

# Don't skip class: A new conceptual model for examining classism among adolescents and families

Zena R. Mello 

Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, USA

## Correspondence

Zena R. Mello, Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA.

Email: [zmello@sfsu.edu](mailto:zmello@sfsu.edu)

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## Abstract

This article introduces a new conceptual model for examining classism among adolescents and families. Classism refers to the discrimination that individuals experience because of their social class. For adolescents, social class refers to their family's social class and includes income, education, occupation, and position in society. Despite extensive research that has shown how social class is associated with adolescent development, there remains a gap in the knowledge about how classism might explain this association. To advance scholarship about classism among adolescents and families, I present a new model. This model integrates theories on (a) classism among adults, (b) discrimination among adolescents, (c) family science, (d) social class, and (e) intersectionality. I include hypotheses about the associations between classism and adolescent developmental outcomes and conclude with directions for future research.

## KEYWORDS

adolescents, classism, families, poverty, social class

**[Adolescent]:** I feel embarrassed to use them [food stamps]. Everybody uses money, but not everybody uses food stamps. I don't want to walk around with food stamps in my pocket. I would rather have money. I feel different from everybody else.

**[Interviewer]:** [Has] anybody said something to you about food stamps?

**[Adolescent]:** Everybody does, and then began to cry (Trzcinski, 2002, p. 347).

In this quote from a study about welfare experiences, an adolescent shares their perspective on being treated unfairly because their family uses food stamps, a form of government aid. Several questions emerge from considering this illustration: How often do adolescents face this type of incident? What effect does it have on their schooling, psychological well-being, or propensity

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for risk-taking? Such information is unknown because there has yet to be a systematic effort to examine such experiences. Scholars have examined family social class for decades (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986) and have documented the connections between family social class and adolescent development (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Hanson & Chen, 2007; McLoyd, 1990; Moor et al., 2015; Reardon, 2011; Reiss, 2013; Sirin, 2005; Willis, 1977; Zhang et al., 2021). However, there is a notable gap in understanding of *classism*—the discrimination that adolescents experience based on their family social class. A new conceptual model is needed for examining classism among adolescents to explain the associations between social class and developmental outcomes among adolescents.

Leading scientific organizations and key scholars have urged researchers to conduct more studies about social class (American Psychological Association, 2007, 2023; Bullock et al., 2018; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Day et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2020; Lott, 2002; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). In response to this charge, I propose a new conceptual model for examining classism among adolescents and families. This model integrates theories on (a) classism among adults (Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004), (b) discrimination among adolescents (García Coll et al., 1996), and (c) family science about social class and intersectionality (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Smith & Landor, 2018). First, theories about classism that were developed for adults are described highlighting the prevalence of classism among adults (Langhout et al., 2007; Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004; Lott, 2002). Second, theories developed for adolescents about discrimination based on race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are discussed (Brown & Bigler, 2005; García Coll et al., 1996; Nadal & Griffin, 2015; Spencer, 1995). Perspectives on marginalized identities are useful for understanding classism because there are parallels among the identities, but there are also distinctions (Chaudoir et al., 2013; Goffman, 2014). Third, theories from family science are incorporated that consider family social class and intersectionality (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Smith & Landor, 2018). Then, I present a new conceptual model that includes hypothesized associations between classism and adolescent developmental outcomes. Exemplary quotes from qualitative studies illustrate key dimensions. Last, I provide directions for future research.

## FAMILY SOCIAL CLASS INCLUDES MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

In this article, the term family represents mothers, fathers, extended family, legal guardians, or other primary caregivers. This notion of the family aligns with today's reality and with discussions about the value of using inclusive family terms (Perry-Jenkins, 2017). Family social class is multi-dimensional and includes objective and subjective factors (Diemer et al., 2013; Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Highlander & Deborah, 2022; Krieger et al., 1997; Liberatos et al., 1988). Objective factors refer to socioeconomic status, including household income, maternal, paternal, or familial educational attainment, occupational type, employment status, and home ownership (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Currie et al., 1997; Duncan, 1961). Other objective factors include economic hardship, such as the ability to afford necessities (Conger et al., 1999; McLoyd, 1990; Wickrama et al., 2024). Subjective factors include relative qualities, such as perceived position in society or being at the top or bottom of a relative hierarchy (Destin et al., 2012; Goodman et al., 2001; Martin-Storey et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). For adolescents in particular, social class is inherited from their family. Adolescent social class is not inherent with the individual adolescent but with their family.

