

Media Images of the Poor

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This article provides a comprehensive overview of research that has examined the content and prevalence of stereotypic media images of the poor. Research examining televised images and print media are reviewed. An analysis of media framing as well as classist, racist, and sexist imagery is provided. Additionally, to assess media depictions of the poor in the wake of welfare reform, 412 newspaper articles about poverty and welfare published during a 3-month period in 1999 were content analyzed. Although most articles were neutral in tone and portrayed the difficulties facing welfare recipients and the poor sympathetically, they did little to contextualize poverty or illuminate its causes. These findings are discussed in terms of their context and political function.

The media are omnipresent in our everyday lives. Cable television provides viewers with a growing number of channels to choose from; videotapes provide easy access to films; and the Internet, newspapers, and 24-hour news radio and television programs provide round-the-clock coverage of current events. In their many forms, media have the potential to educate, raise consciousness, and shape public attitudes (Kinder, 1998). This power to influence our beliefs may be particularly strong when highly politicized issues, such as affirmative action, the death penalty, or public assistance, are considered. Readers or viewers may be limited in

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their ability to evaluate the accuracy of the stories they read or the images they view without direct personal experience or specific background knowledge of an issue. Furthermore, with many mainstream media outlets in the United States controlled by a few powerful corporations, highly politicized issues are likely to be defined by and to reflect the interests of dominant social groups. When this occurs, less powerful groups (e.g., the poor, people of color, women) are at risk of being devalued and stereotyped in the media.

In the United States, classist stereotypes about the characteristics and behaviors of poor people are pervasive. In particular, women receiving public assistance are stereotyped as lazy, disinterested in education, and promiscuous (Jackson, 1997; McLaughlin, 1997; Sidel, 1996; Wilcox, Robbennolt, O'Keeffe, & Pynchon, 1996). Given the widespread endorsement of such beliefs, it is not surprising that similar themes are also reflected in news stories. The vivid 1980s depiction of the promiscuous "welfare queen" who exploits the welfare system rather than seeking work is one such illustration (Lipset, 1990, p. 136).

This article seeks to deconstruct images such as this one as well as other contemporary portrayals of low-income groups in the mainstream media. In addition to providing a review of previous research in this area, we also discuss findings from a pilot study analyzing more than 400 newspaper articles on poverty and welfare published in 1999, three years after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA; P.L. 104-193) was signed into law. Our analysis provides preliminary data on how the welfare system and welfare recipients are portrayed in this post-"reform" era.

We begin by reviewing previous research on media depictions of social class, poverty, and welfare recipients. This is followed by a discussion of our findings regarding post-PRWORA newspaper articles and emergent themes, and we conclude with implications of our findings and suggestions for future media-related research.

Media Depictions of Social Class and Poverty

The Blurring of Class Lines in the Media: Middle Class as the Norm

The belief that the United States is a classless society or, alternatively, that most Americans are "middle class" persists (DeMott, 1990; Kelley & Evans, 1995; Mantsios, 1995a) despite pervasive socioeconomic stratification (see Lott & Bullock, this issue). According to Mantsios (1995b), the media facilitate this perception by (1) presenting the interests of the well-off (e.g., stock, financial portfolios, and leisure time) as general concerns, (2) downplaying structural economic concerns (e.g., job security, income) of the working class and poor, and (3) emphasizing shared interclass concerns (e.g., safety, crime). By downplaying economic insecurity and representing "the middle" as a "state of mind," the media encourage

working-class individuals to identify with a politically neutralized “universal middle class” (Mantsios, 1995b, p. 414). This practice is well illustrated by the considerable amount of media attention given to the “booming” economy and wealth associated with the technology industry. Such stories present a vision of widespread prosperity when, in reality, wealth has not trickled down “from Wall Street to Main Street.” In 1999, income disparities had widened to such a degree that the richest 1% of the population was projected to receive as much after-tax income as the bottom 38% combined (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1999).

By dedicating very little broadcast time or print space to stories that openly discuss class privilege, class-based power differences, and inequalities, the poor are either rendered invisible or portrayed in terms of characterological deficiencies and moral failings (e.g., substance abuse, crime, sexual availability, violence). Either way, the poor are defined as “outsiders” who deviate from middle-class values and norms (Sidel, 1996). This point is well illustrated by an interview with comedian Norm McDonald on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* (December 20, 1999). In a long narrative about buying dinner for a homeless man rather than giving him money, presumably to spend on crack cocaine, McDonald joked about the man’s body odor and mental illness. Most telling was the studio audience’s response. They laughed.

