



PENNSYLVANIA COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

A Branch of the American Counseling Association

Journal of the Pennsylvania Counseling Association

Volume 29, Number 1

Article 4

Spring, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71463/WUDY6923>

Labor Unionization: Counseling and Pedagogical Innovation for Counselor Education

Waleed Y. Sami¹

¹Department of Psychology, Mental Health Counseling, City College of New York

Author Note

Waleed Y. Sami, Department of Psychology, Mental Health Counseling, City College of New York. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Waleed Y. Sami, Department of Psychology, North Academic Center, Room 7/120, 160 Convent Avenue, New York, NY 10031
Email Address: wsami@ccny.cuny.edu



PENNSYLVANIA COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

A Branch of the American Counseling Association

Journal of the Pennsylvania Counseling Association

Labor Unionization: Counseling and Pedagogical Innovation for Counselor Education

Waleed Y. Sami¹

¹City College of New York

Abstract

Labor unions have historically highlighted the critical link between labor relationships, mental health, and vocational outcomes. This article reviews the role of labor unionization as a key social determinant of mental health through a constructivist and social justice-based lens, while discussing its implications for teaching and practice in counselor education. Considerations for CACREP's 2024 standards are also provided for educators looking for potential integration across training and pedagogy.

Keywords: labor unions, counseling, psychotherapy, social determinants, mental health

Labor Unionization: Counseling and Pedagogical Innovation for Counselor Education

Recent scholarship within the counseling and psychology disciplines reflects a growing recognition of the social determinants of (mental) health, or SDO(M)Hs (Johnson, 2023; Robins et al., 2022). This body of work signals a paradigmatic shift toward addressing the systemic and structural inequalities that shape mental health outcomes, research practices, and pedagogical approaches. SDOHs such as neighborhood conditions, workplace environments, recreational spaces, and places of worship demonstrate the profound influence of social structures on mental health (Kirkbride et al., 2024). These determinants influence the lived experiences and mental health of both counselors and clients through a range of direct and indirect

mechanisms that may not always be readily apparent within the counseling dyad. Since SDOHs operate through social causation, meaning social and structural conditions that influence the emergence of both negative and positive mental health outcomes, they remain an important avenue for social justice advocacy (Kirkbride et al., 2024). The environments in which people grow up and live (i.e., social determinants) influence how they perceive both themselves and others within social hierarchies and class structures (Cook et al., 2020). In this way, SDOHs profoundly shape both our personal identities and social relationships.

Although counselor education literature has increasingly turned its attention to the “cause of causes” of mental health, or SDOHs (Johnson, 2023; Johnson & Robins, 2021; Robins et al., 2022; Waters et al., 2022), counselors' awareness of these structural forces often remains limited.

This lack of knowledge reflects the profession's historical underemphasis on systemic factors (Robins et al., 2022) despite recent generational efforts to prioritize social justice and multicultural competence (Ratts et al., 2016). This limited awareness may stem from middle-class biases (Liu et al., 2017) embedded within counseling practices or from uncertainty surrounding how to meaningfully integrate discussions of structural inequality while maintaining a strong therapeutic alliance (Liu et al., 2007; Trott, & Reeves, 2018).

Within the SDOH framework, labor conditions and the role of labor unionization constitute critical, yet often overlooked, structural influences on the lives of working individuals in the United States (U.S.). Labor unions intervene on the structural level within the employer-employee relationship, contributing to improved workplace safety conditions, higher wages, reduction of poverty and income inequality, improved healthcare, greater retirement stability, and a psychological sense of solidarity and community (Hagedorn et al., 2016; Leigh, & Chakalov, 2021; Malinowski et al., 2015). Labor unions are vital for economic justice, making them a natural area of focus for counselor education pedagogy and research under the broader umbrella of social justice (Ratts et al., 2016). Emphasizing labor unionization within counselor education not only aligns with the profession's commitments to social justice but also prepares emerging counselors to conceptualize, research, and practice with an informed understanding of the structural determinants affecting various counseling subspecialties (e.g., career, mental health).

Efforts to integrate structural considerations into counselor education and practice often encounter persistent barriers from practitioners, including limited knowledge, personal or professional resistance, political ideology, and

disagreement regarding the appropriate scope of counseling (Johnson & Robins, 2021; Waters et al., 2022). Moreover, interdisciplinary literature suggests that individuals rarely form their worldviews based on abstract or structural concepts; rather, they tend to make localized, immediate comparisons to assess their position within the social hierarchy (Kim et al., 2018). Labor unions also make issues of class and social inequality particularly salient, thereby challenging counselor education's historic difficulty in teaching and conceptualizing social class within training (Cook et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2007; Tucker et al., 2021). As such, counselor education must grapple with the challenge of translating abstract structural concerns into practical, actionable knowledge. Focusing on labor unions operating in clients' workplaces makes these structural dynamics tangible, as unions directly influence wages, safety, and other material conditions that constitute key SDOHs (Kirkbride et al., 2024; Leigh, & Chakalov, 2021). Counselor education, grounded in constructivist, experiential, and social justice frameworks can, across counseling specialties, cultivate pedagogical and research agendas that explicitly address labor unions as an important SDOH.

