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Perceiving the Problem of Poverty and Schooling: Deconstructing the Class Stereotypes that Mis-Shape Education Practice and Policy

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A rich history of scholarship has demonstrated the ways in which popular stereotypes of disenfranchised communities, including people living in poverty, affect individual biases and preconceptions. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which such stereotypes help frame policy and practice responses regarding social problems, such as the economic "achievement gap." The purpose of this essay is to examine the nature of poverty-based stereotyping in the context of popular discourses regarding the education of poor and low-income students. In doing so, I analyze stereotypes commonly used to locate the problem of the economic "achievement gap" as existing within, rather than as pressing upon, poor and low-income families. I then discuss how these stereotypes have fed deficit ideology and, as a result, misdirected policy and practice responses to gross class inequities in U.S. schools.

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 road skills have offended him in some way. That is, he is fond of directing 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 differs markedly. 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 worldview that is symptomatic of sexism. He responds to these 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 every stereotype; otherwise, why would so many people believe them?"

As troubling as his attitude might be, Frederick is not alone in his worldview 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 psychosocial research details the human tendency to imagine our own social and cultural identity groups as diverse while we imagine "the other," people belonging to a social or cultural identity group with which we are less familiar, as being, for all intents and purposes, monolithic (e.g., Clark,

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1985; Hurst, 2007; Meiser & Hewstone, 2004). Meanwhile, we tend to attribute more positive characteristics to our in-groups than to our out-groups (DiDonato, Ullrich, & Krueger, 2011; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

In many ways, these seemingly contradictory responses stand to reason in the sense that we know our in-groups better than we know our out-groups. For instance, cognitive reasoning research (De Neys & Vanderpeutte, 2011) has demonstrated that when people find themselves in contexts with which they are not familiar, their decision-making cognition defaults to intuition and stereotyped beliefs. Meanwhile, they suppress their abilities, which they might demonstrate in more familiar contexts, to draw on "a deliberate, controlled reasoning process" (De Neys & Vanderpeutte, 2011, p. 432). In other words, when we do not know, we use stereotypes to fill in the blanks. However, although the engagement of stereotypes 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—the content of stereotypes are only partially organic, based upon a measured assessment of the totality of one's experiences. Stereotypes grow, as well, from hegemonic socialization processes and manipulations (Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010)—what we are taught to think about poor people, for instance, even if we are poor, through celebrations of "meritocracy" or conflations of democracy and capitalism. They grow, as well, from our drive to find self-meaning in clear distinctions between our in-groups and out-groups (Hornsey, 2008).

My intention here is to draw upon scholarship about the cognitive and sociopolitical functions of stereotyping to examine common stereotypes about poor people in the U.S., the role of stereotypes in shaping class discourses in the education milieu, and the function of stereotypes in directing or misdirecting policy and practice related to the education of poor and working class students. Although stereotypes inform and misinform thinking across many identities and oppressions, capitalist hegemony has had a particularly powerful silencing effect on contoured discourses about class and poverty in the U.S. (hooks, 2000). Evidence of this condition is illustrated by Ruby Payne's (2005) position and that of the "culture of poverty" paradigm at the center of today's discourses on poverty, class, and education (Gorski, 2008a)—a space occupied, just 20 years ago, by Kozol's (1992) detailed analysis of systemic, "savage," class inequities in U.S. schools. That this shift can be understood, as well, in the context of growing wealth and income gaps in the U.S., the hastening of deficit discourses about poor people and the U.S. "achievement gap" (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Gorski, 2011), and the corporatization of U.S. schooling (Martin, 2011), underscores hooks' (2000) warnings about our failure to attend to matters of class with the same vigor as matters of race and gender.

I begin by continuing my exploration of the process by which we, as educators, become susceptible to, and, if we are not careful, vessels for, class-based and other stereotypes. Next, I share what I found when I put four of the most common stereotypes about poor people to the test, poring over studies about poverty and schooling in the U.S. to assess whether they hold up to empirical scrutiny. I end by discussing the implications of what I found in relation to the goal of creating equitable schools for low-income students.