Popular television situation comedies such as *Friends*, dramas such as *The West Wing*, and serials such as *Ally McBeal* reinforce the normative power of young, predominantly White, middle-class professionals. Class-related themes are rarely explored in prime-time programs. One notable exception is *Frasier*, in which the title character, a successful and elitist male psychiatrist, is played against the foil of his retired working-class father. This program portrays class as a matter of taste or personal preference (e.g., cappuccino versus coffee, sleek Scandinavian furniture versus an old recliner), rather than as access to economic resources. The 1999 fall television season was criticized for an overrepresentation of affluent, adolescent characters and lack of ethnic diversity (Carter, 1999). Not one of the 26 new comedies or dramas included an African American character in a featured role (Hutchinson, 1999). The major networks responded, primarily to pressure from the NAACP and Latino groups, by incorporating a small number of actors of color into their programs (Weintraub, 1999). There has been no similar criticism of the lack of social-class diversity in mainstream evening television programming.

Where the Poor Are: Daytime Talk Shows and Reality-Based Crime Shows

Low-income persons are far more likely to be seen and heard on “real-life” programs such as afternoon talk shows (e.g., *Ricki Lake*, *Jerry Springer*) and reality-based crime programs (e.g., *Cops*) than as characters in fictional programs. Both types of programs, however, present the poor and working class in a distorted and negative manner. Talk shows are one of the few public arenas in which the

voices of low-income women and men are heard nationally but, unfortunately, the images and messages conveyed in them center around dysfunctional relationships, infidelity, and unruly, promiscuous teenage girls. Such depictions reinforce the image of low-income women as ineffective parents and poor role models to their children. Ultimately, not only do these “real-life” programs support negative stereotypes about low-income people, but the highly publicized criticism of tabloid talk shows also further reifies class lines by publicly drawing divisions between what is defined as desirable/tasteful (i.e., highbrow culture) and what is undesirable/distasteful (i.e., unsophisticated, mass culture; Grabe, 1996).

Reality-based police dramas reinforce the stereotype that low-income men, particularly poor men of color, are involved with drugs. Although the “typical” drug consumer and dealer is an employed, high-school-educated European American man, the majority of arrests depicted on reality-based crime programs involve African American and Latino men in densely populated, urban areas (Andersen, 1994). Although such programs may accurately represent disproportionately high arrest rates among poor men of color, they also reinforce stereotypes about drug-related crimes among poor minorities.

Differential representations of crime and social class are also prevalent in various types of television news programs. In an analysis of crime-related stories in tabloid television shows (e.g., *A Current Affair*, *Hard Copy*, *Inside Edition*) versus “highbrow” news programs (e.g., *60 Minutes*, *Primetime Live*, and *20/20*), Grabe (1996) found significant differences in the representation of class-based storylines. Interestingly, tabloid shows tended to focus on stories involving upper-class criminals, particularly celebrities, whereas “highbrow” news programs were more likely to focus on stories involving working-class, unemployed criminals. Tabloid programs, which target lower income demographic groups, are also more likely to air stories that emphasize “rags to riches” themes and the hollowness of wealth (Grabe, 1996).

The Poor as Invisible

Although poverty is one of the most devastating problems facing the United States (see Lott & Bullock, this volume), stories about the poor are relatively rare on television news broadcasts. Analysis of national newscasts on the three major networks between 1981 and 1986 (Iyengar, 1990) found that only 191 stories, or approximately 32 stories per year (11 per network per year), explicitly focused on poverty. A somewhat similar analysis by Entman (1995) yielded a larger number of poverty-related stories. Examining both national and local news programs that aired during three 10-day sampling periods in 1990, Entman (1995) identified 239 stories that implicitly or explicitly focused on poverty. Nevertheless, even this amount of coverage is disproportionately low given the scope of the problem.

Direct references to poverty in televised news programs are particularly uncommon. Consistent with the relative lack of open public discourse about social class in the United States, only 36 stories of the 197 news programs analyzed by Entman (1995) made overt references to “poverty” or “the poor,” and few stories documented poverty in terms of wealth and income distribution.

