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Five stereotypes about poor families and education

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: October 28 at 4:00 am

Here is an excerpt from a new book called "Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap," by Paul C. Gorski, associate professor of integrative studies at George Mason University. The book, which draws from years of research to analyze educational practices that undercut the achievement of low-income students,   is part of the Multicultural Education Series of books edited by James A. Banks and published by Teachers College Columbia University.

The Trouble with the 'Culture of Poverty' and Other Stereotypes about People in Poverty by Paul C. Gorski

A long-time colleague of mine with a penchant for road rage—I'll call him Frederick—is fond of flinging the word "jerk" at drivers whose driving skills have offended him in some way. That is, he is fond of flinging this term at *male* drivers, or drivers he assumes to be men, and reserves it for them exclusively. When a driver he assumes to be a woman pulls in front of him, neglects to use a turn signal, or drives a few miles per hour under the speed limit, his response is different. Rather than calling her a jerk, he shakes his head, brow furled, and exclaims with exasperation, "Women drivers!"

I have challenged Frederick several times on what appears, to me, to be a clear case of gender stereotyping, of a biased view that looks a lot like sexism. He responds to my challenges firmly: "That's not a *stereotype*. It's my *experience*. Women are bad drivers." He tends to append to this defense the common refrain, "Plus, there's a hint of truth in stereotypes; otherwise, why would so many people believe them?"

As troubling as his attitude might be, Frederick is not alone in his view or in his tendency to see somebody within his gender group who has offended his sensibilities as an outlier, a *jerk*, while interpreting a female offender as representing all women. A long history of psycho-social research details the human tendency to imagine our own social and cultural groups as diverse while we imagine "the other," people belonging to a social or cultural group with which we are less familiar, as being, for all intents and purposes, all the same (e.g., Meiser & Hewstone, 2004).

Cognitively speaking, our stereotyping has been shown to be a natural and necessary human response in the face of limited context-specific knowledge. A woman's stereotype about men might prove to be an over-generalization in most instances but her intuition eventually could protect her from sexual assault. However, the *content* of stereotypes is only partially organic, only

partially based upon a measured consideration of the totality of our experiences. Stereotypes grow, as well, from how we're socialized (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). They are the result of what we are *taught to think* about poor people, for instance, even if we *are poor*, through celebrations of "meritocracy" or by watching a parent lock the car doors when driving through certain parts of town. They grow, as well, from a desire to find self-meaning by distinguishing between social and cultural in groups with which we do and do not identify (Homsey, 2008). That's the heady science of it….

… When I teach a class or deliver a workshop about poverty and schools, I often begin by asking participants to reflect on a question: *Why are poor people poor?* Answers vary. However, even when participants believe that societal inequities are responsible for a portion of or even *most* poverty they almost always qualify their responses with a litany of stereotypes: Poor people are lazy. They don't care about education. They're alcoholics and drug abusers. They don't want to work; instead, they are addicted to the welfare system. Unfortunately, these are not outlier views. Most people in the U.S. believe that poor people are poor because of their own deficiencies rather than inequitable access to services and opportunities (Rank, Yoon, & Hirschl, 2003).

So, what if I told you that some stereotypes commonly associated with poor people, such as a propensity for alcohol abuse, are *truer of wealthy people* than they are of poor people (Galea et al, 2007)? It's true. But how often do we, in the education world, apply this stereotype to wealthy people? How often do we hear, "No wonder so many rich kids don't do well at college; their parents are all alcoholics…"?

On the other hand, I might have 5, 10, or 20 low-income students who do not fit a particular stereotype about poor people, but if I have 2 or 3 who do fit it, those 2 or 3 can become, if I'm not aware of my biases, sufficient evidence to confirm my existing stereotype. As Jervis (2006) explains, "Given the complexity and ambiguity of our world, it is unfortunately true that beliefs for which a good deal of evidence can be mustered often turn out to be mistaken" (p. 643). If a low-income student regularly does not turn in homework, am I quicker to attribute it to her socioeconomic status than I would for a student in my own economic bracket?

