

## Anthony's Story

---

### From Radical to Bohemian to Suit Me

Our social-class status distinguishes us from other people, yet it is sometimes so invisible that, although differences between us are recognized, we do not attribute them to class. The differences in class and socioeconomic status begin in childhood. For example, there are certain brands of blue jeans or sneakers that children just “must have” because everyone is wearing them. Other differences can be seen at lunch in the cafeteria, through distinctions between the meals purchased through free lunch programs to homemade meals of peanut butter sandwiches or leftover veal. It is clear that some people are poor: They seem to be unkempt, may smell, and have to eat free lunches. And it is equally clear that some are rich: They drive their own cars to high school. These are the visible differences that are superficial, and although they are at times linked to popularity or attractiveness, social-class issues are not generally labeled as such. But it is important to recognize that social class is also linked to values, standards, and norms for behaviors, less visible characteristics.

Individuals are socialized within a particular social-class structure. Although social class is fluid, the values associated with it are developed through childhood socialization (Robinson, 2005). Social class is linked to values, including the importance of education, vocation, and achievement. Class is related to interpersonal relationships, influencing activities people share. Relationships with authority figures, whether they are treated with respect or disdain, are often determined through social-class socialization. Socialization begun in childhood is reinforced in high school, as adolescents begin to make

decisions on vocational aspirations and college attendance. Decisions are often based on parental income level, the perception of opportunities, role models within the community, and family expectations. When faced with the challenges of adulthood, issues of social class and accompanying values come to the surface.

However, the values of social class may emerge at earlier times in individuals' lives, particularly if change occurs in socioeconomic class levels. The predominant media image is that of a positive change in class standing. Television is filled with shows where individuals can go from rags to riches. The American dream of being able to own a home and have a family is something that is aspired to by many. In fact, one of the stereotypes of immigrants is that they come to the United States for economic gain, to be a part of the American dream. Rarely does one think of social class change in the opposite direction: of losing income. But many Americans are laid off, fired, or downsized from their positions. Parents divorce, causing women and children to sometimes move to poverty level. This change in class standing can influence self-concept and identity development. Anthony's story is one of changes within social class. The reader should note the effect that change in social class status has not only on his self-concept and identity but also on his social activities and interpersonal relationships.

### Anthony's Story

An old Italian jibe states, "How do you get an Italian to keep quiet? Easy. Tie his hands behind his back." The truth fundamental to the joke is that Italians are, by and large, an expressive bunch who routinely gesture in their storytelling.

While growing up, I confess, my family expressed their private joys, public triumphs, and collective pain in storytelling. To them, no subject was considered either too taboo or too sacrosanct. Political correctness, a virtue embraced by the larger culture, was largely absent from my family. Decorum was judged by the level of audience interest. Through their frequent retelling, the stories grew in revision and refinement.

At an early age, I was taught that plainspoken pilgrims and their pursuit of religious freedom shaped America. By inference, they built a dominant culture and extended its benefits to the world.

My family, on the surface, appears to embody this story. With historical veracity, I can trace my lineage back to the founding of the nation as a registered son of the Mayflower. This fact, coupled with my Anglo-Saxon-sounding surname suggests that I am ethnically White. Granted, I realize that

by tracing my lineage back to Plymouth Rock I admit English heritage, but an uncomfortable fact emerges: I can only claim 1 immediate ancestor in 16 as Anglo Saxon. That ancestor, my grandfather, is not strictly English himself. He is a mix of English and black Irish. My name aside, I strain to understand what it means to be White.

As family lore and history books explain, the black Irish were the survivors of the unsuccessful Spanish naval invasion of England. As fate would have it, they washed up on Irish beaches and married the local girls.

In 1930, my grandfather married a Sicilian woman after his arrival from Tennessee. She, an Italian immigrant, had ancestors who emigrated from France in the 1800s. It appears that not all of Napoleon's soldiers returned home after the war.

