Abstract
This autobiographical essay addresses the question: How do the needs of students of working-class origins differ from those of their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds? As one of the invisible differences in the United States, class pervades everything we do, and we are mostly unaware of it. Readers are encouraged to examine their own presumptions about social class, including their suppositions about access to resources and how these can differ based on one’s family of origin. In addition to suggestions on how to address social class in the classroom, readers are encouraged to raise their own consciousness about class in order to reach out to students from working-class backgrounds.

The Situation
In preparing to write this essay, I sat with a student of working-class origins with whom I have a mentoring relationship and asked, “What do you want people to know about interacting with working-class students in our field?” Her answer came without hesitation: “presumptions of access.” She said folks who are not of working-class backgrounds presume everyone has access to whatever they need. Middle- and upper-class people do not think about these access presumptions, so deeply engrained are they in the consciousness of all Americans, even the working class. These access issues are like what Peggy McIntosh (1988) described regarding race in her work about White privilege. McIntosh said White folks, because of the privilege our culture affords us, carry an “invisible knapsack,” full of things always at the ready to smooth our path. We do not see, nor are we aware of, our knapsacks. Non-Whites do not have these invisible knapsacks, and they know it.

Similarly, middle- and upper-class people have invisible knapsacks of privilege and access that come with class. And here is one difference between class and race: Working-class folks are, typically, not aware of the invisible knapsacks others have. Most of us in the United States are in heavy denial of class in our culture and the privileges, or lack of, that come with socioeconomic status (Hochschild, 1995; Kliman & Madsen, 1999; Ostrove & Cole, 2004).
Yet, no matter how much we deny class, our denial does not change the facts. There are different classes in the United States, and the gap between the classes is growing, not contracting. Even with astronomical income inequality, Americans at all income levels incorrectly identify themselves as the ubiquitous “middle class.” Estimates from polls indicate that perceived middle-class annual household income ranges in the United States from $25,117 to $100,466 (e.g., see Pew Research Center’s 2008 survey results at http://pewsocialtrends.org/2008/04/09/inside-the-middle-class-bad-times-hit-the-good-life/). Clearly, people at the lower and upper levels of this range live very differently. Yet, we convince ourselves we are all in the middle, a lie that allows us to continue believing in the American Dream.

The myth of the American Dream insists that anyone born without privilege, no matter their life circumstances, can rise above the poor, nasty, brutish, and short lives fate deals them. At the heart of the American Dream is the presumption of equality of access to things that allow non-privileged folks to “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps” and change our circumstances, including education, working transportation options, health care, asset-building programs, information, and technology.

What Is Class?

Think about how people use the word class. Someone is “classy” if they show markers of upper class: elegant, tasteful, refined, and sophisticated. The opposite of classy is “tacky”: cheap, vulgar, shabby, and in bad taste. Obviously, being classy is preferred to being tacky, thus showing our cultural preference for upper-class and upper-class markers even as we deny that class is something important, or significant, in our culture.

When we meet strangers, we automatically note their sex/gender and race, mostly subconsciously. We also notice their social class markers, that is, their dress, hairstyle, speech patterns and language, the condition of their teeth, the car they drive, where they grew up, the schools they attended, and so on (Goffman, 1959; Yoshino, 2006), and interact with others differently depending on which of various categories she or he occupies. Yet, we pretend we are all the same, more or less, equal in a land of inequalities (Hochschild, 1995; Kliman & Madsen, 1999; Ostrove & Cole, 2004).

Our models of class-based societies stem from our mainstream European origins, where class is a relatively fixed phenomenon that determines a person’s potential and possibilities. In the United States, we tell ourselves class is not static, it is fluid. Anyone can jump the fluid class boundaries, although the presumption is that we will jump up, not down (a belief being sorely tested in the current economic recession). These strong beliefs about the fluidity of class and strong beliefs about meritocracy lead people to individual, rather than structural, causal attributions for social class (Langston, 1992, cited in Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). As Ostrove and Cole explain:
For example, although we often hear wealth explained in terms of ambition and poverty in terms of laziness, and we hear the claim that members of certain ethnic or racial groups are poor because they are lazy, no one makes the claim that a person belongs to a certain ethnic group because he or she is lazy (just as one would never argue that ambitiousness makes people White). Thus, the ideology surrounding class locates the causes of class stratification solely in the behavior or the personality of individuals; yet the class system itself exerts pressure on individual psychology, influencing the ways people view themselves and others. (2003, p. 683)

Our strong attachment to individual causes of class, within a system that perpetuates class distinctions, a system that is mostly ignored when it comes to attributing class, makes class very much a personal issue and quite different from race and gender. Americans believe upward mobility is available to all, if we combine hard work with individual character traits that lead to success (Hochschild, 1995). If folks can’t move up in class, then the problem must be related to their personal attributes, not to the system.