Let's consider another school-based example. There exist several common stereotypes about poor people in the U.S. that suggest that they are inattentive and, as a result, ineffective parents. Low-income parents or guardians who do not attend parent-teacher conferences can become targets of stereotyping—or worse, targets of blame—by those educators. According to Jervis (2006),

Judgments…can be self-reinforcing as ambiguous evidence is taken not only to be consistent with preexisting beliefs, but to confirm them. Logically, the latter is the case only when the evidence both fits with the belief and does not fit the competing ones. But people rarely probe the latter possibility as carefully as they should. (p. 651)

So, whereas a more well-to-do parent or guardian might be pardoned for missing structured opportunities for family involvement —*she's traveling for work*—a low-income parent or guardian's lack of this sort of involvement might be interpreted as additional evidence of disinterest in her or his child's schooling (Pattereson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007).

In our efforts to become equity literate educators, one of our first tasks is to understand our own socializations and the ways in

which we have bought into the stereotypes that hinder our abilities to connect with low-income families, or any families, in the most authentic, open way. It's not easy. It takes an awful lot of humility to say we harbor stereotypes. The fact that many of us have been trained as teachers and administrators with frameworks like the "culture of poverty" that *encourage* stereotyping does not help. One important step in this process, though, is to nudge ourselves to rethink some of the most common stereotypes that exist about people in poverty and the extent to which we have been duped into believing them.

Mis-perceivers Are We: Common Stereotypes about Poor Families and Education

Poor people in the U.S. are stereotyped in innumerable ways (Williams, 2009). A vast majority of these stereotypes are just plain inaccurate. In fact, some are truer of wealthy people than poor people.

I decided several years ago to test a list of the stereotypes about people in poverty that are most common among my teacher education students against social science evidence (Gorski, 2008a), a process I revisited more recently in preparation for writing this book (Gorski, 2012). *Is there a hint of truth in every stereotype?* I wondered.

Here's what I found.

Stereotype 1: Poor People Do Not Value Education

The most popular measure of parental attitudes about education, particularly among teachers, is "family involvement" (Jeynes, 2011). This stands to reason, as research consistently confirms a correlation between family involvement and school achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). However, too often, our notions of family involvement are limited in scope, focused only on *in-school* involvement—the kind of involvement that requires parents and guardians to visit their children's schools or classrooms. While it is true that low-income parents and guardians are less likely to participate in this brand of "involvement" (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005), they engage in home-based involvement strategies, such as encouraging children to read and limiting television watching, *more frequently* than their wealthier counterparts (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

It might be easy, given the stereotype that low-income families do not value education, to associate low-income families' less consistent engagement in on-site, publicly visible, school involvement, such as parent-teacher conferences, with an ethic that devalues education. In fact, research has shown that many teachers assume that low-income families are completely uninvolved in their children's education (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). However, in order to assume a direct relationship between disparities in on-site involvement and a disregard for the importance of school, we would have to omit considerable amounts of contrary evidence. First, low-income parents and guardians experience significant class-specific barriers to school involvement. These include consequences associated with the scarcity of living wage jobs, such as the ability to afford childcare or public transportation or the ability to afford to take time off from wage work (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Li, 2010). They also include the weight of low-income parents' and guardians' own school experiences, which often were hostile and unwelcoming (Lee & Bowen,

2006). Although some schools and districts have responded to these challenges by providing on-site childcare, transportation, and other mitigations, the fact remains that, on average, this type of involvement is considerably less accessible to poor families than to wealthier ones.

Broadly speaking, there simply is no evidence, beyond differences in on-site involvement, that attitudes about the value of education in poor communities differ in any substantial way from those in wealthier communities. The evidence, in fact, suggests that attitudes about the value of education among families in poverty are identical to those among families in other socioeconomic strata. In other words, poor people, demonstrating impressive resilience, value education just as much as wealthy people (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Grenfell & James, 1998) *despite* the fact that they often experience schools as unwelcoming and inequitable.

