

# Social Class, Race, and Ethnicity: Career Interventions for Women Domestic Violence Survivors

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This story describes a community intervention study conducted with women domestic violence survivors and a research dilemma related to the complex interrelationships between women's social class, race and ethnicity, and career development needs and experiences. The author presents diversity and research dilemmas related to facilitating women's critical consciousness of power dynamics at work in their lives. The influence of community context, career intervention curricula, and research team members' values on research decisions are described. This story highlights the importance of researchers examining their values and how those values impact the communities that they serve.

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**KEY WORDS:** domestic violence; career development; critical consciousness; community intervention.

## CONTEXT

The origins of this community intervention project<sup>3</sup> began with my graduate work with women domestic violence survivors. I observed the devastating impact of domestic abuse on women's health and that treatment focused on rehabilitating women physically and emotionally and assisting them with finding immediate financial resources. I recognized that focusing only on women's short-term financial resources, however, placed them at great risk for returning to their abusive partners because women often pursued jobs with low pay, no benefits, and few opportunities for advancement. Consequently, women struggled to support themselves and their families long term, without their abusers' contributions. Recognizing the potential for career counseling to help women attain long-term economic independence, I created two brief group career counseling in-

terventions to address women's short- and long-term career needs.

I implemented these career interventions in my community with assistance from graduate students, postsecondary counselors, direct service providers, and clergy from 45 different institutions, social service agencies, and churches. The core research team included 15 members from these communities.

The community in which this story takes place is a small urban city located in a Pacific Northwest valley bordered by the beautiful Cascade Mountains on one side and the Pacific Ocean on the other. The city is comprised of approximately 140,000 residents, and it is known for its endless biking and hiking trails. Community industries are distributed across management, professional, sales, and production jobs. A major state university, two private colleges, and a community college provide unique educational and research resources. Significant community problems include domestic violence and poverty. One in eight women living in our community experiences a physical assault by her partner each year (Center Against Rape and Domestic Violence, 2004). Approximately 14.4% of city residents live below poverty level, and this number is rising as our community continues to have one of the highest rates of unemployment and child hunger in the United States (U.S. Census

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Bureau, 2003). This economic decline has resulted in more families living at poverty levels and major cuts in government spending for mental health services and public education.

A unique aspect of this city is its progressive voting patterns on various social issues, which has been influenced largely by the presence of the university and a large and politically active LGBT community. Although our community tends to adhere to more progressive social values, in general, the community is ethnically homogeneous and economic and social issues affecting ethnic minority and immigrant communities are not given adequate attention. Approximately 90% of city residents identify as Caucasian/White, 4.6% Latino/a, .4% African American/Black, 1.1% American Indian, 2.2% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 3.3% identify as “multiracial” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). As a result of the ethnic homogeneity, a few distinct and cohesive activist ethnic minority communities have formed and work to keep attention focused on ethnic minority and immigrant residents’ needs.

Given this community context, my aim was to design a career intervention program that would restore longer-term career opportunities and economic stability to women domestic violence survivors. The specific goals of both programs were to increase women’s (a) critical consciousness of the effects of domestic violence on their lives, (b) knowledge of career opportunities, (c) development of career skills, (d) utilization of community support, and (e) short- and long-term career goal planning. I also wanted to create a program that attended to a broad range of multicultural issues and the impact of culture on women’s domestic violence and career development experiences. I wanted to recruit women survivors from all socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds and include the voices of women of color and immigrant women. Specific program activities included career assessments, written exercises, computer-based exercises, and group discussions. Both programs were grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994), but only one program (which will be referred to as the CC program) was grounded in McWhirter’s (1994) empowerment model and included features of critical consciousness.