Frustrated by the lack of poverty-related reporting, Entman (1995) suggests that viewers unfamiliar with U.S. culture might fail to realize that poverty is caused by lack of money. Instead they might infer that, “inexplicably, some people choose to live in deteriorated neighborhoods where they frequently either commit or become victims of crime, or have trouble receiving health care or finding adequate schools” (p. 144). Ultimately, lack of exposure to news that contextualizes social issues may have a negative impact on belief systems, whereas greater exposure to such information may have a positive impact. For example, in a secondary analysis of survey data collected from a large national sample, Gandy and Baron (1998) found that both Whites and Blacks were less likely to blame economic hardships on African Americans when exposed to high levels of racially focused news.

Framing and the Significance of Content

Perhaps even more important than the frequency of such stories about low-income people and issues are the messages conveyed by them. Embedded within news stories are important messages about the prevalence and scope of poverty as well the causes of poverty and the validity of antipoverty programs. Analyzing how news stories are “framed” is particularly valuable. According to Entman (1995), framing refers to “selecting and highlighting some elements of reality and suppressing others, in a way that constructs a story about a social problem, its causes, its moral nature and its possible remedies” (p. 142). In addition to using rhetorical devices such as metaphors, catch phrases, and imagery, news handlers frame stories by using reasoning devices that draw on causal attributions, consequences, and appeals to principle (Thornton & Shah, 1996). These powerful—but typically unnoticed—mechanisms affect viewers’ judgments of responsibility and causality.

Entman (1995) identified two distinct categories used by local and national television to tell stories about poverty: stories that depicted poverty as behaviors that threaten community well-being (e.g., crime, drugs, and gangs) and stories that focused on the suffering of the poor. Of the 239 stories analyzed, Entman (1995) found that 39% depicted poverty as a source of threat (e.g., crime, drugs, and gangs) whereas 61% portrayed poverty in terms of suffering (e.g., racial discrimination, poor health, and inadequate medical care). However, even stories about suffering may elicit ambivalent emotions in viewers. Sympathy as well as animosity and resentment may be elicited if recommended solutions draw upon the resources of the nonpoor (e.g., raising taxes, increasing public spending).

Other research indicates that television news programs tend to frame poverty in one of two ways: as either an episodic or a thematic issue (Iyengar, 1990). Episodic framing depicts poverty in terms of personal experience by highlighting the circumstances of a poor individual or family. Conversely, thematic framing takes an abstract, impersonal approach to poverty by focusing on general poverty trends and public assistance. Iyengar (1990) found, in an analysis of television news coverage of poverty between 1981 and 1986, that episodic framing was more common than thematic framing. Framing affects more than how a story is told; it also influences how social problems like poverty are perceived. It is not surprising, then, that Iyengar (1990) also found that viewers who watched episodic stories were more likely than viewers of thematically framed stories to attribute poverty to individual factors and to perceive the poor as responsible for improving their socioeconomic status. Thematic viewers tended to make structural attributions for poverty and to regard the government as responsible for social change. (For a review of the research literature on attributions for poverty, see Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, this issue.)

Images of Welfare Recipients, the Welfare System, and Welfare Reform

Welfare Recipients: Hated and Stereotyped

Welfare recipients are among one of the most hated and stereotyped groups in contemporary society (Wilthorn, 1996). Underscoring the extent of this devaluation, Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, and Glick (1999) found that welfare recipients were the only group out of 17 stereotyped groups studied (e.g., feminists, housewives, retarded people, rich people, Blacks, Asians, migrant workers) that respondents both disliked and disrespected. Unlike most of the other groups included in the study, welfare recipients were perceived as lacking both competence and warmth. Paradoxically, the largest group of welfare recipients in the United States is poor children (U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, 2000), a group that is typically viewed sympathetically and as deserving (Iyengar, 1990) by the general public. Yet media depictions of welfare recipients seldom focus on children but, instead, on their mothers, who are often single and bear the brunt of public animosity.

The ideological beliefs that fuel contempt for welfare recipients are deeply rooted in age-old debates about the causes of poverty and public assistance. (For comprehensive historical analyses, see Katz, 1989; Piven & Cloward, 1993.) In the United States, the poor have long been perceived as dependent/passive “takers,” lacking both initiative and morality. In the strongly individualistic, capitalist United States, reliance on public assistance signifies failure (Tropman, 1989), and welfare recipients themselves are highly cognizant of this perception (Dodson, 1998; Seccombe, 1999; Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998). Even so-called liberal news sources, such as *Newsweek*, appear to have adopted traditionally

conservative, negative views of welfare recipients (de Goede, 1996). In an analysis of articles on poverty and welfare published in *Newsweek* between 1993 and 1995, de Goede (1996) found that the language used in the articles reinforced strong ingroup-outgroup class-based distinctions, simultaneously extolling the moral superiority of the middle class while degrading the values and behaviors of the poor. Single African American mothers and teenage mothers were frequently the focus of these negative articles.

