided additional context or corrections. In addition to member checks, thick descriptions of the participant experiences are provided below using direct quotes.

The researchers engaged in the process of epoche throughout the research, attending to their own understanding, experiences, and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). The researchers used reflective journaling and debriefing as the primary tools to support the process of epoche. Researchers were particularly cognizant of their own personal social class location as well as their experiences as counselors and counselor educators throughout the process. The first and third researchers identify as growing up lower

middle class and currently identify as members of the professional class. The second researcher identifies as growing up working class and currently identifies as professional class or upper middle class. The first and second researcher identify as White cisgender women; the third researcher identifies as a Black cisgender woman. All researchers acknowledged the experiences of being from a lower-income background while growing up, the shift to their current social class identification, and the impact of their social class identity on the research process.

Results

From the analysis process, five themes emerged. These themes illustrate the social class worldview and mental health experiences described by participants. The themes are interconnected, and the order of presentation below is not hierarchical.

Theme A: A Felt Sense of Social Class

All participants had a felt sense of social class, despite initially expressing difficulty in defining or describing their social class. Participants connected social class to income level, such as Participant 4, who said social class was “social status based on income.” Participants also shared lived experiences that directly related to their social class understanding. Participants who identified as Black or African American closely identified social class with racial identity. Participant 10 said social class “has a lot to do with race,” and Participant 5 said social class is like a “caste system... whatever social class that you are born into, that's the social place that you're staying.” Participant 10 discussed the impact of racism and classism, such as changing the way she spoke or her hair because “being Black, certain stuff isn't acceptable to society.” While non-Black participants often discussed hiding their social class in certain settings, Black participants

indicated an inability to hide their social class, resulting in changing or adjusting the way they presented themselves to lessen classism or discrimination.

Three participants indicated they had known from an early age what their social class was, but most participants discussed understanding their social class after being exposed to others from different social class backgrounds in middle school or after. Participants most frequently used social comparison to identify social class, like attending to what clothing others wore. Participant 8 noted unwritten rules when engaging with friends from a higher social class background, such as “you don't walk in the house with shoes on.” Participant 2 shared that she helped pay her family bills, whereas she had peers who would ask their parents for money. Many participants, including Participant 4, said they “grew up a little too fast” due to having responsibilities, financial stress, or trauma that peers of higher social classes did not seem to experience. Participants also highlighted the values they gained from their social class identification; Participant 3 said, “I think it's taught me to stay humble and to not judge people.” Participant 6 said her social class instilled the value of hard work.

Participants reported experiencing stigma and classism. Participant 11 identified stereotypes about her social class, including being “lazy and not hardworking,” and Participant 9 said, “some parents wouldn't let their kids hang out with us cause we didn't have a lot of money.” Many participants spoke about their social class experiences in a manner that suggested they were seeking to avoid classism or pity in the interview process. For instance, Participant 9 said her family was “not like poor poor,” and Participant 2 said “I help my dad pay the bills and everything, so [my social class is] kind of low, but I mean, we live comfortably.” In

addition, participants occasionally engaged in upward or lateral classism. For instance, Participant 5 described the “elite social class” as “selfish,” and Participant 7 said, “I don't view myself as like a lesser person” because she was going to college to “get out of” the lower social class.

Theme B: Family and Environmental Factors Influencing Mental Health

Many participants reported experiencing mental health symptoms prior to enrolling in college, and all eleven participants noted family and environmental factors influencing their mental health. Participant 9 said her brother was in therapy, but “my mom just assumed, well, the rest of us must be okay... If we were sad or crying, it had to be like for a specific reason.” Many participants shared that mental health was not discussed in their families. Participant 8 reported, “When I was younger, it was really like not acceptable to go and receive help... It really wasn't something you talk about. Like you, just like, deal with it and move on.” Participant 10 shared a surprising conversation with her mother:

[I] told her what I was going through mentally, and she recommended [a counseling center] to me and told me she goes there. And I actually never knew that, never knew that my mom struggled with you know, mental health issues.