Such engagement offers a concrete advocacy strategy aimed at reducing poverty and inequality, while also advancing the field's social justice commitments (Ratts et al., 2016) towards a multicultural working-class population. Moreover, it serves to ground structural determinants of mental health within the everyday lived experiences of clients. For counselors-in-training, labor unionization infused pedagogy provides a particularly valuable framework for assessing what constitutes decent and dignified work (Blustein et al., 2016; Blustein et al., 2022) and its relationship to mental health and well-being. Finally, the inclusion of information about labor

unions fulfills many of the standards set by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2024) and other equivalent standards of education and quality within counselor education programs. This article will review the relationship between labor unions and mental health (mediated as a SDOH), along with its connections to social justice. Furthermore, the article will integrate constructivism as a pedagogical tool for implementing labor unionization pedagogy within CACREP courses and counseling specialties to aid educators and clinicians.

Labor Unionization as a Social Determinant

Labor unions play a significant role in promoting a life-course approach to well-being by enhancing access to key markers of social mobility, including stable income, job security, and healthcare coverage (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). Research indicates that secure employment (as opposed to precarious or hazardous work), adequate wages that outpace inflation, and access to healthcare positively affect mental health trajectories across the lifespan (Hagedorn et al., 2016). Historically, labor unions have functioned not only as economic advocates but also as voluntary associations fostering social capital, similar to civic and religious institutions (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). Their decline in the United States has coincided with rising income inequality, increased employment precarity, and a loss of communal bonds that once fostered solidarity and a sense of collective identity among diverse populations (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2021; Leigh & Chakalov, 2021).

Labor unions have historically played a pivotal role in securing critical labor protections, such as the eight-hour workday, disability accommodations, and the reduction of gender and

racial wage disparities (Hagedorn et al., 2016). The distribution of income within a society is closely linked to the labor force's capacity to organize and bargain effectively, which in turn influences levels of poverty and income inequality (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021; Sami & Jeter, 2021). Despite these contributions, union representation in the U.S. has declined sharply, with a historic low of only 10.8% of workers currently unionized (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). This decline underscores a troubling paradox: while the benefits of labor unionization are well-documented, an increasingly small proportion of the workforce can access them.

Those situated at the lower end of the income spectrum, who often experience social and economic precarity, are disproportionately burdened by poor physical and mental health as well as limited access to essential resources such as food, housing, and healthcare (Hagedorn et al., 2016; Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). These disparities are structured based on social class, which reflects a relational positioning within the broader distribution of income and resources. Individuals in lower social classes often experience restricted access to the conditions necessary for well-being, much of which are mediated by their employment and vocational opportunities; therefore, labor unions concretely intervene to improve marginalized people's lives (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021).

Labor unions influence health outcomes through their capacity to bargain for higher wages and secure contractual guarantees for healthcare access (Hagedorn et al., 2016; Malinowski et al., 2015; Muller & Raphael, 2021). Although health and medical benefits are a foundational component of labor relations, they are often overlooked within broader discussions of SDOHs (Malinowski et al., 2015). Historically, unions have also played a vital role in advancing public

health initiatives, including campaigns addressing tobacco cessation, hypertension awareness, and asthma prevention (Malinowski et al., 2015). Conversely, the decline of union density is associated with rising income inequality, which in turn contributes to poorer health outcomes, including lower self-rated health (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2021).

Beyond healthcare access, unions promote both physical and mental health by facilitating access to higher and continuing education, as well as by contributing to more stable marital outcomes, particularly among men (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). In this way, unions help fulfill the criteria for "good and decent work," as conceptualized by Blustein et al. (2022), thus meeting both the survival and self-actualization needs of workers. Good and decent work, stemming from the psychology of working model, conceives of work as being vital for providing the ability to survive, get social needs met, and make meaning in a dignified way (Blustein et al., 2022). Labor unions increase the probability of obtaining good and decent work.

Labor organizing also fosters solidarity and reduces competition within the workplace, offering individuals a sense of collective identity and purpose, which in turn reduces stress and enhances social cohesion (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). The erosion of union power has been linked to serious mental health consequences, including increased rates of addiction and suicide in regions that have experienced rapid deindustrialization, witnessing a significant weakening of their social fabric (Case & Deaton, 2021; DeFina & Hannon, 2019; Ikeler, 2021). Taken together, these findings underscore that labor unions are not only economic institutions but are also deeply implicated in shaping vocational and mental health outcomes.

Labor Unions, Social Justice, and Counselor Education

As emphasized by Hagedorn et al. (2016), addressing the needs of individuals and families concentrated in lower social gradients and conditions of chronic precarity requires the implementation of broad social, political, and systemic reforms. Key interventions include reducing unemployment, enhancing individuals' subjective control over their work, raising wages, and improving both primary healthcare delivery and the quality of education. There is growing consensus across disciplines, including health and mental health, that national policy interventions aimed at improving income distribution are among the most effective strategies for stabilizing the conditions of those experiencing economic precarity (Patel, 2018). Counselor education, with its social justice principles (Ratts et al., 2016), has much to offer the public when it comes to developing expertise linking SDOHs like labor unions to mental health outcomes.