The lineage on my mother's side is equally as convoluted. My maternal grandfather, a southern Italian, married a Scottish-Hungarian woman. As a result, both my father and my mother grew up in bicultural households with prevailing Italian cultural norms. As a result, I trace my identity back to Italian, Hungarian, Scottish, Irish, English, and French ancestors—Italian American, for short.

The social patterns embedded in an Italian heritage are obvious from the media images. My family is loud, emotionally extravagant, and profligate in storytelling. Communication was, and is, next to impossible without operatic gestures and crescendoing falsettos. To paraphrase Shakespeare in literature and my family in life, "All is but a stage."

Indeed, not only is life a stage but a loud one at that. My family routinely performed at dinnertime. Dinner was both an open forum and, simultaneously, an audition. Moreover, if someone's story became boring and uninteresting, it was then expected, if not required, that another family member save dinner from destruction and take up the reins of conversation.

Outside the family, we dichotomized relationships into the tidy categories of family and everyone else. Notwithstanding, different measures of conduct applied. In times of stress, the family turned to itself for strength and excluded the demands of the dominant culture. Usually, this was accomplished through sarcasm and aloof observation. Stock phrases would be taken out of our cultural vault and deployed against any of the dominant culture's claims on our time, our money, or our allegiance.

Not surprisingly and tragically, we became firmly convinced of our own cultural integrity. In retrospect, after making the necessary concessions to the family's fear of change, I have since come to view their traits in terms of strength and resilience, rather than simple fear and ignorance.

A few short years into my life and my parents' marriage, they divorced. As a result of their divorce, my family's finances plummeted. A sharp thud

later, I awoke to form a fuzzy picture of my financial standing vis-à-vis the other 7-year-olds in the area.

Not long after, as I sat on my front stoop in my Sedgefield jeans with the knees blown wide apart, I collected my thoughts. I quickly reasoned that the new erratic dinner schedule was not due to spontaneity, novelty, and stoicism, nor was it a passionate commitment to child-centered learning. It was a consequence of the divorce. Scarce meals accompanied my mother's erratic work schedule. I plummeted in all the relevant measures of physical fitness: height, weight, and resistance to illness. Other consequences soon followed.

Baseball, a pastime in the neighborhood, required strict attention to detail: uniforms, snug caps, well-oiled gloves, and a litany of bats, wooden and aluminum. Moreover, it required a basic understanding of the concepts strike zone, catching technique, and swinging basics. Shell-shocked from my father's rapid exit, I found all this talk overwhelming and alienating. As a result, I shied away from organized sports.

Not long after her divorce, my mother returned to her childhood home with me and my brother in tow. We toddled along, only later becoming aware that our postcard-perfect smiles opened closed doors.

My grandfather insisted that he provide a second phone line in his home. Magnanimously and publicly, he trumpeted this as a grand gesture to provide for his children. The sleek burgundy phone with its 10 feet of unspooled line sat on a faux-mahogany table. Later, he used this gift, this phone, to whisper his illicit passion into his mistress's ear. I would often sit in the jagged, dry silence trying to swallow my revulsion.

Implicitly, I understood the exchange: shelter for silence. My grandmother, however, played by another set of rules. Stammering over herself in convoluted emotional somersaults, she lashed out, and my grandfather remained complicit in his silence. Quickly, I became the convenient alibi for his indiscretions and an unwilling accomplice in his attempts to shelter time, money, and emotional availability from his wife, my grandmother.

Her legendary rants pierced my already fragile psyche. Before long and fully realizing the consequences of the Faustian exchange, I simply tuned out.

Amid the emotional abuse, willful manipulation, and emasculating atmosphere, I realized the road to happiness would be a bumpy one. To survive, I stripped down my expectations to a bare minimum and deeply buried my emotional needs. I understood that if I could survive until college, I could unpack my troubled identity.

