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INTERTWINING OF POVERTY, GENDER, AND RACE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WELFARE NEWS COVERAGE FROM 1993-2000

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Abstract: Over the years, welfare has become highly intertwined with ideological beliefs involving gender, race, and poverty. As the nature of welfare transformed to include non-white recipients, the perception of welfare recipients as single "worthy white widows" was replaced by the "lazy African-American breeders." This study examined how television news may have appropriated this negative image in its coverage of the changes in the U.S. welfare system that took place during the 1990s. News stories presented by the major U.S. television networks from 1993 to 2000 were examined. The analysis showed that news stories tended to depict the typical welfare recipient as being female and black, and often depicted the recipient as responsible for her welfare status.

Keywords: welfare, legislation, news, framing.

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Since the 1980s, the world has witnessed vast political and economic structural changes. Technological advances in communications and a rise in global capitalism have led nations to push aside territorially-structured systems of exchanges in favor of capitalistically-based exchanges that go beyond territorial borders (Langhorne, 2001). Many nations have worked to serve the demands of transnational corporations and financial markets (Sholte, 2000). With movements toward global capitalism, researchers (e.g. Bowles & Wagman, 1997; Teeple, 1995) have observed a steep decline in the “welfare state” on a worldwide scale.

For most of the twentieth century, state-led social security programs were the norm. As Scholte (2000) describes it, the trend was toward the establishment of “cradle-to-the-grave public sector guarantees of nutrition, health care, housing, education, minimum income and other welfare needs” (p. 54). The last two decades, however, have seen a reversal of this trend. In order to boost global “competitiveness” and attract transnational enterprises, nations have reduced labor costs, tariffs, and trade restrictions while making cutbacks in many long-held welfare programs such as unemployment benefits and food subsidy programs (Bowles & Wagman, 1997).

The patterns and extent of these cutbacks have varied geographically. The United States is said to be one nation in which the reductions have been quite severe and more advanced than in any other (Piven, 2001; Sholte, 2000). Some have argued that even with political and economic structural incentives to reduce welfare programs, the ability of the United States to have made such cuts so swiftly and drastically can be explained by underlying ideological reasons.

Hard work and independence have been held as American core values (Lipset, 1990). Kingfisher (2001) discusses how such core values and a feminization of poverty may have formed a strong basis for arguments toward abolishing or reforming welfare programs. According to this researcher, by representing the nonpoor as “maleness” and self-sufficiency and showing the poor as “femaleness” and dependence, a “gendered binary” was established and the framework set to portray welfare programs as antithetical to the American way. She writes:

The nonpoor represent[ed] society and civilization, maleness, “good” (that

is, controllable) nature, order, autonomy and freedom, intentionality, independence, universality, morality, and rationality, and the poor represent[ed] femaleness, "bad" (or uncontrollable) nature, disorder, need, and necessity, want, desire, particularity, dependence, immorality, and irrationality (p. 277).

Kingfisher (2001) goes on to write that gender was "a key axis of this binary, with the various attributes on the 'masculine' side having a positive valence in relation to those on the 'feminine' side" (p. 277).

To Kingfisher's (2001) assessment, race could also be added, for in the United States, welfare has been highly intertwined with not only ideological beliefs involving gender, but with race as well. In fact, in its early variation, welfare in the United States was initially conceptualized as a necessary evil designed to help only "deserving" white female single-parent families (Brito, 1999). As the program moved to include non-white welfare recipients, the perception of welfare recipients as single mothers remained, while negative connotations of them intensified (Brito, 1999). The "worthy white widow" was replaced by the "lazy African-American breeder" (Williams, 1995) and later, the "welfare queen" (Hancock, 2003), characterized by pathological dependence on others, moral ineptitude, and lack of discipline (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Gilens, 1996).

Even with the growth of egalitarian values these characteristics appear not to have attenuated over the years. Studies conducted in the last couple of decades have shown that the perception of the average welfare recipient is that of an unwed black teenage mother (Williams, 1995), despite the fact that, on a consistent basis, only a small percentage of welfare recipients are teen parents, and African Americans are not the majority of recipients (Administration of, 2003). Scholars (e.g., Gilens, 1996) have asserted that media, in particular television, play a part in shaping and propagating this perception through textual and visual imageries.

The primary purpose of this research was to examine how television news may have appropriated the negative image of the black female welfare recipient in its coverage of the major legislative change in the federal welfare system that took place in the United States during the 1990s as the government took on the task of selling to public the idea of replacing the old welfare program with a new type of program. It was in the 1990s that the government embarked on attempts to reform the U.S. welfare program that had been in existence since the 1930s. Its efforts culminated in the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR), effectively repealing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program that was established by the Social Security Act in 1935. The PRWOR created the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program with overwhelming support by Congressional leaders. President Clinton hailed the program as one that would "transform a broken system that traps too many people in a cycle of dependence to one that emphasizes work and independence" (Clinton, 1996). The legislative reform transitioned welfare

from an entitlement system to one which expressly ties the receipt of benefits to work requirements and which adopts a "5 year lifetime limit" on the receipt of benefits. In addition to requiring recipients to take measures to obtain employment, the PRWOR provides funding for states to promote marriage and reduce illegitimacy. In this way, the Act focuses not only on providing cash assistance but on promoting behavioral changes in recipients as well.