THE NATURE OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STEREOTYPING

One of the keys to distinguishing between stereotyping as a cognitive process for every day, non-exploitative, decision-making (e.g., Where might I find a water fountain in this building?)

and stereotyping as a symptom of systemic oppression is in determining the extent to which the mechanisms described earlier—hegemonic socialization processes and the drive for group distinction—are in play. These mechanisms, in their rewarding of a sort of selective evidence-gathering routine, are at the root of group-level biases (Nesdale & Flesser, 2001). We tend to require less evidence, and less accurate evidence, to convince us of the legitimacy of a stereotype about a group to which we do not belong than to one about our in-groups (Biernat, 2003; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994; Van Rooy et al., 2003). Social psychologists (Raden, 2003; Tajful & Turner, 1986) have referred to this phenomenon as "in-group bias" because it is based more generally on the tendency to see our identity in-groups more favorably overall than groups with which we do not associate (Gorman, 2005). Certainly, my colleague Frederick has what he considers good evidence that women are bad drivers. But, just as certainly, to extrapolate an experience or two into a generalization about all women, he has to suppress considerable amounts of counter-evidence, such as the number of women drivers he never notices because they do not ignite his road rage. This suppression protects him because, if he generalizes men, he also implicates himself.

We all participate in this sort of faulty generalization in one way or another, usually unconsciously (Gorman, 2005). And, as described earlier, this is not always bad in the sense that stereotypes can help us make decisions when gaps exist in our knowledge and experience. For example, stereotyping functions can be helpful when I am searching for a water fountain in an unfamiliar building. Knowing that water fountains often are near restrooms, I follow signs toward the restrooms. However, when stereotypes are applied to groups of people and their relative worth, rather than to buildings and the consistency of their plumbing infrastructures, they are not politically neutral. In the interpersonal case, the socialization behind our stereotypes leads us to seek evidence to cement existing biases (Jervis, 2006). Meanwhile, we often fail to note evidence that does not support these biases. Gorman explains, "People are more likely to notice and remember information that confirms an applicable stereotype than information that disconfirms it" (p. 704).

At the individual level, this results in the confirmation of our existing stereotypes. At the systemic level, where individual attitudes coalesce into popular perception, it can have—and has had—serious policy implications, guiding or misguiding how people respond to all matter of social conditions, from the economic achievement gap to the U.S. wealth gap (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Consider, for example, Payne's (2005) ascent as one of the most popular and prosperous school consultants on poverty and education (Ng & Rury, 2006). Payne enjoys wide and profitable access to school districts across the U.S., despite that the content of her work is grossly inaccurate (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008) and oppressive (Gorski, 2008a; Osei-Kofi, 2005) and that her teacher workshops have been shown to deepen participants' negative stereotypes about poor families (Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011). Unfortunately, these conditions appear to be of little mitigating consequence against what has been another finding of scholarship about Payne's influence on class discourses in education: Her work, steeped in stereotypes about families in poverty, confirms the attitudes and worldviews that many teachers carry into the classroom with them (Redeaux, 2011). In other words, Payne has "common sense" on her side.

This phenomenon, the transformation of individual stereotype and bias into "common sense," occurs across most every identity. Targets can include anybody: white people or people of color; heterosexual people or people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer; men or women. Of course, stereotypes tend to stick more strongly to disenfranchised communities that do not have the institutional power to popularize a counter-narrative (Salzer, 2000) than to privileged

communities that do have the power, not only to popularize a false narrative, but also to use that narrative to justify their own privilege and, in Woddell and Henry's (2005) words, "to rationalize discriminatory practices" (p. 302). In the education realm, where conversations about class and poverty have been dominated for the past decade by Payne (Gorski, 2008a; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005) and the "culture of poverty" paradigm, a framework that assumes—and wrongfully so (Gorski, 2008b; Rosemblatt, 2009)—that poor people share a consistent, predictable set of values and behaviors, a particularly unrelenting kind of stereotyping has been leveled against students living in poverty.

STEREOTYPING POOR PEOPLE

When I teach a class or deliver a workshop about poverty, economic justice, and schooling, I often begin by asking participants, usually pre- or in-service teachers, to consider the question, "Why are poor people poor in the U.S.?" Answers vary. However, even when participants identify structural barriers as responsible for a portion or even most poverty they almost always qualify their answers 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. These teachers are not outliers. Most people in the U.S. believe that poor people are poor because of their own deficiencies rather than opportunity inequalities (Rank, Yoon, & Hirschl, 2003).

