IT'S LONELY AT THE BOTTOM: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL CLASS AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Statement of Originality

I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge and belief the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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Abstract

It has been widely established that working-class people tend to have poorer mental health compared to people from upper classes. Additionally, research suggests that the working class are less socially supported and connected. The present research investigated the role of social integration in the relationship between social class and mental health in both university populations and the general population. Starting with a university focus, Study 1 involved a three-wave longitudinal study (N = 152) conducted within the Australian university population, Study 2 was a longitudinal archival study (N = 2,333), and Study 3 included a cross-sectional study (Chapter 5, N = 321) conducted within the Australian university population. Consistent with my predictions, in Studies 1 and 3, I found that social integration mediated the relationship between social class and mental health. Study 2 demonstrated that the relationship between social class and social integration is pervasive and does not vary as a function of the type of institutions that students attend or where they are living. Further, Study 3's results suggested that working-class students are less socially integrated because they tend to be older and thus have less time available to socialise. I then extended my investigations into the general population with three studies I conducted within the general Australian population. Studies 4 (N = 15,028) and 5 (N = 1,946) included two large nationally representative cross-sectional archival studies. Study 6 involved cross-sectional study (N = 461) with participants recruited from the general Australian population. All studies showed that social integration mediated the relationship between social class and mental health. In addition, Study 6 demonstrated that working-class individuals had less money to socialise and were more uncertain about their place in society, and these differences predicted their lower integration and mental health. Overall, I suggest that social integration has the potential to improve the mental health of working-class individuals.

PREAMBLE

In the middle of my final year as an undergraduate student I had the misfortune of contracting tonsillitis and glandular fever at the same time. Because of this unfortuitous combination of ailments, I missed the enrolment openings for my second semester courses, and thus missed out on my first choice of classes. Included in these missed connections was a seminar series on Mindfulness, which I ended up having to replace with a series on Social Class. At the time, I was less than impressed. However this quickly changed once the series actually started. This seminar series was unlike any other course I had taken at university. Every week our small class of 20 odd students would dissect and discuss two recent research papers on social class. This was finally what I had always imagined university to be, but more to the point the subject matter was incredibly interesting. The research took something we had only ever learnt about in a health context - social and economic inequality - and framed it within a larger social picture.

As the seminar leader (who would later go on to become my PhD supervisor) Mark Rubin explained “social class has a profound influence on people’s personality and behaviour. It predicts what clothes people wear, what food they eat, how they talk, their attitudes, values and preferences (e.g., political, musical, sport); even their physical and mental health.” He also outlined how social class is understudied in psychology, a fact I found mind boggling having come from a working-class town and with a working-class family background (as an example, my dad has worked in the same steel mill in the same role since he was 16). The course covered papers on the relationship between social class and well-being, prejudice, mobility, hostility, self-perceptions, prosocial behaviour, and classism at university to name a few. Discussions about these papers generally divided the class, with some students refuting the notion of class

entirely, and others supporting the conclusions of the papers being discussed; that class exists and is a force to be reckoned with.

Many of the debates I observed and often participated in are reflected in Scanlon's 2014 article from the Conversation "Bogans and hipsters: we're talking the living language of class". In it, he described the conversations he had with students in his university classes. One student of his in particular insisted that social class does not exist and that they just happen to go to a private school and have CEO for a father because of "choices". In comparison, Scanlon describes another one of his students, who was certain that social class exists because they live in a low SES suburb and had to work while attending university. I concur with the latter student in this regard: of course class exists! The cultural phenomenon of social and economic hierarchies has not disappeared entirely, though it may look different to what we see on Downton Abbey. The worldview of the first student, and others who share it, completely disregards privilege and power and how those structures perpetuate inequality. As Scanlon goes on to explain, perpetuating this idea of meritocracy and that class does not exist is beneficial for some (for example, those at the top) but harmful to others (for example, those at the bottom). We were having these same discussions in our seminar series and the papers we were discussing opened my eyes to this neglected area of psychology. Moreover, the lack of social class in psychology research now seemed like a glaring oversight to me. The question I was left asking at the end of the series was – why aren't more people talking about this? And what inequalities, discrimination and suffering are we missing while we ignore this topic area? And so, this leads me to this thesis, which forms my first contribution to the burgeoning research on the social psychology of social class.