Images of Welfare Mothers

Rather than framing women's poverty in terms of structural causes like inadequate child care and low wages, single mothers are often depicted as immoral and neglectful, responsible for their own poverty as well as the breakdown of the nuclear family (see Atkinson, Oerton, & Burns, 1998; de Goede, 1996; Manning-Miller, 1994; Thomas, 1998). Negative images of welfare mothers stand in stark contrast to idealized images of celebrity mothers. Whereas the celebrity mom "is never furious, hysterical, or uncertain" (Douglas & Michaels, 2000, p. 64), "the poster mother for welfare reform spends her days painting her nails, smoking cigarettes, and feeding Pepsi to her baby" (p. 67). These images reinforce negative stereotypes, and they also distance the viewer from poor women by providing no basis for identification with them.

Single teenage mothers serve as convenient scapegoats in politics and the media (Kelly, 1996). From an analysis of more than 700 North American newspaper and magazine articles about single motherhood, Kelly (1996) concluded that teenage mothers were stigmatized through one of two types of stories. "Wrong girl" stories emphasized the flawed psychology of teenage mothers, whereas "wrong family" stories focused on their violation of the traditional two-parent-family ideal. Only alternative news sources with limited readership questioned the stigma associated with single motherhood and welfare dependency. Commenting on the consequences of this trend, Thomas (1998) noted that conservative social reformers and politicians

try to redirect the debate to where they believe its origins lay: women's out-of-control reproductivity, grounded in their entrapment in self-defeating motherhood. As a result, pregnancy and childbearing behavior remain more central to the reform debate than good jobs, elimination of racism and sexism in the labor market, and day care. (p. 439)

This line of reasoning is evident in the preamble of PRWORA, which identifies reducing out-of-wedlock births and promoting two-parent families as primary goals of the welfare "reform" law. To meet these objectives, some states have adopted "family cap" policies that deny benefits for additional children born to families on welfare.

The depiction of single mothers on daytime dramas provides a notable exception to the images in the dominant news media. On soap operas, single mothers are

typically portrayed as White, upper-middle-class professionals, with nurturing male friends and an abundance of reliable child care providers (Larson, 1996). Not only does this depiction distort the reality of women's lives, it also affects how adolescent girls perceive single motherhood. Larson (1996) found that teenage girls who were heavy viewers of soap operas were more likely than lighter viewers to underestimate the relationship between single motherhood and poverty and to overestimate the percentage of single mothers in high-paying jobs.

Welfare Recipients: Targets of Racism and Sexism

Racist stereotypes underlie antiwelfare attitudes (Gilens, 1996; Quadagno, 1994), and media images emphasizing the relationship between poverty and ethnicity clearly fuel the perception that most poor people are African American. Although it is true that African Americans comprise a disproportionately large percentage of the poor, the media exaggerate this relationship. Over the past several decades, images of Black, urban poor have come to dominate public depictions of poverty. In a content analysis of three major news magazines, Gilens (1996) found that African Americans were pictured in 62% of the stories about poverty, even though at the time they comprised only 29% of the poor. So-called model minorities (e.g., Asian Americans), who are stereotyped as hard working and conscientious, are rarely depicted as receiving welfare assistance (Kelsey, 1994). Given the overrepresentation of poor Blacks in the media, it is not surprising that European Americans have been found to greatly overestimate the percentage of African Americans who are poor (Survey Research Center, cited in Gilens, 1996).

During the 1980s and early 1990s, considerable attention focused on the depiction of poor, inner-city African Americans. The image of urban Black men as members of a threatening and violent underclass prevailed both in the news media (Gans, 1995) and in popular films like *Menace to Society*, *Fresh*, and *Boyz 'N the Hood*. Young, single Black mothers were, and continue to be, vilified as "lazy welfare queens" using the system to avoid work or as ignorant, promiscuous women caught in a self-perpetuating "cycle of dependency." These images, which present the poor as undeserving of sympathy and public support, do little to improve public understanding of poverty and ultimately fuel antiwelfare sentiment (Gans, 1995). Additionally, they render White poverty, rural poverty, and poverty among the working poor invisible (Books, 1997; Newman, 1999).

