Media Discourse and the Feminization of Poverty

Carmen L. Manning-Miller
University of Kentucky

Source diversity models suggest that by using non-conventional, non-official sources for news content, the prevailing perceptions about poor people and their needs would be undermined in news coverage. This study found that major newspapers are making efforts to diversify the sources quoted in their coverage of poverty issues. However, the portrayals of poor people have not changed, particularly for women and people of color. Results of this study suggest that source diversity research must go further to explore how sources are used to address the problems of the poor and how media influence public perceptions of public policy related to welfare and welfare reform.

Introduction

News organizations create an important component of public discourse through the selection of events to report, and the interviews and sources employed to interpret these events. As Jannette Dates and Oscar Gandy argue, "news reflects the views of publishers, writers and editors in that they each make choices about what to include, exclude, emphasize or ignore on the basis of political ideologies."[1] Media discourse on poverty, for instance, functions as a medium for both creating and contesting political claims about people who are poor and about the interests of poor people. Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser writes:

> We dispute [in the United States] whether existing social-welfare programs really do meet the needs they purport to satisfy. We also argue about what exactly various groups of people really do need and about who should have the

last word in such matters.[2]

This article examines and conceptualizes the relationship between media discourse on poverty and other public discourses on poverty following the welfare reform legislation of 1988. Specifically, this study examines how journalists in leading newspapers in the United States selects news **sources** for stories about poverty. To do so, it addresses four questions: How extensive is coverage in major newspapers on poverty? How complete is coverage on the causes of poverty? Is there an elitist bias in terms of sources quoted and governmental themes concerning welfare reform and government responsibility? And finally, how are poor people depicted in the coverage?

The paper begins with a discussion of public discourse on poverty in the United States and describes several interrelated processes in the mediation of poverty. In the next section, the methods utilized for this study are discussed, followed by an analysis of the results and a concluding discussion about the implications of this study's findings for social change in the media.

Public Discourses About Poverty

The debate over how to reduce the problems related to public assistance[3] has been raging for decades. Those on the right argue that the current welfare system encourages people to stay out of the labor force because recipients see public assistance as a "free ride," as means of obtaining reward without effort.[4] Other commentators claim that recipients are so socially and economically isolated that they think of welfare as a way of life, the only one they can envision.[5] And, scholars such as University of Chicago's William Julius Wilson argue that dependence on public assistance is a rational response to dire economic conditions.[6]

Given this wide range of perspectives, discourse about poor people and their needs appears as a site of struggle where groups with unequal discursive resources compete to establish their respective stories about legitimate social needs. Democratic theory assumes that a particular perspective will not become subject to legitimate state intervention until it has been debated across a wide range of discourse publics. Further, most of us rely on media to present these various perspectives. As we watch, listen, and read about the likely causes of poverty and proposed state intervention—a **mediated reality** of poverty is created.[7]

The mediation of reality on poverty consists of two interrelated processes. First, although media utilizes sources associated with a wide range of discourse publics, these sources vary greatly with respect to the distribution of power in the United States. Sources associated with leading publics such as government officials are capable of setting the terms of political debate about poverty. Other sources, however, are

linked to historically marginalized publics. In mass communications research, source diversity studies demonstrate that elite sources are favored by reports because they provide regular, credible (to reporters) information.[8] As a result, these sources tend to dominate news content, and consequently skew the balance of sources in the debate about poverty issues in media discourse.

In addition, Fraser claims that when the voices of experts and bureaucratic sources dominate the public debate in media discourse, the people whose lives are in question become repositioned. Media representations of poor people create images of poverty. For example, in the contemporary debate on welfare, poor people are positioned as **recipients** of predefined services rather than active **agents** involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions.[9]

Not only does media reposition the poor as recipients of services, but it also serves to racialize our understanding of poverty. In studies of media, race, and modern racism, researchers conclude that media content influences American's perceptions about how different racial and ethnic minority groups are faring socially and economically and whether the distribution of economic resources is equitable.[10] G. Blake Armstrong and Kimberly Neuendorf, for example, maintain that the association of African Americans in news stories concerning protest, poverty, welfare, crime, and unemployment contributes to beliefs in racial inferiority.[11] Similarly, Robert Entman argues:

> Reality alone does not explain the news constructions of reality, they are framed by elite discourse.... Other elements of traditional American ideology that white elites do generally agree upon (or at least endorse rhetorically) and that persist within the culture will more consistently shape the news, and the audience's processing of it.[12]

These ideological elements include a distrust of big government, and more importantly, the assumption that individuals are responsible for their own fate. The American emphasis on individualism recasts the experience of racism and sexism as individual rather than societal problems and denies the history and structure of discrimination.