## FAMILY SOCIAL CLASS IS PROFOUNDLY ASSOCIATED WITH ADOLESCENT WELL-BEING

In the United States, nearly 11 million children are living in poverty (Center for American Progress, 2023). Globally, the World Bank has estimated that 1.43 billion children are living in

poverty (\$6.85 per day) and that 333 million children are living in extreme poverty (\$2.15 per day; Salmeron-Gomez et al., 2023). Children are twice as likely to live in extreme poverty than adults (Salmeron-Gomez et al., 2023). Using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, Shrider and Koller (2021) showed how strongly educational attainment was associated with income in the United States. They reported that 28% of individuals without a high school diploma were living in poverty compared to just 6% of individuals with a bachelor's degree. Here, the focus is on adolescents disadvantaged in social class defined as those living in families with limited income, education, occupation, and societal standing.

Research has long established that social class is strongly associated with well-being among adolescents, including mental health and academic outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Conger & Donnellan, 2007; McLoyd, 1990; Reardon, 2011; Reiss, 2013; Reynolds & Walberg, 1992; Willis, 1977). Adolescents disadvantaged in social class have lower academic achievement and a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school than their counterparts (Sirin, 2005). In turn, academic achievement is connected to life expectancy (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). Other research indicates that adolescents disadvantaged in social class are three times more likely to experience challenges with mental health than their counterparts (Reiss, 2013). Given the persistent associations between social class and well-being, it is vital that new mechanisms be identified to understand how social class is associated with adolescent development. This underscores the value of generating a new conceptual model for examining classism among adolescents and families.

## THEORIES ABOUT CLASSISM HAVE FOCUSED ON ADULTS

Theories drawing from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including psychology, counseling, and education that focused on classism have also been primarily developed for adults (Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004; Lott, 2002). Early on, Lott (2002) described classism as the distancing, exclusion, and devaluing of the poor and used social class differences in neighborhoods and schools as examples. Langhout et al. (2009) extended this perspective to universities and described institutional and interpersonal forms of classism that exist among college students. For example, when instructors would not put books on reserve for the class, college students disadvantaged in social class would be affected. Langhout et al. (2007) also showed that over 80% of college students reported a form of classism in a study that measured interpersonal classism among other forms. Liu et al. (2004) proposed the Modern Classism Theory and the Social Class Worldview Model to encourage counselors to incorporate social class into their practices with adults. Downward classism was discussed as classism that was experienced by those who were disadvantaged in social class. Individuals were theorized to choose lifestyles or behaviors that perpetuate social class.

Although not addressing classism explicitly, scholars in social psychology have examined social class among adults (Chetty et al., 2022; Croizet & Claire, 1998; Kraus et al., 2012). Utilizing stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997), researchers showed that young adult college students underperformed in intellectual tests when primed with stereotypes concerning social class and intellectual performance (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Kraus et al. (2012) theorized that behaviors are influenced by the social class of contexts. Drawing from studies with young adults and adults, Jordan et al. (2020) created a model of ambivalent classism to examine hostile and benevolent attitudes toward individuals disadvantaged in social class. Chetty et al. (2022) applied social capital theory to show how economically diverse networks are positively associated with economic mobility among adults.

In summary, scholars have provided theories for understanding classism among adults that have drawn from the fields of counseling, social psychology, education, and sociology (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Kraus et al., 2012; Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004; Lott, 2002).

Although these theories have provided rich foundations to examine classism, they were developed for adults and are not well-suited for adolescents. Adolescents have unique developmental qualities, including cognitive abilities, identity formation, and social relationships that require a theory of classism specific to this age.

