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POVERTY AS WE KNOW IT

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF THE POOR

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Introduction

On the campaign trail during the 1992 presidential election, Bill Clinton's stump speech included a pledge to "end welfare as we know it" to the delight of most audiences. Two years later during the 1994 congressional election, one of the most popular planks of the Republicans' Contract with America was the "Personal Responsibility Act," which called for a major overhaul of the welfare system. The election of this Republican Congress initiated a great deal of legislative activity and presidential maneuvering on the issue of welfare reform. The culmination of those efforts occurred in August of 1996 when President Clinton signed into law sweeping welfare reform legislation. By ending the federal guarantee of support for the poor and turning control of welfare programs over to the states, this legislation reversed 6 decades of social policy and begot a new era of welfare politics. Throughout this period of intense political activity, the media focused a significant amount of attention on poverty and welfare reform.

In this research, we analyze media portrayals of the poor during this time when welfare reform was high on the nation's agenda. We investigate whether the media perpetuate inaccurate and stereotypical images of the poor. Specifically, we examine the photographs that accompany stories on poverty in five U.S. news magazines between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 1998.

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Portrayals of the Poor

In a study of news magazines between 1988 and 1992, Gilens (1996a) investigated the accuracy of the media in their portrayals of the poor. Gilens (1996a) found that poverty was disproportionately portrayed as a “black” problem. Blacks make up less than one-third of the poor, but the media would lead citizens to believe that two out of every three poor people are black. Moreover, Gilens (1996a) found that the “deserving” poor, especially the black deserving poor, were underrepresented in news magazines. For example, the black elderly poor and black working poor were rarely portrayed. In addition, Gilens examined media depictions of the poor between 1950 and 1992 and found that blacks were “comparatively absent from media coverage of poverty during times of heightened sympathy for the poor” (1999, p. 132). In this research, we pick up where Gilens left off by analyzing media portrayals of the demographics of poverty between 1993 and 1998.

In addition, we extend Gilens’s work by investigating whether common stereotypical traits or behaviors associated with the poor are portrayed in the media. In our society, citizens believe poor people have many undesirable qualities that violate mainstream American ideals. For example, many citizens say people are poor due to their own “lack of effort” and “loose morals and drunkenness” (Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 79). A majority of Americans believe that “most people who receive welfare benefits are taking advantage of the system” (Ladd 1993, p. 86). Another piece of conventional wisdom is that poor mothers on public assistance have additional babies to receive greater welfare benefits. People also believe that poor families are much larger than middle-class families (Sidel 1996).

Several media studies have found such stereotypical representations of poverty (Golding and Middleton 1982; Martindale 1996). The media often describe the underclass in behavioral terms as criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts, and the underclass is linked with pathological behavior in urban areas (Gans 1995). Parisi’s (1998) in-depth analysis of a *Washington Post* series on poverty demonstrated that the media perpetuate stereotypes of the poor as lazy, sexually irresponsible, and criminally deviant. Coughlin (1989) discussed the media’s emphasis on “welfare queens”—a phrase that invokes images of poor women living the high life by defrauding and taking advantage of the welfare system. These studies focused on how the poor were described in the text of news stories; in this study, we analyze whether stereotypical traits of the poor are presented in magazine photographs.

Why is it important to study the visual images surrounding the issue of poverty? The visual representation of a political issue is an integral part of the definition of that issue.¹ Visual images (along with metaphors, exemplars,

1. See Entman (1995) for a discussion of how poverty is implicitly linked to other issues such as crime, drugs, and gangs through visual images on television news.

and catch phrases) define and illustrate particular issue frames (Gamson and Lasch 1983). For example, Nelson and Kinder (1996) demonstrate that visual frames have a significant impact on public attitudes toward affirmative action. People and events that appear in photographs accompanying news stories are not simply indicative of isolated individuals and occurrences; rather, the photographs are symbolic of “the whole mosaic” (Epstein 1973, p. 5). The pictures provide texture, drama, and detail, and they illustrate the implicit, the latent, the “taken for granted,” and the “goes without saying.” Furthermore, scholars should pay attention to visual images because journalists and editors perceive them to be a central part of a news story. In his classic study of how journalists select stories, Gans argues that magazine “editors consider still pictures as important as text” (1979, p. 159).

