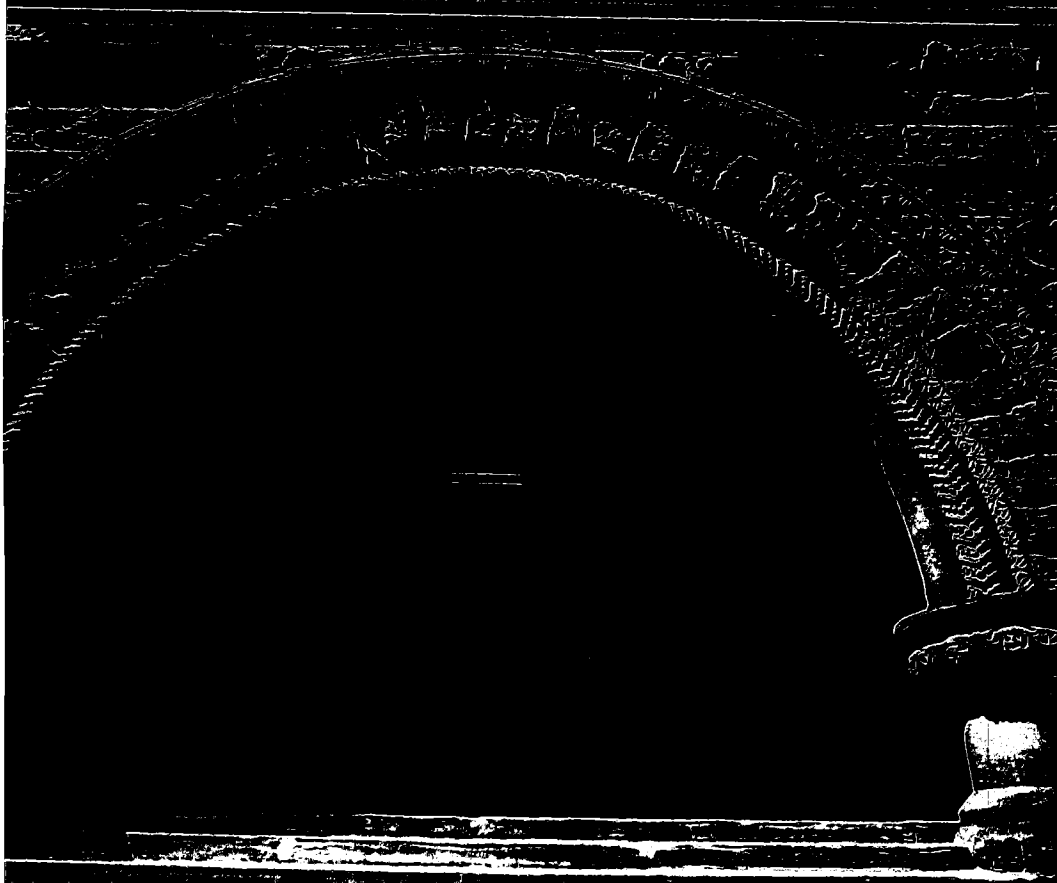# WORKING
IN CLASS

RECOGNIZING HOW SOCIAL CLASS SHAPES OUR ACADEMIC WORK

EDITED BY ALLISON L. HURST AND SANDI KAWECKA NENGA

"While social class is a prominent topic across disciplines, academics rarely consider how class operates in their own professional practice. Hurst and Nenga's *Working in Class* offers a much needed corrective. The authors offer critical commentary on how social class is alive—but not always alive and well—on their campuses and in their classrooms. Ultimately, the collective message is empowering, with recommendations for institutional change and, barring that, transformation of our classrooms into more democratic and class-aware spaces."

—Jenny M. Stuber, University of North Florida; author of *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*

"*Working in Class* combines theoretical analyses of class effects and personal stories of fifteen academics of varying original class locations. As a collection, it is an invaluable guide to a multitude of key issues, such as how to survive in academia as a woman from the working class and how best to teach low-income students of color. The book's many informed voices and its structural clarity make it an important new look at the academy." —Charles Sackrey, coauthor (with Jake Ryan) of *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*

"For undergraduates this is the ideal text for bringing social class to the diversity discussion that today so richly informs many curricula. It's not just about recognizing and overcoming classism, but as many of these authors demonstrate, there is great potential for transformative learning in wading into the very different experiences and values that both students and faculty bring depending on their zip codes of origin. The volume as a whole argues that these differences could easily become assets rather than liabilities if honest light is shed on them. *Working in Class* shines that light brilliantly."

