

# Educationism: The hidden bias we often ignore

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**By Melissa Hogenboom**  
20 December 2017

The first time Lance Fusarelli set foot on a university campus, he felt surrounded by people who seemed to know more than him – about society, social graces and “everything that was different”.

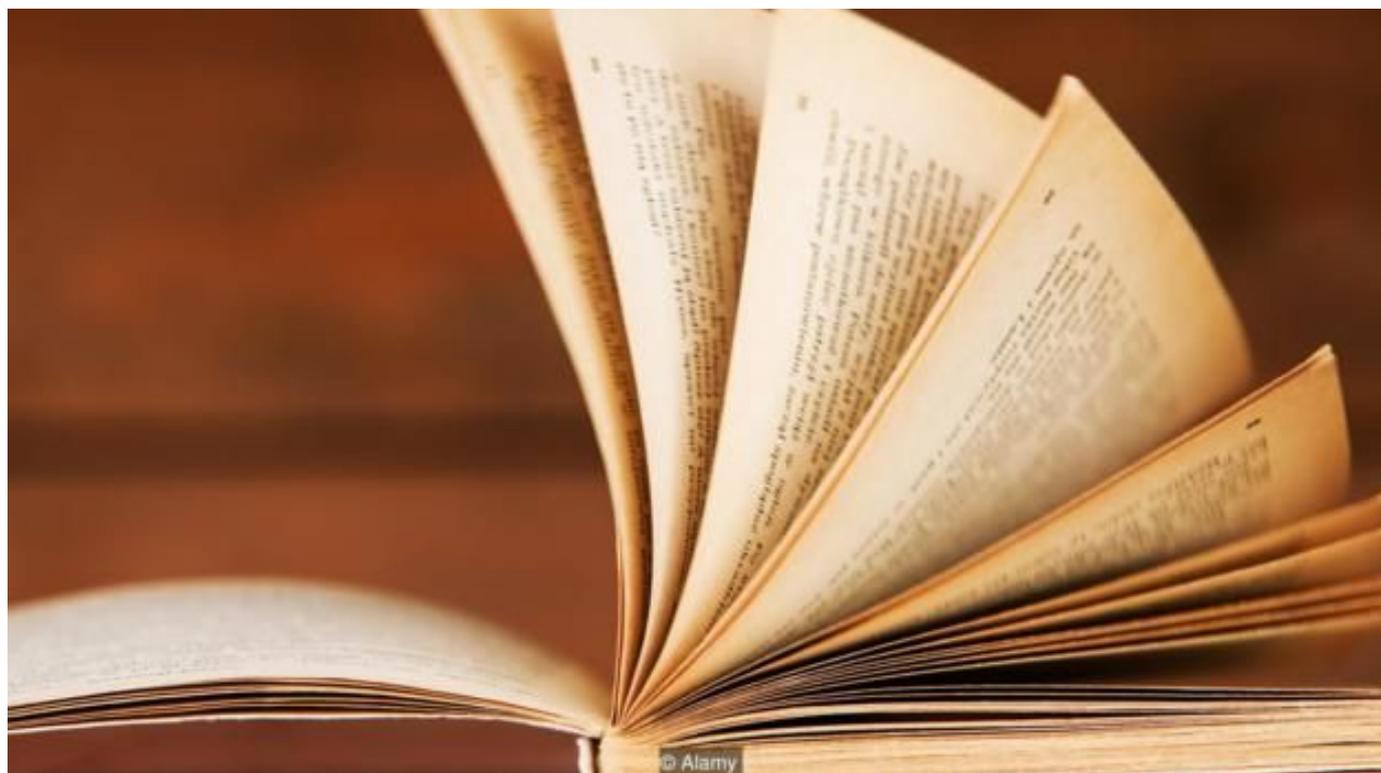
He attributes these differences to his upbringing. While he didn’t grow up poor, it was in a working-class town in a small rural area in Avella, Pennsylvania. He was the first in

his family to go to university – his mother got pregnant and had to drop out of school, while his father went to work in a coal mine in his mid-teens. He lived in an environment where few stayed in education beyond high school.

It worked out well for him. Fusarelli is now highly educated and a professor and director of graduate programmes at North Carolina State University. Occasionally he's reminded of how he felt in those early days, when a colleague innocently corrected his imperfect grammar. "He wasn't being mean, we were good friends, he just grew up in a different environment," he says. "Sometimes I will not always talk like an academic. I tend to use more colourful language."

While Fusarelli has risen through the ranks of academia despite his background, his experiences have highlighted the social divide that can exist in education. For those who are less educated due to their disadvantaged background, they face a subtle but pervasive bias. **A new report** in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology named the term "educationism" and for the first time found clear evidence for what Fusarelli and many others have long suspected: educated people are implicitly biased against the less educated. And this has unfortunate, unintended consequences that often stem from the gap between the rich and poor.

It's a "societal level" issue that creates a significant divide, says Toon Kuppens of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, part of the team who coined the term. "It needs to be addressed."



A subtle bias exists against those who are less educated (Credit: Alamy)

The idea that people are biased against the less educated is not a new one. In the 1980s the French socialist Pierre Bourdieu **called it** the “racism of intelligence... of the dominant class”, which serves to justify their position in society. **Bourdieu pointed to** the fact that the education system was invented by the ruling classes, with middle-class knowledge and questions appearing in tests.

Education also appears to divide society in many ways. Higher levels of educational attainment are linked to greater income, better health, improved well-being and elevated levels of employment. Educational status also reveals political divides. **Those with lower qualifications** were more likely to vote for Britain to leave the European Union, for example. **One report** even found that education level played a bigger role in the Brexit vote than age, sex or income.