Research Design

In this research, we test the hypothesis that the media portray poor people inaccurately and stereotypically. The data were collected by examining every story on the topics of poverty, welfare, and the poor between January 1, 1993, and December 31, 1998, in five news magazines: *Business Week*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.² We used the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* to locate the stories and to identify other cross-referenced topics (e.g., income inequality). Seventy-four stories were identified as relevant for a total of 149 pictures of 357 poor people.³ See table 1 for the distribution of stories, pictures, and people by magazine.

The photographs were analyzed in two ways. First, we scrutinized each picture as a whole. For those pictures that included a mother with children, we noted the size and race of the family. Second, we examined the demographic characteristics of each poor individual in the pictures. For coding race, we departed from Gilens's coding procedure. Gilens (1996a, 1999) coded whether the poor person was black, nonblack, or undeterminable. In contrast, we used a more detailed classification scheme and coded whether the poor person was white, black, Hispanic, Asian American, or undeterminable.

We coded each person's gender (male or female), age (young: under 18; middle-aged: 18–64; or old: 65 and over), residence (urban or rural), and

2. Taken as a whole, these five magazines have a circulation of over 12 million: *Business Week* reaches 1,000,000 people; the *New York Times Magazine* has a circulation of 1,650,179; *Newsweek* has an audience of 3,100,000; *U.S. News & World Report* has a distribution of 2,351,313; and *Time* has the largest readership with 4,083,105 subscribers.

3. There were several stories on poverty we did not include in our sample because: (1) the story did not include any pictures; (2) the story was an editorial or opinion column that only included a picture of the author; (3) the story was found to be irrelevant to our research topic—e.g., one story was cross-listed as income inequality and poor, but actually focused on Democratic and Republican party efforts to win working-class votes; (4) the pictures in the story did not pertain to contemporary poverty in the United States; (5) the story itself was missing from its bound volume ($n = 6$); or (6) the story was in a magazine that was at the binders ($n = 1$).

Table 1. Representations of Poverty by Magazine, 1993–98

	<i>Business Week</i>	<i>Newsweek</i>	<i>New York Times Magazine</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>U.S. News & World Report</i>	Total
Number of stories	18	13	8	13	22	74
Number of pictures	21	24	18	30	56	149
Number of poor people	40	64	35	78	140	357

work status (working/job training or not working).⁴ We also analyzed whether each individual was depicted in stereotypical ways, such as pregnant, engaging in criminal behavior, taking or selling drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or wearing expensive clothing or jewelry.⁵ For many of our variables, we were able to compare the portrayal of poverty in news magazines to the reality of poverty as measured by the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau or as reported by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means.⁶

Research Findings

Many citizens greatly overestimate the number of black people among the poor (Gilens 1996a). Do news magazines perpetuate and reinforce that belief? According to the 1996 CPS, African Americans make up 27 percent of the poor, but these five magazines would lead citizens to believe that blacks are 49 percent of the poor ($p < .001$; see table 2). Whites, on the other hand, are depicted as 33 percent of the poor, when they really make up 45 percent of those in poverty ($p < .001$). There were no magazine portrayals of Asian Americans in poverty, and Hispanics were underrepresented by 5 percent.

This underrepresentation of poor Hispanics and Asian Americans may be

4. A "Do Not Know" category was included for these variables.

5. To ensure the integrity of our data, we conducted a test of intercoder reliability. A second person, who was unaware of the hypotheses, coded a subset of our sample of photographs. Across the variables of interest, there was an average intercoder reliability of .90.

6. Although we are analyzing media portrayals of poverty between 1993 and 1998, for ease of presentation we use CPS data from March 1996 or Ways and Means Committee data from 1996 to establish the true characteristics of the poor. The 1996 data represent a reasonable midpoint. Moreover, the relevant numbers do not vary much across the time period of interest; in no instance would the minor fluctuations change the substantive or statistical interpretation of our results.

Table 2. The Percent of True Poor and the Percent of Magazine Poor by Race, 1993–98

	Whites	African Americans	Hispanics	Asian Americans
True poor	45	27	24	4
Magazine poor	33***	49***	19*	0**
Poor in <i>Newsweek</i> , <i>Time</i> , and <i>U.S. News & World Report</i>	33***	45***	22	0**

SOURCE.—“March Current Population Survey” (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996).