This, however, was not always the case. The now-dominant U.S. view of poor people as morally and intellectually deficient is a relatively new phenomenon (Gorski, 2011), having emerged in the mid-1970s (Rank et al., 2003). Prior to that time, according to Rank et al., research consistently had demonstrated for decades that a majority of people in the U.S. attributed poverty to structural conditions, such as a lack of opportunity, and not to supposed deficiencies among poor people.

This shift in mass perception was propagated by several coalescing forces of social conditioning. One such condition was the growing endorsement by right-leaning policymakers of Lewis's (1961) "culture of poverty" paradigm, which hypothesized that poor people remain poor due largely to a variety of cultural attributes that block them from escaping poverty. According to Lewis, these included an emphasis on the present and neglect of the future, violent tendencies, and a lack of a sense of history. Notably, Lewis's findings, which dozens of scholars since have attempted, and failed, to replicate, largely were rejected by the social science community by the mid-1970s (see, for instance, Billings, 1974; Harris, 1976; Van Til & Van Til, 1973) and widely criticized among poverty scholars for its generalizations and stereotyping (Rosemblatt, 2009; Ryan, 1971; Valentine, 1968). The popular phrase "blaming the victim" was coined by William Ryan in 1971 in his critical response to the "culture of poverty" paradigm.

Still today, the general consensus among poverty researchers is that there is no such thing as a predictable, consistent "culture of poverty" shared by all, or even most, poor people (Adeola, 2005; Bomer et al., 2008). However, that did not stop many prominently-placed conservative policymakers from using it to argue and garner support for a variety of policy initiatives, including those that continue to erode welfare programs (Jennings, 2004). What better way, the thinking went, to redirect "common good" expenditures up the economic pyramid than to paint the populace a picture of poor people as "undeserving" (Gans, 1995), as people who were responsible, not just for their own poverty but also for declining economic conditions (whether real or mythical) in the broader society?

Ronald Reagan played, perhaps, the leading role in popularizing today's stereotypic culture of poverty image of poor people. During his failed bid for the 1976 Republican presidential primary endorsement, Reagan often repeated the story of Linda Taylor, a woman from the south side of Chicago who defrauded the government out of roughly $8,000 in welfare claims by using four aliases. Reagan exaggerated considerably during his speeches, suggesting that Taylor, who he called a "welfare queen," had collected more than $150,000 and used more than 80 aliases, a mischaracterization uncovered at the time by *The Washington Star* ("'Welfare queen' becomes issue in Reagan campaign," 1976). Despite failing to survive past the Republican primary, Reagan left an indelible mark on the popular class and poverty discourse with the strategic and repeated use of that term: "welfare queen." His habitual use of the idiom established it, with all of its stereotypic insinuations, firmly in the U.S. cultural lexicon, where it has remained for more than 30 years, a topic of countless exposés (e.g., Wetzstein, 1997), documentaries (e.g., Stein & Scott, 2002), and TV political commentary show shouting matches.

Notably, Reagan pointed the "welfare queen" label, not just at poor people, but at poor, urban, African American women, and particularly those who were single mothers. As would become standard neoliberal strategy for framing domestic economic discourses in the U.S., Reagan aimed public scorn at people who had little power to popularize a counter-narrative. It is notable, as well, that the stereotypes captured by Reagan's "welfare queen" discourse and those exploited by Payne (2005) and other purveyors of the "culture of poverty" paradigm are virtually indistinguishable, painting poor people as lazy, violent addicts who do not value education, lack communication skills, and take advantage of, even as they disdain, "the system." Certainly, these stereotypes existed in many people's minds prior to Lewis's (1961) introduction of the "culture of poverty" paradigm, Reagan's run, and the mass media fascination with "welfare queens." However, these conditions and manipulations comprise, to a considerable extent, the roots of the mass acceptance of the stereotypes of poor people, and the purposeful social conditioning to accept those stereotypes, that persists today. (For a more detailed discussion of this history, see Gorski, 2011.)