My Story

As I have written elsewhere (King & Zanetti, 2005), one of the pivotal moments in my adulthood occurred when I was called home (Toledo, Ohio) on a family medical emergency and realized my siblings were, at midlife, frozen in a state of lacks. Three of my four siblings’ lives are very much determined by what they do not have—by what they lack—lacks that often define working-class life: lack of resources, lack of efficacy, lack of a sense of empowerment, lack of education and access to information, and lack of critical thinking. My siblings do not think they are in control of their own destinies, do not believe they have the power to change their lives, do not have access to higher education, and do not have the skills and capacities to question authority, speak to power, or critically filter information. They lack social and/or professional networks that may help them better their employment situations. At midlife, these lacks have a very strong hold on my siblings’ lives. And the opportunities to make life changes have long passed. More heartbreaking is the knowledge that, according to the odds and due to class differences in access to health care, life conditions, and life expectancy, my working-class siblings will more likely get sick, or die, before I do. Last year, my brother successfully beat colorectal cancer; but not without serious, life-changing consequences. The severity of his condition was partly due to his lack of health insurance; he had not been seeking regular care for a chronic condition. His very costly and sophisticated cure was financed by that crucial and essential, yet threatened, safety net, Medicaid (we call it “care” for elderly recipients and “aid” for poor recipients, as if only the elderly deserve care).
The foundation of these middle-age lacks was laid in our youth. My father was the mailman (literally) and my mother a full-time homemaker who earned a bit of cash on the side doing child care. There were seven of us in the family, my parents and five children. We got by fairly well, but resources were always tight. Because my father was a federal employee, protected by a union, we had good health and dental care (not the case with many working-class folks). We wore second-hand clothes until we were old enough to make our own—my mother was a master shopper and remains so today. The only books in the house were a set of encyclopedias and a large collection of *National Geographic* magazines. We were not read to.

My (older) sister and I are first-generation college students; we financed our own way through college. My sister was the first in our family to graduate college; I am the first to pursue graduate work. I am the only one in the family with a “career”; my siblings have “jobs,” if they work outside the home. I am the only one not living in my hometown; everyone else lives close to where we grew up, and their social networks do not stray much beyond the family.

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**Packing the Knapsack**

My daughter was raised in radically different circumstances from mine—evidence of “class-jumping.” I packed her invisible knapsack with countless social goodies. We went on vacations; to films, plays, the ballet, and concerts; books were everywhere in our house, and we read voraciously; we argued all the time (still do), and she was encouraged to have her own thoughts and opinions. We gave and attended dinner parties. She traveled to Italy, Kuwait, and Indonesia, all before she finished college. She was expected to go to college and was guided there through a typically higher-class process with middle-class privileges: guidance counseling, college visits, SAT preparation, applying to many colleges, expecting her parents to pay her higher education expenses, and so on.

While growing up, my siblings and I were not encouraged to have opinions; disagreeing with my parents was always an act of disrespect and reason for punishment. There were no dinner table conversations at all, let alone dinner conversations about current events, about politics, or about different takes on various issues. We did not go to parties, concerts, films, plays, or vacations. We did not visit other countries. We did not camp, hike, backpack, or see our country. My parents did their level best, and they did well—we were fed, clothed, and our physical needs were met. This was no small thing.

My maternal grandparents introduced us to another way of living. My maternal grandmother exemplified the “Rosie the Riveter” personality, which she was during World War II. She lived by her own code and made her own decisions. She divorced before it was acceptable, was excommunicated by the Catholic Church for doing so, and remarried twice. She owned and operated a working-class bar and grill long before it was commonplace for women to own...
and operate their own business. My grandparents had parties; they ate foods we did not eat at home. My grandparents had one or more of us kids staying with them every weekend. They sold the bar when I was about 10 years old and moved to a cottage on a lake in lower Michigan, thus providing us with a vacation destination until my grandmother required assisted living.

