Are the poor better at reading emotions?

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People of low socioeconomic status are better at reading others' emotions than are upper-class folk, a new study finds, yet the effect can be undone by simply changing people's perceptions of their own status.

Researchers speculate that the pattern occurs because the poor rely more on friends than on money to fulfill day-to-day needs. For example, someone who can't afford day care for their children might have to ask neighbors or relatives to baby-sit.

"It's all about the social context... 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," said Michael W. Kraus of the University of California-San Francisco, one of the researchers.

The study, by Kraus and two other scientists, appeared online Oct. 25 in the research journal *Psychological Science*.

The group conducted three experiments. One used volunteers who worked at a university. Some had graduated from college and others had not; researchers used educational level as an indicator of social class, since the two are strongly correlated in population studies. The volunteers took a test of emotion perception, in which they were asked to look at pictures of faces and indicate which emotions each face was displaying. Better-educated people performed worse than people with less education, Kraus and colleagues said.

In another study, university students of higher social standing, based on their self-reported perceptions of their families' socioeconomic status, were found to have had a harder time accurately reading a stranger's emotions during a group job interview.

But 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. So "it's not something ingrained," Kraus said.