The mediation of poverty also works to reposition the status of women in American society. Feminist scholars, for instance, contend that media discourse segments and depoliticizes so-called women's issues into specialized arenas, typically the family.[13] The depoliticalization process pits private-domestic matters against public-political matters. Mass media further participates in the depoliticalization process by emphasizing personal and dramatic qualities of events, and isolating stories from one another so that information in the news becomes

fragmented, trivialized, and hard to assemble into a big picture.[14] This kind of coverage precludes interpretations linking private troubles such as welfare reliant unwed mothers and their children to public issues, specifically, economic retrenchment and unemployment.

The Family Support Act of 1988 illustrates this problematic. According to Susan Popkin, the Family Support Act did little to quell the public debate about welfare reform.[15] One of its underlying assumptions is that able-bodied, welfare-reliant citizens have lost the initiative to work. The utilization of government incentives through this new legislation are intended to reduce the numbers of people on welfare rolls.[16] To do so, the new law institutes work requirements for some recipients, requires all states to provide benefits to two-parent families, and establishes new policies for collecting child support. Yet as Popkin argues, the new reform affects only a very small number of poor people. Little attention has been devoted to this fact in the media. Given the media is the main source for such understandings, we must carefully interrogate and analyze its content to uncover the ways in which the problems of poverty are framed, explained, and understood. Within this social and historical context, this article explores whose voices and whose perspectives enter into media discourse about poverty and asks us to consider why this is so.

Method

Data were collected from five major daily U.S. newspapers: the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. Using the index within each paper, every story referenced as a story about poverty or welfare was selected during the four-year period January 1988 through December 1992.

A coding instrument was used to quantify some of the data. The analysis explored subjects of the stories, story emphases, types of stories written, statistics used, sources quoted, and race of the subject(s) used in photographs. Story emphasis were measured with an open-ended question: What issues are raised in this story? The responses were then categorized for analysis.

In addition, story treatment was coded as either issue-oriented or feature-oriented. Issue-oriented reports were defined as articles providing an overview or background of poverty or an aspect of poverty. Categories scaled as issue-oriented dealt with the weakness of current efforts to eliminate poverty the causes of poverty and identification of proposed solutions. Feature-oriented stories were defined as human interest stories focusing on individual triumphs or problems. Categories scaled as feature-oriented included the use of a case study related to personal or individual circumstances. These categories dealt with the personal struggle of an individual or a family in poverty, or existing

programs designed to fight poverty.

The three statistical references categories were: 1) statistics presenting the percentages of people of color who are in poverty (by U.S. government standards) or are beneficiaries of public assistance; 2) percentages of the number of white people who are in poverty (by U.S. government standards) or are beneficiaries of public assistance; and 3) percentages of the total numbers of people in poverty (by U.S. government standards) or are beneficiaries of public assistance.

The names and titles of sources quoted were recorded. Each source quoted was recorded only one time per story. Source titles were then categorized for analysis. Additionally, subjects of the story were categorized as: 1) able-bodied, retired and/or unemployed, impoverished women who were not welfare-reliant; 2) able-bodied, retired and/or unemployed, impoverished men who were not welfare-reliant; 3) able-bodied, welfare-reliant men; 4) able-bodied, welfare-reliant women; and 5) disabled, impoverished men and women. An inter-coder reliability check was established with eighty-seven percent agreement.

Analysis

An examination of the stories about poverty over the four-year period yielded thirty-eight articles on poverty for analysis. A comparison of the articles in the five newspapers revealed that the *New York Times* (twelve stories) published more reports than any of the newspapers studied. The *Los Angeles Times* followed with eight stories, the *Washington Post* and *Christian Science Monitor* published seven stories each, and the *Wall Street Journal* published four stories.

Most of the newspaper coverage was related to welfare reform legislation and government program development (27.27%). References in story coverage were made to cost of benefits to government (16.88%), lack of motivation of welfare beneficiaries (15.58%), and personal inadequacies (23.37%). Fewer mentions were related to joblessness and economic decline (7.80%) and social discrimination (9.09%).