My parents were part of the White flight out of an inner-city neighborhood (with down-payment help from my father’s father) and from the age of 8, I was raised in a good, mixed-class neighborhood. A few fathers on the block had other than working-class jobs, including, for example, a veterinarian and a newspaper reporter. As a result, we were exposed to other ways of living. Most fathers, however, worked at the Jeep plant not too far from the neighborhood.

I do not know why my older sister and I went to college and our three younger siblings have not. My sister and I were not encouraged to go to college by either parent. My older sister and I did well in K–12; perhaps there were teachers or counselors who encouraged us toward college, but I do not recall any in particular who did. I do not remember that our high school had staff members whose job was helping get kids to college; only about 10% of my graduating class went to college. I do know that teachers and the minister at the church I attended encouraged me toward leadership positions (youth representative for the church; school paper editor, etc.). I also sang in the choir and acted in school plays—these experiences gave me “stage presence” skills and a sense of efficacy that contributed to future school and career decisions.

After high school, I enrolled at the local university as a nursing student. It was a bad fit, and I left to become a secretary. After a year of that work and my father’s death, I hightailed it back to college. Two professors during my undergraduate studies inspired me toward completing my degree and fueled my passion for research. Both are also responsible for my choice of major—psychology. That major, along with my love of research, led me to graduate school. My terminal master’s degree led to my first professional job as a policy researcher for the phone company. At that job, I learned a great deal about middle- and upper-class life and what it takes to be a professional. I worked with economists and sociologists, traveled extensively, nationally and internationally, learned how to dress and act in a corporate environment, and learned the language of middle- and upper-class interactions. Policy research led me to public administration.

I did not come to class consciousness until I was in my late thirties, after I finished my doctorate. In other words, I went through all my schooling and a great deal of professional socialization without consciously realizing the differences between me and most of my peers. I knew I was different; I knew I was not a “renaissance person,” like so many of my colleagues. I did not read the newspapers, magazines, and popular books or see the foreign films my peers discussed. I was not skilled in argumentation; I was not an intellectual warrior.
I did not play a musical instrument. I was acutely aware of the effects of gender, that being a woman significantly affected my experiences, but I was not aware that my class origins were also profoundly important. Class was invisible to me, as it is to most in our culture. Ironically, though, I think class is a far more important variable than is sex/gender, as it relates to my experiences. In the field of public administration, we have been willing and able to talk about, and explore the effects of, sex/gender on our experiences and our work environments; but we did not (and still do not) talk about the invisible variable of class.

**THE INVISIBLE AMERICANS**

In 1994, Lillian Rubin wrote about working-class families, calling them “invisible Americans.” She says, “Over the long haul, the denial of their class position leads to a confused and contradictory social identity that leaves working-class people riven with status anxiety and impacts their ability to join together and act in their own behalf” (p. 30). As Rubin noted in the early 1990s, although socially and politically working-class families are invisible, they are, potentially, the single largest interest group in the country. These are men and women, the largest part of the American workforce, employed at lower levels in production, health, and the service sectors of the economy; workers whose education is limited, whose mobility options are severely restricted, and who usually work for an hourly versus a weekly wage. These men and women do not tap many public resources; they reap minimal benefit from government programs for the poor or from the huge government subsidies for the rich (or, even, the vast government subsidy to middle-class folks: the mortgage interest tax deduction). They live life on the edge. As Rubin (1994, p. 31) states, “any unexpected event...threatens to throw them into the abyss.”

For example, my sister’s husband, a corrections officer, has been out of work for the past few years—on temporary disability because of an altercation with an inmate—and has since lost his job. My sister, a care provider working in a home for developmentally disabled adults, was her household’s sole provider. As I was writing this, I learned she had just lost her job. The family is now without an income or health insurance. Health insurance is particularly important because of her husband’s injury and because she suffers from the same chronic condition that led to my brother’s colorectal cancer. My sister and her husband have one car with over 100,000 miles on it, and they cannot afford the required regular maintenance. Therefore, the car has frequent, oftentimes serious, mechanical problems. There is no public transportation in their small town—car trouble means a transportation struggle. So, the car gets fixed, and rent or some other need is postponed. And stress levels increase. They are always living life on the edge; any small thing could throw them over.