NOTE.—We conducted difference of proportion tests in which the proportion observed in the magazine is compared to the true proportion as reported by the Current Population Survey for each racial category (Blalock 1979). A statistically significant result indicates that the magazine portrayal of a particular racial group is not representative of the true poor. Due to rounding, the percentages may sum to more than 100 percent. The sample size is 347 for the analysis based on all five magazines. The sample size is 272 for the analysis based on *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

part of a larger phenomenon in which these groups are ignored by the media in general. For example, Hispanics and Asian Americans are rarely found in mass media advertising (Bowen and Schmid 1997; Wilkes and Valencia 1989). Similarly, Dixon (1998) documented the invisibility of Hispanics in local news; however, there is evidence that in particular regions Hispanics are represented in accordance with their proportion in the population (Greenberg and Brand 1998; Turk et al. 1989). Unlike blacks, Asian Americans are associated with intelligence, not welfare dependency (Gilbert and Hixon 1991; Gilens 1999). Thus, their absence may reflect a positive stereotype, but a stereotype nonetheless. Clearly these comments regarding Hispanics and Asian Americans are speculative. Further research is needed on media representations of these two groups.

Focusing on just the three magazines Gilens included in his study (i.e., *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*), whites make up 33 percent, blacks make up 45 percent, and Hispanics are 22 percent of the magazine poor (see table 2). In comparison, Gilens (1996a) found that 62 percent of the poor were African American in these magazines between 1988 and 1992. Although at first glance our statistics may suggest that the magazines have become less likely to put a black face on poverty, we hesitate to draw that conclusion given the coding difference mentioned earlier. Recall that Gilens coded whether the poor person was black, nonblack, or undeterminable. Since Gilens (1996a) reports a higher percentage of poor people for which race was not identified (12 percent compared to our 4 percent), it seems likely that many of the poor people we coded as Hispanic, Gilens would have coded as undeterminable. If we treat Hispanics in that fashion and therefore exclude

Table 3. The Percent of AFDC Parents and the Percent of Magazine Adult Poor by Race, 1993–98

	Whites	African Americans	Hispanics	Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Other
AFDC parents	36	37	21	7
Magazine adult poor	34	48**	18	0***

SOURCE.—*Overview of Entitlement Programs* (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means 1998).

NOTE.— $N = 159$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

them from our analysis, blacks make up 58 percent of the poor and whites make up 42 percent—figures that mirror Gilens's data quite closely. Regardless of the exact proportion, it is clear these news magazines continue to race code the issue of poverty.⁷

Since we are examining portrayals of the poor during a period of intense debate over welfare reform, perhaps the racial characteristics of the magazine poor mirror welfare recipients more closely than they represent poor people in general. The House Ways and Means Committee provides the racial breakdown for parents on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Therefore, in table 3, we compare the racial composition of AFDC parents to the magazine portrayal of poor adults. Indeed, the portrayal of poor whites and Hispanics matches more closely the true racial characteristics of welfare recipients; however, blacks are still heavily overrepresented (48 percent) among the magazine poor. Moreover, blacks make up 52 percent of the poor adults who are portrayed in stories that focus specifically on welfare (rather than on poverty in general).

Gilens (1996a, 1999) found that blacks were even more prominent in stories on poverty topics that were not very popular with the public. Between 1993 and 1998, there were several stories on unpopular issues, such as welfare reform and pregnancy, public housing, and welfare and the cycle of dependency.⁸ We examined the proportion of blacks among the poor in these stories and found that it jumped to 63 percent, whereas whites made up only 19 percent and Hispanics were 18 percent. In contrast, blacks were associated less often with sympathetic topics. In stories on welfare reform and children, welfare recipients and day care, and job training, 46 percent of the poor were black, while 32 percent were white and 22 percent were Hispanic.⁹ We also

7. Unfortunately, we faced a trade-off between providing a more detailed analysis of the racial portrayal of the poor and making exact comparisons with Gilens's research.

8. These stories on unpopular issues included 75 poor individuals.

9. These stories on sympathetic topics included 100 poor individuals.

Table 4. The Percent of True Poor and the Percent of Magazine Poor by Age, 1993–98

	Under 18	18–64	65 and Over
True poor	40	51	9
Magazine poor	53***	43**	4**

SOURCE.—“March Current Population Survey” (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996).

NOTE.—*N* = 347.

** *p* < .01.

*** *p* < .001.

analyzed two stories that focused on various “myths” surrounding welfare reform. Ironically, 16 of the 22 poor people depicted in these two stories were black.