A value-laden distinction was found between "deserving" men and women, and "undeserving" women in the media discourses about poverty. For example, a total of six references were made to men in the stories. Consistently, men's economic conditions were referred to as "without work or unemployed." The two reports about elderly women in poverty described the women as innocent victims living under changed social-economic conditions. One article highlighted the circumstances of a seventy-year old widowed woman:

> I never realized the consequences of working in low-paying jobs that do not offer both Social Security and a pension.... No one discussed it then. It was just assumed

that your husband would take care of you.[17]
In another article describing the impoverishment of elderly nuns:

> Elderly nuns are in retirement binds because, unlike the male hierarchy who controlled the collection plate, the sisters put neither their trust in money nor their money in trust.[18]

On the other hand, the majority of the poverty coverage concerned unemployed, welfare-reliant women of childbearing age (fifty percent of twenty-eight total mentions of story subjects). A *Wall Street Journal* article headline reads: "Good Girls Fare Better In Standard of Living."[19] A hospital nurse's statement of attribution (*Christian Science Monitor*) charges: "He's [patient's baby boy] going to be another toy for her to play with... It's pointless to teach her about parenting."[20] Another front-page article in the *New York Times* describes the causes of poverty for most welfare recipients in a disparaging way: "This is not the South Bronx or Appalachia, where poverty often is attributed to the culture or behavior, to racism, or reckless childbearing."[21]

Such references are made about subjects in the reports. Allthough poor people were used as sources in 22.86% of the total coverage, over fifty percent of the people in poverty were quoted in the *New York Times*. Two of the five newspapers studied, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*, did not use quotes by poor people at all.

Of the stories including statistics about poverty, the majority (fifty percent of thirty-two) of the references emphasized the number of people of color in poverty and total numbers of people in poverty (43.75% of thirty-two). Although the majority of the stories reported poverty rates of people of color, only 6.25% of the stories reported white poverty rates. These figures contrast sharply to actual percentages of women in poverty: 38% of women who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children are white, compared to 40% who are Black, 16% Latino, 2.7% Asian, and 1.3% American Indian.[22] News media reports of welfare-reliant women of color without complimentary statistics of welfare-reliant white women mask the fact that so many poor women are white and making welfare a tool in the politics of race.

The newspapers also used **over twice as many visuals of women of color** in poverty as whites in poverty. Out of the ten photographs used, seven of the photographs were of women of color. Only three photographs were of white women. Such visual choices further reinscribe images of the poor as women of color. In addition, the majority of the coverage was feature-oriented. Of the thirty-eight stories, 73.68% of the coverage was feature-oriented and 26.32% of the coverage was issue-oriented. These results suggest that very few of the *articles* discussed the societal realities that contribute to poverty. Fur-

ther, these data reveal that media reports on poverty adopt a very narrow perspective of poverty and its causes, particularly for women.

Placing the Newspaper Coverage of Poverty in Context

Robert Stallings claims that an isolated incident and a series of like events are quite different in terms of the logic required to make them sensible. The isolated incident is easier to dismiss (and to disown) as an aberration, an exception, or a result of improbably circumstances that are unlikely to be duplicated. A pattern, on the other hand, implies regularities, repeated occurrences that are difficult to dismiss as chance.[23]

Maintaining the singularity of circumstance can be an important aspect of what Fraser calls depoliticization.[24] Journalists, aided by their news sources, facilitate the depoliticization process through the creation of images in the public arena. Media accounts which link women to singular events (i.e., childbearing outside of wedlock, choosing welfare benefits) preclude an understanding of the systemic reasons for which such "choices" are made. Consequently, the plausibility of poor women being labeled as deviant increases,[25] and the lack of concern for their issues as **political** matters increases. Further, the media favors personal or psychological explanations over political and social explanations in poverty discourse. These explanations are most likely to be prevalent because they suit the needs of the contributors to media discourse. Finally, focusing on the individualistic aspects of poverty simplifies the communication process for journalists. Feature and event-oriented treatments of poverty are simply easier to write than those containing more complex, socio-economic explanations.

Through such explanations for poverty, the media powerfully constructs a value-laden framework on social issues.[26] In the reports on poverty in the *New York Times*, efforts were made by journalists to use poor people as sources. One might assume that as the use of diverse sources in news coverage grows, social and political explanations of poverty would also increase. However, the story emphases of the newspapers studied did not vary in significant ways. Thus, newspaper representations of poor people occur within a gerrymandered framework. Through political sensibilities and commercial pressures, newspaper stories selectively construct the boundaries within which images of poor people are constructed and maintained.

The conclusions drawn from my content analysis offer further support to the claims of theorists that reporters select media events and issues to fit their audience's expectations. Exposure to the resulting stereotypes over time may make poor women and people of color appear consistently threatening and burdensome, demanding and undeserving of accommodation by government. If humane welfare policy is to be further advanced in combination with traditional democratic liberties, the

enduring public anger about poor people must be corrected. Such a political approach implies a media discourse that makes connections between hard economic issues and personal "choices."