In his germinial 1989 article on working-class students, “If Rocky Goes to College: Dilemmas of Working-Class College Students,” Howard Baker
captured the essence of the struggle of working-class students at that time—an essence that remains true today. The article informed college and university psychiatric care providers about the presenting problems of working-class (or first-generation) students. In the film *Rocky*, the working-class character from the streets of Philadelphia, played by Sylvester Stallone, repeatedly says, “I do not want to be just another bum on the block.” In his article, Baker asked, what if Rocky went to college instead of choosing to fight his way out of his destiny? According to Baker, and true to my own personal experiences,

unlike their middle and upper-middle class peers, working class students...almost certainly begin a process of changing social class... which will complicate the lives of these students, burdening them with impediments to both academic success and psychological development. These added challenges will, moreover, continue once they graduate and enter the business and adult social worlds. (1989, p.70)

As many first-generation students know, the price for social advancement can be high. As Rubin (1977) states, blue-collar families often live in “worlds of pain.” Much of this pain centers on jobs that are often repetitive, boring, dangerous, and sometimes demeaning. The family structure is hierarchical; the father (if he is in the household) is at the head and everyone must show him respect, which usually means unquestioning obedience and not challenging the illusion of his position atop the heap. Whether the family is activist and the kids “red-diaper babies” (children of the working-class activist/union/communist movements of the 1950s and 1960s) or offspring of “radical hillbillies” (working-class people from Appalachia, mostly miners, who became radicalized through unions and similar organizations; see King & Zanetti, 2005), the authority lines in most working-class families are remarkably alike. Echoing the lack of collaboration and democracy often found in blue- or pink-collar workplaces, the structure at home is rarely collaborative or democratic. Women and children are submissive to the titular head. If that authority is questioned or potentially threatened, all kinds of hell can rain down on family members. And, while the heads of working-class families often want their children to do better than they—to succeed, to go to college—a college student in the family can be perceived as a potential threat to the tenuous authority of the family system. A college student in the family may also threaten the efficiency that comes with sameness that many working-class family systems require. As Baker (1989) states:

Perhaps, most important, in many families there is little possibility for individualized responsiveness...normative thinking and behavior are necessary for daily functioning. Efficiency is necessary; things work most smoothly if everyone has similar tastes, interests and values. (p. 82)
When they get to college, working-class kids usually go to “get a job,” and are thus channeled into fields with clear prospects, like teaching and nursing (for women), engineering (for men), and business/management (for women and men). The public, liberal arts college where I teach is earning a good reputation for positive educational experiences for first-generation students. Yet, many of our first-generation students have a hard time in a liberal arts college. While things are changing, working-class kids are often educated through high school in places that stress performance and rote learning. These students, when they go to college, do well when rote learning is required but struggle with creative/analytical thinking assignments. Furthermore, often the home does not socialize first-generation and/or working-class students to discuss current events, argue about politics, or use critical and analytical reasoning to work through problems or deal with conflict. When put into a college situation requiring these attributes, in addition to highly developed verbal and written argumentation skills, working-class and first-generation students struggle (Casey, 2005). Meanwhile, their professors mostly do not know why these students are having such a hard time.

These adjustment problems are compounded by class issues around what Goffman (1959) called “presentation of self.” How we present ourselves to others is related to class, race, sex, and ethnicity. Here, class is particularly important because self-presentation is a significant variable in working environments. There are particular self-presentation expectations for middle- and upper-class environments having to do with everything from dress to speech to how we hold our bodies, not to mention etiquette and other finer points of living. Working-class students usually do not have the right presentation of self skills for higher class situations; moreover, they often hold onto their working-class presentations as a form of self-defense and, in some cases, a form of class resistance. For example, in his study of “working-class lads” in Birmingham, England, Paul Willis observed that acts of resistance to middle-class norms—the defiance with which the young men expressed their anger at class inequalities—helped reinforce the class structure by further entrenching them in their working-class status (Willis, 1982, in Rubin, 1994). In short, working-class students often have much going against them in their desire to succeed in academic life and very little working in their favor.