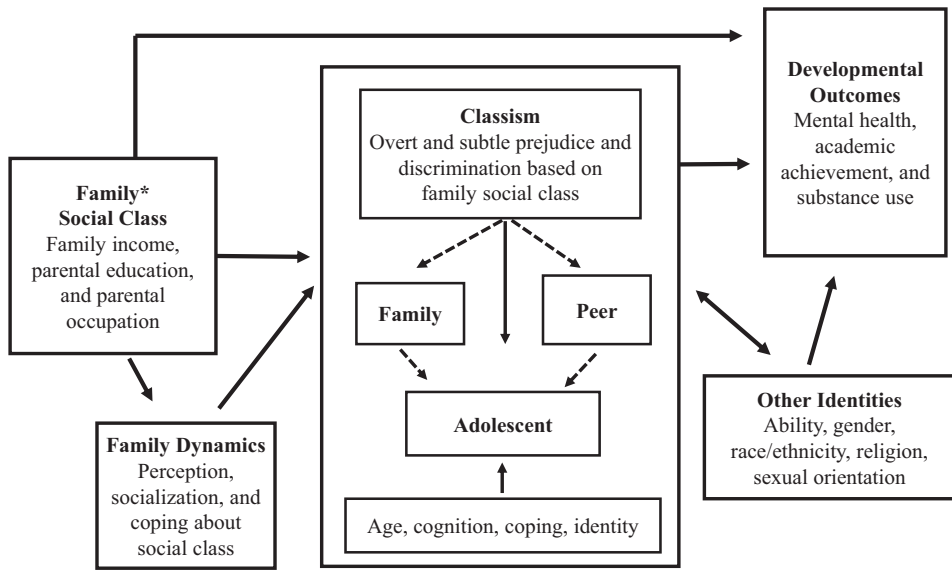
## **THEORIES ON ADOLESCENTS AND DISCRIMINATION HAVE FOCUSED ON GENDER, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION**

Theories on discrimination among adolescents have focused on gender and race/ethnicity (Bigler & Liben, 2006; Brown & Bigler, 2005; García Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, 1995). These models are useful in guiding the conceptualization of classism among adolescents because they show how marginalized identities are associated with development. The Integrative Model (García Coll et al., 1996) highlighted how developmental outcomes among children and adolescents are influenced indirectly by social position (race/ethnicity) via oppression (discrimination). The Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (Spencer, 1995) illustrated how identity formation processes influence the associations between racial/ethnic minority status and developmental outcomes among adolescents. Although these frameworks incorporate social class, their primary focus is on race/ethnicity. Drawing from these models, I hypothesize that classism plays a vital role in shaping the development of adolescents disadvantaged in social class.

Extensive knowledge has been generated about discrimination based on race/ethnicity and sexual orientation among adolescents (Benner et al., 2018; Greene et al., 2006; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Huynh, 2012; Nadal & Griffin, 2015). This work has shown how discrimination is overt (e.g., harassment) and subtle (e.g., microaggressions; Greene et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015). Results have highlighted the ways that discrimination is directly and indirectly (vicariously) experienced by adolescents via their families, peers, and other adults (Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Huynh et al., 2017). Vicarious discrimination refers to the incident where adolescents witness or hear about discrimination that a peer, family member, or other adult has experienced (Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Huynh et al., 2017). Research has identified key individuals as sources of discrimination based on race/ethnicity for adolescents, including peers, teachers, and school personnel (Benner & Graham, 2013; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Smith & Fincham, 2016). I hypothesize that adolescents experience classism directly and indirectly (vicariously via family and friends), overtly and subtly, and from multiple sources, such as peers, teachers, school personnel, and adults in the community that adolescents reside.

## **A NEW CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR EXAMINING CLASSISM AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN FAMILIES**

A new conceptual model is presented for examining classism among adolescents and families (see Figure 1) that integrates theories about (a) classism among adults (Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004), (b) discrimination based on race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation among adolescents (Brown & Bigler, 2005; García Coll et al., 1996; Nadal & Griffin, 2015), and (c) family science about social class and intersectionality (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Smith & Landor, 2018). Social class has parallels with other oppressed identities, making it useful to draw from such research, but there are also important distinctions. Unlike race/ethnicity and gender that are identities inherent within the individual, adolescent social class is dependent on the family. Social class can also change, whereas race/ethnicity is stable. Visibility also differentiates social class from other identities, as social class can be invisible



**FIGURE 1** A conceptual model for examining classism among adolescents and families. \*Families refer to mothers, fathers, extended family, legal guardians, or other primary caregivers. Solid lines indicate direct associations, whereas dotted lines indicate indirect associations.

(Chaudoir et al., 2013; Goffman, 2014). The proposed conceptual model has the following dimensions: (a) family social class, (b) family dynamics, (c) classism, (d) other identities, and (e) developmental outcomes. Below, the dimensions are described and illustrative quotes from past qualitative studies are used to exemplify key dimensions. Testable hypotheses are stated.