As mentioned earlier, the tendency to harbor these stereotypes and to base them upon selective evidence-gathering is strongest and most dangerous when done by members of a dominant or privileged group. Non-dominant groups—people of color, poor people, people whose home languages are not English—generally do not have the social or political power to popularize counter-narratives (Godrej, 2011) in order to challenge stereotypes about them. As a result, stigmatizing stereotypes stick more fiercely to poor people than they do to wealthy people, even when the stereotypes are false. Certainly, teachers, most of whom are working- or middle-class, do not constitute a privileged group; growing up in a working-class family, my economic reality much more resembled that of people on the bottom of the economic hierarchy than those at the top. However, middle- and working-class teachers do experience economic privilege in relation to their more economically disadvantaged students, and they, like the general public, are socialized to have and apply these stereotypes (Smith, Allen, & Bowen, 2010).

Complicating matters, research has shown that the most commonly held stereotypes are those that distinguish non-dominant groups from the ways in which privileged groups tend to imagine, and wish to project, themselves (Sherman et al., 2009). In this way, stereotypes, as they relate to mental processes, are less about the stereotyper's desire to accurately portray "the other" than about her or his desire to reinforce a self-image in direct contrast to those people being stereotyped (Fein, von Hippel, & Spencer, 1999; Jervis, 2006; Spencer, Fein, Wolfe, Fong, & Dunn, 1998).

It should come as no surprise, then, that some stereotypes that are associated commonly with poor people, such as a propensity for alcohol abuse, are truer of wealthy people than they are of poor people (Diala et al., 2001; Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007). But how often is this propensity applied universally 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."? It is through this power of the privileged elite to manipulate popular perception that common stereotypes are entrenched in the mainstream psyche.

These intricacies in the relationships between stereotypes and sociopolitical framing are important, not only because of their interpersonal implications but also because stereotypes, in the way they inform how individuals process information, affect perceptions about the viability, fairness, and effectiveness (or potential effectiveness) of public policy (Burns & Gimpel, 2000). Illustrating this point, Burns and Gimpel argue, "Those who believe the stereotype that blacks are lazy are likely to be opposed to policies that seek to ameliorate racial discrimination" (p. 204). It is critical to note here that the driving dispositional force is not the accuracy of the stereotype, but the stereotype itself. A teacher might have 5, 10, or 20 low-income students who do not fit a particular stereotype about poor people, but if she or he has 2 or 3 who do fit it, they can become, in the teacher's mind, sufficient evidence to confirm the stereotype. 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). The point is that one can find a lot of evidence for nearly anything, but considering that evidence while ignoring twice the contrary evidence does not make something true.

Consider a 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. In education circles, for example, low-income parents or guardians who do not attend parent-teacher conferences can become targets of stereotyping—or worse, targets of blame—not by educators who mean to stifle their students in any way, but by those who are conditioned to gather mental evidence selectively (and especially in ways that attach stereotypes to "the other" rather than themselves). So, whereas a more well-to-do parent or guardian might be pardoned more readily 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 education (Pattereson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007). Jervis (2006) explains, "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).

To understand the complexity of this stereotyping process, it is important to examine not only the selective evidence-gathering process but also the evidence we might be ignoring altogether to come to the stereotyped conclusion that, for example, poor parents are inattentive. Based on my discourse analyses of Payne's (2005) work and other poverty discourses in the U.S. (Gorski, 2008a, 2008b, 2011), I have come to see this ignored or omitted evidence as coming in at least two forms. The first of these I call "sociopolitical evidence"—information about the social conditions that influence individuals' lives and, as a result, their options. To believe, for example, that poor people are poor solely because of their own deficiencies, I must ignore a slew of sociopolitical realities related to poverty and class in the U.S., including inequitable access to schooling and the scarcity of living wage jobs.

Similarly, to believe that the primary reason poor parents and guardians are less likely than their wealthier counterparts to attend structured opportunities for family involvement is their lack of attentiveness to education, I would need to suppress several sociopolitical factors that may explain some portion of the discrepancy. These might include that they are more likely to work multiple jobs, including evening jobs; that they are more likely to have jobs for which they do not have paid leave; that they are less likely to be able to afford child care or public transportation if necessary to attend; that they are more likely to have experienced, and to continue experiencing, school environments as hostile and unwelcoming (Graham, 2009; Howard, Dresser, & Dunklee, 2009; Van Galen, 2007). In other words, I would need to ignore that these sorts of opportunities tend not to be offered in ways that make them as accessible to families living in poverty as they are to wealthy or even middle-class families.