Growing up in such an environment, I attempted to lessen the stigma of poverty by controlling my environment. Initially, I enforced this by not placing myself in any potentially embarrassing situations where my deprivations would be exposed. Often, when confronted with a happy two-parent family

with a bright economic future, I ridiculed them. Importantly, it must be noted that rarely were these thoughts verbalized. Eventually, I turned the ridicule inward on myself. Often this cycle culminated in a racing heart rate, a constriction of my vision, and a near blackout.

To cope with what I saw as a debilitating condition, I recast the entire experience into my family's far-left political language.

My earliest childhood recollections include a moment where my mother cooed over me: "Who is my little radical?" Prompted, I responded that indeed I was her little radical. With Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon" wafting in the background, I was strongly encouraged to never work for the corporations because they were evil incarnate.

My mother's idealism, countercultural spin, and politics led her in the early 1970s to entertain some unconventional notions of mainstream culture. In short, a radical group recruited my mother to bomb an abortion clinic. After deliberation, she refused, but only after considering the repercussions on her two infant sons. Her beliefs framed the radical-left character of the family's politics.

Later, I trained myself to crucify any hope of economic betterment, and I purged myself of friendships and experiences that could conceivably testify to other alternatives. Surprisingly, I found that poverty was quite resistant and had a life of its own, replete with its self-sustaining mores, norms, and values. By the time I entered college, I began to question my conclusions.

As a student in the early 1980s, I unflinchingly sized up the local high school. Consequently, I understood that my future lay elsewhere.

Seeking to escape a substandard education, I, along with a handful of resolute ragtag urban city dwellers, clambered onto the bus. We peered out at the passing urban landscape as our bus bent its way to the north transit terminal considered by all Westsiders to be the equivalent of the Brandenburg Gate. There, I exchanged the frayed city green for the crisp suburban blue. After running the gauntlet across the city's edge, I longingly gazed on suburban West Park's ample lawns and sturdy stone homes. I traveled a snug suburban mile to Carnegie College Prep, an academy for the well-heeled.

Again, I was the kid with the Anglo last name but misplaced Italian heritage. Even more to the point, as a city dweller, I was regarded as disadvantaged and potentially violent. As a result of having a confused heritage, a questionable pedigree, and a checkered financial legacy, I soon became marginalized and encountered difficulty in assimilating.

Inside the classroom, I adjusted to the academic demands. However, outside the classroom, I strained to find common ground with my classmates because their conversations revolved around experiences beyond my reach. I could not identify with the gated communities, the downtown business

internships, and the jaunts to Europe. I felt I needed stories and experiences of my own to counter the wide net cast by Carnegie College Prep.

Confused, I tried to put an affirming spin on my shame. Inwardly, I agreed with the stereotypes to create a “violent identity” for myself. I concluded that I would always remain a second-class citizen, a poster child for the downtrodden—in short, a *pity project*. I hardened my childhood flirtations with alcohol, drugs, and gangs into a more active participation.

Working in the city at a local banquet hall opened the door to the purchase, barter, and, often, the outright theft of hard liquor. Jack Daniels, marijuana, and hash became my drugs of choice, and my friends who passed through the criminal system gave me instant clout in the rarified air of Carnegie College Prep.

In a Conradesque way, I became the anti-wonder-boy of the community. I dealt them alternative stories, beautifully tragic, to counter my own sense of inadequacy. I tried to project myself as an embodiment of their upper class fears.

After years of this borderline self-destructive behavior, I gladly parted with this ill-fitting identity and embraced Christianity. I traded my alcoholic tales and drug-induced visions for a new story of redemption and healing. At last, I felt I had a road map to reconstruct my fractured sense of self. Although I successfully eliminated most of the destructive symptoms of my pain, the root confusion still remained. During the nonthreatening environment of college, I attempted to clarify my struggle. I attempted to patch my identity together with spiritual and aesthetic glue. Comical in retrospect, I endeavored to solve my questions by transcending them.

Clove cigarettes, Echo and his Bunnymen, and late-night Marxism—bohemia beckoned, and I felt the allure irresistible. In defining myself as an artist, I felt I could leave all the inconvenient talk of heritage, ethnicity, and duty behind and replace it with the lively topics of beauty, inspiration, and class warfare. After my best imitation of Jasper Johns, and an unsuccessful storming of a government building to protest late-night Nicaraguan romps by the Contras, I grew tired of being so countercultural.