Understanding the distribution of income, resources, and broader social determinants necessitates a systemic, macro-level analysis of political and economic structures. Nevertheless, within the counseling profession, prevailing theories, research paradigms, and practitioner orientations have often reflected dominant white, middle-class, and individualistic cultural assumptions (Liu, 2017). Given the contemporary rise in poverty and inequality, critically examining how social class and classism are conceptualized offers a vital opportunity to connect political economy with the lived interpersonal realities of individuals and families in lower socioeconomic strata. This approach concretizes the understanding of labor unions within counselor education pedagogy, allowing counselors-in-training to make tangible

connections between systemic forces and client experiences.

In this context, Sami and Jeter (2021) argue that counselors seeking to improve mental health and vocational outcomes for economically marginalized populations must develop an understanding of political economy, particularly the distribution of resources, to meaningfully engage in social justice advocacy. Historically, labor unions have improved both material and psychosocial outcomes for working-class populations and have served as a critical vehicle for social mobility (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). For counselor educators, engaging with the issue of income inequality, particularly as it relates to labor unionization, offers a powerful lens for understanding the intersections of work, class, and mental health.

Inequality and Labor Unions

Poverty and inequality remain central dynamics influencing mental health outcomes in the U.S. (Patel et al., 2018), with social determinants either mitigating or compounding these effects. Poverty and income inequality rates within the U.S. are large, despite the enormous amount of wealth within the nation (OECD, 2021). In 2022, the American Psychological Association (APA) identified inflation and economic instability as the most significant sources of stress for Americans, highlighting the relevance of income and social class to mental health (APA, 2022). The wealthiest cities in the U.S. are now seven times wealthier than the poorest, with this disparity having doubled since the year 1960 (Suss et al., 2024); the wealth in those cities is concentrated in the hands of a few, creating enormous health and mental health pressures for many clients seeking mental health services. The rise in poverty and inequality presents profound challenges for the counseling profession, complicating clients' access to stable

and meaningful work and shaping vocational choices under conditions of economic insecurity.

Labor unions have also historically played a key role in mitigating income inequality and poverty, which are urgent challenges within the field of counselor education (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). Counselors are uniquely positioned to address the intersections of systemic policy, social inequity, and individual mental health, both within the therapeutic context and through broader social justice and advocacy efforts (Ratts et al., 2016). In particular, counselors can play a critical role in elucidating the connection between work structures and mental health outcomes within the counseling relationship, particularly with clients who experience economic precarity and poverty. Labor unions, as systemic interventions, reshape the employment relationship by enabling collective bargaining for better wages, benefits, and working conditions—outcomes that have been shown to reduce income inequality and poverty (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). Education on labor unions in the counseling curriculum potentially allows students to make natural connections between work structures, poverty, and inequality through a SDOH lens.

Persistent findings in the counselor education literature have demonstrated that counselors often struggle to work effectively with individuals experiencing poverty or economic precarity (Clark et al., 2020; Foss-Kelly et al., 2017; Myers & Gill, 2004). Much of this difficulty can be traced back to the challenges of integrating social class perspectives and supervision into early training, along with long-standing challenges in developing clinical frameworks for assessing SDOHs and systems-thinking (Boyd et al., 2025; Clark et al., 2020). Labor union integration into counseling curriculums facilitates constructivist conversations around poverty and income

inequality, while developing the awareness and advocacy tools needed to address the needs of clients facing economic precarity (Clark et al., 2020). Nonetheless, counselors addressing poverty and inequality (along with the integration of labor unionization as a social determinant) may be hampered by persistent challenges in conceptualizing social class within the discipline.

Social Class and Labor Unions

Counselors frequently report discomfort and limited awareness when addressing social class and economic inequality, which can unintentionally reinforce classism in clinical practice (Cook et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2007; Tucker et al., 2021). Although students often feel confident discussing identity-related topics, they tend to avoid clients' financial hardships or broader class-based stressors (Tucker et al., 2021). As a result, many counselors remain unfamiliar with how economic systems, labor conditions, and access to decent work shape mental health. These gaps in training have been well documented in the counseling literature, which continues to show inconsistent definitions of social class and minimal integration of class-related topics across curricula (Clark et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2020; Shepard et al., 2022). Without explicit engagement with these issues, counseling professionals risk replicating the same middle-class assumptions that have historically shaped the discipline's theories and practices (Liu et al., 2007; Tucker et al., 2021).