The second type of omitted evidence I call "comparative evidence"—that which directly refutes a stereotype by demonstrating that a phenomenon is no more prevalent in the stereotyped group than it is in the larger society. So, to accept the stereotype that associates substance abuse with poor people, I must suppress evidence, such as that which I see before me (hotels full of colleagues drinking to excess at professional conferences, perhaps) or studies showing that poor people are less likely than their wealthier counterparts to be users or abusers of alcohol (Diala et al., 2001; Galea et al., 2007). (More on this momentarily.)

These sorts of misperceptions and missed perceptions have the potential to thwart efforts for class equity in schools. As a result, an examination of the stereotypes that drive educators' attitudes about students living in poverty is a critical undertaking. In what follows I consider, in that spirit, four of the most common stereotypes about poor people in the U.S. I scrutinize these stereotypes, examining whether they hold up under the analysis of a concerted evidence-gathering process.

COMMON STEREOTYPES ABOUT POOR STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Poor people in the U.S. are stereotyped in innumerable ways (Williams, 2009). Research has shown that these stereotypes are embedded during childhood through a variety of implicit and explicit messages from the media and other institutions and influences (Smith, Allen, & Bowen, 2010). I chose to focus on four specific stereotypes commonly applied to poor people for two reasons. First, space constraints make it impossible to examine the evidence of every stereotype about poor people in a single article. Given this constraint, and due to Payne's (2005) immense influence in the teacher professional development milieu, I chose four stereotypes that appear prominently, whether implicitly or explicitly, in her literature according to the many published analyses of her work (e.g., Gorski, 2008a; Ng & Rury, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2005).

Stereotype 1: Poor People Do Not Value Education

The popular measure of parental attitudes about the importance of education, particularly among teachers, is the extent of parent involvement in their children's education (Hill & Craft, 2003). This stands to reason, as research has consistently confirmed a correlation between family involvement

and school achievement (Barnard, 2004; Griffith, 1998; J.-S. Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mattingly et al., 2002; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007). However, notions of parent involvement often are limited in scope, focused upon in-school involvement—the kind of involvement that requires parents and guardians to visit their child's school or classroom. While it is true that low-income parents and guardians are less likely to participate in this brand of "involvement" (Mattingly et al., 2002; 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 (J.-S. 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. But to do so would require am omission of considerable evidence to the contrary. First, a sociopolitical omission: As mentioned earlier, low-income parents and guardians experience significant class-specific barriers to school involvement (Gorski, 2008b; Hill & Taylor, 2004; J.-S. Lee & Bowen, 2006). These include consequences associated with the scarcity of living wage jobs, such as the ability to afford child care or public transportation and the ability to afford to take time off from wage work (Gorski, 2008a) as well as the weight of their own negative school experiences (J.-S. Lee & Bowen, 2006). Although some schools and districts have responded to these challenges by providing on-site child care, transportation, and other mitigations, the fact remains that, on average, this type of involvement remains considerably less accessible to poor families than to wealthier ones.

Secondly, there simply is no evidence, beyond differences in on-site involvement, that attitudes about the value of education in poor communities differ in any way from those in wealthier communities (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Gorski, 2008b). The evidence suggests that attitudes about the value of education among families in poverty mirror 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 historic and present class inequities in schools.

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 a weak work ethic (Kelly, 2010). Like other stereotypes, this one is less an accurate portrayal of poor people than an illustration of how the privileged manufacture negative images of "the other" to cement and project positive self-images, justify unequal conditions, and blame the disenfranchised for their "misfortune." Unfortunately, despite its inaccuracy, the "laziness" image of the poor and the stigma attached to it has been shown to have particularly devastating effects on the morale of poor communities (Cleaveland, 2008) while encouraging mass compliance with growing economic stratification (Gorski, 2011).