### Family social class

Family social class includes multiple socioeconomic factors that are objective (household income, maternal, paternal, or familial educational attainment, occupational type, employment status, home ownership, and economic hardship) and subjective (perceived position in society; Bornstein & Bradley, 2003; Currie et al., 1997; Destin et al., 2012; Diemer et al., 2013; Duncan, 1961; Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Goodman et al., 2001; Krieger et al., 1997; Liberatos et al., 1988). The term family is used broadly to represent mothers, fathers, or primary caregivers that could include extended family or legal guardians. This operationalization draws from the reality of today’s families and discussions that encourage researchers to encompass diverse familial configurations (Perry-Jenkins, 2017).

Family social class is hypothesized to directly influence classism, such that adolescents in families disadvantaged in social class experience more classism than their advantaged counterparts. Adults disadvantaged in social class report more classism than their counterparts (Allan et al., 2016; Cavalhieri & Chwalisz, 2020; Langhout et al., 2009). Adolescents who were disadvantaged in social class reported more classism than their advantaged counterparts (Bucchianeri et al., 2013). Research that has examined topics that are conceptually like classism has also shown differences between adolescents who are advantaged and disadvantaged. Gonul et al. (2023) demonstrated that adolescents disadvantaged in social class were more likely to interpret being excluded as a form of discrimination than their counterparts who were more advantaged in social class. Although it is theoretically possible for classism to occur among adolescents with advantage, research supports the notion that classism primarily occurs

among adolescents disadvantaged in social class (Allan et al., 2016; Bucchianeri et al., 2013; Cavallieri & Chwalisz, 2020; Gonul et al., 2023; Langhout et al., 2009).

Family science highlights how the types of work influence classism among adolescents (McHale et al., 2006; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2019; Shows & Gerstal, 2009). Shows and Gerstal (2009) demonstrated how fathering depended on the social class associated with employment. Fathers with more advantaged occupations (i.e., physicians) were less involved in the daily care of children compared to fathers with disadvantaged occupations (i.e., medical technicians). Perry-Jenkins et al. (2019) demonstrated how the qualities of parental employment longitudinally predicted behavioral problems among children. In this study, maternal job autonomy and paternal work hours predicted fewer behavior problems and more adaptive skills in child participants. Based on this research, I hypothesize that the quality of work in adolescents' families are associated with adolescents' experiences of classism. For example, adolescents experience classism because their family members work at multiple low-wage jobs or have atypical work schedules that are outside conventional working hours.

## Family dynamics

Family socialization about social class could also contribute to classism among adolescents. This assertion stems from empirical research about socialization among adolescents. Jones et al. (2018) outlined how parents socialize their adolescent children about social class among European American families disadvantaged in social class. Scholars have used similar approaches to examine parental racial socialization among adolescents. McHale et al. (2006) found that fathers engaged in racial socialization more with sons than daughters. Family members differ in how they socialize their adolescent children about social class, and in turn, this shapes how adolescents experience classism. I hypothesize that adolescents differ in the meaning of their family's social class. Some adolescents believe that their social class stems from their mother, whereas others believe it stems from another family member, such as their grandmother.

The ABC-X models of family stress and coping (Hill, 1958; Rosino, 2016) also provides guidance for understanding classism among adolescents and families. Hill's (1958) foundational framework examined how a stressor event influences families via interactions among the stressor event, the family's crisis-meeting resources, and the family's interpretation of the event. Hill noted that families disadvantaged in social class would have limited resources to cope with stressor events. Rosino (2016) described how the stressor could include a negative change in family social class, such as the loss of income or employment, and underscored how the impact of the event on the family depended on the family's perceptions of the event. These perspectives support the notion that adolescents in families disadvantaged in social class experience more classism than their counterparts. The ABC-X model (Hill, 1958; Rosino, 2016) indicates that family perceptions contribute to an adolescent's experience of classism. I hypothesize that adolescents' familial-based vicarious experiences of classism vary depending on familial perceptions of social class, and in turn, this determines adolescents' experiences of classism.