The proposed reforms to the social welfare system generated a major political, economic, and social welfare debate during the 1990s. The discussions about the proposed reforms reflected a uniquely American social history regarding work, poverty, gender, and race. Researchers (e.g., Gring-Premble, 2001; White, 1995) have suggested that legislators, in their reform efforts, often invoked the stereotypical imagery of women, people of color, and the poor, that frequently appear in differing forms of media. The question then is, was the news media during these debates also engaging in the use of such imagery? If they were doing so, the possibility exists that the news media may have had some effect on the development and implementation of the welfare legislation.

In this research, while we did not attempt to show a direct effect of news imagery on the passage of the welfare legislation, we did explore the potential role the news media might have played in the crucial debate process. With the assumption, based on prior research (e.g., Hallin, 1994; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980), that mainstream media tend to support those in dominant political and economic positions especially during times of conflict or controversy, we examined the possibility that news stories favored negative stereotypic images of welfare recipients which tended to attribute poverty to individual shortcomings, thus reinforcing the dominant political position of scaling back social welfare systems for the poor.

Since the government was in a distinctive position of dismissing an old welfare program while selling a new form of one, we also focused on how the benefits of the new welfare program would be presented in the news. More specifically, we examined whether or not news stories that focused on the successes of new forms of welfare that embodied the TANF program were more likely to feature white females as overcoming welfare due to psychologically-oriented personal characteristics, while showing black females as overcoming welfare due to structural, situational reasons. In other words, was more credit given to the white female than the black female, thus privileging the white female over the black female when discussing stories of individuals successfully pulling themselves out of welfare? To address this question, we conducted both qualitative and quantitative analyses of news stories presented by the major U.S. television networks from 1993 to 2000. We were interested in determining whether or not the privileging of white female welfare recipients over black female recipients took place more so during the years leading up to the 1996 welfare legislation than the years following.

WELFARE LEGISLATION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Welfare has its roots in state Mothers' or Widows' Pensions established in the early 1900s to aid single white families who lacked male breadwinners as a way to help deserving poor mothers avoid placing their children in orphanages due to poverty alone (Brito, 1999; Smith, 2002). The first such program was enacted in 1911, and by 1920, 40 states had enacted different versions (Leff, 1973). The paltry financial assistance these mothers received was consistent with traditional notions of women's roles as mothers and housekeepers (Brito, 1999; Leff, 1973). Recipients were subjected to morality tests, and benefits were offered only to those who were deemed proper (Brito, 1999). In describing the screening process, Smith (2002) writes:

Through lengthy and intrusive applications, home visits, and legal proceedings, the social workers and local judges not only assessed each family's economic needs but also scrutinized the mothers' household budgeting skills, drinking habits, and child-rearing practices. Because recipients were not allowed to cohabit or to have a sexual relationship with a man out-of-wedlock, their social lives were subjected to investigation (p. 126-127).

Black women, for the most part, were excluded from these aid programs, partially because social workers presumed that they could not pass the imposed morality tests and partially because many local governments in the South refused to establish the programs (Appleton, 1996; Brito, 1999; Smith, 2002). In fact, Brito (1999) noted that "reformers apparently did not believe that black women fit within their meaning of worthy motherhood or, with supervision, could be assimilated into this vision" (p. 421).

During the New Deal Era, the pensions were replaced by a national welfare system, Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1935, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). ADC (later renamed "Aid to Families with Dependent Children," AFDC) was modeled on and tended to replicate the moralistic and race-based approach of prior aid programs. Brito (1999) wrote that "administrators often imposed heightened eligibility standards which often had the effect of preventing Blacks from obtaining equal access to government aid" (p. 422). Additional restrictions also were imposed, such as "man in the house" rules that resulted in unannounced visits used to cut off benefits to recipients with live-in relationships (Jewell, 1993). The few black mothers who did receive Pensions also received smaller benefits than white recipients (Brito, 1999).

Legal challenges in the 1960s spurred by the Civil Rights movement and the resulting formation of the National Welfare Rights Organization (Morrissey, 1990) ended the more obvious race-based welfare exclusions (Brito, 1999; Jewell, 1988). As a result, the numbers of non-white welfare recipients significantly increased, and costs escalated, leading legislators to look for ways to restrict

eligibility and limit benefits. As welfare became more explicitly inclusive and costs continued to rise, the perception of the welfare recipient changed. While sustaining the image of welfare as essentially a “women’s issue” and the “preservation of patriarchy” as the operating principle (Appleton, 1996:33), images of the welfare recipient changed from “worthy white widow to lazy African-American breeder” (White, 1995:1178) and then to “welfare queen” (Hancock, 2003). Scholars have suggested that the media, especially television programs and films, may have played a crucial role in promulgating this image (Jewell, 1993).