Many participants found college to be a supportive environment for seeking help. Participants described their college as providing accessible services and promoting an accepting atmosphere related to mental health struggles. Participant 10 said, “M colleges now...they actually encourage you to, you know, get help if you're feeling down, and some of the teachers help you out with that as well.” However, some participants had negative experiences at college

and felt as though it was assumed that college students would be mentally unwell. Participant 1 reported,

I feel like in college, like it's kind of like, when you signed up for this, you knew [it] was going to take a toll on your mental health, so be quiet about it. [The college] will give you resources, but we don't want to hear about it...It's just a given that college kids are going to struggle with their mental health.

Others reported that even with the access to services and discussions of mental health, a taboo remained. Participant 4 noted,

I think as a college student, there's like a lot of talk about resources, but still, there's that stigma... I remember last year when I went just walking [to the counseling center], I was just super embarrassed. Like I didn't want anyone to see me walking there or anything...it felt like something I should be ashamed of.

Theme C: Mental Health Stress and Social Class

Participants indicated a relationship between social class and mental health; specifically, nine out of 11 participants indicated that individuals who were from lower-income backgrounds had lower mental health outcomes. Many participants shared their personal experiences of this and spoke of challenges paying bills or the impact of financial stress, including the stress of managing life as a student. Participant 1 said, "I'm worried about my grades, I'm worrying about working full time, and I'm worrying about what is going on with FAFSA." Participant 6 said, "not working as much as in school stresses me out because I have bills, and that makes me more anxious about how I will get the money." In addition to the financial stress, participants, such as Participant 4, noted the social impact: "I

never really had a social life or anything. I mean, I didn't really have time to make a lot of friends or anything like that, so that was always difficult for me."

Participants noted significant barriers to receiving mental health services as related to their social class. These barriers included cultural barriers, stigma, and family expectations. Participant 10 shared that "growing up in a Black household, they...hint to just ignore, like to ignore your problems." Nine out of the 11 participants explicitly mentioned financial constraints to receiving mental health services, including hidden costs such as time, gas money, and having to take unpaid time off from work. Participant 3 said,

I feel like counseling is a lot of money. And sometimes it can be hard for people to come up with the money to get healthy... Personally, that was also a part of my situation. That it was a lot [of money], and I was like, "Do I really need the help? Can I just suck it up and deal with it for a little bit?"

Participants also discussed challenges with finding a counselor they perceived to be competent due to access and finances. Participant 1 called "government assisted mental health help" an "absolute nightmare," and Participant 6 said she only went to the college counseling center because "I can't afford anyone anywhere else, but like I wish I could." Some participants also experienced a combination of financial barriers and a lack of representation of counselors with similar backgrounds. Participant 11 said a previous counselor of hers "didn't understand half the things that I was saying. And he told me he didn't understand how things work that I was saying, but I had nobody else to go to really that matched my demographic."

Theme D: Valuing Counseling Despite Mixed Experiences

Overall, participants reported believing that counseling had value, even if their personal experiences of counseling were mixed. Three out of the 11 participants described their overall counseling experiences as positive, one participant described her counseling experience as limited but neutral, and seven participants described positive and negative or mixed experiences. Participants with positive experiences shared that their counselors were empathetic, caring, engaging, and interactive. Participants with positive experiences also said they were able to be themselves in counseling. Participant 5 shared her counselor “made me feel like a real person.” Ultimately, participants said that finding the right counselor and having a “good fit” with their counselor made the counseling experience positive and productive.

Negative experiences with counselors included counselors who were not helpful or dismissive, as well as counselors who lacked boundaries, competence, or diversity in experience and representation. Participant 7 described concerns with when counselors were not able to manage their emotional state. She said after disclosing past trauma to counselors, “that’s usually when they’d give the puppy dog eyes... I felt like they became like a friend, not like a counselor. They would kind of like cross over.” Participant 11 also said a counselor she worked with “couldn’t handle half the things that I had to disclose. Like she would physically start tearing up and then [be] like in a numb, emotional state.” Other negative experiences occurred when participants felt as though counseling was not helpful. Participant 8 discussed a desire to learn how to “deal with” her symptoms better, not just “talk about my feelings.” She described a counselor who would attempt to talk about her extracurriculars as opposed to her presenting concerns. She said,

“Why are we talking about this? Like it has nothing to do with anything. Like she would just want to have a conversation, and I was like, we’re not friends, like what am I here for?”