McWhirter (1994) defines empowerment as the “process by which people, organizations, or groups who are powerless or marginalized (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some

reasonable control over their lives, (c) which they exercise, (d) without infringing on the rights of others, and (e) which coincides with actively supporting the empowerment of others in their community” (p. 12). The career counseling programs were designed for the empowerment of women domestic violence survivors, and as such, required that group leaders facilitate women’s awareness of the power dynamics at work in their lives, recognition and use of their skills, and ultimately, women’s ability to contribute to the empowerment of others in their community. The 5Cs of empowerment include facilitating *collaboration* between the counselor and woman; acknowledging and utilizing her *competencies*; increasing her awareness of the impact of *context* on her life (e.g. relationships, neighborhood); utilizing her *communities* for support (e.g., family members, religious community, ethnic community); and facilitating her *critical consciousness*, or awareness of power dynamics at work in her life. Features of critical consciousness were purposefully and systematically incorporated into one program only (CC program).

*Conscientizacao*, or the process of developing critical consciousness, was first defined by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire (1971). Freire defined the process of critical consciousness as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 19). Freire worked with citizens who were impoverished and illiterate and argued that for these oppressed individuals to surmount their situation of oppression (e.g., government abuse) they must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation. Essentially, the critical consciousness process involves increasing awareness of self (identity), others (context), and the relation of self to others (power dynamics), and accordingly, advancing understanding of one’s control in life situations. In turn, critical consciousness strengthens one’s intention and commitment to change, and increases her/his pursuit for liberation from oppression.

My hypothesis was that a career intervention that facilitated women survivors’ critical consciousness of the effects of domestic violence and other sources of oppression on their personal and career development would (a) help decrease women’s internalization of blame for the violence they experienced and the consequences of such violence (e.g., failure at a job) and (b) would increase women’s recognition and utilization of their skills and power to make life changes—more than a career program that did not

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include features of critical consciousness. The key features and components of critical consciousness that were incorporated in the CC program were facilitating collaborative *dialogue*; enhancing *group identification* as women domestic violence survivors; *posing problems* and *identifying contradictions*, which includes discussing discrepancies between women's negative self beliefs and their skills and abilities; *analysis of power* in women's relationships, and *critical self-reflection* of one's privilege and power.

For 10 consecutive months, research team members conducted the group career intervention program sessions and I supervised all intervention activities. Women were randomly assigned to one of the two career intervention programs. Each intervention group comprised six to eight women who reported experiencing domestic violence in the last 5 years. Group sessions lasted 2 hr, with women meeting in the same groups every week for five consecutive weeks. Women completed a series of pre- and postintervention measures assessing their career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and perceived career barriers and supports, which allowed me to examine the effectiveness of each career program.

Seventy-three adult women domestic violence survivors participated one of the two career intervention programs. Age range of participants is 18–62 years. 54 women self-identified as Caucasian/White, 5 Latina, 4 American Indian, one Eskimo/Aleut, one Asian American/Pacific Islander, 4 “biracial,” 3 “multiracial,” one “other,” and two women did not identify their race/ethnicity. The majority of women were not in an abusive intimate relationship at the time of their participation, and all but three abusive partners were identified as male. Thirty women were unemployed. Women who were employed worked in a broad range of jobs including farm labor, unskilled work, sales, and semiprofessional work. Highest educational background reported by women ranged from ‘finished grade school’ to “earned a professional degree” (PhD., JD., MS). Career program participants were representative of our larger community with regards to racial/ethnic background, except that there were no participants who identified as African American/Black. Although the majority of participants were from lower social class backgrounds and many received government assistance, the career programs attracted women from all social classes. This is a strong feature of this intervention because there is a critical need for career counseling services for women domestic violence survivors and

a decreased stigma associated with participating in a career program versus a therapy group.

## CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

A significant challenge that our research team encountered was facilitating group identification and connection among women participants from different social classes. For the purposes of this story, social class is defined as an individual's position within an economic hierarchy that is determined by his/her income, education level, and occupation; the individual is also aware of his/her place in the economic hierarchy and others who may share the similar position (Liu et al., 2004). During the study, group leaders observed a group dynamic that occurred consistently when there seemed to be significant social class differences in a group. A few participants expressed to research team members that they felt uncomfortable in the groups. A 45-year-old Caucasian/White participant who was working as a bank clerk approached me one evening after group. She leaned in closely and whispered, “I don't think I belong here. I don't do drugs, I don't drink, and I've never been homeless. I can afford a lot of things they can't.” A 23-year-old Caucasian/White participant who was living with her parents approached a group leader and stated, “Um, I'm not sure if I am like these other women. I live with my parents and I plan to go to community college. I'm just not as bad off and I don't feel like talkin' because some ladies have so many problems.” Another woman, 42-year-old Caucasian/White, and a mother of four adolescent boys shared with me, “You know, I'm not sure about this group. I mean, my husband makes good money. I can afford to go to school . . . well, as long as he lets me. I just don't think I have the same plans. I want to go somewhere and make something of myself. I don't feel like some of them want to do that or can [do that].”

Group leaders and I spoke with each woman who approached us to identify and clarify her concerns. Consistent themes expressed by women included (a) feeling “different” because they had never been homeless or experienced poverty; (b) feeling that their domestic violence experiences were not “as bad”; and (c) feeling like they had more access to financial resources and career options, and consequently, wanted to focus on advanced career development issues. We responded initially by assuring these women that they would receive assessment feedback and career information specific to their

career needs. We also dialogued with the women about group dynamics and feelings that might underlie their discomfort, such as how it might be difficult for them to observe other group members and acknowledge how devastating domestic violence can be for many women and children. Women's responses varied. Group leaders seemed unable to engage all of the participants in a group dialogue about social class differences and the potential benefits of learning from one another's experiences. Women who reported more economic resources and shared their concerns individually with research team members did not share their concerns in group. Instead, women continued to share their discomfort with research team members, ask for separate career counseling services, and two women dropped out because they felt so uncomfortable in the groups.

Half way through the study, the group leaders and I observed that the women who expressed concerns about getting their needs met in group and "fitting in" also reported on their demographic questionnaires higher economic resources (i.e., income) and educational backgrounds *and* were members of groups that consisted of at least one woman of color. The racial/ethnic makeup of the groups is noteworthy given the racial/ethnic homogeneity of our community and the career groups. Almost all women of color participants reported few economic resources and unemployed status. The group dynamic challenge, therefore, was intensified by the apparent link between women's concerns about getting their career needs met and the social class and racial/ethnic differences among participants.

Other women participants, most of whom identified as women of color, also started to approach research team members expressing that they felt "judged" by certain group members. One woman, who was 34-years old, identified as a multiracial woman of color and who had recently been released from jail said to me, "I am really mad at Jane.<sup>4</sup> It's like she's looking down at me because I don't look like and talk like she does. I'm not here to prove myself to anybody!" After a group discussion on the effects of domestic violence on women's access to economic resources, another participant who was 62-years old and identified as American Indian said to her group leader, "That was a good discussion, but I just don't think . . . well, rich, White women get it. She looks at me like I'm a lost puppy."

<sup>4</sup>All names used in this story are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Given research team members' observations, it was apparent that some women participants were frustrated and felt less safe in the groups. These women expressed feeling discriminated against by women in the groups who were wealthier, all of whom were Caucasian/White. Some women of color, as well as Caucasian/White women, from lower social classes asked if I would separate their groups based on social class. None of the women mentioned separating the groups by race, which may have been because women realized that there were so few women of color in each program group and having a separate group for women of color was not feasible. In addition, none of the women wanted to overtly express their desire to have separate groups as this would make the divide between them too overt. In general, social class differences in some of the groups, and the relationship for some women between their racial/ethnic backgrounds and social classes, presented significant barriers to women's group identification—an essential component on which I built the career counseling programs.

I realized that my initial response (i.e., to dialogue with women individually and in the groups) to these group dynamics was not sufficient given that the dynamics continued and women still felt uncomfortable and less safe. My second response was to consult with research team members and community stakeholders to dialogue about women's responses and how to manage these group dynamics. Our dialogue as a community resulted in the following responses.