There is no evidence that poor people on average are lazier or have weaker work ethics than people from other socioeconomic groups (Wilson, 1996). To the contrary, there is evidence that poor people work just as hard as—and perhaps harder than—people from higher socioeconomic brackets (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004). Poor working adults work, on average, 2,500 hours

per year—the equivalent of 1.2 full-jobs (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004), often patching together several part-time jobs in order to survive. Those people living in poverty who are working part-time are more likely than people from other class 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 the working poor are concentrated in the lowest-paying jobs with the most negligible opportunities for advancement—jobs that require the most intense manual labor (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009) and that offer virtually no benefits (paid sick leave, for instance) (Kim, 1999). 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 steadily growing 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), following increased unemployment rates over the last several years, the "recovery" brought back over a million jobs, but a disproportionate number of these jobs 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 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 noted earlier, low-income people in the U.S. are less likely overall to use or abuse alcohol than their wealthier counterparts (Diala et al., 2001; Galea et al., 2007; International Center for Alcohol Policies [ICAP], 2000; Keyes & Hasin, 2008; National Survey on Drug Use and Health [NSDUH], 2004). This is consistent with international patterns of alcohol consumption and addiction. Around the world, alcohol use and addiction are associated positively with income; in other words, the higher somebody's income, the more likely she or he is to use alcohol or to be an alcoholic (Degenhardt et al., 2008).

What we know about youth and alcohol use is 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, Chen, Sheth, Krejci, and Wallace (2003) found alcohol consumption to be significantly higher in the former than in the latter. Others, such as the NSDUH (2004) and Monitoring the Future (2008), report that alcohol use among youth is equally distributed across socioeconomic strata. Overall, then, there seems to be no evidence that alcohol use or addiction are more prevalent among low-income people than among those of any other socioeconomic group, rendering any stereotype associating the two as false. 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 social deprivation (S. Lee & Jeon, 2005).

Similarly, there is little evidence that low-income people are more likely overall to use illicit drugs than their wealthier counterparts. Drug use in the U.S. is distributed fairly evenly across income levels (Degenhardt et al., 2008; Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001) regardless of age. In its annual national study of adolescent drug use, Monitoring the Future (2008) found that this pattern holds among high school students in the U.S. as well.

Stereotype 4: Poor People Are Linguistically Deficient

Mirroring attitudes in the general public, many educators, from teachers to school psychologists, believe that poor students are linguistically deficient (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). This is a particularly dangerous stereotype given the extent to which identity is wrapped in language (Fishman, 1989; Gayles & Denerville, 2007; Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009; Lippi-Green, 1994; Luhman, 1990). Criticizing students' language can result in feelings of disconnectedness among those who are targeted in this way (Christensen, 2008). In addition, the assumptions underlying the language deficiency stereotype have been shown to negatively impact assessments of student performance when language is assumed to be a marker of intelligence (Bourdieu, 1991; Grant, Oka, & Baker, 2009). At the base of this stereotype are three 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, (2) that the use of particular variations of English reflect inferior language capabilities, and (3) that, for those students who speak languages other than English at home, such as children of recent immigrants, English Language Learner (or ELL) status is, itself, a marker of class.

The notion that children from impoverished families enter school linguistically deprived, with smaller and less complex vocabularies than their wealthier peers, and that this condition is the fault of family "cultures" that do not value learning, has become part of the "common sense" of the education reform discourse in the U.S., despite that it is based largely on a single study of a few dozen economically diverse families in the Kansas City area (Hart & Risley, 1995), as detailed by Dudley-Marling and Lucas (2009). Certainly it is widely known that low-income and working-class children enter school with less-developed reading skills on average than their wealthier counterparts (Children's Defense Fund, 2008) and that this initial discrepancy can be a strong predictor of reading proficiency throughout their schooling (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 parent disinterest in education. As Flessa (2007) explained,

> One might link poverty to lack of employment opportunities that pay a living wage, in turn to a family's need to move frequently, in turn to inconsistent school attendance, in turn to low reading scores; or one might link poverty to economically segregated neighborhoods to low school quality to novice teachers to low reading scores. (p. 10)

Similarly, based on their study of 1,364 racially diverse public school children, Dupere, Leventhal, Crosnoe, and Dion (2010) concluded that the reading score discrepancy between low-income and wealthier students could be explained largely by the institutions to which they had access since birth. For example, poor and working class families rarely have access to high-quality early childhood education programs—the kind that support children's language (and other) learning in intensive, engaging ways (Kilburn & Karoly, 2008; Temple, Reynolds, & Arteaga, 2010).