I concluded that being a Bohemian was a definite dead-ender. Against my better radical judgment, I fancied that there may be something to the tired talk of heritage, ethnicity, and duty. But before beginning a systematic exploration of my roots, I took a 10-year detour through second-generation Asian America.

After college, my childhood imps of despair and fatalism feverishly gnawed on my relationships. I lived with a robust fear of the “spontaneous meal” or the “unplanned movie.” I feared if my social encounters drifted into unexpected expenses, I would meet three equally unsettling choices: (1) invent

an indecorous excuse, (2) accept someone's charity, or (3) commit myself to an expense I could ill afford. As a result, any sustained effort at intimacy became difficult. A cycle of shame and anxiety danced in my head.

I reasoned if I chose friendship over finances, the unexpected would create feelings of worthlessness, a loss of control, and a sense of being less than masculine. After surveying these thoughts, I often returned to the cycle of anxiety and blackouts. So I chose to limit my relationships. With good reason, I equated my singleness with my financial situation.

With an eye on the inevitable emotional hangover, I routinely stayed in on weekends. I reached out to the Christian community, and they thankfully responded.

I firmly believe that my God has an incredible sense of humor. He took me, an angry and broken Italian American, and placed me into the tightly woven community of second-generation Korean American Christians. This Asian faith community provided the reliable and predictable behavior I needed to heal my identity, while I deconstructed my Anglo Italian, liberal-artistic upbringing. In time, and only after receiving much support, wisdom, and healing, I began to test the limits of my adopted culture.

Soon, a majority of my social life centered on the Korean community. I became a youth pastor to a Korean church, roomed with a second-generation Korean American, and socialized almost exclusively within the Korean American community.

Thankfully, I healed my identity in a community dedicated to the pursuit of truth and harmony. These two ideals balanced the excesses of my heritage. Later, when I became confident of my identity, I found it necessary to separate my ethnic identity from my growing spirituality. That necessitated a break from the Korean American community.

Struggling against post-college poverty, I perceived that my socioeconomic position sharply contrasted with my aspiration to be White. I persistently wrestled with my sense of belonging. My pigmentation allowed me to pass for White in the dominant culture, whereas my mannerisms frequently aroused suspicion. Often, I was asked to tone down because I caused distraction. It was explained to me that "most people do not act like that."

This variance created in me a desire to further define myself according to my family's radical political legacy.

I entertained two questions: "How could I, a second-generation radical, push the envelope beyond the limits set by my former hippy parents?" and, second, and not as crucial to my identity but imperative to my immediate survival, "How can I eat regularly?"

Thankfully, I found an acceptable balance of these two competing needs. I betrayed my family's mores, values, and trust. I snapped a conservative

navy blazer into place and laced up for success. I decided that I needed to work for the corporations.

Working as an agent, I received a regular paycheck, which alleviated my immediate financial crisis. More important, my job served as a convenient wedge between me and my near-hysterical mother. It allowed me the necessary psychological space to complete my identity formation.

Inwardly, I delighted in the shrewdness of my seemingly mundane career choice; I valued it as the *pièce de résistance* of my post-college identity development. However, in the long run, I could not separate this job from my emergent identity. Eventually, I found the job ill suited for both my temperament and my sense of belonging. Suffice to say, I could not reconcile the White, affluent business world with my ethnic and class understanding. In retrospect, I should have been tipped off by the constant lunchtime dry heaves.

I left the corporate world after a 2-year stint and went headlong into teaching. Initially, I resisted the idea because it reflected my father's failings, himself a public school teacher. After, taking inventory of my gifts, talents, and temperament, I realized that the road to healing ran straight through my father's profession.

My 6-year journey to teaching was difficult and offered little immediate relief. In my pursuit of my dream, I culled eight meals from my weekly budget, compromised on air quality with my apartment's toxic mold, and studied late into the night amid the sounds of the bustling city rats scurrying under the floorboards.