Another Story

When I introduce myself to students at the beginning of a term, the first thing I say is, “I am a first-generation college graduate.” That is all I have to say. That statement, alone, gives most first-generation students the permission they need to approach me. And interestingly, class—not sex/gender—ends up being the significant element that leads to most of my mentoring relationships.

As I gaze at a group of students in a classroom, I can usually spot those who are first generation by their class markers and/or presentation of self. Often, those students represent the two ends of the spectrum: They are either trying too hard to fit in and “wearing” ill-fitting middle-/upper-class markers, or they are in a
full-blown act of resistance to/defiance against middle-class norms, “over-wearing,” so
to speak, their working-class markers. If working-class students do not approach,
me, I find a way to talk with them outside the formal class environment, whether
they ask or not. And beware the clever, brilliant first-generation students! I hone
in on them with well-developed radar, offering them advice they did not ask for,
holding them to standards to which I may not hold others.

This pattern manifested itself recently with a mid-30s undergraduate woman
I will call Jean. Jean goes out of her way to mark herself as a working-class,
first-generation student, over-wearing the markers. Her clothing, comportment,
language, speech patterns, interaction style, and attitudes scream “Working
class!” Early in the quarter, she told me about one of my colleagues who
dismissed her intellectually early on in his work with her, and advised her out
of college. She told me this proudly, almost as if she were challenging me to
do the same. When she spoke in class, her contributions were usually off the
mark, overly personal, and defensive (she presumed everyone would attack her
because of her conservative leanings). She did not know how to have reasoned,
intellectual conversation/debate about policy issues. She knew how to get
reference material from popular press/culture sources but did not know how to
access more reliable, scholarly materials.

I watched the non-working-class students quickly dismiss her. They had
the tools Jean lacked—they knew how to debate/argue, how to access and cite
legitimate sources with standing, they dressed differently (more polished, even
if they were sporting a carefully coiffed bed head), they were not defensive, they
had a wealth of experiences to draw on, and they knew how to talk with the
professors. But everything about her demeanor made her “untouchable” to the
very students from which she could learn a great deal, and they from her. And, as
is often the case with race, students “sat together in the cafeteria” (Tatum, 2003),
metaphorically speaking, with like-class students.

About one third of the way through the quarter, after I required Jean to
revise and resubmit assignments and challenged her to step up her work, she hit
the ball out of the park in a writing assignment. I saw in her writing someone
very different from the person she publicly presented. I sat her down and told
her my story. I said she could be taken seriously by others and has the potential
to achieve great things, but she needs to be willing to adjust some essential parts
of herself. She must become bicultural by acting, comporting, and writing like
her middle- and upper-class colleagues. If she does not make these changes, she is
not going to be successful in many educational or work environments. Her other
professors may dismiss her, as my colleague did, because she was not bringing
her best self to her work and they, likely, would not have seen under the surface
to the class differences affecting her performance. If a professor is not living
biculturally when it comes to class, or has no consciousness about how class can
present itself in a learning environment, he or she can miss that class of origin
may be at the base of a student’s struggles.
To be taken seriously, Jean needs to separate herself from her working-class trappings and remake herself. In doing so, she likely will leave people behind who cannot countenance the changes in her. She also has to achieve this separation while continuing to struggle with her working-class realities, including everything from unreliable transportation (and she does not have public transportation options) to choosing between paying bills and buying food for her family. This is no small feat, this class separation while solidly in the middle of class dilemmas, and many students cannot accomplish it. Students who do achieve it likely will spend the rest of their lives in what Lubrano (2005) calls “limbo”—straddling two classes, never feeling quite at home in either. They are likely to struggle with what Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (Clance, 1985) called “imposter syndrome,” the sense that you do not really belong in your higher social class, and a reckoning may take place anytime.

Certainly, I can be accused of trying to remake this student according to middle- and upper-class standards. I can be accused of asking the student to assimilate according to stereotypes and, as a result, to not achieve the end of speaking power to power, calling for changes in the mainstream categories that require assimilation. On the contrary, I am doing what I believe professors should do with working-class students. Namely, I am helping her learn the skills she needs to survive in her new surroundings, without becoming condescending toward her roots. She can live in this new world, but still appreciate her family’s struggles and those of her childhood friends who were working class and never went to college. She can jump status without abandoning her understanding of the costs and benefits of being born working class; I have learned the same lessons, and they help me appreciate both my current and earlier living circumstances.