MEDIA IMAGES AND THE WELFARE RECIPIENT

In his exposition of American core values, Lipset (1990), wrote, “Americans are expected to be righteous, hard-working, and ambitious” (p. 143). According to Lipset, thoughts of Americans existing in poverty are disturbing to Americans. Rather than acknowledge major economically-based social stratifications, most Americans prefer to believe that the middle or upper-middle class is the norm. In the average American mind-set, equal opportunity exists in the United States and if an individual happens to find him/herself below the socioeconomic norm, that individual must take sole responsibility for it. American discomfort with poverty and the poor appears to have permeated legislative debates involving welfare over the years. The central idea that has tended to retain popularity in these debates is that poverty is caused in large part by immoral and antisocial behavior, rather than by institutional factors. Many policy makers adhere to the concept of a “culture of poverty” and assume certain groups are “culturally trapped within a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty” (Smith, 2002; Jewell, 1993). The group that is often pinpointed is African-Americans, despite the fact that government figures have consistently shown throughout the 1990s that only about a one or two percentage difference exists between the number of black welfare recipients and white welfare recipients (Administration of Children and Families, 2003). For example, in 1999, the number of individuals who received at least one month of public assistance was 13 million blacks, 9 million Hispanics, and 21 million non-Hispanic whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Moreover, this analysis by the Census Bureau indicates that although a much higher proportion of the Hispanic and African-American population receives public assistance compared to the non-Hispanic white population, nearly all of this difference is accounted for by higher poverty rates.

Several researchers (e.g., Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gilens, 1996; Mantsios, 1995) have argued that the media help to foster and reinforce false notions of minorities as overwhelming recipients of public assistance by the imagery they present in both entertainment and news programming. According to many of these researchers, the media do so by either ignoring or downplaying class distinctions and by associating social deviance with the poor. The themes of substance abuse, aggression, and promiscuity are presented in association with the poor, especially in primetime television dramas

and “reality” crime and talk shows. Even in news programs, depictions of the poor tend to be negative, with many of those individuals portrayed as criminals or deviants. Furthermore, the principle group that is often shown to represent the poor is African Americans living in urban areas (de Goede, 1996; Gilens, 1996). Gilens (1996) has argued that media depictions of the poor and unflattering stereotypes of African Americans reinforce each other: “If poverty is a black problem, many whites reason, then blacks must not be trying hard enough” (p. 518). More specifically, whites may reason that the black female mother is not trying enough, for it is she specifically who is typically associated with welfare (Jewell, 1993). Even black males have not come forward to question this assumption; the National Welfare Rights Organization, which advocated for the rights of welfare recipients in the 1960s, failed to receive support even from the black churches and the Congressional Black Caucus, groups dominated by black males (Hancock, 2003).

The public’s understanding of the typical welfare recipient appears to intersect with the continuity of imagery that has shaped public perceptions of African American women throughout history (Jewell, 1993). The principal stereotypic images of the black female that have developed over the years through the media are the “mammy,” Aunt Jemima, and the Jezebel or “tragic mulatto” (Jewell, 1993). The “mammy” and Aunt Jemima are one-dimensional characters whose principal function is to serve their employers as maids, cooks, and caretakers. The mammy is “usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (Bogle, 1996:9). Aunt Jemima has been described as “‘mammy’s offshoot’ and unlike the mammy is usually sweet, jolly, and good-tempered” (Bogle, 1996:9). Seemingly devoid of ambition, neither mammy nor Aunt Jemima questions the role of servant and, instead, appears to accept and even enjoy the position (Jewell, 1993). She may be shown with her own children or as the caretaker of other, usually white, children, but often missing is a husband or father.

The Jezebel image depicts African American women as immoral and sexually promiscuous. Described as “alluring, sexually arousing and seductive,” the Jezebel character “reinforces cultural stereotypes regarding the hypersexuality of the African American female, who yearns for sexual encounters” (Jewell, 1993). Jezebel is often portrayed as a “tragic mulatto,” a fair-skinned woman of mixed race whose character most often comes to a tragic end and who serves as a model for preaching about the dangers of sexual excess and racial mixing. Such characterizations represent black women as sexually available and lacking in restraint—characterizations in a social hierarchy based on race that stand in direct contrast to the more positive imagery of white women (Jewell, 1993). These black women often victimize men, bear too many children and, as a result, are unable to get or stay married (Jewell, 1988). These portrayals of irresponsibility and immorality can be traced to the antebellum period when slaves were unable to legally marry and after the Civil War when the sustaining belief was that black women were unwilling to maintain conventional marriages (Franke, 1999). These portrayals still persist in media depictions of black women, who are rarely portrayed as good mothers (Ashe, 1997) or in loving, stable married relationships (Jewell,

1993).