Undeterred, I courted my present situation with a ripening sense of purpose. I taught for 6 years as a substitute teacher while pursuing my teaching certificate. While back in school, I separated from both the radical notions of my childhood and the Asian culture that supported my healing. I found peace and a growing sense of my identity.

I left the Asian community to deepen my spirituality. Ironically, as I left, I reconciled with my father and found a faith community that fit both of us. It was there that I met my wife, an Asian American.

My wife and I continue to explore our shared bicultural/biracial experience. Importantly, our cultural differences are undergirded by a common faith.

The most noticeable differences in our marriage revolve around time management, conflict style, and in-laws. Our conflict with time might humorously be relegated to the time differential between Los Angeles and Seoul.

Small underlying conflicts have occasionally spilled into larger cultural messes. My Italian heritage gives full vent to emotional expression. As a result, most of the cultural cues of tone, facial expression, and nonverbal

language are readily understood. In the same vein, Korean culture relies on a subsequent series of cultural cues, protracted periods of silence, and non-verbal protocol to express meaning.

To illustrate, my wife and I temporarily shared living space with a couple while our home was being built. While seated on a couch rapt by CNN's coverage of the second Gulf War, I observed our Korean American friend express, albeit nonverbally, a sense of displeasure. Moreover, as I readily understood her mild displeasure, I intuited it had nothing to do with the war or my viewing of it.

After a quick internal check of possible offenses, I concluded none existed. As a result, I continued watching the broadcast. Later, this friend exploded into unmitigated rage. On the surface, she explained that she was angry that I neglected to bring in the newspaper. It soon became evident that her rage was directed at my reluctance to probe for a more complete understanding of her distress and my unwillingness to respond to her discomfort with a kind act of service. The Korean word *nunchi* expresses this dynamic.

From my predominately Italian American understanding, *nunchi* is tantamount to being held an emotional hostage. My inner Tony Soprano mumbled, "If she's gotta' problem with me, then she needs to tell me." My cultural paradigm informed me of three things: People need to take responsibility for their own discomfort, responsibility involves expression, and if people choose to not verbally communicate their anger or frustration, then the problem resides with them.

In contrast, the Korean concept of *nunchi* places great emphasis on the nonverbal and demands a response by the recipient. Additionally, the act of verbalizing is viewed as somehow diminishing the value of the exchange.

I have since translated *nunchi* into the more readily understood concepts of being empathic, thoughtful, and proactive. Still, the cultural assumptions of the role verbal expression plays in relationships present ongoing challenges.

Returning to the nature of in-laws, I have, of late, more fully embraced my mother-in-law. Our relationship has gone through a series of awkward steps but has culminated into full acceptance with the birth of her grandson. Initially we were on a first-name basis, which reflects the American value of informality. Now, often I refer to her as *Chung-mo-nim*, the Korean term of respect given by a son-in-law. Occasionally, I refer to her as Nana, my son's version of "Grandmother."

Building on this belief, I have come to understand that my ethnic identity and sociocultural history, along with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, define me.

The answer to my own identity struggle is a complex one. Recently, I have rejoiced in the fact that I can lay claim to a bicultural identity. My identity

remains primarily rooted in my faith but is open to new experiences. The intensity and raw emotionality of my Italian heritage is being refined in my marriage to a Korean American. Emotional expressiveness is giving way to thoughtful restraint. Storytelling is ceding ground to acts of service.

## Content Themes

Anthony's story is rich with images around social class and socioeconomic status and their influence on self-concept and identity. There are two central themes in the story: the influence of changes in social class and the influence of dominant middle-class values.