Research on classism among adolescents is informed by perspectives on family stress and development (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; McLoyd, 1990). McLoyd (1990) theorized that economic hardship leads to psychological distress among parents resulting in diminished parenting practices that negatively affect children's development. McLoyd et al. (1994) showed that parental unemployment led to parental depressive symptomology, more punishment of adolescents, and depressive symptoms among adolescents. Similarly, the Iowa Youth and Families Project (Conger et al., 1992) captured how economic hardship resulting from the 1980s Iowa Farm Crisis impacted families with adolescents. Findings showed that changes in economic hardship were related to parental emotions and behaviors, and in turn, adolescent adjustment

(Conger et al., 1992). Recent studies in Ireland and China have shown similar patterns (Mari & Keizer, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). I hypothesize that family social class leads indirectly to classism among adolescents via the variation within the family's ability to cope with the stress of being disadvantaged in social class.

## Classism

Classism is defined as the interpersonal prejudice and discrimination adolescents' experience because of their family's social class. As shown in Figure 1, classism is experienced by adolescents directly (solid lines) or indirectly (dotted lines). Direct experiences of classism occur from peers, teachers and school personnel, or adults in the neighborhoods or communities in which adolescents reside. An adolescent in a qualitative study of high school students illustrated their direct experience with classism from their friends:

My parents they own a gas station...students ...assume I live on top. I was like offering to have ...over some of my friends. They are like 'we can't be cramped up in like the top of like your teeny gas station.' And then I was like silent. (Mello, Kakar, Dogru, et al., 2024)

Adolescents experience classism indirectly by witnessing the classism faced by their family members. For example, an adolescent hears their mother discuss negative experiences with using food stamps at the grocery store, like the sentiment indicated in the quote stated at the beginning of this article. Research has demonstrated that adolescents have reported seeing their parents argue about not having enough money (Conger et al., 1999). For adolescents, classism also includes how they are seen by others. For example, a high school student in a study about Appalachia stated: "I need a job, a good job. A job that will help me and my family. Maybe then people won't look at me and think 'dumb hillbilly'" (Ali & McWhirter, 2006, p. 88). Another example comes from a child in a qualitative study who insisted that others would not like people with "dingy clothes" as they explained:

Because... they might come out with no-name shoes or something, and those people, rich people wear Nikes or Filas or something like that. They might....look different. (Weinger, 1998, p. 108)

In addition to the direct and indirect ways that adolescents experience classism, this form of discrimination is also experienced overtly and subtly. Overt classism includes the blatant ways that an adolescent is treated negatively because of their social class, such as being physically or verbally assaulted. Subtle classism includes microaggressions that refer to everyday intentional or unintentional acts that communicate a bias toward a historically marginalized group (Nadal & Griffin, 2015; Sue et al., 2007). Classism-based microaggressions among adolescents include when an adolescent is excluded or ignored because of their social class or when a teacher makes a derogatory comment about social class. An adolescent's experience with a subtle form of classism is illustrated with the following example from a qualitative study about academic achievement and identity at an elite high school in the United States:

**[Adolescent]:** The other day, this teacher was talking about a character of a book, he [teacher] said something like, 'You got this guy who's got, like, a mechanic mouth.' And I was about to walk out because my Mom's fiancée is a mechanic. (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003, p. 762)

## Adolescence

Adolescence is a unique period of development to examine classism because of advances in cognitive abilities, identity formation, and social relationships (see Figure 1; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Brown, 1990; Erikson, 1968; Keating, 2012; Rubin et al., 2006; Sanders, 2013; Steinberg, 2008). This life stage includes individuals aged 10–18. Scholars conducting neuroscience and observational research have shown the significant growth in cognitive abilities during adolescence (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Keating, 2012; Sanders, 2013; Steinberg, 2008). Compared to children, adolescents can think abstractly and reason with complex issues (Keating, 2012; Sanders, 2013). Adolescents are developing a prefrontal cortex and a limbic system that differentiates them from adults (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Steinberg, 2008). Adolescents have less experience in applying the new cognitive advances compared to adults given their age. Adolescents' cognitive abilities require that conceptual models of classism be developed particularly for this age group.