Summary of Pre-"Reform" Images

The previously discussed research documents the prevalence of classist, racist, and sexist assumptions in media depictions of welfare recipients. By portraying poor women as promiscuous and neglectful mothers and welfare recipients as uneducated, lazy "freeloaders," media images fail to contextualize the reality of

poverty or the structural factors that perpetuate inequality. Framing techniques that present poverty as an individual problem rather than a societal issue rooted in economic and political inequality further reinforce the perceived undeservingness of the poor.

It seems likely that the dominant, destructive images of the 1980s and early 1990s contributed to public support for welfare “reform,” particularly among middle-class European Americans. Whether such images were used inadvertently or deliberately to generate support for dismantling the welfare system, interesting questions are raised concerning how welfare recipients are depicted post-“reform.” Just as media framing and stereotypical images may have bolstered public support for welfare “reform” legislation, post-PRWORA images are likely to shape perceptions of the poor and judgments about the effectiveness of this legislation. For example, as recipients come up against time limits and move from welfare to jobs that are primarily low-paying, menial, and dead-end, the media may choose to depict welfare reform as a success, question the fairness of the new policies, or applaud recipient perseverance in the face of adversity. To address these issues, we now turn our attention to findings from our pilot study of post-“reform” newspaper articles.

Post-Welfare “Reform” Imagery: A Pilot Study

Behind recent headlines heralding declining welfare rolls, advocates for the poor claim there is another story: one of continuing struggle and hardship (Children’s Defense Fund and National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). Their concern centers on depicting “reform” as a “success” based on declining caseloads, rather than real movement from poverty. Thus far, few empirical analyses of post-PRWORA images of welfare recipients or messages about “reform” have been reported. In one of the few studies in this area, Wyche and Mattern (1997) reviewed newspaper articles about poverty published between January and April 1997 and found that although the general tone of the writing was sympathetic to the poor, the articles lacked actual facts to counter myths.

To learn more about post-PRWORA portrayals of welfare “reform” and welfare recipients, a pilot investigation of the messages conveyed in newspaper articles published between April 1 and July 1, 1999, in nine high-circulation newspapers was conducted (see Appendix for a description of the sample and the coding strategy used). Our initial search using “poverty” and “welfare” as keywords yielded almost 2,000 “hits,” but only 412 articles explicitly focused on domestic poverty or welfare “reform.” Interestingly, *USA Today*, a paper readily available anywhere in the country, published the fewest articles on poverty/welfare ($n = 16$), whereas the *New York Times* had the greatest number ($n = 115$).

Intended as an exploratory examination of post-PRWORA, our investigation sought to identify the major themes discussed in post-PRWORA newspaper

articles, to examine the prevalence of classist stereotypes, and to assess whether welfare “reform” is portrayed as a success. The following discussion focuses on several areas that yielded meaningful contrasts between pre- and postwelfare “reform” imagery.

Post-PRWORA Framing of Welfare Recipients and Welfare “Reform”

Using Iyengar’s (1990) distinction between episodic (i.e., individual-focused) and thematic (i.e., structural) framing, a small number of articles were classified as episodic ($n = 23$; 6%). Thirteen of these stories described individuals who had triumphed over poverty, typically through hard work and perseverance. These articles reinforced the innate value of work regardless of wages and benefits. In addition to the “hard work pays off” theme, another seven articles focused on the lives of individuals with numerous barriers to escaping poverty (e.g., poor teeth, lack of skills, alcohol/drug addiction). These articles provided little hope or insight into how one could escape poverty. Three others contained both positive and negative portrayals of individuals struggling to make the transition from welfare to a paid job. These profiles of those beating or being beaten by the odds did little to situate mobility or stasis in terms of contextual variables. By providing little discussion of the structural factors that hinder or facilitate economic mobility (i.e., access to postsecondary education, affordable housing, living-wage jobs), understanding of the mechanisms that foster economic security is discouraged.