As the primary research investigator, creator of the career counseling programs, and a biracial woman of color, who is originally from a working class background, I felt conflicted. My initial reaction was to keep the women together and facilitate more dialogue about the effects of domestic violence on women from all racial/ethnic and social class backgrounds. I wanted participants to experience the benefits of sharing their similar and distinct experiences as women domestic violence survivors. I also thought it was important for women to dialogue about and understand how their experiences of domestic violence may be similar and different because of their races/ethnicities and social classes, particularly given the complex intersections between domestic violence, poverty, and race. In contrast, I recognized that some states offer different support groups for women of different social classes and races/ethnicities to increase group connection and

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address women's specific needs. I also recognized that many groups did not discuss power dynamics beyond those of the abusive power associated with intimate partner violence or seek to facilitate critical consciousness of those issues that may be more distant to women's immediate survival (e.g., social class issues, racism). My greatest fear, however, was that if I offered separate groups or did not facilitate critical consciousness of power dynamics affecting women in the group, but not directly related to domestic violence, I would ignore larger societal power dynamics (possibly playing out in the groups) that foster classism and racism.

Research partners from postsecondary institutions included two female faculty members who identified as Caucasian/White and were from upper middle social class backgrounds. Postsecondary partners also included all female group leaders and research assistants who were advanced counseling/clinical psychology doctoral students, with seven women identifying as Caucasian/White, one as Asian American, one as Arab American, and one African American. Group leaders' social class backgrounds ranged from lower middle (most graduate assistants) to upper middle class (both faculty members). Postsecondary institution research team members believed that it was important for the group dynamics to be addressed in the groups, for women to dialogue about their differences and similarities, and to keep the groups together.

Direct service providers were divided. Direct service providers included mostly women and three male clergy. Two female service providers identified as Latina and were from lower middle social class backgrounds. These women were core research team members. Other community service providers with whom I consulted identified as Caucasian/White and middle to upper middle social class. The educational background of direct service providers ranged from completed high school to theological training and postsecondary/professional education. Some social service providers emphasized that domestic violence crossed all class and ethnic cultural backgrounds, and as such they thought it was important, politically and socially, for women to work together in the groups to understand the broad reach of domestic violence. Other service providers felt that facilitating women's critical consciousness of larger social issues and power dynamics was not developmentally appropriate at this time and that keeping the women together in the groups to further dialogue about such power dynamics would

dilute the effectiveness of the career intervention programs.

After many hours of discussion with research team members and community stakeholders, I decided not to separate participants into groups divided by social class and to help facilitators support women with acknowledging, dialoguing about, and valuing their different experiences. I based my decision on the fact that both career programs were grounded in an empowerment model of counseling, which included critical consciousness development. I had hypothesized that critical consciousness was a component that contributed to the greater effectiveness of the CC program, above and beyond the career program in which critical consciousness features were not incorporated. My research was based on the belief that increasing women's awareness of power dynamics, support, and oppression in their lives would advance their career development further than not attending to power dynamics. To minimize discussion of such issues and/or separate the groups by social class felt to me like ignoring power dynamics that were playing out in these women's lives as well as in the groups.

As new program groups formed, the group leaders and I continued to observe divisions between women from different social class backgrounds. We continued to respond more directly, in group and individually, to women's experiences of discomfort and judgment. Our final outcome data indicated that women participants showed significant increases in their career-search self-efficacy and critical consciousness and made progress toward their career goals. Does this data indicate that I made the "right" decision?

## REFLECTIONS AND DISCUSSION

I don't believe there was a "right" decision. I see many benefits to keeping women survivors together in more diverse community career intervention groups and to facilitating critical consciousness of multiple contextual power dynamics at play in women's lives. First, the diversity of women's experiences increases the potential for women to hear different perspectives and learn a broad range of skills from other group members. Second, women from diverse cultural backgrounds, and who have a comprehensive understanding of their sociocultural contexts and experiences, may broaden social support networks and community connections for group

members. Third, maintaining groups that are more diverse is a reality for many social service agencies because there are not enough staff and financial resources to offer separate cultural groups (e.g., Latina support group, Lesbian Alliance support group, etc.).