This pattern is further reinforced by broader cultural narratives that attribute poverty to personal failings rather than systemic inequities. Research shows that individuals who endorse meritocratic beliefs or internalize the "American Dream" are more likely to view economic hardship as a function of individual effort, a bias that can subtly influence counselors' perceptions of clients (Hoyt et al., 2021). In unequal societies,

these beliefs also contribute to psychological strain and social comparison, shaping clients' aspirations, vocational identity, and experiences of distress (Hoyt et al., 2021).

When counselors overlook these dynamics, they may miss key structural contributors to client problems, such as wage instability, occupational hazards, or the absence of collective protections in the workplace. This oversight helps explain why labor unions, despite their relevance to working conditions, financial security, and community support, remain largely absent from counseling discourse on SDOHs (Clark et al., 2020; Lott, 2013). Integrating class consciousness and labor-related factors into counselor education is therefore essential for strengthening the profession's commitment to equity and for equipping practitioners to address the material realities shaping clients' lives.

Integrating Labor Unionization through a Constructivist and Social Justice Perspective

Integrating labor unions into counselor education pedagogy requires a creative and novel innovation with the potential to deepen SDOH expertise and critical consciousness across a range of courses and specialties. Social justice and constructivism within counselor education hold this potential. Constructivism in counselor education pedagogy is a valuable paradigm that informs the approach to labor union integration within counselor education for counselors-in-training (Kang et al., 2017; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2010). Educators adopting constructivist methods often incorporate experiential activities, case-based learning, and dialogical teaching strategies that encourage students to reflect on their lived experiences, personal values, and emerging professional identities (Kang et al., 2017). This approach facilitates cognitive development along with emotional and interpersonal growth, which

are crucial components in preparing competent, reflective, and socially responsive counselors.

Constructivist approaches to counselor education frequently confront students with opposing perspectives that challenge their assumptive worldviews, leading to intellectual growth (Atkins & Lorelle, 2022). This process involves decentering one's assumptions and engaging with diverse viewpoints, cultivating cultural humility towards clients and critical awareness of social issues that influence both clinical practice and education (Atkins & Lorelle, 2022). Moreover, constructivist pedagogy supports the integration of multicultural and social justice frameworks into counselor training. By centering learners' sociocultural contexts and promoting critical consciousness, constructivist strategies help students interrogate systems of power and oppression that shape both their clients' and their own lived realities (Keppler et al., 2016). The generation of critical consciousness is part and parcel of the unionization experience (Leigh, & Chakalov, 2021). Furthermore, the sense of community and solidarity, along with potential relationship-building across diverse groups of workers, promotes critical consciousness rather than polarization. Thus, the constructivist paradigm aligns naturally with the integration of labor union information within counselor education curricula.

Social justice is a foundational imperative in contemporary counselor education, shaping how future counselors understand their roles within increasingly diverse and inequitable social contexts (Ratts et al., 2016). Rooted in a commitment to equity and human dignity, social justice pedagogy challenges educators to move beyond technical skill-building and toward fostering critical consciousness and ethical responsibility in students (Ratts et al., 2016). This approach includes interrogating systemic

oppression, power dynamics, and the sociopolitical factors that impact mental health and well-being (Decker et al., 2016). This orientation is not only ethically essential but also supported by professional guidelines, such as those from the American Counseling Association (ACA), which encourage counselors to act as advocates and agents of change (2014). Through social justice-infused pedagogy, counselor education becomes not only a space for professional skill development but a transformative process that equips students to recognize and resist systemic inequities (Decker et al., 2016).

Implications for Counselor Education

Counselors and counselor educators draw upon a range of pedagogical and clinical tools to prepare for and engage in effective practice (Kang et al., 2017). Integrating pedagogical instruction on labor unionization as a SDOH provides counselor education with a tangible framework for understanding and addressing economic injustice, workplace precarity, and related SDOHs and career development. Table 1.1 offers a starting point for the integration of labor union pedagogy across different specialties, highlighting its probable linkages to research, CACREP standards, and pedagogical outcomes (CACREP, 2024).

CACREP Standards

CACREP is the nationally recognized accrediting body responsible for establishing and maintaining standards in counselor education (Lu & Pillay, 2020). Through its roles in accreditation, policy advocacy, and quality assurance, CACREP helps ensure that counselor training programs remain aligned with the evolving needs of the profession (CACREP, 2024). Central to this mission is the integration of social justice and advocacy competencies into counselor preparation (CACREP, 2024). A robust

Table 1

Labor Union Integration into Counselor Education

Counseling Specialty	Labor Union Integration	Pedagogical Outcome
Addiction Counseling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationship with de-unionization and overdose deaths (Definna, 2018) 2. Labor unions as sites of public health education and collaboration (Malinowski et al., 2016) 3. Unions as helpful in promoting stable working conditions and accessing care (DeFina, & Hannon, 2019; CACREP, 2024, p. 5-A, 8-10) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constructivism: allowing students to connect SDOHs with practice 2. Experiential: integration of case studies from the literature
Career Counseling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Labor unions as promoting good and decent work (Blustein et al., 2022) 2. Labor unions as sites of work training and career development outside of college education (Malinowski et al., 2016) 3. Theories of globalization and labor under capitalism and its relationship with work (Sami et al., 2021, CACREP, 2024, p., 5-B, 1-10) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constructivism: allowing students to connect SDOHs with practice 2. Constructivism: connecting good and decent work with mental health counseling/integration 3. Experiential: creating projects or collaborations with labor unions and career counseling classrooms
Rehabilitation Counseling	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Labor unions and their history of advocating for disability rights (Fremlin, 2017) 2. CACREP’s requirements for vocational advocacy, accommodations, and work hardening (CACREP, 2024, p., 5-G, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constructivism: connecting SDOHs with practice 2. Experiential: allowing partnerships to develop with rehabilitation counselors and labor unions over worker disability accommodations