Most of the articles that we analyzed, however, fit neither into Iyengar’s (1990) nor Entman’s (1995) categorical frameworks. Instead, a split emerged between stories that focused on state/local welfare trends and those that focused on broad, national issues related to welfare “reform.” State/local articles ($n = 233$) discussed primarily how the state was handling its program (e.g., state welfare-to-work training programs, state enrollment in assistance programs) and to a lesser degree the experiences of individual recipients within the state system (e.g., both success and hardship stories). The emphasis on state welfare programs makes sense given that, under PRWORA, states are given block grants and are responsible for designing and implementing their own programs for needy families.

Nationally focused articles ($n = 144$) somewhat paralleled Iyengar’s “thematic” category and dealt with broad-scale, general trends regarding the use of funds for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families as well as other support programs (e.g., Social Security, food stamps). A small number of articles ($n = 24$) addressed both national and local-level issues and used the experiences of local individuals to humanize national trends. For example, a *New York Times* article about using debit cards to access welfare benefits focused on technological problems as well as the stress experienced by recipients trying to use malfunctioning cards.

It is difficult to gauge the impact such stories will have on readers' attitudes toward poverty and welfare. For the most part, both state- and national-level stories provided little insight into the antecedents or consequences of poverty. Instead, they focused primarily on reducing welfare "dependency" and declining welfare rolls with little analysis of underlying economic or institutional factors, such as barriers to employment and education.

The Prevalence of Ethnic Minorities

To assess whether people of color are overrepresented in post-PRWORA news articles, we examined stories for direct references to an individual's ethnicity. Although we were unable to access accompanying photographs electronically, we were nevertheless able to make some assessments of ethnicity, because a sizeable number of articles referred to it directly or it was identifiable from the story's larger context (e.g., poverty in African American neighborhoods). Given the racialization of poverty and welfare and the normative assumption that unmarked individuals are White, we assumed that when ethnicity was not clearly identified, individuals were, in fact, European American.

Working from this assumption, 97 of 412 articles (24%) we reviewed contained at least some overt discussion of ethnic/racial minorities. Twenty-seven of these articles focused on general trends among people of color. The largest category in this group ($n = 20$) discussed ethnic/racial minorities in terms of disadvantage (e.g., poor schools, poor health, mortality) and demographic trends (poverty rates, death rates, and death row). A small number of articles discussed programs designed to help minorities ($n = 4$), successful students at poor, multiethnic high schools ($n = 2$), and individuals honored for their community work ($n = 1$).

Seventy articles explicitly quoted individuals with ethnicity-specific names (e.g., José) or identified individuals in the story as minority-group members. Specifically, 32 articles referred to Hispanics/Latinos/immigrants, 29 articles referred to African Americans, 4 articles mentioned Native Americans, and 5 articles included references to other ethnicities (i.e., Palestinian, Ecuadoran, Vietnamese, and Dominican). Only two articles specifically identified individuals as European American.

Stories about African Americans and Latinos were mixed in terms of the messages they conveyed about ethnicity and poverty/welfare. For example, eight articles about African Americans focused on chronic poverty and single motherhood, and five articles focused on fraud. In contrast, six articles highlighted the lives of African Americans who had triumphed over poverty. Stories about Latinos were similarly mixed, with a sizeable number ($n = 12$) calling for improved access to health care and benefits, particularly for immigrants. The small number of articles ($n = 4$) about Native Americans discussed persistent poverty and unemployment on reservations and casinos as an antipoverty strategy. Of the two stories

that mentioned European Americans, one discussed the increasing number of White heroin addicts, and the other reported on a welfare fraud case.

Because we could not examine the photographs that accompanied stories, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the representation of ethnic minorities. However, it is telling that such a large number of articles identified the ethnicity of quoted speakers when the speaker was a person of color, whereas only two articles identified European American speakers. It should also be noted that the vast majority of articles about African Americans focused on Black women, whereas only one article focused on the economic well-being of Black men. This is quite different from the heavy media coverage of urban, African American "underclass" men during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gans, 1995).

Is Welfare "Reform" Being Portrayed as a Success?

We examined our sample of 412 articles along the following dimensions: overall article tone, tone toward recipients, and tone toward welfare "reform." Consistent with Wyche and Mattern's (1997) findings, the majority of articles were neutral in terms of overall tone. Sixty percent of the articles took a balanced/neutral tone toward welfare policies ($n = 249$), 32% ($n = 131$) took a positive tone (i.e., supported services and programs for the poor), and approximately 8% ($n = 32$) used a negative tone (i.e., presented fraud, drug addiction, and "difficult" cases).