Contemporary depictions of welfare recipients as “welfare queens,” popularized during the Reagan administration, bear striking resemblance to historical stereotypes of black women as lacking restraint, bearing too many children; devoid of ambition, and sexually permissive (Hancock, 2003). This collection of stereotypes and moral judgments that came to represent the “typical welfare recipient,” which was based on contrasts to the dominant white, married, middle-class male, effectively blocked discussion of the structural factors related to poverty (Jewell, 1993). Scholars (e.g., Dates, 1993; Davis, 1989) have frequently noted the role stereotypes play in conveying ideological messages that impact societal debate. They point out that stereotypes, once assimilated, are rarely questioned and events are interpreted to confirm stereotyped beliefs. Legislative discussions of welfare and discussions about the need for reform also skillfully integrated historical stereotypes of black women in discussions about typical welfare recipients. Recipients were repeatedly identified as lazy mothers with more children than they could afford who were unwilling to work, but who aggressively sought to profit from governmental largesse. The welfare “reform” debates of the 1990s were liberally infused with stereotypes, assumptions and misperceptions about welfare recipients, “unquestionably target[ing] women, not men” and poor black women, in particular (Appleton, 1996). Indeed, given current sensibilities about overt racial discrimination, explicit references to race by legislators were remarkable, including, for example, repeated references to the growth in black illegitimacy and crime by young, fatherless black males.

Although evidence (e.g., Gilens, 1996; White, 1995) exists that the media have promoted negative depictions of the poor since the 1960s, the question remains as to what media depictions were provided during the actual course of the welfare reform debates and implementation. Were depictions in line with the political rhetoric that tended to permeate the welfare debates? Did the news media tend to rely on unflattering depictions of unwed African American mothers on welfare? In contrast, were white females predominantly featured by the media as successfully having left welfare often through their own personal initiative? These are the overarching questions that guided our research. Based on prior research, the underlying assumption behind these questions is that news discourse from mainstream media tend to speak as one voice, reflect societal power relations, and favor those in elite positions, often privileging men over women, and whites over any other racial/ethnic group in the United States. Researchers (e.g., Bagdikian, 2000; Baker, 2002; Kellner, 1990; McChesney, 1999) have pointed out that the news media’s tendency to speak as one voice is largely due to the trend toward media conglomeration. Since the 1980s, the media have experienced unprecedented consolidation and conglomeration, and control of media outlets has been reduced sharply from about fifty principal firms in the 1980s to about six today (Bagdikian, 2000). These firms have increased in size and are some of the world’s largest corporations.

Researchers have argued that the increasing consolidation of media outlets has magnified a critical absence of diversity in media personnel, management and content. They assert that in such a media environment, with non-whites virtually unseen in the role of gatekeepers, the news media reinforce stereotypical images of people of color (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). According to Wilson and Gutierrez (1995), "Information items that conform to existing White attitudes toward other groups are ... selected for inclusion in news media and given repeated emphasis until they reach thematic proportions" (p. 157). They go on to write that "an image of non-Whites as 'problem people' ... who either have problems or cause problems for society" is supported by the themes presented in the news (p. 157). Entman (1994) also describes how the news, through framing, encourages negative stereotypes of blacks. In the news framing process, journalists, often under competitive pressure and limited resources, highlight and make more salient certain aspects of reality, while obscuring others. In doing so, Entman (1994) and others (e.g., Entman & Rojecki, 2000) have found that journalists tend to portray African-Americans as self-interested, and violent. In conducting this present study, the assumption was made that news frames are indeed reflections of power relations and with middle to upper-middle class whites still making up the majority of the mainstream news audience, when covering welfare and welfare recipients, television news will tend to echo the beliefs and values of this audience. This study attempted to empirically approach this area of research by using attribution theory as a guiding framework and analyzing, in a systematic fashion, the type of attributions made about welfare recipients. An effort was made to systematically examine whether or not race/ethnicity might have been associated with the news media's references to negative personal traits of welfare recipients.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Social psychologist Fritz Heider is often credited as the founder of attribution theory. In an attempt to understand the reasoning process that individuals go through to explain personal behaviors and actions, Heider theorized that an individual's perceived sense of responsibility for his/her own behavior varies according to the extent to which environmental factors influenced the behavior's outcome (Heider, 1953). According to his proposition, if environmental factors were seen to have greatly influenced a behavior's outcome, the degree of responsibility felt by the person would decrease.