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Despite this long-held understanding, the existence of such a strong educational bias is rarely addressed head on, argues Kuppens, though there are numerous studies on gender, ethnicity and age prejudices.

To address this, Kuppens and colleagues set up several experiments to understand individuals’ attitude towards education. They asked subjects outright how positive and warm they felt about others, but they also asked indirectly by describing several individuals’ jobs and education background, which participants then had to evaluate positively or negatively.



A lack of resources is 'psychologically constraining' (Credit: Alamy)

The results were clear - individuals who attained higher levels of education were liked more, both from high and lower-educated subjects. Participants who were more highly educated were clearly not “inherently more tolerant” than the lower-educated, as is commonly believed, says Kuppens.

What’s more, he says that one of the reasons the bias exists is that education level is somehow perceived to be something people can control. “We are evaluating people – giving them negative attitudes – even though we know that in reality they cannot be blamed for their low education.”

The reason people cannot be blamed for low levels of education is due to its link to poverty. Those from poor backgrounds quickly **fall behind** their classmates at school and **fewer teens** from disadvantaged backgrounds go to university.



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It is now becoming clearer that there are complex reasons for this – namely that poverty effects day-to-day decision making in previously unforeseen ways. Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington of the London School of Economics, says that a lack of resources is “psychologically constraining”. **It also adds a sense of stigma and shame** that creates low self-esteem, a pattern she says is more likely in societies with meritocratic ideologies, where an individual’s achievement is seen as being based largely upon intelligence and hard-work.

Poverty even affects decision making. **In one revealing study**, Sheehy-Skeffington randomly assigned middle-income participants to different groups – some were told they were doing badly in society while others were successful. Those who were told they were “low status individuals” performed worse on both financial decisions and basic cognitive tasks.

“That’s saying the cognitive skills you need in order to make good financial decisions aren’t readily available when you’re facing the stress of realising you’re doing worse than others,” she says. It’s not that their mental processes shut down, but rather that individuals were more focussed on the present threat to their status rather than concentrating on tasks at hand.



Fewer individuals from underprivileged backgrounds are admitted to Oxbridge (Credit: Alamy)

In her analysis on the psychology of poverty, Sheehy-Skeffington has found that those on low incomes feel a diminished sense of control over future life outcomes. “If you think you can’t control your future it makes sense to invest what limited energy or money you have to improve your present situation,” she says.

Work like hers reveals a cycle that is hard to break: performance on mental tasks suffer when faced with financial constraints. And once these constraints exist, the ability to plan for the future and make sensible decisions is also negatively affected. This clearly plays out in the education system. Those who live in the present have less incentive to do well at school or plan for a higher education.

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*They effectively hinder their prospects as far as the continuation of education is concerned*

One team of researchers goes even further, however, arguing that the education system is “motivated to maintain the status quo” – where the children of highly-educated parents go to university, while children with less exposure to education go into vocational training or apprenticeships. This was highlighted in a **2017 study** led by social psychologist Fabrizio Butera of the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. His team showed that “examiners” scored individuals lower on the same task when they were told that the pupil came from a less privileged background.

“It’s like they consider a kid from a lower background shouldn’t be on that track, and

therefore they effectively hinder their prospects as far as the continuation of education is concerned,” says Butera. “Perpetuating the status quo is a way to maintain the privilege that these classes have.”

And even if individuals from a working-class do reach higher education, they often have to “discard the original parts of their identity in order to become socially mobile”, explains Erica Southgate from the University of Newcastle in Australia. **She has studied** the stigmas faced by individuals who are the first in their family to reach higher education. She found that in subjects such as medicine, there’s a prevailing assumption from classmates that everyone comes from a similar social background. “It wasn’t so much overt stigma, but the hidden injuries of social class that kept emerging – people kept having to explain themselves.”



Children from poorer families do worse at school (Credit: Alamy)

So, what could help overcome the education divide? One view is that different ways of scoring tests could help even the playing field. In several studies, **Butera’s team showed** that giving children graded tests or exam scores actually **reduces motivation** and performance in reasoning and decision making. If there are no graded scores it also reduces social comparison, which we know can often negatively affect performance, as Sheehy-Skeffington’s work revealed.

If detailed feedback on how to improve is given instead of simple graded scores, it helps “focus on assessment as a tool for education” rather than assessment for selection, Butera argues. In other words, children learn to further their knowledge,

rather than learn to do well on tests.

“Our team has shown that one viable solution is to create a classroom environment where assessment is part of the learning process,” says Butera. “This appears to reduce social class and gender inequalities, and promote a culture of solidarity and cooperation.”

Some alternative schools place less emphasis on exams, such as the Montessori, Steiner and Freinet schools, while in Finland there are **no standardised tests** in primary schools. These examples are in the minority and not to everyone’s taste. Many parents want to see grades, and without them it can be hard to assess how children are doing. “Here in Switzerland they abolished grades in one place but there was an uprising mainly due to parents who all of a sudden couldn’t figure out how their kids were doing,” says Butera.



The education system was invented by the ruling class, said French socialist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980s (Credit: Alamy)

For Fusarelli, the most important thing is for both parents and teachers to expect the best from children at a young age to reinforce the idea that “they can do this and succeed”.

“If you have low expectations of the kids they’ll sink to the level of expectations,” he says. **A study has even shown** that low-income students do worse when teachers expect them to do badly in maths, reading and vocabulary. That’s why he tells prospective low-income students to “trust your ability and believe you belong”.

Of course, biases in the education system won't go away overnight. What's worse is that most of us don't realise that these biases exist. The meritocratic attitude that hard workers will succeed is still pervasive, despite evidence to show that many factors beyond an individual's control can hinder potential.

And unfortunately, it is those who are better educated, and who should be sensitive to discrimination, who can benefit – often unknowingly – from the very inequality they helped to create.