The news magazines exaggerated the feminization of poverty by about 14 percent. According to the CPS, 62 percent of the adult poor are women, whereas 76 percent of the magazine poor are women (*N* = 161).¹⁰ Again, though, since most of these stories discuss poverty specifically in the context of welfare reform, it is important to compare the magazine poor to people on welfare. The vast majority of adult AFDC recipients are female, so the predominance of women among the poor is fairly accurate (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means 1998).

In terms of the age of the poor people, we found that children were overrepresented among the magazine poor (see table 4).¹¹ Children are usually thought of as a fairly deserving group of poor people (Cook and Barrett 1992); however, the large proportion of black children among the magazine poor may undermine that belief. In Iyengar’s (1990) experimental research on attributions of responsibility for poverty, subjects indicated that black children should take responsibility for their own plight, whereas white children were not expected to solve their own problems.

In contrast, the elderly, who are the most sympathetic group of poor people, were rarely portrayed. Most people believe the elderly really need their benefits and that they use them wisely (Cook and Barrett 1992). Iyengar (1990) found that people thought society should aid (both black and white) poor elderly widows. This sympathetic group makes up 9 percent of the true poor, but only 4 percent of the magazine poor (see table 4).

We also examined whether poor people were portrayed in urban or rural settings. The magazine depictions implied that poverty is almost completely

10. There was no race by gender interaction.

11. There was no race by age interaction.

an urban problem. Ninety-six percent of the poor were shown in urban areas.¹² According to the CPS, most poor people (77 percent) do reside in metropolitan areas; however, the magazine portrayals greatly exaggerate the true proportion ($p < .001$).¹³ According to Gans (1995), the urban underclass is often linked with various pathologies and antisocial behavior. Thus, this emphasis on the urban poor does not promote a positive image of those in poverty.

The media leave the impression that most poor people do not work: only 30 percent of poor adults were shown working or participating in job training programs ($N = 198$). In reality, 50 percent of the poor work in full- or part-time jobs, according to the CPS ($p < .001$).¹⁴ When we focus solely on those stories that specifically discuss welfare, 35 percent of the poor are shown either working or in job training. According to the House Ways and Means Committee, 23 percent of AFDC recipients worked or participated in education or job training programs in 1995. These photographs reflect the emphasis of many contemporary welfare reformers, liberal and conservative, on “workfare” rather than welfare. Since many citizens support work requirements for welfare recipients (Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995), these images are positive ones. Not surprisingly, whites were more likely to be shown in these pictures than blacks.

Next, we analyzed the extent to which the news magazines relied on stereotypical traits in their depictions of the poor. We examined whether the media perpetuate the notion that women on welfare have lots of children. When a mother was portrayed with her children in these magazines, the average family size was 2.80. This is virtually identical to the figure of 2.78 reported by the House Ways and Means Committee for the average AFDC family size in 1996. In the magazines, the representation of poor women and their children differed by race. The average family size for whites was 2.44, whereas the average size for blacks was 3.05 and 2.92 for Hispanics. Although these differences are not statistically significant, the direction suggests that citizens received a less flattering view of poor minority families. The Ways and Means Committee does not report the true figure by race; however, the U.S. Census Bureau (1995) provides data on the average number of children ever had (rather than the average number of children currently receiving benefits) by AFDC mothers by race.¹⁵ These data show that black AFDC women have only slightly (and nonsignificantly) more children than white AFDC women.

12. Please note these statistics are based on a reduced sample size ($N = 205$), because many (43 percent) of the poor individuals were coded as “Don’t Know” for their residency. In many cases it was difficult to ascertain whether the setting was a rural or urban one, so we decided to err on the conservative side and code only the unambiguous settings.

13. There was no race by residence interaction.

14. The data on the working poor from the Current Population Survey include people who are 16 and over, whereas the data on the magazine working poor include people who are 13 and over.

15. These data are from the Survey of Income and Program Participation conducted between June and September of 1993 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1995).

Hispanic AFDC mothers, on the other hand, do have more children than non-Hispanic AFDC women.