The second shaky notion—that particular variations of English indicate superior or inferior language capabilities—is grounded in the assumed existence of "superior" and "inferior" language practices (Carli, Guardiano, Kaucic-Basa, Tessarolo, & Ussai, 2003; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Luhman, 1990; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). Linguists roundly reject the superior/inferior dichotomy, a social construction they call "standard language ideology" in reference to the fallacious term "standard English" (Joseph, 1987; Lippi-Green, 1994). Like most stereotyped beliefs, standard language ideology results from the stereotyper's desire to associate with the

dominant "norm," even when that "norm" is hegemonic, handed down from the power structure (Godley, Carpenter, & Werner, 2007). As synthesized by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994), "Moral indignation over nonstandard forms derives from ideological associations of the standard with the qualities valued within the culture, such as clarity or truthfulness" (p. 64). Linguists have been bemoaning since at least the early 1970s the ways in which students in U.S. schools are taught to misunderstand the nature of language, such as through the false dichotomy of "correct/proper" and "incorrect/improper" language varieties (Burling, 1973). They reject, as well, the belief that language varieties can be ranked as more or less "evolved" in relation to a "standard" variation (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994).

In linguistic reality, all variations of a language and all dialects, from what some people call "Black English Vernacular" (Gayles & Denerville, 2007; Honda, 2001) to the Appalachian English spoken by my maternal grandmother (Luhman, 1990), are highly structured with their own sets of grammatical rules (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). These variations of English, just like so-called "standard" English, are not markers of intelligence or wealth; rather, they are indications of the regional, cultural, and social contexts in which somebody learned to speak. This is why the denigration of one's language, both directly and through the imposition of a "standard" which might be understood as the language of one's oppressor, is a form of what Bourdieu (1982) called "symbolic" domination and social exclusion. As with other social identities and oppressions, the notion of a language "norm" is handed down by the privileged classes, ensuring that *their* norm is understood as *the* norm (Speicher & Bielanski, 2000). Schools in the U.S., in their imposition of hegemonic language norms, historically have played a key role in this domination, normed acculturation (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007), and social, political, and economic stratification (Heller, 1995; Pennycook, 2006). "Standard" English hegemony is so heavy in the U.S., and so conflated with notions of a larger U.S. superiority, that state and federal policies and practices, like those banning bilingual education programs in some states (Johnson, 2010) and those instituting English-only testing regimens (Menken, 2008), often are enacted despite overwhelming evidence that they conflict with the most effective pedagogical practices. In turn, many families who live at the intersection where economic, linguistic, and, at times, racial disenfranchisement merge experience yet another form of oppression.

Another common language stereotype, propagated widely by Payne (2005), is that children from generational poverty primarily speak with an "informal" register or style (as one might speak with a sibling or close friend) while their middle class and wealthier counterparts speak with a "formal" register (as one might speak during a job interview). However, like other forms of code-switching—modifying behavior in context-specific ways—all people use a full continuum of language registers (Brizuela, Andersen, & Stallings, 1999), regardless of the variety of language they speak. The false association, for instance, of Appalachian English with informal register demonstrates a mistaken conflation of "formal" with what we call "standard" English. Lippi-Green (1994) summarizes: "Linguists proceed on the assumption that all naturally occurring languages . . . are equally functional . . .; there has been no evidence in the many years of inquiry to disprove this basic thesis" (p. 165).

STEREOTYPING, DEFICIT IDEOLOGY, AND POLICYMAKING

The dangers of class stereotyping are plentiful. At the individual level, stereotypes can make educators unnecessarily afraid or accusatory of our own students—of our most disenfranchised

students—and their families. They can lead educators to express low expectations for low-income students and their families or to blame them for the very symptoms of their repression. Complicating matters, according to Steele (2010), the stereotyped are attuned to the ways in which they are stereotyped, so that the accuracy of a stereotype largely is meaningless in relation to the toll the stereotype, accurate or not, takes on its target. 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 consciousness—the very possibility of somebody applying a stereotype—can affect students' cognitive performance and emotional well-being, as research on stereotype susceptibility and stereotype threat has demonstrated (Ambady, Shih, Kim, & Palinsky, 2001; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Steele, 2010; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

At the systemic level, these stereotypes can misdirect well-intentioned efforts to develop and implement effective policies for mitigating or eliminating socioeconomic inequities in schools. Or worse, they put us in the roll of "buffer class" (Kivel, 2006), protecting the elite classes by complying with their strategies for justifying an inequitable system, such as by framing as an "achievement gap" the symptoms of systemic inequities (a lack of access to health care or the scarcity of living wage jobs, for instance) while ignoring those inequities and their implications on schooling. So, for example, if I buy into stereotypes that suggest that parents living in poverty are inattentive to their children's education or poor role models, and that that is why the "achievement gap" exists, then I might seek to address outcome inequalities such as test score gaps by supporting programs or policies designed to "fix" their parenting. When I do so, and particularly when I do so while I ignore systemic inequities, I am helping to justify the existing conditions. Meanwhile, I am blaming disenfranchised people for their own disenfranchisement. I am blaming them for the ways in which they are locked out of equitable educational opportunity.