Theme E: The Need for Increased Counselor Awareness

All participants suggested the need for counselors to increase their social class awareness and sensitivity. For instance, Participant 1 said, “I want counselors to understand that, like, lower class really does have an impact on mental health,” and Participant 9 said that counselors should “definitely ask more questions” regarding social class. Participant 5 said, “if you don’t understand, say you don’t understand, be honest with us.” She went on to encourage counselors to “explore” rather than to make assumptions.

Participants also noted the importance of building a therapeutic relationship and avoiding judgment. Participant 8 said “it’s just important [for counselors] to listen and like try to really understand how a person’s feeling.” Participant 7 said it would be helpful for counselors to understand “why [people like me] pull away from counseling,” and indicated she was not interested in receiving services when she felt pitied by the counselor. Participant 10 said counselors should “be patient... everybody wasn’t raised to, you know, talk about their feelings and share how they feel with other people. So just be patient and give [clients] time to open up to you and get comfortable with you.”

Most participants reported assuming that their counselor was from a different social class background. Participants shared stories of what counselors said or did to suggest they were from a different social class background, including a counselor Participant 1 saw who shared they were “taking a trip to Italy... like something I

would have to save up for like 25 years to do.” Participants did not suggest social class needed to be an explicit part of all conversations, provided counselors demonstrated awareness and empathy. Participant 3 said,

I could tell [there were social class differences]. Like obviously they were doing okay. But they didn’t like make it known. Like they weren’t flexing or anything. They made me feel comfortable and safe. Like they knew, and I knew, but it was never talked about.

Participants indicated that counselors should assess potential social class implications related to mental health. Participant 3 encouraged counselors to “be very understanding... take a step back to listen and see how things are going.” Participant 2 said counselors should “not judge anyone based on whatever social class they stand in.” In this, participants stressed exploration and understanding rather than stereotyping or judgment.

Discussion

The results of this qualitative study provide insight into the social class and mental health experiences of college students who identify as being from a low-income background. Fundamentally, while participants expressed difficulty or uncertainty regarding how to define or describe social class, there was a felt experience of social class for all participants. This may be due to low levels of class awareness (Liu, 2011; Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012) as well as changes in how social class is commonly defined across time and in different social groups (Cohen et al., 2017). The results of the study indicate support for understanding social class as more than financial status (Clark et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2020; Liu, 2011), as participants indicated an influence of their social class on their values, relationships, and more.

Consistent with prior research, participants had clear examples of the ways they had been shaped by their social class, including financial stress and classism (Cattaneo et al., 2019).

Participants reported distancing themselves from their class identification in certain settings, yet this differed based on racial identification. We (the researchers) originally believed that most participants would engage in code-switching related to social class. Code-switching is the process of adjusting communication style through tone, grammar, dialect based on setting, and previous research indicates that students from low-income backgrounds may use code-switching as a strategy while navigating social class differences at college (Elkins & Hanke, 2018). However, Black or African American participants used code-switching, while participants of other racial backgrounds engaged in what we termed ‘class-passing.’ In this, the participants who identified as Black or African American indicated their social class was assumed or apparent due to their race, while other participants shared strategies of hiding their social class location to try to “pass” as being from a higher social class. This aligns with differing definitions of social class based on race (Cohen et al., 2017), where race was not a salient social class factor for White participants but a primary factor for Black or African American participants. It also highlights an understudied area of social class related to how individuals may hide or distance themselves from their social class.

The findings of the present study align with previous research regarding the impact of social class on mental health (Wahlbeck et al., 2017), as participants suggested a relationship between class-based stressors and negative mental health outcomes. Individuals from low-income backgrounds must often overcome barriers to receiving counseling, including stigma (Choi &

Miller, 2018) and financial constraints (Ebert et al., 2019), which participants discussed in detail. Participants had a positive view of counseling in general (Sabaner & Arnold, 2021); however, their personal experiences varied. Participants who shared positive experiences discussed feeling cared for, listened to, and understood. They noted that their counselors were able to adjust and adapt their personal style to meet the participants' preferences. These are indicators of a positive working alliance (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003), whereas the negative experiences of participants indicated potential concerns related to counselor skills and training. Due to the nature of the study only client exploring client views, it is not possible to know if the participants' experiences were due to lack of counselor competency or some other issue. However, many participants shared negative experiences, affirming the need for increased social class awareness of counselors (Cook & Lawson, 2016; Thompson et al., 2015).