To transcend class is a personal process. It is about “covering,” as Yoshino (2006) puts it. Covering, according to Yoshino, is to downplay or hide a disfavored trait to blend into the mainstream. Yoshino argues that because we all have stigmatized attributes, we all cover and, as a result, see covering as acceptable. Yoshino argues that while we’ve made great strides as a nation with regard to not penalizing people for differences based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, and disability, we still deny equal treatment to people who do not downplay their differences, who do not cover. People of color are told to “act White.” Women are told to “act like a man.” Gays, lesbians, transgendered, and bisexuals are asked not to be too terribly public about their affections and not to put heterosexuals in uncomfortable situations. The religious/spiritual are asked to minimize their faith when in public. Individuals with disabilities are asked not to make us uncomfortable with the details of their disabilities. People of working-class origins are asked to cover their roots. All of those existing outside the mainstream, what a friend calls the “Caucasian, hetero-normative model,” have to cover or conform in some way. This is why we have words to describe folks of different races who “mainstream-up,” such as Oreos (black on the outside, white on the inside) or Apples (red on the outside, white on the inside).
Observations

I wish I could say I had an enlightenment moment at some point in my academic or professional life about class issues and how they affected me. Instead, the awakening happened gradually. As mentioned earlier, I recognized the effects of sex and gender on my sense of self and success (or lack of) long before I recognized class. Like so many students I mentor, I held onto my class distinctions as a matter of honor and as a way of maintaining my individuality. Perhaps, I also held onto some of my class distinctions as a way of remaining true to my family and history. As a friend recently pointed out, I still hold onto patterns of behavior and speech that identify me as a person of working-class origins; even, possibly, that I use them as a form of discrimination against others of higher class backgrounds. It is true I have never lost a sort of “rawness” or edginess—but these traits are what continuously lead me back to writing about topics off the beaten path, at the margins of the field of public administration. As Lubrano explains (2005), the state of limbo is to have a foot in two different classes while never feeling at home in either. Never feeling quite at home, neither with my family and places of origin (e.g., friends, school reunions, neighborhoods) nor in the life I have built outside those places, has led to a near constant level of critical consciousness and reflection that I cannot turn off—it is ingrained in me and, in turn, leads my teaching and scholarship.

The two most difficult things in my class-jumping socialization are the imposter syndrome and occupying Lubrano’s (2005) state of limbo. For reasons having nothing to do with intent, I was never told I was smart while growing up. I knew I was different from the rest of my family and knew it had something to do with my love of the printed word (my childhood soundtrack went something like this: “Cheryl Lynn Simrell, get your nose out of that book and come and [name of chore]!”). Our neighborhood library was my salvation; I can still describe every nook and cranny in that place. While my teachers may have encouraged my intellectual life, I have no specific recollections of a special teacher until I met the two (male) undergraduate professors who became my role models and inspired me to become an academic. I was fortunate to have excellent mentors in my graduate programs and afterwards. Several took me under their wings intellectually and culturally, teaching me about the life (and behavioral expectations) of an American intellectual.

Trouble is, none of these wonderful mentors could speak directly about the work I had to do—that I had to “class-jump” to be successful. They modeled and socialized and encouraged, but did not speak directly to what would be required of me to join the intelligentsia. They could not tell me how hard it is to class-jump and how hard it is to live in limbo. They could not tell me how hard
it would be to return home, not only as the dark horse or black sheep, but as an “other,” and how hard it would be to maintain a sense of history and familial identity. They could not tell me I would, at least early in my work, be constantly questioning my veracity, feeling an imposter, always looking over my shoulder waiting to be called out and told to go back where I belong.