The ideology that underlies the process of seeking evidence for these sorts of stereotypes and then using that evidence—sound or not—to blame poor people for their poverty or for outcomes resulting from their poverty has been called "deficit ideology" (Gorski, 2011; Sleeter, 2004) or "deficit thinking" (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Valencia, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Deficit ideology is a worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities—standardized test scores or levels of educational attainment, for example—by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities (Brandon, 2003; Gorski, 2011; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2003). Additionally, deficit ideology discounts sociopolitical context, such as social conditions that grant some people greater access than others to resources, including high-quality schooling (Brandon, 2003; Dudley-Marling, 2007).

The function of deficit ideology is to justify existing conditions, such as the socioeconomic achievement gap, by identifying the problem of inequality as located within, rather than as pressing upon, poor people. Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests that the very practice of using the term "achievement gap" to describe a problem that, ultimately, is less about achievement than about access—access to prenatal care, access to educational (or any) preschool, access to full-day kindergarten, access to fully-equipped and adequately funded schools—is symptomatic of deficit ideology. In essence, deficit ideology defines the problem in terms of students' inabilities to achieve and their families' inabilities to help them achieve rather than the many barriers that

impede their achievement or the hegemony evident in the very way we construct the notion of "achievement." Unfortunately, in her examination of the deficit discourses framing current understandings of, and responses to, the racial achievement gap, Love (2004) demonstrates the pervasiveness of deficit ideology, even among those purportedly committed to educational equity.

This is why a refusal to accept selective evidence, or to base policy or practice on such evidence, is critical to the goal of educational equity. When stereotypes creep into educational practice, policy, and programs, educators and policymakers risk justifying injustice, explaining away failure (including our failure to insist upon equitable educational access), and adopting misguided reform efforts, such as those aimed at redressing inequalities by "fixing" poor people rather than the conditions that disenfranchise them. Many such efforts are underway with fanfare in schools today and advocated widely: parenting workshops for families in poverty (Tough, 2009), mentor programs for poor students (and students of color) (Balfarz, Mac Iver, & Byrnes, 2006), and tutoring programs (Maheady, Mallette, & Harper, 2006), among others. Sure, all parents and guardians, regardless of socioeconomic status, should have the opportunity to attend workshops that might equip them with additional parenting strategies; all young people should have mentors; everyone should have access to tutors. But are these sorts of programs grounded in a consideration of the full spectrum of evidence about why students from families in poverty do not do as well in school as their wealthier peers? In whom do these programs locate the "problem" to be solved? Do they address the fundamental inequities—social, economic, and educational—that affect school performance? What sorts of stereotypes about poor families do they imply?

SOUNDING THE CALL

This is not a call for all educators or schools to spend their entire energies and resources on eliminating structural social inequities such as the scarcity of living wage jobs. Berliner (2006) rightly argues that schools neither are intended nor constructed for that battle. (Whether they should be is another topic altogether.) Instead, it is a call for us to consider whether the programs, policies, and practices we enact to redress class inequities are based on real and contoured understandings of those inequities. It is a call, as well, to consider the extent to which the "common sense" guiding us is informed common sense rather than stereotype and hegemony. How are we, as educators, socialized to contribute to class inequities even when our intention is to counter them?

Even at the basest level, we cannot hope to provide the best possible educational experiences to students from families in poverty without a willingness to reject stereotypes and prejudices. Neither can we do so without a commitment to understanding the disenfranchisements and repressions of the poor—conditions of which these stereotypes are symptoms. In both cases, we must commit to examining how, implicitly and explicitly, these attitudes and conditions drive education policy and practice. After all, educators' stereotype-laden prejudices and class repression both are reflections, not of the individual or group deficiencies of poor people, but of the social deficiency of economic injustice.

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