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Participation was limited to students from low-income backgrounds who received counseling; this inclusion criteria limits generalizability to students from low-income backgrounds who have not received services. The lack of gender and racial/ethnic diversity in the sample also impacts transferability to broader groups. It is important to note that several individuals representing diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds were interested in participating in the study but were not eligible to participate due to not having engaged in counseling services. This is potentially due to sociocultural factors that influence help-seeking behaviors related to race/ethnicity (Kam et al., 2019) or structural barriers based on income. In addition, male students' help-seeking behaviors are influenced by stigma and gender roles, often leading them to seek services at a lower rate (Conceição et al.,

2022; Hubbard et al., 2018; Nogueira, et al., 2021). Research indicates gender differences related to coping strategies (Graves et al., 2021), which suggests the results of this study would have been impacted by greater gender diversity. Regardless of reasons for not receiving services, additional research is needed to understand the relationship between social class and mental health for students from low-income backgrounds who do not engage in counseling.

Other limitations included the wording of interview questions. While it became apparent that participants had a felt sense of social class, answering some of the questions seemed to be a challenge for participants. Participants often struggled initially to answer how they would define their social class, but through the process of the interview shared experiences that illustrated their social class. Participants also seemed confused when asked questions about other elements of their identity that might impact their social class experiences. This appeared to be a combination of interview questions that were intentionally open-ended with the purpose to capture participant experience (such as questions surrounding identity), as well as the general lack of discussion of social class in the larger culture (Sanders & Mahalingam, 2012). Finally, a limitation of the study was that both institutions where participants were recruited from were small, 4 year liberal-arts colleges in the same metropolitan area. As such, experiences in this study may not be reflective of college students at community colleges, large state universities, or in other geographic areas.

Implications

This study provides clinical and research implications. Clinical implications include better training for counselors working with individuals from low-income backgrounds (Cook & Lawson, 2016; Thompson et al., 2015). Participants who shared positive experiences of

counseling stated that their counselors exhibited genuine interest, empathy, and care; yet participants also described negative experiences where counselors displayed pity, misunderstanding, or engaged in ethical transgressions. As such, continued support for counselors in building therapeutic alliances as well as knowing when to appropriately use counseling skills is needed. A strong therapeutic alliance in counselor-client dyads from different social class backgrounds is possible (Behn et al., 2018) but increased cultural humility and understanding of social class is necessary to develop this alliance.

Additionally, several participants indicated dissatisfaction with their ability to access quality care. They described working with overworked counselors at underfunded or understaffed locations, financial or structural barriers limiting their choice of counselor, or developing a relationship with a counselor only to have that counselor take another position at a different agency. Research indicates that counselors who work with clients from low-income backgrounds experience these frustrations as well, acknowledging barriers to treatment, lack of training, or countertransference impacting care (Thompson et al., 2015). This points to systemic issues, specifically that individuals from self-identified low-income backgrounds often have limited access to qualified and experienced counselors.

Future research is needed to explore the impact of race and ethnicity on social class understanding and experiences in counseling. We advocate for additional research to consider the relationship between race and social class, including expanding the definition of social class to include race/ethnicity. For instance, one participant linked social class to the caste system (Cohen et al., 2017; Wilkerson, 2020), which is a powerful perspective warranting further

exploration. This view also clearly indicates the need to consider other primary factors that influence social class beyond financial status alone. In addition, more research is needed to explore experiences of populations with greater gender diversity, racial diversity, and emerging adults not in college. It may also be helpful to explore other identities specific to college experience, such as first-generation status.

Conclusion

Many college students face mental health challenges (Liu et al., 2019), and those who identify from low-income backgrounds encounter additional stressors (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Jordan, 2021). In this study, eleven college student participants who self-identified as being from low-income backgrounds shared their experiences of receiving mental health counseling. Participants struggled to define social class but identified the impact of their social class, including the strain on their mental health. Participants overall perceived mental health and counseling as important, yet they had mixed experiences when engaging in counseling. All participants shared a desire for increased counselor understanding of social class and for counselors to without class-based judgement. Counselors are encouraged to build fundamental counseling skills, increase social class awareness, and form strong therapeutic alliances to support individuals from diverse social class backgrounds.

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