

'Class' and working lives: Implications for enabling healthy occupations in practice

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Introduction: While some Western cultures consider that 'class' does not exist in our society today (Sayer, 2005), the discourse on issues, such as work-life balance, reveal its continued foothold. The 'work-life balance' discourse is focused almost exclusively on 'career-minded' individuals (Reece, et al., 2009), with low wage earners and the 'working poor' essentially excluded from work-life balance programs and policies.

Objectives: This presentation will demonstrate that the concept of class continues within the literature on the working lives of people. It will describe the implications that the concept of class has for occupational therapy, its clients and the practice.

Description: Class permeates the discourse on working lives; i.e., the construct 'work-life balance' is used almost exclusively to discuss the working lives of career-minded individuals while the construct 'making ends meet' is used for low-wage earners and the working poor. This presentation will start with a brief overview of the concept of class. Then, it will be demonstrated that this concept has presented differential opportunities for different groups of workers creating a divide between the 'career-minded' and the 'working poor'. This divide will be used to illustrate how seemingly well-meaning discourses can serve to reproduce occupational injustices and social inequalities due to unrecognized and unacknowledged underlying belief systems.

Discussion: The work-life balance discourse demonstrates how the underlying belief about class can result in the differential treatment of people and prohibit equal access to programs and policies that enable optimal occupational engagement.

Conclusion: It is essential that the existence of 'class' be acknowledged and the place it holds in the occupational lives of clients be recognized. Occupational therapists need to understand how beliefs about 'class' may be reflected in their practice so they can ensure that they do not inadvertently become ineffective enablers.

Practice Contributions: Occupational therapists are dedicated to creating an inclusive society that enables healthy occupation for all occupational therapy clients. It will be argued that occupational therapists must become aware of their own class-based beliefs and those within the society in which they practice. With this awareness, occupational therapists can better meet the occupational challenges faced by their clients.