— Jack Metzgar, author of *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered*

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Working in Class

Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work

Edited by Allison L. Hurst and
Sandi Kawecka Nenga

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Chapter Two

Controlling for Class

Or the Persistence of Classism in Psychology

Irene López and Olivia Legan

In the field of psychological research, psychologists are trained to assess the "true" association between variables by first ruling out the effect of other extraneous variables. As such, demographic variables, such as socioeconomic status, are routinely "controlled" because they supposedly confound the relationships between our main constructs of interest. Yet what does it mean to control for these types of variables? And what does it convey about what psychology considers important to study?

In this essay, I (the first author) review my work and discuss how my understanding of class has developed and shaped my research. Over time, I have shifted from ignoring or trying to "control" or "partial out" the effects of social class to more explicitly integrating the association of class with other variables. Doing so has not only required me to learn the statistical and methodological challenges involved in assessing class, but has also helped me understand how class shapes my variables of interest. Ultimately, I have learned that when we, as psychologists, attempt to "control for class" we are, in effect, engaging in classism.

THE OMISSION OF CLASS

Open any introductory undergraduate psychology textbook and you are likely to find that psychology is routinely defined as the scientific study of behavior and mental processes (American Psychological Association [APA] 2015b). The definition stems from the field's initial study of individual differences in sense and perception. As such, the primary focus of psychology

has historically been on delineating differences in bodily perceptions, cognitions, and reaction times, and not necessarily on studying the impact of larger contextual variables.

Consequently, the subject areas and "subjects"[1] studied were considered to be classless (Lott 2014). The field's early and exclusive focus on documenting individual and biological differences, therefore, did not allow for the assessment of larger structural forces (for an exception see Walsh, Teo, and Baydala 2014).

Yet social class, defined as "power, prestige, and control over resources" (Diemer et al. 2012), is related to social position and rank (Kraus and Stephens 2012), and has always been an appropriate and necessary topic of study in psychology. Social class affects individual experiences, and, in fact, shapes the totality of our lived experiences.

It influences a host of varied outcomes, from our individual perceptions, attributions, bodily reactions, brain development (Chen and Miller 2013; Gianaros and Manuck 2010; Kraus and Mendes 2014), to our health and mental health (Robertson et al. 2015; Scott 2014; World Health Organization 2014). Psychology is, therefore, more aptly defined as the scientific study of behavior and mental process *in context*, with social class being one of the most encompassing and defining of all contexts.

Still, despite its centrality and importance, social class has been woefully neglected in psychology (Fiske and Markus 2012; Kraus and Stephens 2012; Lott 2014). Indeed, psychology has been so "myopic" in its focus (Lott 2014) that a study of six APA journals, from 1970 to 1989, indicated that only 33.5% of studies contained the social class information of participants (Graham 1992). Thus, not only are the issues related to the poor underresearched, but the poor themselves are underrepresented in the research as well. Such neglect has meant that social class has been "under-theorized" in psychology (Day, Rickett, and Woolhouse 2014, 397).

The neglect of social class is readily apparent at the graduate level, where students receive little training in studying and integrating it into research and therapy—despite repeated calls to the contrary (Diemer et al. 2012; Liu 2011; L. Smith 2009). In fact, a recent content analysis of the top two journals in the field of counseling psychology found that, while class was the variable *most* likely to be mentioned in comparison to race and gender, the impact of class was the *least* likely to be further assessed or analyzed (Reimers 2007).

Thus, while multicultural training is essential, and indeed helps students acquire more compassionate and accurate structural explanations regarding poverty (Toporek and Pope-Davis 2005), class-focused discussions in graduate school remain rare. This is unfortunate because it is vital to understand how class interacts with and shapes our representations of race and gender (Liu et al. 2004b; Ostrove and Cole 2003; L. Smith 2009).

Indeed, in my own training as a clinical psychologist, I never had a class that specifically dealt with issues of economic status and power. Indeed, in my own training as a clinical psychologist, I never had a class that specifically dealt with issues of economic status and power—although this was clearly an interest of mine (Hall, López, & Bansal 2001). Instead, there was the optional class on "diversity," which was solely focused on conversations of race and gender.

When class issues were discussed, they were inevitably eclipsed by and confounded with race. For example, I specifically remember one seminar that introduced the use of the MMPI-2, a standard psychological instrument. When I inquired about the validity of this measure with less advantaged (poor) populations, I was told that, with some minimal adjustments, this measure could successfully be used with "these special populations."