### Changes in Socioeconomic Status and Social Class

The first major content theme is the change in social-class status that Anthony experienced and the influence of this change on his self-concept and identity. When his parents divorced, it is likely that he dropped from middle-class status to working class. His mother moved to her parents' home because she may not have been able to afford her own place and perhaps because she wanted to receive child care for her children. It is not uncommon for individuals, particularly women, to move into a household with their parents or extended family members immediately following a divorce to save on housing costs, reduce child care expenses, and receive emotional support. If individuals do not have family for financial support, the change in social standing most likely would be from the middle class to poverty level. Anthony's mother was fortunate to be able to relocate with her parents. Nonetheless, there must have been a drastic change in status because Anthony reports consequences to his physical status.

The changes had effects on Anthony's development and social activities. The initial effect was on his peer relationships in the neighborhood, which seemed to result from changes in family structure and social class. When the children in the neighborhood talked about baseball, Anthony became overwhelmed and began to withdraw. When in high school, Anthony experienced a similar disconnection from his peers. He was not able to associate through the middle- and upper-class activities and discussions. Anthony felt the other students assumed that because he was from the city he was "disadvantaged and potentially violent." He began to construct his identity based on the stereotypes projected onto him and his inability to connect with his peers. Unfortunately, Anthony chose to participate in illicit activities to define himself.

Anthony's transition is similar to the character portrayed by Judd Nelson in the movie *The Breakfast Club*. His peers were all more financially stable and seemed to come from intact nuclear families. To hide his shame and embarrassment, he took on the role of the delinquent. His real personality, of being sensitive, empathic, and caring, was revealed as he spent time with the other characters. Many adolescents who feel alienated and disconnected from the mainstream may choose this path to define themselves; the tough-guy stance serves as protection against rejection and hurt. Had Anthony continued with his behaviors, he may have ended up dropping out of high school or possibly imprisoned. Fortunately, his desire to be able to feed himself helped him to find career direction and to pursue college. Anthony also found solace in the Christian community.

The sense of social isolation continued after college and after he entered the workforce. Anthony decided to reenter school to pursue his teaching career, which left him on a tight budget. He became fearful of being invited out for spontaneous outings because he could not afford meals, movies, or activities outside of his budget. Anthony chose to isolate himself from peers and to remain single due to the shame of his social-class position. Unfortunately for Anthony, the pressure to fit within the dominant culture continued through young adulthood, college, and employment. It also continued to influence interpersonal relationships.

### Dominant Class Standards

Anthony begins his story discussing his mixed ethnic heritage and his claim to the Italian American culture. His family sounds as if they were loud and boisterous, shared many heated discussions, and enjoyed each other's company. Of course, even in the introduction, Anthony discusses his relationship with the dominant culture and his feeling of separation from it. Although racially he identifies with being White, it is clear that, for Anthony, his cultural identity is more rooted in his Italian American heritage than in his Whiteness. However, examining his relationship to social class and interpersonal relationships, it is clear that his socialization was influenced by dominant White, middle-class values, which he eventually internalized, even though he fought them earlier.

White middle-class values include the importance of individualism; independence; autonomy, achievement, and competition; the Protestant work ethic; a future time orientation; status and power; and ownership of goods and property (Robinson, 2005; Sue & Sue, 2003). Although some of Anthony's values may have differed from the mainstream values due to ethnic variations, it is also likely that they differed due to social-class status. Anthony

was able to attend a high school noted for academics and to pursue college, so it is clear that he endorsed the mainstream values of achievement and autonomy. He reported that his college experience was “nonthreatening.” When choosing a career, however, the socialization that Anthony experienced influenced his choice, which differed from mainstream values. He reports that his mother was a “hippie” who taught him that valuing money was inappropriate. The notion of status and power and ownership of property, goods, and assets may not have been important or a priority for the family. However, his quest to stay aligned with his family’s values contradicted his need to eat and support himself, so he attempted to acculturate to the dominant mainstream values and began to work for a corporation. Working in this environment was unsettling for Anthony, however, and seemed to make him physically sick. The differences in values may have been too overwhelming for him.