To our surprise, the media did not overly emphasize other stereotypical characteristics associated with the poor. Of the 357 people coded, only three were shown engaging in criminal behavior, and another three were shown with drugs. No alcoholics were presented, and only one person was smoking a cigarette. However, of those seven stereotypical portrayals, only the person smoking was white—the others were either black or Hispanic. Only one poor woman was pregnant, so the media were not providing images suggesting that poor women simply have babies to obtain larger welfare checks. Again, though, this stereotypical portrayal is of a Hispanic woman. We also examined whether the media presented images consistent with the “welfare queen” stereotype. We felt that poor people who were shown wearing expensive jewelry or clothing would fit this stereotype. Thirty-nine individuals were shown with flashy jewelry or fancy clothes; blacks and Hispanics were somewhat more likely to be portrayed this way than whites.

In sum, the magazines often portrayed an inaccurate picture of the demographic characteristics of poor people. These magazines overrepresented the black, urban, and nonworking poor. Blacks were especially prominent in stories on unpopular poverty topics, and black women were portrayed with the most children. Other stereotypical traits linked with poor people were not common in the magazine portrayals. Nevertheless, in those instances when the media depicted poor people with stereotypical characteristics, they tended to be black or Hispanic. The most sympathetic group of poor people, the elderly, was underrepresented among the magazine poor. The media were most accurate in mirroring the predominance of women among welfare recipients.

Discussion

These portrayals of poverty are important because they have an impact on public opinion. A variety of experimental research demonstrates that negative images of blacks influence public opinion (Gilliam et al. 1996; Iyengar 1990; Johnson et al. 1997; Mendelberg 1997; Peffley, Shields, and Williams 1996). Furthermore, white citizens' stereotypical beliefs about blacks decrease their support for welfare (Gilens 1995, 1996b).

In turn, public opinion has an impact on public policy (Page and Shapiro 1983). Thus, if attitudes on poverty-related issues are driven by inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals of the poor, then the policies favored by the public (and political elites) may not adequately address the true problems of poverty. Furthermore, these inaccurate portrayals of the racial characteristics of the poor may prime the white public to favor political candidates who make racially coded arguments a linchpin of their campaign strategies. When these

candidates are elected, they favor welfare (and other) policies that are in keeping with their racialized rhetoric.

It is possible that the text of these stories on poverty contains data describing the true demographic characteristics of the poor. It is unclear what impact a story that dispels stereotypes in its text but perpetuates stereotypes in its photographs would have on public opinion. Graber's research on television suggests that audiovisual themes are more memorable than verbal information (Graber 1990, 1991). Although news magazines are a very different medium than television, it is certainly possible that magazine photos capture the audience's attention in the same way as television visuals. Psychological research suggests that vivid images of particular cases are more memorable and influential than dry statistical data (Fischhoff and Bar-Hillel 1984). Indeed, Hamill, Wilson, and Nisbett's (1980) experimental research shows that a vivid, detailed description of a poor woman on welfare has a larger impact on subjects' opinions about welfare recipients than statistical information about women on welfare.

Gilens (1996a, 1999) investigated several explanations for why blacks are overrepresented among the poor and concluded that, at least in part, it is due to journalists' stereotypes. Gilens's research received considerable attention from media elites, including being the lead topic of discussion on CNN's *Reliable Sources* on August 24, 1997. Unfortunately, our data illustrate that journalists and editors have continued the practice of race coding the issue of poverty even after it was brought to their attention.

We must also point out that this race coding of poverty in news magazines is not an isolated incident; rather, the racial bias reported here is a widespread phenomenon. For example, Clawson and Kegler (in press) conducted a comparable analysis on the portrayal of poverty in introductory textbooks on American government and found that blacks were disproportionately represented. In addition, several scholars have documented the negative images of blacks in news coverage of crime (Delgado 1994; Dixon 1998; Entman 1990, 1992, 1994; Johnson 1987). And it does not end there: whether it is children's programs, "reality-based" programs, sitcoms, or advertising, blacks are often portrayed in a stereotypical fashion (Graves 1996; Humphrey and Schuman 1984; Oliver 1994; Poindexter and Stroman 1981). These images are pervasive in our society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, blacks were disproportionately portrayed among magazine portrayals of the poor between 1993 and 1998. Blacks were especially overrepresented in negative stories on poverty and in those instances when the poor were presented with stereotypical traits. In addition, the "deserving" poor were underrepresented in the magazines. Overall, the photographic images of

poor people in these five news magazines do not capture the reality of poverty; instead, they provide a stereotypical and inaccurate picture of poverty which results in negative beliefs about the poor, antipathy toward blacks, and a lack of support for welfare programs.

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