I appreciate midlife because I am beyond most of these struggles. My family members and I have negotiated new relationships based on my leaving a great deal of who I am out of these relationships. I have learned to love and respect their need to hold a part of me constant. Meanwhile, they have learned to love and accept parts of me that have changed. I remain in limbo and always will. I accept that I will forever have one foot in one place and the other in another; this rarely pains me. Perhaps this is why a regular practice of yoga (or something similar) is essential—in yoga, I learn and develop the ability to balance in precarious poses, to build strength from balancing, and to lean into twists and turns because they are cleansing and grounding. Through leaning into the twists and turns of my life, I no longer question my purpose, my right to be where I am, my intellectual capacities, or my abilities. I no longer feel like an imposter. Moving beyond these struggles and learning the delicate balance of limbo brought me to a full awakening about class.

TRANSLATING CLASS INTO THE CLASSROOM

I now return to the beginning of this essay, to the conversation with the working-class student. When asked what she wanted people to know, she said not to presume equality of access—to know that not all students have access to the same resources and this is based in large part on one’s class of origin. In response to her request, I posited that middle- and upper-class folks carry an invisible knapsack of class privilege, much like the invisible knapsack of White privilege that Peggy McIntosh (1988) described in her germinal work on White privilege. My recommendations for what we can do inside and outside the classroom to raise awareness of the role of class in our field, and in our teaching, are organized around the assumption that many of us fail to recognize the privileges of class, nor are we aware of how these shape our students’ experiences.

To this end, teachers and scholars of public administration can do work in three areas to make social class an integral part of our discipline, including: (a) raising your own class consciousness and, if needed, seeking colleagues to whom you can refer first-generation students; (b) integrating class into your courses both as a matter of study and as an analytical frame; and (c) disempowering “covering” and making the mainstream more inclusive. Each of these suggestions are addressed briefly below.

Raise your own class consciousness; seek out colleagues to whom you can send first-generation students. Teachers and scholars of public administration need an awareness of how class shapes and delimits students’ experiences and possibilities. In turn, we must translate this awareness into our interactions with students.
and colleagues. As a field, we have done fairly well at developing consciousness about race, sex/gender, and sexual orientation/identity. We have done less well in developing class consciousness. Perhaps this is because strong beliefs about the fluidity of class and meritocracy lead people to personal, rather than structural, causal attributions for social class (Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Langston, 1992, cited in Ostrove & Cole). In other words, because our culture believes so strongly in the American Dream—that anyone can change their circumstances with enough hard work—if a person cannot rise above the circumstances of their birth, then we attribute that failure to the individual instead of to structural or systemic causes. An enduring and endearing trait of the American Dream is that it is true for some; a problem with the American Dream is that it is only true for some.

If, as a discipline, public administration and public policy is to develop a stronger consciousness about class and the difficulty of transcending class, it requires that we remove our blinders about the supposed classlessness of the United States. This step is especially important for professors of public administration because class is embedded in so much of our work, in both theory and practice. It also requires us to examine how class plays out in academe and in relationships among faculty.

For faculty of middle- and upper-class origins, supporting students of working-class origins may require seeking out colleagues who can advise both them and their students. Meanwhile, faculty with working-class roots need to stop covering their class of origin and become, in turn conscious of their own class issues. One way of doing this is by making themselves available to colleagues and students by speaking about class of origin issues and how these affect our field’s teaching and learning. Additionally, schools/departments of public administration can emulate some of the practices that TRIO programs currently use for helping first-generation college students of working-class origins, both graduate and undergraduate, succeed in higher education. (http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html).

Moreover, as a field, we must unpack our own, invisible knapsacks of class privilege. This activity is useful for anyone in academe, irrespective of background. As a teacher/scholar of working-class origins, it was important for me to learn about class privilege so I could situate my own experiences. I needed to understand how class plays out in the academy, and thereby recognize the unconscious ways I have assimilated to fit into academic life. Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) work on invisible privilege has been used extensively in race-consciousness and anti-oppression workshops. We can design similar opportunities for people to look inside the class-invisible knapsack and unpack the privileges of class. The organization, Class Action (www.classism.org/), has developed a list of class privileges, using McIntosh’s White privilege work as a guide. These, as well as suggestions on conducting workshops about class, are available at http://educationandclass.com/2008/05/16/middle-class-privilege/.
Integrate class into the curriculum. Of course, class is a construct that belongs in any coursework on diversity and cultural competency. Working with students on the invisible knapsacks of both race and class is a powerful experience that situates class and oppression within systems of invisible privilege and demonstrate our complicity in perpetuating these arrangements.