Note. This table represents a foundational integration; it is not the potential basis for all integration that may be possible.

understanding of political economy, income inequality, and the social determinants of poverty equips future counselors with the material literacy necessary to engage in meaningful social justice work (CACREP, 2024; Sami & Jeter, 2021).

Labor unionization represents one such structural intervention (Malinowski et al., 2015). Here, the aim is not to involve labor unions directly in counseling practice but to help counselors understand how unions influence clients' working conditions and broader economic environments. Recognizing how unions affect wages, safety, benefits, and job security equips counselors and counselor educators to identify systemic contributors to client distress and to advocate more effectively (Johnson, 2023; Robins et al., 2022). Within counselor education, unions can also be used as pedagogical case examples that illustrate how collective workplace structures influence key determinants of mental health. For counselors-in-training, exposure to these structural dynamics supports the development of critical consciousness and contextualized case conceptualization. Integrating this content aligns with CACREP's mission to promote advocacy, access, and equity while strengthening the field's capacity to address the structural roots of mental health disparities.

Social Justice – Poverty and Inequality

Counselors frequently work with clients experiencing economic precarity or positioned within lower social gradients. Capitalism remains the dominant framework organizing resource and labor distribution in society (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2021), which means that structural inequalities generated by this system often manifest as poverty, unstable employment, and limited access to healthcare. Consequently, interventions aimed at reducing economic inequities fall within counseling's ethical

responsibilities, especially given the profession's commitment to social justice (CACREP, 2024; Ratts et al., 2016). Empirical research supports this view: membership in labor unions has been linked to higher wages, improved benefits, greater job security, access to employer-provided health insurance, and safer workplace conditions, all of which are strongly associated with better physical and mental health (Malinowski et al., 2015; Muller & Raphael, 2021). Further, recent evidence shows that union membership among U.S. workers correlate with significantly better self-rated health, mediated in part by greater control over work schedules and working conditions (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2021). For counselors and counselor educators committed to structural change, advocating for increased unionization across the mental health field and broader society offers a powerful, yet underutilized, strategy to advance social justice for clients living in poverty (Hoyt et al., 2021; Tucker et al., 2021).

Social Justice – Racial and Gender Justice

Counselors and counseling educators have increasingly adopted anti-racist and gender-justice frameworks to address systemic racial inequities in the U.S. (Ratts et al., 2016). Nonetheless, racial justice work within the counseling profession remains incomplete without an analysis of the economic structures that disproportionately marginalize racial minorities, immigrants, and women—groups that are often concentrated in lower social gradients and precarious economic conditions (Sami & Jeter, 2021). Anti-racist counseling practice must be attentive not only to interpersonal bias and cultural competence but also to systemic economic interventions that challenge structural inequality. Labor unionization offers one such intervention. As an evidence-based strategy, unionization has been shown to reduce racial and gender disparities in wages, job security, and access to health care (Economic Policy Institute,

2021; Haggerdon et al., 2016). While counselors cannot unionize their client's workplaces, understanding the benefits that unions provide improves counselor's advocacy and knowledge of SDOH.

Anti-racist counseling practices therefore align naturally with a critical analysis of the political economy and are consistent with CACREP's emphasis on social justice and multicultural competence. Specifically, the CACREP (2024) standards on social and cultural diversity call for counselor education programs to address diversity, equity, and critical thinking. These directives call for attention to class privilege and SDOHs, which pose significant challenges to both counselor training and clinical practice (Cook et al., 2020, 2021; Liu et al., 2004, 2007). Race and class remain interwoven within the U.S., making class issues also racial justice issues and vice versa.

Social Justice – Social Class and Classism

It is critical to understand how classism functions, both in the minds of clients and the attitudes of practitioners. Counselors and educators, many of whom come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, may unconsciously reinforce classism in their practice and pedagogy (Cook et al., 2020, 2021; Liu et al., 2007). Addressing these dynamics within counselor education requires open, critical discussions about poverty, income inequality, and the structural determinants of mental health experience (Leigh, & Chakalov, 2021). Integrating knowledge about labor unions facilitates this pedagogy, enabling constructivist connections by focusing on sectors of the population most likely to benefit concretely from stable working conditions, higher wages, and safer work environments.