Making the choice to leave corporate America and to pursue a teaching career returned Anthony to *his working-class status*. He followed the Protestant work ethic by attending school to earn his teaching degree, so he meets the dominant standards in some regards. However, few would take the option of leaving a well-paying job to move to a place where rats could be seen or heard, making his choice different from the choice other White middle-class men would have made. One wonders if this option would have been available to him if he were married and had children.

## Clinical Applications

This section addresses assessment concerns, techniques and interventions, and countertransference issues.

### Assessment

Social-class influences values, standards, and norms for behavior, along with interpersonal relationships. Therapists need to assess clients to determine how they have been socialized regarding class. Therapists also need to assess changes within generations as well as within individual lifetimes regarding socioeconomic status. Clinicians may also want to assess how social class influences interpersonal relationships.

The following assessment questions are recommended:

What is your current social class level?

Has there been a change in your social class? Have you recently received a promotion or raise at work? Have you been downsized, laid off, or fired?

Has there been a change in your family's social class?

What messages did your parents or other family members give you regarding finances or economics? Were you encouraged to save money or plan for the future?

What messages did you receive regarding education, achievement, or career aspirations?

How were your relationships influenced by your socioeconomic status?

## Techniques and Interventions

Anthony's story teaches about the influence of social class on self-concept and interpersonal relationships. Clinicians need to be sensitive to changes in social class and how the changes influence functioning. A number of techniques are recommended for treatment.

### *Dominant Values*

First, clinicians need to address social-class norms and standards and help clients who feel as if they differ from the norms. Middle-class values predominate in the media, along with the drive for consumerism, and influence self-concept and self-esteem. Clinicians should help clients understand how their socialization experience, values, and self-concept are related to social class. Exploring childhood experiences around social class might be a useful way of helping clients elicit values related to class. Focusing on clothing, toys, games, and accessories may be a useful way for clinicians to begin. Children are socialized early about the importance of material goods; in preschool, friendship changes based on who has the best new toy. By school age, children use ownership of goods as a way to assess worth and to measure self-esteem. These messages may be supported by parents who often go into debt to buy extravagant gifts for children during holiday seasons and birthdays; birthday parties are even becoming expensive affairs, with goody bags and treats for children who attend. The macrosystem and general cultural ideology of consumerism reinforce these values.

Helping clients explore the relationship between their self-concept and their class-related values may elicit an awareness previously not present about how they go about selecting their mate, their careers, and other lifestyle options and are intimately related to their socialization and to their social class. For example, often clients consider themselves "less than" in terms of their social-class standing and their background and may wrongly assume that they do not have access to certain professions or future spouses solely based on a self-deprecating view of themselves based on their social

class. A woman with a professional degree who was raised working class may feel that she is not a suitable partner for a professional man raised in the upper middle class, although their current social class is the same. Others may consider themselves “more than” and avoid making a professional or occupational choice because they may consider themselves above it. For example, executives who are downsized may refuse to accept employment under a certain salary level or a particular title.

Many dual-career families may feel like failures because they cannot obtain the same status that previous generations could obtain living on one income (Kliman, 1998). As disparities in income grow and media images continue to depict upper middle-class comfort that few people can afford, therapeutic conversations about historical phenomena and class disparities may help normalize this issue and decrease shame for these couples and families. Having clarifying conversations with clients can be revealing and life changing.

Clients should also be encouraged to discuss educational and career goals and their relationship to social class. The Protestant work ethic is part of mainstream culture, along with the notion of the importance of achievement, accomplishment, and status. Again, children are socialized with these messages and, therefore, may be encouraged to prepare for standardized tests and to begin to think of a vocation at an early age. Clinicians should discuss individuals' career expectations and aspirations, especially when working with adolescents, because these aspirations and expectations may differ based on social class. For example, a teenager growing up in an urban inner city may aspire to become a physician. However, due to expectations about the cost of college and medical school, the lack of role models within the community, and the lack of access to information regarding available scholarships, the adolescent may decide that pursuing college is an impossible dream. Clients of all ages should be assisted in finding resources to pursue career aspirations and vocational goals.