Following Heider's work, a number of other researchers (e.g., Deschamps, 1983; Heradstveit, 1981) embarked on efforts to extrapolate from Heider's basic ideas and to formulate a testable attribution model. The empirical studies that followed found that attribution did not always occur so logically and consistently. They found that attributional biases frequently existed and that when examining attributions, a social dimension needed to be taken into account. They consistently found that the attributional processes and the emerged patterns were very dependent upon the social group to which the individual belonged and the nature of the

behavioral outcome (i.e., whether the outcome was perceived in a positive vs. a negative light). Many of their studies concluded that people tend to attribute internal personal traits or dispositional causes to positive ingroup behavior and external or situational causes to negative ingroup behavior, a pattern which some have called "egoistic attribution." For example, if an individual succeeds in attaining a grant to do research, his ingroup members may attribute his success to the individual's ingenuity (internal/dispositional); if the individual failed in receiving the grant, however, the ingroup members may attribute this to the "politics" of grant assignments (external/situational). Along with this came the general finding that positive outgroup behavior was often attributed to situational causes, while negative outgroup behavior was attributed to dispositional causes. So, if the individual who failed to receive the grant were an outgroup member, then that individual might be perceived as having failed due to lack of initiative (internal/dispositional) rather than due to any situational circumstance.

Informed by the work in attribution theory, this study investigated whether such attributional biases were evident in television news coverage of welfare recipients. With the assumption that welfare recipients are generally viewed as outgroup members, we attempted to see whether or not internal, personal characteristics were often focused upon to explain the welfare status of the individuals presented in the television news stories. Furthermore, we examined the potential role of race/ethnicity in the type of attributions provided. By doing so, we hoped to explore the question of whether or not a privileging of whites over blacks, and more specifically, white women over black women, was apparent in news coverage of welfare reform. To carry out this study, news stories presented by the major U.S. television networks from 1993 to 2000 were analyzed. We separated the timeframe into two periods in an effort to examine the existence of any differences in the framing of present and former welfare recipients during the years leading up to and following the welfare legislation of 1996.

METHOD

We searched the Vanderbilt Television News Archives for network news stories (i.e., ABC News, NBC News, CBS News, and CNN) pertaining explicitly to welfare in the United States that were aired during the period from 1993 to 2000. Keywords used in the search were "welfare," "poverty," "TANF," "AFDC," and "public assistance." The search resulted in a total of 723 stories. We then sampled 20% of the stories for each year; after excluding stories that fell beyond the domain of this research (e.g., international stories on welfare policy and poverty), stories that briefly touched on welfare or poverty, but then focused more on a different subject matter, and stories that were not complete news packages presented by reporters, we were left with a total of 107 stories.

For the quantitative content analysis of the news stories, we created two coding forms, one to code each story as a whole and the other to code featured

individuals (i.e., current or former welfare recipients) as the unit of analysis. Such main items as gender, age, race/ethnicity, reasons (dispositional versus situational) for welfare receipt, and reasons (dispositional versus situational) for welfare exit were included as variables. On the coding forms, dispositional reasons were explained as those that provide personal characteristics such as lack of initiative, or degree of intelligence, while situational reasons were those that offer systemic reasons such as adequate schooling, government assistance, or economic conditions. Two separate tests of the coding forms were conducted with two coders, and ambiguities that arose during the test runs were corrected to create the final coding forms. Using these forms, we obtained intercoder reliability figures with two new coders with extensive training in the coding method. The variables of race and gender predominantly featured in the stories both yielded Scott Pi reliability figures of 1.00, while the framing of welfare status variable yielded a figure of .73 and the framing success in leaving welfare variable yielded a reliability of .82. While the figures for welfare status and success in leaving welfare were beyond the accepted reliability rate of .70, through further discussion, systematic discrepancies were resolved between the coders and the figures rose to .92 for welfare status and .94 for success in leaving welfare.

To qualitatively examine the programs in a more in-depth manner, the three researchers analyzed a random sample of over 20% of the stories that featured individuals as former or current welfare recipients using van Dijk's (1994) method of discourse analysis as a guide. After completing the analysis, we compared notes and discussed differences and commonalities. The qualitative findings on which we were in agreement are presented below to illuminate the quantitative findings.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Our analyses revealed that for the entire timeframe, African Americans predominated among both former and current welfare recipients featured in the reviewed news stories, and that females were featured more frequently than males as both current and former welfare recipients. Of individuals featured through interviews and background information as current or former welfare recipients ($n=118$), 49.2% were black, 36.4% were white, 1.7% were Asian, 11.0% were Hispanic, and 1.7% were Native American. About three-quarters (74.6%) of current and former welfare recipients were female. A majority of women were shown as single mothers (55.7%) with only 6.8% shown as married mothers. (Status could not be determined for 37.5%). 27.1% were explicitly identified as or appeared to be teenagers.

When we separated the timeframe into two periods (1993-1996 and 1997-2000), we found that most of the stories (66%) fell in the first period versus the second (34%). Table 1 shows significant differences by race in the distribution of reasons portrayed to explain receipt of welfare during the first time period.¹¹ External or situational reasons (such as lack of jobs or transportation) were

provided for over 30% of white recipients, compared to a little over 10% for black recipients and 8% for other non-white recipients. Personal characteristics were far more often cited as explanations for receipt of welfare among blacks and other non-white groups.