Integrating constructivist examples, such as labor unionization, that connect income

inequality to SDOH within counselor training programs may help reduce attributional bias (Hoyt et al., 2022), improve counselor broaching strategies (Johnson, 2023), and foster greater empathy and competence when working with economically marginalized clients (Sax, 2015; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2022). Moreover, such engagement may cultivate counselors' interest in broader systemic solutions, such as advocating for labor unionization, as part of their commitment to social justice.

Curriculum

Courses in counselor education, particularly those focused on career counseling, addictions, and specialties such as career and rehabilitation counseling stand to benefit from integrating empirical and conceptual perspectives on labor unionization. For example, the CACREP (2024) standards for career counseling explicitly require programs to incorporate approaches for assessing how work environment conditions influence clients' life experiences. Work conditions, labor practices, and the structural benefits and disadvantages tied to various occupations are central concerns within the SDOH framework (Waters et al., 2022). Individuals working in more precarious or low-autonomy positions report diminished subjective control and are more likely to experience poor health and mental health outcomes (Tang et al., 2022).

In the U.S. context, where wage labor is increasingly disconnected from gains in productivity (Chu et al., 2018; Patel et al., 2018), the psychological and vocational stressors faced by workers are often intensified (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). These realities directly affect clients' experiences and should be addressed in counselor education. The CACREP (2024) standards for career counseling also focus on globalization, emphasizing that students should understand the impact of globalization on careers and the workplace. Globalization, closely linked

to neoliberal economic policies, has reshaped labor markets through outsourcing, technological automation, and the erosion of worker protections, conditions that call for critical engagement with the political economy in the training of career counselors (Kang et al., 2017).

Labor unions offer structural solutions to the instability and inequity intensified by globalization, such as advocating for livable wages, job security, and worker voices (Leigh & Chakalov, 2021). Blustein's (2016) *Psychology of Working Theory (PWT)* provides a useful theoretical foundation for integrating labor unionization into career counseling pedagogy and research. The theory emphasizes the intersections of work, survival, and social inclusion—core themes that align with unionization's goals and mechanisms. Furthermore, the theory argues that access to good and decent work is foundational to social justice concerns (Blustein, 2016), aligning with the ethos of the counseling profession (Ratts et al., 2016).

The field of addictions counseling, a specialization in professional counselor identity (CACREP, 2024), benefits from integrating labor unionization as a social determinant in addictions pedagogy. The decline of labor unions, combined with rising economic precarity, offers a critical context for understanding the rise of addiction-related disorders (Defina & Hannon, 2019). Case and Deaton (2021) describe an alarming rise in “deaths of despair,” including addiction and suicide among working-class Americans in deindustrialized regions. These findings are supported by Ikeler (2021), who has identified labor union decline as a significant predictor of overdose mortality. Emerging empirical evidence further suggests that unions are protective against such outcomes (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of equipping addictions counselors with tools to

analyze and address the systemic roots of substance use disorders.

Rehabilitation counseling, another critical specialty, can similarly benefit from integrating labor union frameworks into pedagogy and advocacy. CACREP (2024) standards for rehabilitation counseling emphasize the importance of understanding education and employment trends, labor market information, and career resources as they relate to individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities face increased vocational barriers and heightened risk for mental health challenges (Fremlin, 2017). Labor unions play a crucial advocacy role in this domain; for instance, the AFL-CIO passed a 2009 resolution recognizing labor's role in protecting workplace rights for individuals with disabilities through collective bargaining (Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO, 2009). Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO) identified six core areas where unions promote disability inclusion: (a) ensuring legislative and labor standard adequacy; (b) raising awareness and advocating for equity; (c) forming and representing unions; (d) upholding decent work standards; (e) supporting recruitment, career advancement, and retention; and (f) providing services and accommodations at work (Fremlin, 2017). Through these six core areas, counselor education serves as a vital partner with labor unions in advancing workplace equity and disability justice.

Conclusion

The interconnections between systemic concepts such as SDOHs, social class, and labor unions offer counselor education vital theoretical and practical frameworks for advancing both pedagogy and practice. It is important to note that labor union discussions or integration within counselor education does not automatically create the aforementioned associations; rather,

the integration serves to create an emergent reality in which connections between social class, poverty, income inequality, and social justice are explored naturally through constructivist pedagogy. These connections are grounded in the ACA (2014)'s Code of Ethics, with its emphasis on social justice. In turn, these connections may be further concretized with experiential learning, which can aid counselors-in-training in developing their self-awareness and critical consciousness in relation to social disparities and inequalities. Table 1.1 highlights inclusion of labor union pedagogy across traditional CACREP (2024) specialties and may be used as a starting primer by educators looking for a constructivist integration. Future empirical work may investigate the role labor union pedagogy plays in developing awareness around SDOH and social class conscious amongst counselors-in-training.