For example:

- in a study of low-income urban families, Compton-Lilly (2000) found that parents overwhelmingly have high educational expectations for their children and expect their children's teachers to have equally high expectations for them, particularly in reading;
- in their study focusing on low-income African American parents, Cirecie West-Olatunji and her colleagues (2010) found that they regularly reached out to their children's schools and stressed the importance of education to their children;
- similarly, Patricia Jennings (2004), in her study on how women on welfare respond to the "culture of poverty" stereotype, found that single mothers voraciously valued and sought out educational opportunities for themselves, both as a way to secure living wage work and as an opportunity to model the importance of school to their children;
- based on their study of 234 low-income parents and guardians, Kathryn Drummond and Deborah Stipek (2004) found that they worked tirelessly to support their children's intellectual development;
- during an ethnographic study of a racially diverse group of low-income families, Guofang Li (2010) found that parents, including those who were not English-proficient, used a variety of strategies to bolster their children's literacy development;
- a recent study shows, contrasting popular perception, that poor families invest just as much time as their wealthier counterparts exploring school options for their children (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010); and
- using data from the more than 20,000 families that participated in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Carey Cooper and her colleagues (2010) found, quite simply, that "poor parents reported engaging their children in home-learning activities as often as nonpoor parents" (p. 876).
As with any stereotype, the notion that people in poverty don't value education might have more to do with *our* well-intended misinterpretations of social realities than with *their* disinterest in school. For example, some low-income families, and particularly low-income immigrant families, may not be as informed as their wealthier counterparts about how educational systems in the U.S. work (Ceja, 2006; Lareau & Meininger, 2008), an obvious consequence of the alienation from school systems many poor people experience, starting with their time as students. It can be easy to interpret this lack of understanding, which is a symptom, itself, of educational inequities, as disinterest. Similarly, it can be easy to interpret lower levels of *some types of school involvement*,

including types that are not scheduled or structured to be accessible to low-income families, as evidence that low-income parents simply don't care about school. But these interpretations, in the end, are based more on stereotype than reality. They are, for the most part, just plain wrong.

The challenge for us, then, is to do the difficult work of considering what we are apt to misinterpret, not simply as a fluffy attempt at "inclusion," but as a high-stakes matter of student success. After all, research also shows that when teachers *perceive* that their parents value education, they tend to assess student work more positively (Hill & Craft, 2003). Bias matters.

Stereotype 2: Poor People Are Lazy

Another common stereotype about poor people, and particularly poor people of color (Cleaveland, 2008; Seccombe, 2002), is that they are lazy or have weak work ethics (Kelly, 2010). Unfortunately, despite its inaccuracy, the "laziness" image of people in poverty and the stigma attached to it has particularly devastating effects on the morale of poor communities (Cleaveland, 2008).

The truth is, there is no indication that poor people are lazier or have weaker work ethics than people from other socioeconomic groups (Iversen & Farber, 1996; Wilson, 1997). To the contrary, all indications are that poor people work just as hard as, and perhaps *harder than*, people from higher socioeconomic brackets (Reamer, Waldron, Hatcher, & Hayes, 2008). In fact, poor working adults work, on average, 2,500 hours per year, the rough equivalent of 1.2 full time jobs (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004), often patching together several part-time jobs in order to support their families. People living in poverty who are working part-time are more likely than people from other socioeconomic conditions to be doing so involuntarily, despite seeking full-time work (Kim, 1999).

This is an astounding display of resilience in light of the fact that working low-income people are concentrated in the lowest-paying jobs with the most negligible opportunities for advancement; in jobs that require the most intense manual labor and offer virtually no benefits, such as paid sick leave (Kim, 1999). If you are thinking, *Well, then they should find better-paying jobs*, consider this: more than one out of five jobs in the U.S. pays at a rate that is below the poverty threshold (Waldron et al, 2004). And prospects are growing steadily dimmer, as more and more new jobs pay a poverty-level or lower wage (Reamer et al, 2008). According to the National Employment Law Project (2011), after increased unemployment rates over the last several years, the "recovery" brought back over a million jobs, but a disproportionate number of them were low-wage jobs, which accounted for 23% of job losses prior to 2010, but nearly half of newly available jobs as of 2011. Meanwhile, less than half of the jobs the Department of Labor predicts will be added to the U.S. economy by 2018 will pay enough to keep a two-worker, two-child, family out of poverty (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2010).

Stereotype 3: Poor People Are Substance Abusers

As I mentioned earlier, low-income people in the U.S. are *less likely* to use or abuse alcohol than their wealthier counterparts (Galea et al, 2007; Keyes & Hasin, 2008; NSDUH, 2004). Interestingly, this pattern is consistent internationally. Around the

world, alcohol use and addiction are associated positively with income; in other words, the higher somebody's income, the more likely he is to use alcohol or to be an alcoholic (Degenhardt et al, 2008).