The disadvantages to keeping the women together in these groups and/or minimizing the development of critical consciousness are equally compelling. Groups that are formed based on a shared identity, and that women choose themselves, may greatly enhance connection and group identification in ways that a more diverse group cannot. A more homogeneous sample in terms of women's domestic violence experiences, social class, career needs, and/or critical consciousness development may enhance group identification, connectedness, and support—a few of the most powerful features of critical consciousness. With a shared group identity, women also may be able to address more challenging and intimate issues in a shorter amount of time because they understand each other's experiences. Furthermore, critical consciousness development occurs over time, and is in fact developmental. It may not have been necessary or helpful to facilitate women's critical consciousness of multiple power dynamics in this one brief, career intervention.

In addition to considering the advantages and disadvantages of separating women by social class and/or decreasing our facilitation of critical consciousness of multiple power dynamics, it is important to me to explore what influenced my decision. I made my final decision based on a hierarchy of values, specifically *my* hierarchy. The word hierarchy is important because I don't believe that I, research team members, and participants had *opposing* values, although there were differences (i.e., my belief in the CC program philosophy, participants' need for career assistance). Rather, it was the priority of our values that differed. At the top of participants' hierarchy was their need for career assistance, support, and safety. Women valued most receiving information in an environment where they felt safe. To engage in more in-depth processing of interpersonal group dynamics and discrimination among group members was not the women's priority.

My position as a biracial Asian American woman and the first person in my family to attend graduate school, moving from a lower to middle social class background, influenced my hierarchy of values. First, my counseling psychology training was grounded in values for social justice and empowerment through community action and implementation

of preventive interventions across multiple ecological contexts. I also value education as a way by which individuals can gain access to resources and opportunities. My education in empowerment and emancipatory communitarian approaches to psychological practice (McWhirter, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997) also emphasized the link between liberation from oppression and advancement of individual and community needs. At the top of my hierarchy was addressing larger social contexts and power dynamics in both career programs. I did not want to address women's career needs, life experiences, and the group dynamics as if they were unrelated.

Second, my position as a woman of color in our community significantly influenced my decision not to separate the groups and continue to facilitate critical consciousness of larger contextual power dynamics. As a biracial woman (Caucasian/White and Asian American) living in a racially and ethnically homogeneous community and as a biracial woman affiliated with a university, I wanted to "educate" Caucasian/White women about the struggles of poorer as well as ethnic minority women and increase their awareness of their prejudices. My reaction was likely due in part to the fact that I am half Caucasian/White, which means that my experiences with Caucasian/White people may be different from those of women of color who are not part Caucasian/White. The Caucasian/White part of myself didn't want to reject the Caucasian/White women and the Asian part wanted to protect the women of color by increasing Caucasian/White women's awareness of their racism and classism. At the time, I was not so keenly aware of the influence of my values, ethnic identity, and experiences on my decision-making.

Research team members from postsecondary institutions held values similar to my own because they had received parallel education and training. Our discussions were energized and we were of like minds based on our genders, educational backgrounds, and current social classes. As university-educated women our learning consisted of examining sociocultural influences including gender role expectations and violence against women. Specifically, we were taught to fight together as women to change systems that perpetuated oppression based on gender. These experiences influenced our values such that educating participants about multiple sociocultural influences on their lives and creating unity as women fighting against larger oppressive forces was at the top of our hierarchy. Our different races/ethnicities were

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secondary because we were working toward the same goal, to educate women about racism and classism.

Direct service providers were divided. Although there were no clear racial, ethnic, or social class distinctions regarding who wanted to facilitate further dialogue in the groups or separate the groups, direct service providers had daily contact with women and understood the nuances of service provision to domestic violence survivors. Direct service providers facilitated general support groups and culture-specific groups (e.g., Latina survivors), and they understood the power of cultural similarities and shared experiences as well as the reality of what information and services we could provide women in only 5 weeks. Our discussions about facilitating critical consciousness and separating the groups were long and tense. For every point there was a counterpoint, and no one voice seemed “more right” than any of the others.