While the percentage of personal characteristics explanations was also frequently provided for whites during this pre-legislation period, the percentages of situational explanations for welfare receipt for whites was high as well. As shown in Table 2, during the post-legislation period, a more drastic difference exists between blacks and whites in terms of the reasons given for explaining their welfare status. While personal characteristics were provided as reasons for over 44% of the black recipients, such reasons were not presented for the white recipients. Instead, when reasons were provided for the welfare status of whites, situational reasons were given (58.3%). No such situational reasons were provided for the black recipients. It should be cautioned here, however, that due to the small N size for the second period of our chosen timeframe, the p value of our chi-square analysis might not be reliable.

TABLE 1.
1993-1996
RACE (Former or Current Welfare Recipient) by REASONS (for Welfare Status).

	<u>Blacks</u>	<u>Whites</u>	<u>*Other</u>
<u>Personal characteristics</u>	36.7%	41.9%	41.7%
<u>External/Situational</u>	10.2%	32.3%	8.3%
<u>Both Personal/Situational</u>	10.2%	3.2%	41.7%
<u>No Reasons Provided</u>	42.9%	22.6%	8.3%
TOTAL (N = 92)	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(n=49)	(n=31)	(n=12)
$\chi^2 = 21.91$, $df = 6$, $p = .00$			
*Note: Due to small numbers, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans were combined into one group.			

Table 3 demonstrates the reasons provided for former welfare recipients' successful exits from welfare. Although situational reasons (such as programs helping individuals find jobs) were the most commonly provided explanations for blacks successfully leaving welfare, personal characteristics (such as high motivation) were most often provided for the success among whites and other races.

TABLE 2.
1997-2000
RACE (Former or Current Welfare Recipient) by REASONS (for Welfare Status).

	<u>Blacks</u>	<u>Whites</u>	<u>*Other</u>
<u>Personal characteristics</u>	44.4%	0%	0%
<u>External/Situational</u>	0%	58.3%	60.0%
<u>Both Personal/Situational</u>	0%	0%	20.0%
<u>No Reasons Provided</u>	<u>55.6%</u>	<u>41.7%</u>	<u>20.0%</u>
TOTAL (N = 26)	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(n=9)	(n=12)	(n=5)

$\chi^2 = 18.06$, $df = 6$, $p = .01$

*Note: Due to small numbers, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans were combined into one group.

We see in Table 4, that for the second time period, personal characteristics are more likely provided to explain the success of blacks leaving welfare (44.4%) compared to situational reasons (33.3%). For whites, unlike in the first time frame, all reasons given for explaining whites successfully leaving welfare are situational in nature. Again, however, we must caution that for this second period, the significance of the results may be unreliable due to the small N size.

TABLE 3.
1993-1996
RACE (Former or Current Welfare Recipient) by REASONS (for Successfully Leaving Welfare).

	<u>Blacks</u>	<u>Whites</u>	<u>*Other</u>
<u>Personal characteristics</u>	12.2%	48.4%	33.3%
<u>External/Situational</u>	30.6%	25.8%	8.3%
<u>Both Personal/Situational</u>	12.2%	12.9%	25.0%
<u>No Reasons Provided</u>	<u>44.9%</u>	<u>12.9%</u>	<u>33.3%</u>
TOTAL (N = 92)	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(n=49)	(n=31)	(n=12)

$\chi^2 = 18.28$, $df = 6$, $p = .01$

TABLE 4.
1997-2000
RACE (Former or Current Welfare Recipient) by REASONS (for Successfully Leaving Welfare).

	<u>Blacks</u>	<u>Whites</u>	<u>*Other</u>
<u>Personal characteristics</u>	44.4%	0%	0%
<u>External/Situational</u>	33.3%	75.0%	20.0%
<u>Both Personal/Situational</u>	0%	0%	20.0%
<u>No Reasons Provided</u>	<u>22.2%</u>	<u>25.0%</u>	<u>60.0%</u>
TOTAL (N = 26)	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(n=9)	(n=12)	(n=5)
$\chi^2 = 16.39, df = 6, p = .01$			

Summarizing, our quantitative analysis of the news stories showed females overwhelmingly featured in the stories as current or former welfare recipients, with African Americans predominating. In considering both time periods together, we find that personal characteristics were more often provided than situational reasons for blacks' welfare status, whereas situational reasons were more often provided for whites' welfare receipt. For example, in a January 5, 1995, NBC story, the reporter focuses on how the lack of adequate jobs has driven a white couple to welfare. In describing the couple, the reporter states, "These are not welfare deadbeats." This was not the case for the reporting of blacks; personal characteristics or dispositional reasons were more often provided. For example, in a September 18, 1995, ABC story, after focusing on a black welfare recipient who experienced going on and off of welfare, the reporter explains how such individuals are unable to retain jobs due to a deficiency in work ethics.

