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Upper-Class People Have Trouble Recognizing Others' Emotions

Upper-class people have more educational opportunities, greater financial security, and better job prospects than people from lower social classes, but that doesn't mean they're more skilled at everything. A new study published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds surprisingly, that lower-class people are better at reading the emotions of others.

The researchers were inspired by observing that, for lower-class people, success depends more on how much they can rely on other individuals? For example, if you can't afford to buy support services, such as daycare service for your children, you have to rely on your neighbors or relatives to watch the kids while you attend classes or run errands, says Michael W. Kraus of the University of California-San Francisco. He co-wrote the study with Stéphane Côté of the University of Toronto and Dacher Keltner of the University of California-Berkeley.

One experiment used volunteers who worked at a university. Some had graduated from college and others had not; researchers used educational level as a proxy for social class. The volunteers did a test of emotion perception, in which they were instructed to look at pictures of faces and indicate which emotions each face was displaying. People with more education performed worse on the task than people with less education. In another study, university students who were of higher social standing (determined from each student's self-reported perceptions of his or her family's socioeconomic status) had a more difficult time accurately reading the emotions of a stranger during a group job interview.

These results suggest that people of upper-class status aren't very good at recognizing the emotions other people are feeling. The researchers speculate that this is because, they can solve their problems, like the daycare example, without relying on others -- they aren't as dependent on the people around them.

A final experiment found that, when people were made to feel that they were at a lower social class than they actually were, they got better at reading emotions. This shows that "it's not something ingrained in the individual," Kraus says. "It's the cultural context leading to these differences." He says this work helps show that stereotypes about the classes are wrong. "It's not that a lower-class person, no matter what, is going to be less intelligent than an upper-class person. It's all about the social context the person lives in, and the specific challenges the person faces. If you can shift the context even temporarily, social class differences in any number of behaviors can be eliminated."

Editor's Note: This article is not intended to provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.