One way to integrate class into the PA curriculum is to do so directly, and The Center for Working-Class studies at Youngstown State University offers both sound advice for teaching about this topic and an extensive reading list on various socioeconomic subjects. (http://cwcs.ysu.edu/teaching/teaching-class/readings). The Class Action website mentioned earlier also provides good materials for classroom use.

Kenji Yoshino’s book, *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Human Rights* (2006), is especially effective in uncovering the things we cover, if you will, unpacks civil rights, and details the social implications of doing so. Janet Galligani Casey’s (2003) article entitled “Diversity, Discourse, and the Working-Class Student” is a powerful piece that addresses the rhetoric of diversity and how working-class students are not served in contemporary discourse because the discussion glosses over disadvantages, thereby perpetuating the academy’s inherent middle-/upper-class ideology.

Discourse defined from such an ideology dominates in most situations, not just the academy. Therefore it’s not enough just to include class as another diversity variable. We also must deconstruct and unpack the mainstream assumptions that make class an invisible construct. Therefore, instructors should do more than simply integrate class consciousness mechanisms into the public administration curriculum. We also need to inspire students to revise and remake the dominant discourses that privilege certain categories over others and thereby ensure the continuation of middle-/upper-class, normative frameworks.

We can indirectly incorporate class into the curriculum by assigning texts and readings that use socioeconomic issues as a central analytic or organizing framework. The other papers in this symposium do an excellent job of identifying relevant texts and other materials, and I refer readers to these good works on the topic.

Disempower “covering.” Make the mainstream more inclusive. Inspire students to do the same in their work. In *Transformational Public Administration* (2005), Lisa Zanetti and I situated the American Dream as a nightmare, one we all need to awaken from. Outing class in the United States is an important step in our awakening. To do so, the first step is to situate class theoretically, ideologically, and intellectually. Instructors also need to live the realities of these class differences so we can be more open to others’ experiences. Living the realities means working to bring more students of working-class origins into our PhD programs, so we can have more professors with working-class origins teaching and doing research in the field. We should also analyze our student populations to see if programs are serving a significant portion of students with working-class origins. If so, it may mean that departments think about departmental strategies
toward serving these students, instead of relying on individual professors to do so in their classrooms and in student advising.

In conclusion, we should out, or uncover, class by building new social models that do not require covering, all the while teaching students about covering and how it limits rights and opportunities. Class allows the opportunity to talk about how covering is both a civil rights and a social/relational issue. Because everyone covers in some way, we all can empathize with implied or perceived blaming that often happens in multiculturalism and diversity work (Yoshino, 2006). Ironically, recognizing the things that keep us apart can bring us together. Yoshino’s book can be used in just about any public administration course. Instructors can use it to discuss covering in terms of civil rights, human resources, or citizen relationships.

One more story: On a recent trip, as I was waiting for my plane to depart, a small family, clearly of working-class origins, passed by the waiting area. Besides their class markers of clothing, hair, and baggage, the people in this family were talking extremely loudly, as if they had no concept of “inside voices.” I watched people in the waiting area meet each other’s eyes and smirk, raise eyebrows, and pass other signs of class collusion. This furtive communication conveyed a silent recognition of the “otherness” of the passing family and an admission of class judgment. Whether folks would name it or not, they were judging based on class differences. This happens every day, in every walk of life. We are much less aware of our practices of class judgments/prejudices than we are of our judgments/prejudices based on race, sex/gender, sexual orientation, and age. Recognizing classism, as it happens in everyday life, is a good place to start our awareness work. The field of public administration, because of its members’ obligations to serve everyone, is a good place to begin moving toward raising this class awareness.

Footnotes

1 In 2009, the top 20% of the population, those making more than $100,000 a year, took in nearly 50% of all income generated in the United States; the 44 million people living below the poverty line received only 3.4%. The 14.5-to-1 ratio was an increase from 13.6–1 in 2008 and nearly double a low of 7.69–1 in 1968 (www.wsww.org/articles/2010/sep2010/cens-s29.shtml).

2 Today, students who are the first of their family to go to college are called “first-generation students” and are served by federal programs such as TRIO. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and those with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html).

References

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