To explain the success of individuals who were able to leave welfare, we see that stories in the combined two time periods provided more situational reasons for both blacks and whites, but personal characteristics were used to explain success for whites twice as often as for blacks. As an example of personal characteristics highlighted to explain the success of a white individual leaving welfare, in a January 4, 1995, NBC story, the reporter discusses a white former welfare recipient's initiative in studying for her GED and embarking on a job-training program. The story then presents the woman on camera stating, "I wanted to do it to get somewhere in life." An example of a story that provided external/situational reasons for a black woman leaving welfare is a December 14, 1996, CBS story that opens with the following line: "For the first time in a dozen years, Juanita Rusaw has her own place and a steady job at a Coast Guard base doing dishes." The story then explains how a program in Miami, Florida—a program that the federal government was using as a model program—helped the woman get off of welfare and find a job.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

To better understand the findings shown in the tables above, we also conducted an in-depth qualitative study of a random sample of over 20% of the news stories featuring welfare recipients. The language and visual imagery in these stories sharply transmitted the message that welfare recipients are primarily African American women with many children. Depictions of recipients as well as their bleak surroundings underscored voice-overs by journalists that tended to reinforce stereotypes about welfare, poverty and people of color. Below, we provide thematic examples and discussion.

African Americans as predominant welfare recipients

The news stories implicitly reinforced the identification of the poor as overwhelmingly female, African American or Hispanic. For example, a 1997 story (July 2, NBC) about an optimistic government report on children first sets up a stark contrast by literally identifying "two Americas," largely defined by family structure. The contrast is supported by visual imagery of happy, healthy, two-parent white families juxtaposed against single, female-parent poor African American families.

A single black mother is quoted in this story saying, "I am the mother and father. And I'm dealing with the problem of being poor myself, and more than likely if I continue to be poor, my children will be poor..." The reporter later identifies an unmarried African American mother as part of a "national trend." A black male is presented as a "success story" who grew up in a poor, single, female-parent home but "beat the odds" to become a youth counselor.

This consistent portrayal of welfare and, therefore, poverty, as an African American issue shown on television news is in concert with Gring-Premble's (2001) finding that in Congressional committee hearings about welfare "reform," African-Americans were often featured. She calls attention to the fact that, at the same time that race was emphasized as the major feature of poverty and welfare, legislators' discussions overlooked the important role that racism, sexism, and ethnic and class discrimination play in causing poverty. The racialization of the poor helps to create distance between the societal problem of poverty and the increasing gap between rich and poor from the viewing public (McChesney, 1999). The suggestion of a link between poverty and deviant behaviors and lifestyles made in these stories also taints the public's view of the legitimacy of social welfare systems.

Women bear responsibility

News stories clearly presented welfare as a female issue. Women were predominant in news media imagery about welfare and poverty. A story presented by ABC news (December 1, 1993) during the welfare reform debates queries whether women's partners can "help" welfare recipients, clearly suggesting that the care and support of children are primarily the responsibility of mothers and

secondarily that of males. Indeed, despite the equal legal responsibility of men to share in the support of their children, we found no news stories highlighting the responsibilities that males bear for the support of their children and none emphasizing solutions involving male action.

Welfare "dependency."

Several stories suggested cycles of dependency. For example, a December 1, 1993, ABC story suggests this by featuring a single black woman who has been a welfare recipient for 18 years. After the woman is shown on-camera stating, "I didn't have no experience and I didn't want to work for no McDonalds or anything like that, so I dealt with the system." The reporter then adds, "Sharon learned that system early, growing up on welfare, having her first baby at 16, dropping out of school. Since then, welfare has made it possible for her to raise four children. She has never married their father." A January 31, 1995, CBS story features a single black woman who was on welfare for 20 years. The woman explains on camera why she was so dependent on welfare: "All I had to do was sit around and wait for the mailman. I didn't have to go to work. I didn't have to do nothing for it."

These stories clearly do not capture the prevailing patterns of welfare use at the time. In fact, the average length of time for continuous AFDC receipt was less than two years (Blank, 1989; Harris, 1993). Even after accounting for the fact that 60% of mothers who were able to leave AFDC later returned, a majority of AFDC recipients spent five or fewer total years on AFDC, and the median length of total time on AFDC was fewer than four years (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). Moreover, the story suggests that receiving public assistance was a game "to be learned" and that recipients are "taking advantage of the system" and the public's largesse by willfully refusing to work.

Personal characteristics vs. complex situational issues

Perhaps the most common recurring theme we found in our reviews of these stories was an emphasis on personal characteristics, such as lack of motivation, as explanations for poverty. Moreover, seldom were these characteristics presented as complex or multi-faceted. For example, an ABC story that aired on January 12, 1995, begins with the statement "Much of what is wrong with much of America begins with welfare." Despite the lack of any causal connection between poverty and crime, the predominant visual imagery in this report is that of black men selling drugs on the streets, black children being taken away by the police, and a black child lying in a casket.