Also consistent with Wyche and Mattern's (1997) results, the majority of the articles we examined portrayed welfare recipients sympathetically. Sixty percent ($n = 145$) of the articles depicted the poor and welfare recipients as deserving of support, as hard-working families with children in need; 17% ($n = 42$) depicted recipients negatively (i.e., as drug addicts, as neglectful parents); 14% ($n = 35$) portrayed the poor/welfare recipients neutrally; and 8% ($n = 20$) presented a mix of both negative and positive images of the poor. Interestingly, we found a slightly larger number of articles that focused on fraud among welfare officials and/or the state than deception by the poor themselves.

We also looked specifically at the tone taken toward welfare "reform" and/or state handling of welfare cases. Forty-one percent of the articles were coded as positive ($n = 135$), 35% ($n = 113$) as neutral, and 24% ($n = 78$) as negative. Positive articles concentrated on the movement of 4.6 million people off welfare rolls since August 1996, when PRWORA was signed into law. Although the robust economy since the passage of PRWORA was mentioned as a contributing factor, these articles tended to attribute the declining rolls to new, tougher welfare policies. On the other hand, negative articles tended to focus on the mishandling of welfare programs on the state or local levels and to question the integrity of these programs. Neutral articles tended to focus on both the strengths and shortcomings of public assistance programs.

Although we found that most articles portrayed welfare “reform” positively, it was not, in many cases, depicted as an unqualified success. Problems with the implementation of state programs and gaps in service emerged as a dominant theme in stories about state “reform.” Stories about “red tape” and state bureaucracy emphasized the ineffectiveness of state agencies in managing welfare programs. These stories were not anti-“reform,” but they were critical of state procedures for handling welfare cases.

Other articles focused on access-related problems and individuals “falling through the cracks,” particularly the plight of the “deserving” poor (i.e., children, the elderly). Issues that received the most attention were those dealing with inadequate health insurance, poor schools, children’s health, difficulty finding and maintaining housing, hunger, transportation problems, inadequate skills training, and lack of affordable day care. State programs and policies were implicitly implicated as the root cause of these problems.

Post-“Reform” Images: Implications and Directions for Future Research

The dramatic restructuring of the welfare system under PRWORA has received considerable media attention, yet we know very little about how the mainstream media depict these changes, the prevalence of classist stereotypes in post-“reform” stories, or the emergence of different themes and framing techniques in various forms of media. Our findings suggest that post-“reform” images may differ from pre-“reform” messages in several important areas.

Our pilot study of post-PRWORA news stories revealed few of the older stereotypes or overt negative attitudes toward the poor (deGoede, 1996; Kelly, 1996; Manning-Miller, 1994). Most articles were neutral in terms of their overall tone and portrayed the difficulties facing welfare recipients and the poor sympathetically. However, these articles also did little to contextualize poverty or to illuminate its causes. Although definitive conclusions cannot be drawn from our exploratory analysis, the findings suggest a number of important directions for future research in this area.

Further analyses documenting whether negative images of low-income groups are, in fact, declining in both print and visual media are needed. In particular, racialized images of welfare recipients and their impact on attitudes toward welfare programs must be examined. Studies assessing the frequency of different framing techniques in mainstream media as well as empirical investigations of their impact on viewers and readers should also be conducted. Research that builds on previous findings, such as the prevalence of thematic versus episodic framing (Iyengar, 1990), while taking into account other frameworks brought to the forefront by welfare reform (i.e., state/local vs. national welfare trends) will provide the most sophisticated understanding of the media’s representation of these issues.

Our preliminary findings underscore the continued importance of analyzing whose story is told and whose voice is heard. Just as popular television programs render poor and working-class people invisible, the voices of poor people, particularly poor women, were seldom heard in the news stories we examined. Although many articles included a statement made by a poor woman or welfare recipient, stories were rarely framed from their vantage point. Statements were used primarily to illustrate larger points or to “humanize” the story, but not to shape the overall perspective of the article.

Structural analyses examining the antecedents and consequences of poverty and welfare use were also largely absent from the articles we reviewed. Rather than focusing on the elimination of poverty, emphasis was placed on ending welfare or decreasing welfare “dependency.” Structural barriers (e.g., inadequate schools, weak job skills) were discussed in terms of their ability to reduce the welfare rolls, not poverty. Similarly, although a number of articles focused on programmatic shortcomings and the problem of needy persons “falling between the cracks,” they did not address the variables underlying need. As a result, researchers must not only examine the themes and perspectives that appear in print, but also “read between the lines” to illuminate the invisible.