### *Budgets*

Many live with high levels of debt; it is easier to buy items on credit today than at any other point in history, an effect of the interaction of the macro-system ideology of consumerism and the chronosystem in which consumer spending is seen as the answer for economic recessions and slowdowns. Although it may feel out of the arena of treatment, therapists should explore financial wellness with clients. Teaching clients how to balance a checkbook can be an important tool for fiscal responsibility. Clients should also be encouraged to develop reasonable and manageable budgets for living expenses. Living

in debt, with the fear of being pursued by creditors, can create undue stress and pressure for individuals. As we saw in Anthony's story, it can also lead to a sense of social isolation. Clinicians should refer clients to reputable non-profit credit counseling agencies. Therapists must be cautioned that the cost of therapeutic services can exacerbate the financial stress clients face. Even if clients make a small copayment, the cost of therapy should be carefully considered and included in budgets. Therapists are encouraged to follow suggestions present in many of the ethical codes and consider providing pro bono services; this may be a preferred option, along with a reduced fee, for clients who are in need of treatment services but experiencing financial stress.

### Countertransference

It is tempting for counselors to avoid or ignore issues of social class in the counseling relationship when counselors perceive themselves as being of the same social class as their clients. However, it is important for counselors not to assume that their clients share similar worldviews and expectations, even if they are perceived to belong to the same social class. Hearing stories such as Anthony's can elicit emotional reactions in clinicians, including sadness and sympathy for his social-class differences and confusion about his financial choices. The importance of mainstream middle-class values and their influence on counseling also need to be addressed. Anthony experienced social isolation throughout school based on his perception of alienation from his peers. Clinicians who have experienced a similar sense of isolation based on social class may overidentify with clients such as Anthony. This hinders therapists' ability to display genuine empathy for clients. Therapists who were socialized and raised in the middle and upper classes may associate clients such as Anthony with delinquent or criminal behaviors. Stereotyping clients also hinders the development of the therapeutic relationship.

### *Differences in Values*

Therapists may feel confused about Anthony's decision to struggle financially by leaving a job in a corporation to pursue a teaching degree. Becoming wealthier seems to be a part of the mainstream values because status, power, and financial gain are valued. Individuals with education who choose to live in poverty are viewed as deviant. "Being poor in American society and staying poor is not valued. Being poor and then becoming rich is often admired; the values of hard work, pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, change, and perseverance are showcased" (Robinson, 2005, p. 178). Special care may have to be taken to work with clients whose value systems differ from mainstream

middle-class norms. Therapists need to determine what is “normal” according to their social-class socialization and how that perception of normal influences their perceptions of clients.

Finally, clinicians should remember that counseling occurs within a particular context and follows mainstream values (Sue & Sue, 2003). In addition to valuing independence and autonomy in individuals, counseling reinforces the notion of hard work, perseverance, and self-control. This includes the concept that change is the responsibility of clients and emphasizes an internal locus of control. Clients whose cultural values are different from the mainstream may expect different approaches to treatment.

TOOLBOX ACTIVITY—ANTHONY		
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Resources</i>
<p><b>Content themes</b> What other themes do you see emerging in the story that the author did not identify?</p> <p><b>Assessment</b> Are there any questions you would like to ask Anthony?</p> <p><b>Interventions</b> What other interventions could you propose with Anthony?</p> <p><b>Countertransference</b> What countertransference reactions were emerging in yourself as you read this story?</p> <p><b>Other scenarios</b> Imagine that Anthony decided to remain in his corporate position for fear of being poor. How would you help him deal with his stress?</p>	<p>Conduct a values auction. Determine which values are most important to you and how they are related to social class (see Pedersen &amp; Hernandez, 1996).</p> <p>Write an essay about the social class values you hold and their influence on psychotherapy.</p>	<p><b>Suggested readings</b></p> <p>Ehrenreich, B. (2002). <i>Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America</i>. New York: Owl Books.</p> <p>Shipler, D. K. (2004). <i>The working poor: Invisible in America</i>. New York: Knopf.</p>