Patterns of alcohol use among *youth* are a little less definitive. Some studies suggest that, as with the broader population, alcohol consumption and addiction are positively related to income. For example, in their study of two populations of high school students, one predominantly white and economically privileged and the other predominantly African American and low-income, Kevin Chen and his colleagues (2003) found significantly higher alcohol consumption in the former than the latter. Studies by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2004) and Monitoring the Future (2008) suggest that alcohol use among youth is equally distributed across socioeconomic strata. What is certain is that alcohol use and addiction are less prevalent overall among low-income people than among their wealthier counterparts. This is particularly astounding, and an indication of tremendous resiliency among low-income communities, when we consider that alcohol abuse can be a side effect of discrimination and social deprivation, such as inequitable access to social services (Lee & Jeon, 2005).

Similarly, there is little evidence that low-income people are more likely than wealthier people to use illicit drugs. Drug use in the U.S. is distributed fairly evenly across income levels (Degenhardt et al, 2008; Saxe, et al., 2001), regardless of age and other factors. According to Monitoring the Future (2008), for instance, found that socioeconomic status does not predict rates of alcohol use and abuse among youth.

It is true, of course, that alcohol and drug abuse exist in poor communities, just as it exists in wealthier communities. It also is true that substance abuse is a serious issue that has deleterious effects on youth regardless of their socioeconomic status. I certainly am not making the point that we should not attend to drug and alcohol use among low-income people or consider how it affects students' opportunities to achieve in school. We should. We also should realize that when these problems do exist in low-income families, they have the potential to be particularly devastating because people in poverty who are struggling with substance abuse generally do not have at their disposal the sorts of recovery opportunities available to wealthier families. Nor do they have access to preventative medical attention that might catch and treat growing dependencies before they become full-fledged addictions. This is one of many reasons to advocate for universal health care as one way to ensure equitable educational opportunity.

What we must try *not* to do is falsely associate drug and alcohol use and addiction with a "culture of poverty" or think of it as yet another example of why poor people are poor.

Stereotype 4: Poor People Are Linguistically Deficient and Poor Communicators

Mirroring attitudes in the broader society, many educators have been led to believe erroneously that poor people, like my Grandma, are linguistically deficient (Collins, 1988; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). This is a particularly dangerous stereotype given the extent to which students' identities are associated with their languages (Gayles & Denerville, 2007; Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009). Criticizing a person's language means criticizing her or his deepest self. It can lead students targeted in this way to feel disconnected from school (Christensen, 2008).

Fortunately, there is good reason *not* to criticize. When teachers assume that language is a marker of intelligence, the stereotype that poor people are also language-poor negatively affects their assessments of low-income students' performance (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009). This stereotype is built upon two shaky assumptions: (1) that poor children do not enter school with the volume or type of vocabulary they need to succeed (and that this is a reflection of parent disinterest in education), and (2) that the use of particular variations of English reflect inferior language capabilities.

The idea that children from low-income families enter school linguistically deprived, with smaller or less complex vocabularies than their wealthier peers, and that this condition is a result of family "cultures" that devalue learning, has become part of the "common sense" of education reform. What you might not know is that the idea that low-income students are linguistically deficient is based largely on a single study of a few dozen economically diverse families in the Kansas City area (Hart & Risley, 1995), as described in great detail by Curt Dudley-Marling and Krista Lucas (2009) in their essay, "Pathologizing the Language and Culture of Poor Children."

Studies have shown, indeed, that low-income and working class children begin school with less-developed reading skills on average than their wealthier counterparts (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). This initial discrepancy can foreshadow lags in reading proficiency throughout their school lives (Duncan et al, 2007). However, there is no evidence that this discrepancy in reading skills is connected to a language *use* deficiency or that it reflects parental disinterest in education. Similarly, based on their study involving a sample of 1,364 racially diverse public school children, Veronique Dupere and her colleagues (2010) concluded that reading score differences between low-income and wealthier students could be explained largely by discrepancies in the sorts of institutions to which they had access throughout early childhood. For example, poor and working class families, unlike many of their wealthier counterparts, rarely have access to high-quality early childhood education programs that support children's language learning in intensive, engaging ways (Kilburn & Karoly, 2008; Temple, Reynolds, & Arteaga, 2010).