Drawing from research on cognitive abilities, scholars have proposed a developmental framework of discrimination. Brown and Bigler (2005) generated a model that demonstrates how cognitive advances underlie age-related changes in children's understanding of gender-based discrimination. Researchers have extended this model to racial/ethnic-based discrimination. For example, Greene et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study about racial/ethnic-based discrimination and demonstrated how African American adolescents reported experiencing an increasing amount of discrimination over chronological time. Although these models are based on gender and race/ethnicity, they provide guidance for how classism might be reflected across the developmental period of adolescence. I hypothesize that adolescents report an increasing amount of classism from early to late-adolescence. However, there is also variation in classism, as some adolescents can cope with experiences of classism better than others. This point stems from debates about the role of socialization and agency in the reproduction of social classes (Guhin et al., 2021).

Sociocognitive approaches are useful in guiding research on classism among adolescents (Killen et al., 2022; Killen & Stangor, 2001). These scholars have noted how views on fairness and morality develop through childhood and adolescence and have implications for the development of classism. For example, views on social inequality increased in complexity between childhood and adolescence (Elenbaas et al., 2020). Similarly, adolescents were more likely to view exclusion as wrong and to report unfair treatment and discrimination than children (Gonul et al., 2023). Elenbaas (2019) showed that interwealth contact was associated with more equitable peer interactions in a study of children when wealth was depicted using images of houses, cars, and backpacks.

Adolescents are capable of accurately reporting their family's social class (Diemer et al., 2013; Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Liberatos et al., 1988). Individuals as young as five understand their family's social class and the social class of others (Mistry et al., 2015; Mistry et al., 2021; Weinger, 1998). Adolescents have also been shown to report on concepts related to social class. Adolescents indicated their perceptions about the economy by showing that they had more awareness about wealth than poverty in the United States (Flanagan et al., 2014). Adolescents have conveyed expectations for adult employment (Hill et al., 2018) and thoughts about inequality (McLoyd, 2019). An adolescent's subjective perspective of their family's social class might be affected by classism as they consider their family's position in the context of society.

Identity is another distinct quality of adolescence that has relevance for classism. Identity formation refers to the subjective experience of knowing oneself and is the hallmark of this period (Erikson, 1968). In this stage, adolescents are actively engaged in forming an identity that includes their social class (Velez & Spencer, 2018). Researchers have drawn from identity-based perspectives to examine classism. For example, Thomas and Azmitia (2014) examined



social class using social identity theory, a framework that highlights the role of comparisons in informing individuals about their own identity. Findings indicated that young adult college students reported that social class affected their everyday experience more than their gender or race/ethnicity (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014). Other scholars have posited a status-based identity referring to individuals' construal of their own social class (Destin et al., 2017). Drawing from these studies, I hypothesize that identity moderates the associations between family social class and classism among adolescents. There is a stronger association between classism and developmental outcomes for adolescents for whom social class is more central to their identity than their counterparts who have a weaker association between social class and their identity.

Social relationships change dramatically in adolescence compared to childhood (Brown, 1990; Rubin et al., 2006), which can have implications for classism. Time spent with peers increases significantly at this age (Brown, 1990; Rubin et al., 2006). I hypothesize that peers are a frequent source of classism for adolescents. Another way that peers can shape adolescents' experiences of classism is vicariously, as adolescents are likely to be meaningfully affected by witnessing their peers experience classism. Still, peers serve as a means of coping with experiences of classism among adolescents. Fischer-Neumann and Bönke (2022) showed that interactions with peers buffered the effect of poverty in a longitudinal study of individuals from late adolescence to adulthood. I hypothesize that peers play a central and nuanced role in how adolescents experience classism.

Adolescence is associated with changes across contexts. As adolescents mature, they gain independence from the family and can go to places away from the home, such as the park or mall. The opportunity for independence also corresponds to a greater likelihood that adolescents experience classism. For example, research illustrates how adolescents experience classism in the community. An adolescent described how when shopping on the sales rack at a store, she heard a person say "[that] she didn't want to be poor because then she would end up looking like us" and that the person said "we dressed as though we lived in the street and we had to buy our clothes on sale" (Ayres, 2009, p. 23). Schools are also likely to be an important source of classism for adolescents, as they spend most of their day in this setting. A qualitative study indicated that adolescents reported more classism at high school than any other setting (Ayres, 2009). This was supported by qualitative research showing how adolescents who were disadvantaged in social class reported that they were not considered for school awards because of their social class (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003).

