### Roxy Birdsall transcript

**[Music playing]**

Hi: I'm Roxy Birdsall. This is class and counselling. I'm going to be exploring how we can become aware of class dynamics in the therapy room. I'll be honest, like my own personal experiences, I had until recently been overlooking class in my counselling practice. Throughout my life I have had a complicated relationship with class. I've faced micro-aggressions and barriers due to class, from the middle-class high school peer who expressed and shock and near-contempt that I had attained an equal grade to him, to the ongoing struggle to own a home on low income and insecure employment contracts. On the flip side, I have been privileged to access education to a doctoral level, and have at times benefited from family members' wealth and networks. So even though my life, and sometimes sense of self-worth have been shaped by it, class has still managed to fly under my radar. However, I suspect that many other counsellors and psychotherapists may also fail to consider class in the counselling room.

In this article I will explore class in the present day, reasons why class may be overlooked in counselling, the implications of this on practice, and finally, considerations for practitioners to develop awareness of and explore their attitudes towards class. In my exploration of class I will be using the understanding that social class is about inequality of material wealth, and the status it consequently gives an individual. I will also make links between poverty and working-class identity.

**A middle-class profession**

Class as an issue of client diversity, and an area requiring competency within counselling practice, is severely neglected in the UK. Social class features infrequently in the counselling literature, research and academic discussion, arguably because class is increasingly considered an outdated and irrelevant notion. Despite this, I would argue that class is as important as ever. Many of the UK's top universities have been found to be rife with classism. Working-class women have been found to be the worst affected by job loss during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and rising numbers of people are experiencing destitution year on year. So why is class so neglected within the counselling profession? To begin with, it may be pertinent to consider the social class of the counsellors and psychotherapists who make up the profession. Training as a counsellor is expensive. Personal therapy, supervision and sometimes placement fees and travel costs are necessary expenditures on top of course fees. This is not to mention the time spent on undertaking the unpaid work required to gain [unclear words 0:03:03.6] qualification.

This subsequently creates a barrier for those without established financial wealth, resulting in more middle-class individuals undertaking and completing training. As one participant from [?boundary and rights 0:03:18.2 ] co-operative inquiry into social class and counselling succinctly put it, 'You need money to train as a counsellor.' Post-qualification, circumstances do not necessarily improve. In the area where I trained, there are two universities producing large cohorts of counsellors and psychotherapists in a region with very few relevant employment opportunities for them. Furthermore, in the same way that many counselling trainees are middle class, due to the costs of training as a counsellor, this can be assumed to be true for counselling trainers and tutors too. This lack of diversity risks creating a counselling culture with middle-class norms and ideals. Beyond the lack of awareness and class-[?defined 0:04:04.0] attitudes, another issue may be a discomfort in acknowledging or even naming class in the counselling room, even if awareness of this different is present.

Balmforth explored the effects of class difference between counsellor and client on the therapeutic relationship. She found that the clients who identified as working class experienced the class difference as profoundly present within the counselling relationship. Although, the working-class clients were open to discussing the difference, if initiated by the counsellor, the class-based [?parallels 0:04:38.8] meant that it felt risky to introduce the issue themselves. Although, potentially, a sensitive and tentative task for the counsellor, addressing the class difference may have had profound effects for the clients and therapy. One participant stated that, if the counsellor had addressed the class difference, then they would have felt less inadequate and more confident to be themselves. In the commonly-practiced models of therapy, there can be a predisposition to focus on the internal circumstances of the individual, rather than also acknowledging the injustice of individuals' external circumstances. As the predominant models of therapy are derived from white, Western thought, it can be said that there is an emphasis on individualism and self-determination.

A final issue may be understanding class in the modern age. As Britain has evolved economically, socially and politically, what it means to be working class or middle class has also changed. For example, classification systems such as the National Statistics Socio-economic classification, group individuals by occupation and employment. While this may have provided an accurate measure of class in previous decades, it is arguable whether this is still the case. Is an individual's occupation still relevant as a sole indicator of class, or does a single-factor classification fail to capture the current-day nuances of class? The Great British Class Survey, or GBCS, could be considered to be a more nuanced and updated way of measuring and defining class, as it brings in the role of cultural taste, social circles, financial savings, and property. This had yielded new and extended groupings beyond working and middle class, including a class of neo-affluent workers, a group of emergent service workers, and a precariat who is characterised by very low levels of capital and lasting precarious economic security.

However, these new groupings may, arguably, be more representative of where someone is in their life stage, as they may grow out of their current class simply by ageing. Despite this, the GBCS can still serve to highlight the interplay between the many factors that can contribute to class identity in addition to occupation.

**Class in practice**

As previously explored, there are many barriers to considering class in practice. However, failing to over come these barriers can impact the therapeutic relationship. In Balmforth's study an identified issue was a lack of psychological connection, and instead there was a perceived distance within the therapeutic relationship caused by the class difference. Across therapeutic approaches the relationship between therapist and client has been shown to be instrumental in client outcomes and improvement. The failure to consider class risks impairing the whole therapeutic relationship. It may also harm the client if it is considered that the client's struggles and hardships are solely resulting from internal responses that require better management or a perspective change than the very real external oppressive systems that the client is subject to are ignored. While it may, undoubtably, be helpful to equip an individual to cope with external stresses and triggers by regulating their inner responses, failing to identify oppressive systems, isms and prejudice experienced by clients [?are excluding 0:08:51.9] with injustice, and may put the onus on the client to accept an unacceptable situation.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that there is a link between poverty and an increased likelihood of experiencing mental ill health. Despite this, it is notable that working-class people are less likely to access talking therapies. We as a profession must question and examine why this is, and how we are contributing to this differential. Whether it is due to working-class perceptions of therapy, financial barriers, impaired therapeutic relationships due to class difference, or all of the above, it is our responsibility as a profession to make therapy inclusive and accessible to all.

**Class competency**

So now we have an understanding of the reasons why class may not be considered and why it is important to do so. We can explore what can be done to increase self-awareness, both in life and in counselling practice.