However, when I pressed further about this issue, the speaker reported on some preliminary normed data that had been obtained with a small number of *racial minorities*. Apparently, race was not only synonymous with economic disadvantage, but was also being described euphemistically as "special." In later research, my professor and I were able to show that indeed the MMPI-2 did not discriminate against ethnic minorities (Hall, Bansal, & López 1999)—although we did not assess the mitigating role of socioeconomic status.

Why is it, I wondered, that in a field that prides itself on its ability to understand the nuances of psychological experience, we were so unable to consider the unique influence of class? Further, why were Whites allowed to be classed while racial and ethnic minorities were not?

The lack of specific training in class issues did not dampen my interest in these issues although it did affect how I proceeded with my work. In my first-authored publication written while in graduate school, I assessed whether monocultural involvement was a better predictor of adjustment than dual-cultural involvement among teenage Puerto Rican mothers—without considering whether this predictive relationship could vary by class (López and Contreras 2005).

I assumed, as many others did, that if my participants were low-income, their inclusion was sufficient to address class issues. Yet, while my work had real-world (face) validity, there was no explicit measurement of social class. While we found that dual-cultural involvement (biculturality) was a better predictor of well-being than monocultural involvement, the lack of social class measurement meant that we could not be sure if this relation could vary by status.

This lack of measurement was unfortunate as many of the psychological benefits often attributed to biculturality can, perhaps, be partially explained by having greater leverage or access to particular types of class privilege. In other words, if we define biculturality as the acquisition of dual-cultural

norms, could it be that the benefits of biculturality may be due to the acquisition of, or access to, behaviors or values that are more highly esteemed, valued, and classed?

Also, can it be that someone who has a lower income and is bicultural may have less access to either economic or cultural resources, and thus be less adjusted, than someone who has a higher income and is bicultural? In other words, psychological well-being may not only be contingent on how biculturality is defined, but may also be explained by how biculturality interacts with class.

THE (MARGINAL) INCLUSION OF CLASS

Indeed, in my next study, which focused on adult Puerto Rican women, there was clear evidence of how cultural opportunities were limited by class. Specifically, this study assessed the moderating effect of skin color on ethnic identity and self-esteem (López, 2008a). Unlike my first study, I moved from omitting social class to including it—even though the measurement was coarse and not central to any of my analyses.

First, in this study, there were explicit measures of socioeconomic status. Specifically, the usual indicators of socioeconomic status were included, such as income, occupation, and years of educational attainment, because these three measures have been considered the triumvirate of measurement in the objective assessment of socioeconomic status (Diemer et al. 2012; Kraus and Stephens 2012).

But to make these indicators more context sensitive, participants were asked how many years of schooling they had received in the continental United States as well as on the island of Puerto Rico. Doing so acknowledged the circular migration that characterized the lives of many Puerto Ricans (Aranda 2007; Duany 2002) and assessed whether these variables could differentially predict outcome.

Additionally, familial access to resources was assessed. Findings indicated that although 70% of the sample had some college education, approximately half of the women reported that neither their fathers, nor mothers, had obtained a high school education (López 2008a). Knowing that these participants came from families with limited resources helped put in perspective the rather surprising finding that, despite their own high educational gains, close to a third of the participants still lived in subsidized housing (López 2008a).

This study, therefore, instructs us that it is key to have multiple measures of class. Doing so allows researchers to assess the degree of correlation between measures and to assess when they diverge (Diemer et al. 2012). Indeed, a growing body of research is showing that income and education are not always correlated across different ethnic and racial groups (e.g., Shavers

2007), indicating that an investment in education does not always produce the same benefits and social mobility for all (Hurst 2010).

Apart from such descriptive statistics based on covariates, correlational analyses from this study also revealed that various markers of class were associated with the outcome variable of self-esteem. Participants with higher educational attainment, as well as those who did not receive welfare benefits, reported having higher self-esteem than their less-educated peers who received public assistance (López 2008a).

However, by far the most illuminating of all the findings was how class mitigated the overall relationship between the main variables. Specifically, as hypothesized, skin color alone did not predict self-esteem. Rather, it was the interaction between skin color and ethnic identity that predicted self-esteem.

Yet economic pressures, such as living in poverty, sometimes impeded participants' ability to partake in the cultural experiences necessary for the development of a higher ethnic identity. In particular, while an overwhelming majority of the participants had visited Puerto Rico, having the means to frequently visit Puerto Rico was associated with a higher ethnic identity and self-esteem.