References

- APA. (2022, March 10). Inflation, war push stress to alarming levels at two-year COVID-19 anniversary. <https://www.apa.org>. Retrieved September 27, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2022/03/inflation-war-stress>
- Atkins, K., & Lorelle, S. (2022). Cultural humility: Lessons learned through a counseling cultural immersion. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 15(1). Retrieved from <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/jcps/vol15/iss1/9>
- Blustein, D. L., Lysova, E. I., & Duffy, R. D. (2022). Understanding decent work and meaningful work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 289–314. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031921-024847>
- Blustein, D. L., Olle, C., Connors-Kellgren, A., & Diamonti, A. J. (2016). Decent work: A psychological perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00407>
- Boyd, D. P., Hays, D. G., & Jones, L. K. (2025). Assessing and addressing social determinants of mental health in counseling: A grounded theory investigation. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 103(4), 469–483. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.70003>
- CACREP. (2024). *2024 CACREP standards*. Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. <https://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2024-CACREP-Standards-Guidance-Documents-November-2024-update-1.pdf>
- Chu, A. C., Kou, Z., & Liu, X. (2018). Labor union and the wealth-income ratio. *Economics Letters*, 167, 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2018.02.023>
- Cook, J. M., Clark, M., Wojcik, K. D., Nair, D., Baillargeon, T., & Kowalik, E. (2020). A 17-year systematic content analysis of social class and socioeconomic status in two counseling journals. *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation*, 11(2), 104–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2019.1647409>

- Cook, J. M., Ong, L. Z., & Zavgorodnya, O. (2021). A Mixed-methods examination of counselors' social class and socioeconomic status perceptions. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, 60*(2), 117–136. <https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12160>
- DeFina, R., & Hannon, L. (2019). De-unionization and drug death rates. *Social Currents, 6*(1), 4–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496518804555>
- Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO. (2009). *Resolution 18: Unions should give people with disabilities a voice and a face [amended]*. American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. <https://aflcio.org/resolution/unions-should-givepeople-disabilities-voice-and-face-amended>
- Economic Policy Institute. (2021). *Unions help reduce disparities and strengthen our democracy*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/unions-help-reduce-disparities-and-strengthen-our-democracy/>
- Eisenberg-Guyot, J., Mooney, S. J., Barrington, W. E., & Hajat, A. (2021). Does the union make us strong? Labor-Union membership, Self-rated health, and mental illness: A parametric G-Formula approach. *American Journal of Epidemiology, 190*(4), 630–641. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwaa221>
- Eisenberg-Guyot, J., Mooney, S. J., Barrington, W. E., & Hajat, A. (2021). Union burying ground: Mortality, mortality inequities, and sinking labor union membership in the United States. *Epidemiology, 32*(5), 721–730. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ede.0000000000001386>
- Foss-Kelly, L. L., Generali, M. M., & Kress, V. E. (2017). Counseling strategies for empowering people living in poverty: The I-CARE model. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 45*(3), 201–213. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12074>
- Fremlin, P. (2017). Trade union action on disability and decent work a global overview. *International Labour Organization*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_553663.pdf
- Hagedorn, J., Paras, C. A., Greenwich, H., & Hagopian, A. (2016). The role of labor unions in creating working conditions that promote public health. *American Journal of Public Health, 106*(6), 989–995. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2016.303138>
- Heiserman, N., & Simpson, B. (2017). Higher inequality increases the gap in the perceived merit of the rich and poor. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 80*(3), 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272517711919>
- Hoyt, C. L., Burnette, J. L., Forsyth, R. B., Parry, M., & DeShields, B. H. (2021). Believing in the American dream sustains negative attitudes toward those in poverty. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 84*(3), 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725211022319>

- Ikeler, P. (2021). Labor relations and the overdose crisis in the United States. *Addiction Research and Theory, 29*(4), 271–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2020.1793962>
- Johnson, K. F. (2023). Development and initial validation of the addressing client needs with social determinants of health scale (ACN: SDH). *BMC Health Services Research, 23*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-023-09292-z>
- Johnson, K., & Robins, L. B. (2021). Counselor educators experiences and techniques teaching about social-health inequities. *Journal of Counselor preparation and Supervision, 14*(4), 7. <https://doi.org/10.7729/11.0105>
- Kang, Z., Kim, H., & Trusty, J. (2017). Constructivist and social constructionist career counseling: A delphi study. *The Career Development Quarterly, 65*(1), 72–87. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12081>
- Keppler, K., Silva, D., & Berger, K. (2016). Constructivism in multicultural education. *Journal of Universality of Global Education Issues, 3*. <https://journals.tdl.org/ugei/index.php/ugei/article/download/1/1>
- Kim, H. J., McNeil-Young, V. A., Wang, D., Duffy, R. D., & Underill, B. D. (2022). Women of color and decent work: An examination of psychology of working theory. *The Career Development Quarterly, 70*(2), 125–137. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12291>
- Kim, N. R., Kim, H. J., & Lee, K. H. (2020). Social status and decent work: Test of a moderated mediation model. *The Career Development Quarterly, 68*(3), 208–221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12232>
- Kirkbride, J. B., Anglin, D. M., Colman, I., Dykxhoorn, J., Jones, P. B., Patalay, P., Pitman, A., Sonesson, E., Steare, T., Wright, T., & Griffiths, S. L. (2024). The social determinants of mental health and disorder: Evidence, prevention and recommendations. *World Psychiatry, 23*(1), 58–90. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21160>
- Leigh, J. P., & Chakalov, B. (2021). Labor unions and health: A literature review of pathways and outcomes in the workplace. *Preventive Medicine Reports, 24*, 101502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2021.101502>
- Lee, S. M., Cho, S. H., Kissinger, D., & Ogle, N. T. (2010). A typology of burnout in professional counselors. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 88*(2), 131–138. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2010.tb00001.x>
- Liu, W. M. (2017). White male power and privilege: The relationship between white supremacy and social class. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(4), 349–358. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000227>
- Lindqvist, A., Björklund, F., & Bäckström, M. (2017). The perception of the poor: Capturing stereotype content with different measures. *Nordic Psychology, 69*(4), 231–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2016.1270774>