The second shaky notion, that particular variations of English reflect superior or inferior language capabilities, incorrectly assumes the existence of "superior" and "inferior" language varieties (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). Linguists roundly reject this superior/inferior dichotomy. Some call it "standard language ideology" in reference to the presumptuous and familiar term, "standard English" (Lippi-Green, 1994). According to Kathryn Woolard and Bambi Schieffelin (1994), "Moral indignation over nonstandard forms [of language] derives from ideological associations of the standard with the qualities valued within the culture, such as clarity or truthfulness" (p. 64). In fact, since at least the early 1970s linguists have bemoaned the ways in which students are taught to misunderstand the nature of language, including the false dichotomy of "correct/proper" and "incorrect/improper" language varieties (Baugh, 1983; Burling, 1973).

In linguistic reality, all variations of a language and all dialects, from what some people call "Black English Vernacular" (Gayles & Denerville, 2007) to the Appalachian English spoken by my Grandma (Luhman, 1990), are highly structured with their own sets of grammatical rules (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). These variations of English, like so-called "standard" English, are not indicators of poor intelligence or deficient cultures. Instead, they are indicators of the regional, cultural, and social contexts in which somebody learned to speak. Among linguists this is no revelation. More than 100 years of linguistic research points to the fact that

all languages and language varieties are communicatively equal because they are, in their contexts, equally complex and coherent (see, for example, Boas, 1911; Chomsky, 1965; Labov, 1972; Newmeyer, 1985; Terry et al., 2010). As James Collins (1988) explains, "…languages are *systems*, of formidable and roughly equal complexity, whether classic 'world languages' or the speech of economically simple societies, whether prestige standards or stigmatized dialects" (p. 301).

Another common language stereotype is that children from poor families primarily speak with an "informal" register or style, as I might speak with my sister or a close friend, while their middle class and wealthier peers speak with a "formal" register, as I might speak during a job interview. However, like other forms of code-switching—the ways we modify behavior based on the context in which we find ourselves—*all people* use a broad range of language registers (Brizuela, Andersen, & Stallings, 1999; Edwards, 1976), regardless of the variety of language we speak. The false association, for instance, of middle Appalachian English with *informal register* mistakes "formal" ways of speaking with what we call "standard" English.

To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that students, low-income or not, do not need to learn the varieties of English that will help them gain access to the fullest range of educational and vocational opportunities. I believe, in fact, that I, as an educator, have a responsibility to help students develop a firm understanding of, and ability to use, what some people mistakenly call "standard" English. But I believe that I should do so without denigrating the language varieties spoken in students' homes and communities and without wrongly assuming that students' language varieties are indicators of their intelligence.

A related stereotype, and one that is featured prominently in the "culture of poverty" or "mindset of poverty" model (Payne, 2005), is that low-income people are ineffective communicators. Ruby Payne has said, and incorrectly so, that people in poverty often fight with each other because they do not have the necessary verbal communication skills to resolve conflicts. "Words are not seen as being very effective in generational poverty to resolve differences; fists are," (2006, ¶ 3) she has written in her brief essay, "Reflections on Katrina and the Role of Poverty in the Gulf Coast Crisis."

Contrasting this stereotype, studies have shown that low-income people communicate with the same sophistication as their wealthier peers. For example, Mary Ohmer and her colleagues (2010) studied the communication strategies used by members of a low-income, predominantly African American community who had assembled to confront a variety of neighborhood problems. They documented how people at these gatherings discussed and modeled complex communication techniques that could help them address these problems effectively with their neighbors. They talked, for instance, about using language to *de-escalate* conflict, being conscious of their tone of voice, and approaching their neighbors in an inviting, non-hostile manner.

Their study reminded me of the time I spent as a child with my Grandma's peoples in the mountains of Appalachian western Maryland, where I never heard so much as a raised voice nor saw a single person lay anything other than a friendly hand on anybody else.

Stereotype 5: Poor People Are Ineffective and Inattentive Parents

In my experience, the "bad parent" stereotype is based largely on other false stereotypes, like the ones we already have debunked: poor parents don't value education, poor parents are substance abusers, and so on. It also is based on decontextualized considerations of other sorts of evidence. For instance, when I hear that low-income children watch television and participate in other sedentary activities at higher rates than their wealthier peers, my initial reaction might be, "A-ha, further evidence that poor parents are inattentive to children's well-being." In order to reach that conclusion, though, I would have to ignore the fact that low-income youth have considerably less access to a whole range of after school and extracurricular activities, as well as to recreational facilities, than their wealthier peers (Macleod et al., 2008; Shann, 2001).