Still, in retrospect, the study should have discerned if the ability to frequently visit Puerto Rico was restricted by income or if income was restricted because of frequent visits to Puerto Rico. Additionally, there could also have been further investigation into how psychological variables, such as ethnic and cultural identity, affected the association with income (Chen and Miller 2012; Ostrove and Cole 2003).

Finally, it could have been assessed if poverty itself was the cause of circular migration, as Puerto Ricans may seek to ameliorate their economic situation by relocating (Pérez 2004). Whatever the case, visits to Puerto Rico were an important cultural necessity that appeared intimately tied to socioeconomic status.

CONTROLLING FOR CLASS

Despite such improvements in measurement, this study still fell short because, while socioeconomic status was measured, in many respects the analysis was an afterthought that did not center on class. Indeed, a review of the psychological research notes that psychology has shifted from neglecting social class to either marginally including it (see Reimers 2007 for an excellent review) or trying to statistically control for it.

Social class is thus understood as "noise" that is distracting from "real data." Hence, many psychological researchers only gather socioeconomic information to control for it or to remove messy outliers (Liu et al. 2004a).

Furthermore, it is important to remember that a participant's individual socioeconomic status is situated in local (e.g., school, work, neighborhood) and international contexts. These multiple contexts, in turn, can have a wide variety of effects on health, mental health, and even mortality (Dahl et al. 2006; Fone et al. 2007; McGrath, Matthews, and Brady 2006).

Understanding the importance of context has consequently affected how I do research. In particular, I have tried to focus on recruiting and studying participants not only in locations with high concentrations of Puerto Ricans but also in neighborhoods that are most representative of this group. I did this using US Census blocks based on zip codes in the continental United States (López 2008a), as well surveying Puerto Rican municipalities in Puerto Rico with the highest population density (e.g., López et al. 2009).

By obtaining representative samples, site differences could be made between Puerto Ricans residing in New York and those in San Juan. The results indicated that, despite similarly high rates of poverty in both locales, child psychopathology in New York was associated with worse outcomes, such as more stressful life events and more exposure to violence (López et al. 2009).

These site differences possibly alluded to ethnic specific factors, such as the importance of maternal warmth, which protected the children in Puerto Rico more than the children in New York. Hence, psychological processes could have ameliorated the negative effects of poverty. Indeed, other psychological factors, such as perceived competency and personal meaning, have been noted as being key in helping marginalized individuals thrive (Abelev 2009).

Subjective Assessments

Psychological experiences are, therefore, key to understanding the impact of social class. This is because objective markers of socioeconomic status cannot fully capture subjective social class. Subjective social class refers to how individuals view themselves within society with regard to markers of rank and prestige.

Determining subjective social class, therefore, entails questions beyond quantification and classification of income and education, and instead centers on issues of identity and group processes (Fiske and Markus 2012; Ostrove and Cole 2003; Ritterman et al. 2009).

Additionally, considering subjective social class allows for the assessment of variance even among groups who may show very little variability in objective economic markers. One can assess, for example, how disenfranchised groups compare to one another in terms of not only their earnings but their attributed rank.

Thus, considering subjective social class may explain why it is that even though Puerto Ricans are Americans who typically have greater access to

resources than noncitizen Latinos, Puerto Ricans still consistently rank themselves as having lower prestige than other Americans (Aranda 2007). In this regard, racial and ethnic discrimination work in confluence to enforce social stratification and further serve to marginalize these communities. Considered in their totality, these factors can contribute to their sense of dislocation—despite their higher earnings and financial mobility (Aranda 2007).

Furthermore, subjective social class is important to consider as a predictive variable because it can explain a variety of outcomes above and beyond traditional measures of socioeconomic status (Adler, Epel, and Ickovics 2000; Ritterman et al. 2009). Hence, there exist many possibilities when we incorporate subjective social class into our research.

In particular, researchers can assess the degree of overlap between objective and subjective measures of class, as well as differences in the predictive utility in each measure. Additionally, as with objective economic factors, there can be a further investigation of how psychological experiences, such as discrimination, shape social exclusion based on perceived rank and power.

In my own research, I have written about how issues relevant within minority communities, such as concerns over skin color, affect not only objective life chances but also one's sense of rank, worth, and perceived beauty (López 2008b; López, Walker, and Yidliz Spinel 2015; López, Gonzalez, and Ho 2012). Indeed, my review of anxiety concerns among minority women has noted that distress over appearance is not only about gendered and racialized concerns, but is also about trying to meet beauty standards that are classed as well (López, Gonzalez, and Ho 2012).