Because mass communication is a fluid process, source diversity models suggest that by using more non-official, non-conventional sources for news stories in a statistically representative manner, the prevailing negative perceptions about the poor could be greatly undermined. Further, by identifying and highlighting news story "elements" that shift responsibility to different actors (i.e., the government and the social forces such as unemployment), different political solutions can be brought to light.

In conclusion, this study finds that when media portray people in poverty, it focuses on the individual, rather than related institutions. Newspaper representations are ideological to the extent that the assumptions underlying media discourse (i.e., individualism and meritocracy) shift our understanding away from social processes to matters of individual, rational choice. Such representations appear natural and inevitable rather than the result of social and political struggles over power. In most instances, when newspapers report on poverty, governmental policy is not challenged and the underlying social and economic forces go **unexamined**. Thus, the mediation of reality remains a major problem for poor people in the Unites States' "democratic" society.

NOTES

[1]Jannette Dates and Oscar Gandy, "How Ideological Constraints Affected Coverage of the Jesse Jackson Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Fall 1985): 595.

[2]Nancy Fraser, "Talking about Needs: Interpretive Contests as Political Conflicts in Welfare-State Societies," in *Feminism & Political Theory*, ed. C. R. Sunstein (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 159.

[3]Public assistance refers to welfare benefits given to people who fall within government-defined poverty levels. Abramovitz argues that everyone is on welfare. Tax codes provide numerous health, education, and welfare benefits to the rich and the middle class and another set of subsidies to corporations.

[4]Stuart Butler and Anna Kondratas, *Out of the Poverty Trap: A Conservative Strategy for Welfare Reform* (New York: The Free Press, 1987); L. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

[5]William Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: The University of

Chicago Press, 1987).

[6]Frances Piven and Richard Cloward, *The New Class War* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); Susan Popkin, "Welfare: Views from the Bottom," *Social Problems* 37 (February 1990): 64-77.

[7]Doris Graber, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1986).

[8]Jane Brown, Carl Bybee, Stanley Wearden, and Dulcie Straughan, "Invisible Power: Newspaper News Sources and the Limits of Diversity," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (Spring 1987): 45-54; Lana Rakow and K. Kranich, "Women as Sign in Television News," *Journal of Communication* 41 (Spring 1991): 8-23; Pamela Shoemaker, "Building a Theory of News Content: A Synthesis of Current Approaches," *Journalism Monographs* 103 (June 1987); D. Charles Whitney, Marilyn Fritzler, Steven Jones, Sharon Mazzarella, and Lana Rakow, "Geographic and Source Biases in Network Television News 1982-1984," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 33 (Spring 1989): 159-174.

[9]Fraser, *Feminism & Political Theory*, 159-184.

[10]G. Blake Armstrong and Kimberly Neuendorf, "TV Entertainment, News and Racial Perceptions of College Students," *Journal of Communication* 42 (Fall 1992): 153-176; Oscar Gandy and Paula Matabane, "Television and Social Perceptions Among African-Americans and Hispanics," *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*, eds. M. K. Asante and W. B. Gudykunst (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 318-348.

[11]Armstrong and Neuendorf, 153-176.

[12]Robert Entman, "Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism and Cultural Change," *Journalism Quarterly* 69 (Spring 1992): 341-361.

[13]Rakow and Kranich, 8-23.

[14]Daniel Hallin, "The High Modernism of American Journalism," *Journal of Communication* 42 (Fall 1992): 14-26; Herbert Schiller, *The Mind Managers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

[15]Popkin.

[16]Popkin, 64-77.

[17]"Senior Women in Poverty," *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 May 1992, 14.

[18]"Vows of Poverty, Lives of Destitution," *The Washington Post*, 20 October 1990, A23.

[19]"Good Girls Fare Better in Standard of Living," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 January 1990, B1.

[20]"Poverty's Legacy - Fragile Families," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 December 1988, 10.

[21]"Lives of Unexpected Poverty in Center of a Land of Plenty," *New York Times*, 7 July 1992, A1.

[22]Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*.

[23]Robert Stallings, "Media Discourse and the Social Construction of Risk," *Social Problems* 37 (February 1990): 80-95.

[24]Fraser, *Feminism and Political Theory*, 159-184.

[25]See for example, Lisa McLaughlin, "Discourses of Prostitution/Discourses of Sexuality," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (September 1991): 249-272. McLaughlin contends that the notion of deviance and immorality is expressed through both gender and class. Because of the traditional definitions of womanhood, basic class distinctions can be made between "respectable" and "disrespectable" women.

[26]Steve Barkin and Michael Gurevitch, "Out of Work and On the Air: Television News of Unemployment," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 4 (March 1987): 1-20.