Researchers routinely have found that low-income parents and guardians are extremely attentive to their children's needs despite the many barriers they must overcome to provide for their families. This is no less true for poor single mothers, who often are the most scorned targets of the "bad parent" stereotype. We already established, for instance, that poor single mothers overwhelmingly claim a sense of responsibility for inspiring their children to pursue higher education. More broadly speaking, when Robert Hawkins (2010) used a variety of qualitative research techniques to examine how 20 formerly homeless single mothers use their social networks to improve their lives, he found that they prioritized the wellbeing of their children in virtually every decision they made. He also found that they were not shy about seeking the help they needed to provide a good life for their children, even when doing so made them vulnerable or uncomfortable.

In fact, following their longitudinal study of low-income families, a follow-up to Annette Lareau's (2000) now-famous study of how socioeconomic class affects children's home lives, she and Elliot Weininger (2008) unequivocally denounced the "bad parent" stereotype. They concluded that "working class and poor parents are no less deeply committed … to the well being of their children than are middle class parents" (p. 142).

<center>The Dangers of Stereotypes and Stereotype Threat</center>

Why, you may be wondering, *are we spending so much time on stereotypes? Why are we focusing on all of this negativity rather than talking about what we* can do *to strengthen educational opportunities for all students?*

… In the end, our understandings of poverty and our attitudes toward poor families play an enormous role, and perhaps the *most* enormous role, in how we see and treat our low-income students (Robinson, 2007; Williams, 2009), not to mention the lengths to which we will or will not go to advocate for them and their educational rights.

The dangers of not doing so are plentiful. Stereotypes can make us unnecessarily afraid or accusatory of our own students, including our *most disenfranchise*d students, not to mention their families. They can misguide us into expressing low expectations for poor youth and their families or to blame them for very the ways in which the barriers they face impede their abilities to engage with schools the way some of us might engage with schools.

Complicating matters, according to Claude Steele (2010), an expert on stereotyping and its dangers, people who are stereotyped

are attuned to the ways in which they are stereotyped. As a result, the *accuracy* of a stereotype about people in poverty might be irrelevant to the *toll* the stereotype takes on our low-income students. He explains:

This means that whenever we're in a situation where a bad stereotype could be applied to us—such as those about being old, poor, rich, or female—we know it. We know what 'people could think.' We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly. (p. 5)

The weight of this "knowing," imagining the very *possibility* that somebody might target them with a stereotype, can affect students' school performance and emotional wellbeing, as research on stereotype susceptibility and stereotype threat has demonstrated (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele, 2010). Stereotype threat, according to Bettina Spencer and Emanuele Castano (2007), occurs when people who share a particular identity—race, for example, or socioeconomic status—perform below their potential on an assigned task due to fear that their performance will confirm negative stereotypes people already have about them. The stereotype threat hypothesis might sound like a far-fetched idea, particularly for those of us who never have been consistent targets of bias related race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or other identities. We might wonder how stereotypes can have such an immediate and measureable effect on students. But stereotype threat is real as evidenced by a robust and constantly growing collection of studies demonstrating its effects (Steele, 2010). Most of the researchers studying stereotype threat have focused on its effects for students of color and female students. However, stereotype threat also affects low-income students. For example, when informed that their socioeconomic status is relevant to a task they are being asked to complete, such as by being told before a test that students in poverty do not do as well on it, on average, as wealthier students, low-income students perform worse than they when nobody suggests the disparity (Spencer & Castano, 2007).

So our understandings of and attitude about people in poverty, even if we don't believe we are applying them to individual students, have an effect on low-income students' school performance. Stereotypes and biases matter. They matter in an extremely practical and immediate way. And no amount of resources or pedagogical strategies will help us provide the best opportunity for low-income students to reach their full potentials as learners if we do not attend, first, to the stereotypes, biases, and assumptions we have about them and their families. Our first practical task, then, is this: identify, then work on expunging, what we thought we knew about poor people if what we thought we knew paints families in poverty with broad, negative, stereotype-ridden strokes.