Visual Assessments

One way that subjective social class has been assessed has been through the use of visual assessments. With these assessments researchers gain an understanding of where participants view themselves by asking them to visually mark, on a ladder, how they see themselves in relation to others.

In particular, in one of the most popular visual assessments, the MacArthur Scale, participants are shown two ladders and asked to mark an "X" for where they see themselves, in terms of their socioeconomic status and subjective social class, within the United States and their own community (Adler et al. 2000). In this way, social class is assessed in multiple contexts.

The use of visual assessments is helpful because it bypasses the need for literacy and may, therefore, be particularly useful when working with children, nonnative English speakers, and/or populations with a limited education. The participation of these samples, in turn, contributed to diversifying psychological research, because most studies to date have been based on convenience samples of undergraduate students that bear very little resem-

However, there are statistical, conceptual, and ethical concerns with this practice.

Statistically, psychologists often control for class because we wish to get unbiased estimates. We therefore often control for social class because of concerns over measurement error. However, class has its own important and independent effects on our outcome variables. Thus, while it is important not to confound the effects of class with other variables, controlling for class, in effect, isolates and removes social class from the predictive relationship.

Further, by isolating the effect of social class, we remain unable to see how different indices of class can interact with one another and differentially predict outcome. Controlling for class, conceptually, is also problematic because it fails to recognize the mutually constitutive effect that class can have on our study variables. Additionally, reducing social class to proxy measures of socioeconomic status conflates markers of poverty with class identity.

Most importantly, "controlling for class" legitimizes the erasure of people who are poor from our studies. As such, the expression "controlling for class" uses a language of force that underscores classist attitudes toward those who are poor.

In short, there is a fundamental error in viewing social class as an experience that can be controlled rather than an experience that can contribute. Instead of controlling for class, we should integrate class into our analyses. By doing so we cannot only assess its unique effects but also the additive, multiplicative, and constitutive effects of class in combination with other variables.

DIVERSIFYING OUR ASSESSMENTS AND DESIGNS

In addition to reevaluating our analyses, we need to rethink our assessments. However, progress in the field of social class research has been delayed, in part, because of the difficulties in defining and measuring social class. For example, a content analysis of close to four thousand articles in counseling journals found nearly five hundred different terms used for the overarching concept of "social class" (Liu et al. 2004a), making it very difficult for researchers to compare their findings.

Still, within this dizzying array of terms, there does appear to be a consensus that at least conceptually social class can be measured based on either an objective assessment of socioeconomic status, and/or a subjective assessment of social status (Diemer et al. 2012). Depending on the outcome in question, researchers may use one or both of these types of measurements. Diversifying our assessments, as well as our analyses, allows us to assess how these different measures may either vary from one another, converge, combine, or

interact with one another to exacerbate outcomes among different populations (e.g., Miething 2013; Quon and McGrath 2014).

Objective Assessments

Most studies to date have relied on a handful of objective measures, such as measures of occupational prestige, or resources-oriented measures, such as educational attainment and income (Diemer et al. 2012; Kraus and Stephens 2012). Yet various problems have been associated with these measures. In this regard, it is worth quoting at length Rubin et al. (2014) who note:

> [O]bjective measures of social class and SES need to be benchmarked and interpreted relative to population-based standards, and these can be difficult and controversial to establish. In particular, if social class and/or SES are conceptualized as categorical variables, then decisions about how many categories to include and the cut-off points for these categories are debatable (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 2). Even after agreement is reached on such issues, the resulting standards are limited to specific time-periods and contexts. Hence, objective standards can become quickly outdated and cannot be generalized outside of the local contexts in which they were developed.

Further, participants may misreport information because of concerns over social desirability, inaccurate recall, or difficulties in understanding survey measures (Diemer et al. 2012; Godoy et al. 2008). As a result, they may overestimate, underestimate, or censor their responses to items related to financial standing (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Skewes 2002).

These inaccuracies can, therefore, affect the descriptive statistics based on the correlations of socioeconomic status with other variables. Additionally, if indicators of socioeconomic status are studied as explanatory variables, incorrect information derived from these independent variables will affect the inferences we make (Godoy et al. 2008).

Among Latinos, which has been the group that I have primarily studied, accurate and stable estimations of socioeconomic status can also be difficult to obtain because Latinos regularly spend a large portion of their income on sending remittances abroad (e.g., Pew Hispanic Research Center 2002). In fact, among immigrants in general, it is difficult to get accurate poverty estimates as migrants may send anywhere from 10% to upward of 80% of their monthly income abroad (Terry and Wilson 2005).