In sum, adolescence represents a unique period of development to examine classism. Adolescents are developing cognitive abilities that afford them abilities to consider complexity (Sanders, 2013) and identity formation processes emerge invoking reflection about social class (Erikson, 1968). Social relationships change making peers particularly influential (Rubin et al., 2006), resulting in new ways for adolescents to experience and cope with classism. Changes in classism are likely to occur across adolescence, as individuals mature.

## Intersectionality

I hypothesize that classism functions independently *and* in relation to other identities, including ability, gender, immigration, race/ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. I expect that classism is meaningful for adolescents across racial/ethnic groups *and* that racial/ethnic minority adolescents experience more classism because of oppression. In Figure 1, intersectionality is shown as the interaction between classism and other identities. A reciprocal relationship is hypothesized. Adolescents with marginalized identities experience more classism. Examining how multiple forms of identities intersect is crucial for building a comprehensive understanding of the challenges that adolescents face. These efforts can examine the intersection between privileged and minoritized identities, such as African American girls and boys.

Scholars have highlighted how social class intersects with other marginalized identities in shaping the human experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Forcadell-Diez et al., 2023; Hooks, 2000; Velez & Spencer, 2018). In the United States, social class is confounded with race/ethnicity, as racial/ethnic minority groups are disproportionately disadvantaged in social class (Center for American Progress, 2021). Hooks (2000) discussed how social class was intricately interlocked with race/ethnicity and gender. This confound is underscored in a review of research that highlights how race/ethnicity and class jointly contribute to associations between work and family (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020). Smith and Landor (2018) have highlighted the social class stressors faced by African American families. Intersectional perspectives have provided a framework for considering how gender and class interact as adolescents in families disadvantaged in social class are more likely to reside in female-headed households than their counterparts (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Intersectional identities are also incorporated into the seminal Everyday Discrimination Scale (Williams et al., 1997), as it assesses discrimination based on multiple identities, including social class.

Research with adolescents shows how identities intersect (Forcadell-Diez et al., 2023; Velez & Spencer, 2018). Cattaneo et al. (2019) illustrated that in addition to economic background, immigration status was positively associated with classism in a study of college students. Prince et al. (2018) conducted a study with adolescents to examine the effects of multiple forms of discrimination. Participants were asked about discrimination based on race or ethnicity, nationality or religion, gender, and physical or mental disability. Findings indicated that the adolescents who experienced more discrimination overall were also likely to report more discrimination from another identity. Bucchianeri et al. (2013) examined harassment based on social class, race, weight, and sexual orientation. Findings showed that adolescents who were overweight reported the highest rates of all forms of harassment.

## DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

Collectively, research with adolescents about discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation has shown associations with several developmental outcomes, including academic achievement, mental health, and substance use (Benner et al., 2018; Benner & Graham, 2013; Greene et al., 2006; Huynh, 2012; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Smith & Fincham, 2016; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015). Drawing from this research, I hypothesize that classism is directly associated with key areas of adolescent development, such as psychological well-being, education, and risk-taking. Research in this area can extend lines of inquiry that have demonstrated how family social class directly influences adolescent mental health, academic achievement, and substance use (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Green et al., 2016; Hanson & Chen, 2007; McLoyd, 1990; Moor et al., 2015; Reardon, 2011; Reiss, 2013; Sirin, 2005) by showing how classism is a new mechanism that explains these associations.

Studies on the association between classism and academic achievement is limited and has resulted in mixed findings. Some research has shown how classism is inversely associated with academic achievement and mental health outcomes in studies with adults (Allan et al., 2016; Cavallieri et al., 2023; Cavallieri & Chwalisz, 2020). In a study with college students, classism was inversely associated with academic outcomes, including school belonging and intentions to leave school (Langhout et al., 2009). For adolescents, research on the associations between classism and academic achievement does exist, although it is limited to a handful of studies. Classism was negatively associated with grade point averages among adolescents (Mello, Kakar, & Hennigen, 2024). This research adapted a racial/ethnic discrimination scale (Fisher et al., 2000) to assess classism. However, in another study that employed an alternative adaptation of the same measure of racism (Fisher et al., 2000) to assess classism, an association was

not observed between classism and several academic outcomes, including educational expectations, school engagement, and grades (Fernandez & Benner, 2022).