Given all of the research team members’ opinions and arguments, I decided to continue to facilitate dialogue and critical consciousness development in the groups and not to separate women by social class. I must then ask, “What was the role of critical consciousness in the empowerment process and this community career intervention?” I believed that ignoring the interpersonal group dynamics and women’s relationships with one another was incongruent with empowerment. Would my failure to address in-group discrimination and prejudices be my failure to increase women’s awareness of power dynamics, facilitate their control without infringing on the rights of others, and enhance women’s support of others’ empowerment? In actuality, I failed to remember that empowerment and the development of critical consciousness are *processes*. McWhirter (1994) describes the empowerment process, including the development of critical consciousness as a continuum, with no specific beginning or end. I did not need to address every aspect of the empowerment process in these career programs, and advance women’s awareness of all power dynamics at work in their lives, to contribute to their empowerment. Interventions do not need to enhance women’s cross-cultural experiences to be empowering. I do believe that researchers can facilitate participants’ understanding of themselves as cultural beings and the influence of culture on their development, regardless of the intervention. Such increased self-awareness is distinct from processing cross-cultural group dynamics. Interventions also do not need to enhance

women’s contributions to their communities to be empowering. It seems most important for interventions to first meet the needs of individuals, as long as those needs don’t infringe on the rights of others, and then facilitate individuals’ development of skills that allow them to support the empowerment of others.

I also made an error in assuming that women’s career needs and domestic violence experiences would be similar enough to create a strong group identity, or even that women’s survival experiences would be a salient part of their identity. Critical consciousness is facilitated when group identification is strong, and yet, for some women their shared identity as domestic violence survivors was not as salient as their cultural differences based on social class and/or race and ethnicity. This makes sense given that an individual’s cultural identity, particularly her/his ethnic identity, may change with context (Root, 1995).

Critical consciousness also is a domain specific construct (Chronister & McWhirter, *in press*, 2003). That is, an increase in critical consciousness about oppression in one area of an individual’s life may not necessarily generalize to an understanding of power dynamics and experiences of oppression in other life areas. I incorrectly assumed that the career programs could facilitate women’s critical consciousness of racism and classism, in addition to domestic violence, and facilitate a resolution—and in only five weeks. The career intervention groups also were not therapy groups, which may have limited women’s expectations and feelings of safety for processing in-depth group dynamics.

Another aspect that I believe was missing from this community intervention research was my own critical consciousness development. In collaborative community intervention research, researchers’ critical consciousness is essential because it helps increase researchers’ awareness of the values—and the consequences of such values—on which they base their research. Researchers’ critical consciousness reduces their risk of engaging in oppressive power dynamics with participants and excluding participants’ voices. Had I been more aware of my values and the influence of my cultural background, I may have made a different decision.

Including women’s voices also may have involved giving women a choice of career groups and informing them about the critical consciousness components of the program. Would the career programs have been more effective if the women were informed of the purposes of the career interventions and allowed to choose their groups? The

use of an experimental design did not give women such a choice. Although the experimental design is rigorous, women's collaborative power and voice in the research process was diminished, and possibly the effectiveness of the intervention. If women were informed of the critical consciousness process and expected to dialogue about power dynamics across multiple contexts, the intervention may have been more effective. Evaluating the effects of self-selection, and to assess for what reasons women choose particular interventions, is important to outcome research.

At the beginning of this story I asked, "Did I make the right decision?" I realize now that I am not searching for the answer to this question, but rather a different question. I believe that collaborative and empowering community intervention research requires researchers' development of critical consciousness. A greater awareness of my privilege and power in this research process may have led me to understand how my personal and professional values were impacting my conceptualization of women's needs. If I had to go back in time I would not ask, "Am I making the right decision?" I would ask, "Based on what values am I making this decision and what are the consequences?"

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