Thus, in my own work, I not only ask about earned income but also regularly inquire about additional expenditures, such as remittances and trips to visit family in Puerto Rico. These costs, in turn, can occur either episodically or seasonally depending on the availability and stability of employment.

blance to the American population at large (Arnett 2008; Day, Rickett, and Woolhouse 2014).

Community Work

The use of visual assessments highlights the need to extend our methods of assessments away from traditional paper and pencil surveys. Similarly, the more we move psychology out of the lab, the more we can access populations that have been traditionally underrepresented and ignored in the field.

While community-based work may at times involve changing our recruitment techniques, and relying on nonprobability sampling such as snowballing, such efforts not only increase participation but also increase the ecological validity of our work.

Additionally, community-based participatory research requires that participants get involved in various aspects of the research to ensure that their issues are accurately represented and their needs are properly meet, which further increases the utility of our work (Foster and Stanek 2007). In fact, the ultimate goal of community-based participatory research is to ensure that the findings of studies are translated into scientifically supported interventions.

Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research Methods

Community-based projects not only alter our usual methods of recruitment, assessment, and dissemination, but they also have the capacity to alter our research designs. To date, a growing body of research has elaborated on the utility, and indeed necessity, of mixed methods as well as qualitatively oriented research. Mixed methods research, which combines qualitative and quantitative measures and analyses, allows researchers to triangulate various types of data to get a more accurate assessment of the lives of our participants.

In my own work, I have employed mixed methods research to analyze the quantitative and qualitative aspects surrounding appearance among Puerto Rican women (López, Walker, and Yildiz Spinel 2015). Quantitative results show that, despite generally high levels of ethnic identity in the sample, approximately 80% of the sample were told that they did not look Puerto Rican. Further, when queried in open-ended interviews, some reported that they were told that they did not look Puerto Rican because they did not conform to Puerto Rican stereotypes. That is, they were not "loud and rude" and did not wear "street clothes." Hence, ethnic group membership was evaluated based on hurtful and classist stereotypes.

However, despite the advantages of mixed methods research, in psychology there remains a steadfast suspicion and reluctance toward more qualitative forms of inquiry because these methods are not seen as sufficiently empiri-

cal. Yet empiricism, which refers to data gathered through experience, is not synonymous with a solely quantitative focus. Therefore, the historically exclusive reliance on positivistic measures and analyses in psychology needs to be updated in order to conduct more complex research on class.

PITFALLS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the end, my own class experiences have influenced my research. In particular, class has guided what issues I investigate, altered how I measure variables, and how I interpret and disseminate my findings. Doing class-oriented work requires that we be aware of our biases and that we process and navigate our own social class roles as researchers (Shpungin and Lyubansky 2006).

For working-class academics such as myself, this process is not always easy because our concerns, priorities, and interests are consistently undervalued (Dews and Law 1995). And while the climate can be difficult for women in academia (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993), the situation is particularly toxic for women of color (like myself) who are often presumed incompetent (Gutiérrez 2012).

Therefore, not only have my participants, and their issues, been undervalued, but my abilities as a researcher have been questioned as well. For example, my work has been dismissed because it has been viewed as too sociological, and my abilities to conduct research have also been questioned. Indeed, colleagues have suggested that my work has only been published because it is considered "novel" and "exploratory" in nature.

However, as I have progressed in my career, I have shifted from ignoring or controlling for class to prioritizing it in my work. Doing so has required learning new types of assessments, altering analyses, and rethinking my data collection and research designs. More to the point, I have realized that relying on previous ways of doing measurements, analyses, and designs have prevented those with less resources and lower rank from being involved in our research.

This, in turn, has not only led to inaccurate assessments (and hence bad science) but has created a body of research that has been based on those with the most resources. Consequently, it has produced interventions that primarily service those with the most resources. Thus, by continuing to engage in these practices, and by continuing to "control for class," we are, in effect, excluding and silencing others and engaging in classism.

Indeed, if the mission of the APA is to "to advance knowledge that benefits society and improves people's lives" (APA 2015a) then the profession needs to recommit itself to the study of social class (Lott 2014). As a

Latina, who comes from a working-class background, I know that I can no longer be silent.

NOTE

1. Even the language that we use in psychology is infused with reference to class hierarchy. For example, up until recently, individuals involved in psychological studies were referred to as "subjects" and not "participants."

tion.