Regarding mental health, classism was positively associated with internalizing and externalizing problems in a study with children and adolescents that were conducted in China (Song et al., 2020). Classism was measured with items that addressed participants' perceptions about Beijing, as a location that is advantaged in social class. A sample item included "I think Beijing locals look down on me." Researchers indicated that classism was positively associated with depression symptoms and negatively associated with self-esteem among adolescents in a study that employed an adapted measure of racism (Fisher et al., 2000) to assess classism (Dogru & Mello, 2024). Conger et al. (1999) reported that adolescents' perceptions of family economic challenges were associated with depression and anxiety in a study about adolescents and families facing the Iowa Farm Crisis. In studies with adults, classism has also been associated with mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and distress (Allan et al., 2016; Cavallieri et al., 2023; Cavallieri & Chwalisz, 2020; Langhout et al., 2009).

Regarding classism and substance use among adolescents, the available literature is limited. In one study, adolescents reported an increased risk of smoking cigarettes when their mothers reported experiencing classism (Sartor et al., 2021). However, a more recent study examined how classism was associated with substance use among adolescents. A measure of racism (Fisher et al., 2000) was used to assess classism (Mello, Kakar, & Jaramillo, 2024). Findings indicated that classism was positively associated with combustible tobacco use and nicotine vaping (Mello, Kakar, & Jaramillo, 2024). To date, there has yet to be a thorough examination of the association between classism and developmental outcomes among adolescents. The research that has been conducted has employed different measures and operationalizations of classism, making it difficult to understand the source of discrepancies. This area of study represents an important direction of future research.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The new conceptual model of classism for adolescents and families I propose in this article can engender future research. First, a key direction is the measurement of classism. Extant measures have been designed for adults (Cavallieri & Chwalisz, 2020; Langhout et al., 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2013) and are not age-appropriate for adolescents. Whereas measures designed for adolescents have been adapted for classism from measures that assess racism (Fernandez & Benner, 2022; Mello, Kakar, & Jaramillo, 2024) or assess topics that are related but distinct from classism, such as family economic hardship (Conger et al., 1999). New measures on classism can stimulate research on the topic, refine its conceptualization, and enable a more nuanced understanding of classism. Second, research on classism can advance knowledge about the frequency and intensity that classism is experienced among adolescents. Evidence about base rates is limited. This direction of research can also clarify the forms (direct and indirect) and sources (peers, family, and other adults) that are the most salient for adolescents. Third, documenting how classism varies globally is especially important as there are likely differences in how adolescents and families experience classism across national and cultural contexts.

Fourth, investigating the associations between classism and key indicators of adolescent development are essential. It is important for researchers to thoroughly examine how classism is associated with academic achievement, mental health, and substance use given their plausible associations with classism and their relevance to the developmental period of adolescence. Fifth, investigating the mechanisms that connect stress to developmental outcomes among adolescents is a fruitful avenue of research. Drawing from Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), adolescents experience stress because of classism, and in turn, this affects their development.

There is emerging support for this assertion (see Fuller-Rowell et al., 2012). However, the mechanism linking classism to development might depend on the outcome. Studies that compare mechanisms will be fruitful.

## CONCLUSION

Poverty persists globally and remains a critical issue (Salmeron-Gomez et al., 2023). Social class includes income, education, occupation, and social standing (Diemer et al., 2013) and is associated with adolescent development, including academic achievement, mental health, and risky behaviors (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Conger et al., 1999; Hanson & Chen, 2007; McLoyd, 1990; Moor et al., 2015; Reardon, 2011; Reiss, 2013; Willis, 1977). However, there has not yet been a systematic investigation for how classism—discrimination based on social class, explains these associations. This article seeks to engender research on classism among adolescents, so that social class inequalities are alleviated. To address this knowledge gap, a new conceptual model was presented that integrated theories on classism for adults from several disciplines, including counseling, education, social psychology (Kraus et al., 2012; Langhout et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2004; Lott, 2002), theories for adolescents focused on discrimination about gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Brown & Bigler, 2005; García Coll et al., 1996; Nadal & Griffin, 2015; Spencer, 1995), and family science about social class and intersectionality (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020; Smith & Landor, 2018). The new model was illustrated with exemplary quotes from past studies. Associations between classism and key areas of adolescent development were hypothesized. Future directions of research were proposed with a focus on measurement, intersectionality, and culture.

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## ORCID

Zena R. Mello  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8218-9801>

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