Our analysis of post-“reform” newspaper articles also illustrates the need to critically examine how the broader sociopolitical climate influences whose perspective is voiced, how it is framed, and the tone taken. Interpreting the overall lack of negative imagery found in our analysis warrants this level of analysis. The lack of negative imagery we found may indicate a change or fundamental shift in attitudes toward welfare recipients or, conversely, it may reflect the demands of the historical period in which these articles were written. Similarly, the positive tone found in the post-PRWORA articles that we analyzed may be more a function of the effort to portray welfare “reform” as a success (i.e., the poor are working) than a fundamental shift in attitudes toward the poor.

Published slightly more than 3 years after the signing of PRWORA into law, the articles we examined were written during a time of strong economic growth with welfare rolls declining at record rates. Federal and state agencies, as well as Congress, were and continue to be deeply invested in the “reform” process and the success of their programs. Many of the articles reflected this commitment to change by discussing the shortcomings and strengths of state programs and by focusing on welfare-to-work success rates without, however, providing readers with information about or analysis of what was happening to those no longer on the welfare rolls. Within this framework that emphasized the success of the new legislation, the poor were less likely than before to be depicted as lazy.

Pre- and post-“reform” imagery must be analyzed in terms of its political utility. Classist stereotypes serve as a powerful form of social control that discourage individuals from applying for or staying on public assistance (Piven & Cloward, 1993), but with policies now in place that make long-term welfare assistance

impossible, there may be less need for such regulatory images. If stereotypes tend to bolster support for restrictive policies or to deter potential recipients from applying for assistance, the codification of restrictive policies may reduce the need for images that serve this function. In fact, many of the articles focused on the need to improve services for the “deserving” poor, particularly children and the elderly, groups who elicit considerable sympathy. Focusing on the specific functions that different images serve will greatly enhance our understanding of the power and the potential uses (and abuses) of the media. Such analyses may be particularly useful several years from now when PRWORA comes up for reauthorization.

The media have the potential to challenge dominant beliefs about the poor and to generate support for progressive antipoverty movements (Carroll & Ratner, 1999), but for the most part, economic inequality, social class, and poverty are presented superficially or are rendered invisible by the mainstream media. In this post-“reform” era, with the poor being regulated by welfare time limits and work requirements, more positive messages about welfare recipients are making headlines, but in contexts that lack structural content or analysis. Both pre- and post-“reform” images are thus powerful reminders that the media both create and maintain the political interests of dominant social groups. In our media-saturated society, creating truly democratic and open media may prove to be one of our greatest challenges.

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Appendix

Sample

The following nine newspapers were selected for analysis: *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *The New York Times*. These papers were selected to replicate previous work by Wyche and Mattern (1997) and because of their large circulation (more than 300,000), the diversity of their readership, and geographic range. Using the keywords “poverty” and “welfare” in DIALOG, a newspaper database, articles published between April 1 and July 1, 1999, were located. Of the nine newspapers selected for analysis, only *The New York Times* was unavailable through DIALOG, and a separate search within the paper’s online archive was conducted. Our initial search yielded close to 2,000 articles (DIALOG $n = 695$; *New York Times* $n = 1,132$), but many of these were unsuitable for analysis. Articles on international welfare policy, animal/child welfare or third-world poverty were excluded, as were nonfeature articles (i.e., obituaries, book/film/movie reviews, and editorials). Only news articles that explicitly focused on poverty and welfare issues in the United States were included in the analysis—a total of 412 articles (DIALOG $n = 297$; *New York Times* $n = 115$). Because some articles did not fit all the coding items, sample size varied across analyses.

Coding

Articles were coded in the following categories: topic, overall tone of the article, tone toward government/policy, tone toward the poor, inclusion of facts (i.e., background information regarding the issue), framing (episodic vs. thematic), focus (national vs. state/local level), and ethnicity. Neither DIALOG nor the online *New York Times* archives included the photographs that accompanied the articles, but we were able to make some assessments of ethnicity because a sizeable number

of articles referred to it directly or it was identifiable from the story's larger context (e.g., poverty in African American neighborhoods). Two independent coders read each article. When coding discrepancies occurred, the coders discussed the categorization until consensus was reached.

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