- Lott, B. (2013). Social class myopia: the case of psychology and labor unions. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 14*(1), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12029>
- Lu, H., & Pillay, Y. (2020). Examining the 2016 CACREP Standards: A national survey. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 13*(2), 10. <https://doi.org/10.7729/42.1418>
- Malinowski, B., Minkler, M., & Stock, L. (2015). Labor unions: A public health institution. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(2), 261–271. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2014.302309>
- McAuliffe, G., & Eriksen, K. (2010). Guidelines for Constructivist-Developmental counselor education: Constructivist, developmental, and experiential approaches. In *Handbook of Counselor Preparation* (1st ed., p. 31). SAGE.
- Muller, J., & Raphael, D. (2021). Does unionization and working under collective agreements promote health? *Health Promotion International, 38*(4). <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daab181>
- Myers, J. E., & Gill, C. S. (2004). Poor, rural and female: Under-Studied, Under-Counseled, more At-Risk. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 26*(3), 225–242. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.26.3.png90pjuhl4prrh>
- OECD. (2021). *Poverty rate (indicator)*. Organization for economic cooperation and development. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/pove-ty-rate.html>
- Paro-Tompkins, C., Pereira, J., Suprina, J. S., Veloso, E., PhD, Davis, E., Goldhagen, R. F. S., Wojnas, K., & Both, S. (2023). *Multicultural competence in counseling students: Addressing social class in multicultural counseling courses*. *Journal of Counselor preparation and Supervision* <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/jcps/vol17/iss4/5/>
- Patel, V., Burns, J. K., Dhingra, M., Tarver, L., Kohrt, B. A., & Lund, C. (2018). Income inequality and depression: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the association and a scoping review of mechanisms. *World Psychiatry, 17*(1), 76–89. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20492>
- Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2016). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for the counseling profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 44*(1), 28–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12035>
- Robins, L. B., Johnson, K. F., Duyile, B., Gantt-Howrey, A., Dockery, N., Robins, L. B., & Wheeler, N. J. (2022). Family counselors addressing social determinants of mental health in underserved communities. *The Family Journal, 31*(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221132799>
- Sami, W. Y., & Jeter, C. (2021). The political economy and inequality's impact on mental health. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 43*(3), 212–227. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.43.3.04>

- Sax, S. S. (2015). *Clinicians' experiences of personal wealth: Impacts within clinical practice* (Thesis). Smith College, Northampton, MA.
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/658/>
- Shepard, D., Wheat, L. S., & Minton, C. a. B. (2022). Expanding the role of social class in multicultural counselor education curricula. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 15*(2).
<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/jcps/vol15/iss2/2/>
- Tang, M., Montgomery, M. L. T., Collins, B., & Jenkins, K. (2021). Integrating career and mental health counseling: Necessity and strategies. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 58*(1), 23–35.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/joec.12155>
- Tanjitpiyanond, P., Jetten, J., & Peters, K. (2022). How economic inequality shapes social class stereotyping. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 98*, 104248.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104248>
- Trott, A., & Reeves, A. (2018). Social class and the therapeutic relationship: The perspective of therapists as clients. A qualitative study using a questionnaire survey. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 18*(2), 166–177. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12163>
- Tucker, S. K., Schmit, M. K., & Giordana, A. L. (2021). Perceptions of poverty: Exploring counseling students' reactions to presenting concerns. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 14*(4), 1–25.
<https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps/vol14/iss4/1/>
- US Census Bureau. (2023, September 26). *Income, poverty and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2022*. Census.gov.
<https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.html>
- U.S Bureau Of Labor Statistics. (2021, January 22). *Union members summary*. U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics.
<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2020, December). *Changes in poverty rates and poverty areas over time: 2005 to 2019*.
<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/acs/acsbr20008.pdf>
- Waters, J. M., Gantt, A. C., Worth, A., Duyile, B., Johnson, K., & Mariotti, D. (2022). Motivated but challenged: Counselor educators' experiences teaching about social determinants of health. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 15*(2), 6.
<https://research.library.kutztown.edu/jcps/vol15/iss2/6/>