The overwhelming message of this story is of an entire segment of the population out of sync with America and American values. It suggests that welfare causes poverty and societal problems such as violence, hopelessness, and dependence, with an omnipresent (though at-times subtle) connection between poverty and race. The reporter in this segment cites Republicans, who claim that the "problems" began in 1965 "when welfare benefits were expanded to single mothers" (ABC, January 12, 1995). In fact, single mothers had been eligible for

AFDC since its inception, and it is unclear whether this erroneous implication originated from the reporter or from the Republicans she cited. Even more telling about the apparent racialization of social welfare is that the 1965, date most probably represents the time during which welfare benefits were extended to non-white recipients.

The news coverage we examined often oversimplified the causes and effects of poverty and suggests that poverty and social welfare are leading to a decline of America. As Congressional debates emphasized the values and choices of the poor as being responsible for their failures (Gring-Pemle, 2001), the news depictions of the poor and social programs to aid them worked to legitimize such political posturing by frequently attributing poverty to individual rather than situational causes. The news stories suggest that welfare recipients are undeserving of help or empathy for the lack of sufficient resources to meet basic subsistence needs.

For example, a September 18, 1995, ABC news story features a white business owner lamenting the difficulties he had faced retaining former welfare recipients as workers. After footage of a former black welfare recipient is shown, the business owner appears on camera saying, "It took me a while to realize that there are people out there who really just don't want to work." The reporter then states that this employer, "after five years of hiring dozens of people who failed drug tests, showed up late, or didn't show up at all... finally has a stable work force." Over this soundbite, white female workers working conscientiously at their work-stations are pictured. The employer appears on camera again to state, "I can train someone to disassemble a phone and put it back together again. I can't train that person to have a good attitude about work and show up on time and so on."

The story creates a gender-racial dichotomy of white workers who can be trained and black workers who lack the motivation to maintain employment. The focus on this story is on personal effort, motivation and attitude, de-emphasizing complex issues such as transportation and adequate child care. It disconnects structural issues that contribute to poverty as well as disassociating the idea of upward job mobility, transferable skills, a living wage and benefits from job motivation. In contrast to the employer's and reporter's apparent oversimplification of the issues facing poor women, the women interviewed for the story raise complex institutional issues that are ripe for public debate. Ironically, the recipients interviewed for the story query whether they had the appropriate skills to get a job, asking how they will be able to make ends meet earning minimum wage, and whether it is possible to balance a job with raising children. The amount of time spent on these significant societal questions, however, is minimal in the news story.

Stories suggested a high degree of agency in poverty, implying that African Americans make choices (most focusing on sexual responsibility and work) that place and keep them in poverty. They exorcise any discussion of institutional structures that contribute to maintenance of an underclass from the public domain. Rather than take the opportunity to open debate about the complex socio-political

questions involved in poverty and welfare, news stories more frequently described welfare receipt as evidence of a "lack of work ethic" (ABC, September 18, 1995).

A similar story that aired on CBS strongly suggests that a positive attitude is the solution to poverty, depicting a white single mother of two who had successfully moved from welfare to work. The woman states, "Now that I'm on the other end, I can now say 'get a job.' I know you can. You can't give me an excuse of why you're not working." Acknowledging the appeal of such an approach, the reporter nevertheless points out the lack of jobs in certain areas. The story closes by showing the white woman featured in the beginning of the story working, smiling, picking up her two boys at school as the reporter concludes that the state must find a way to encourage the poor to leave welfare for work.

Although complex issues such as child care, health care, lack of jobs, transportation, and the adequacy of public education were mentioned briefly in some of the stories we reviewed, they were not featured as central issues worthy of public debate. Instead, these stories explicitly and implicitly drew on familiar stereotypes about black women and the poor to suggest individual failings as the cause of poverty. Men and societal institutions were largely absent from the news coverage as significant players in the lives of poor women and their children. Women were depicted as perpetually poor, despite statistics that show that welfare tends to be a temporary solution for the majority of recipients. Nor did the coverage explain the circumstances that force many families to rely on government benefits to tide them over in emergencies.

An ABC story that aired on December 12, 1996, illustrates the most simplistic approach by featuring "Bottomless Closet," a program that provides professional wardrobes for women who are leaving welfare for paid employment. Calling the program "a final helping hand" and featuring images of well-dressed women of diverse races in offices, the story fails to discuss or acknowledge complex issues such as lack of child care and transportation, health and mental health needs, and lack of training and educational resources. Moreover, it highlights the news media's focus on the visual and often superficial. Rather than critically examine poverty, the news stories about one of the most important public policy and legislative changes of the last century failed to dig beyond the surface. Clearly no single story can provide in-depth coverage of every issue, but this story fails even to acknowledge the complexity. The finding sustains what others have written regarding how "women's work" often goes unvalued in the Western culture (Wood, 1994).

Welfare recipients as animals

The news stories also reflected an extreme lack of empathy for welfare recipients and the effort to distance welfare from the mainstream by illustrating the willingness of politicians to associate welfare recipients with animals. Blatant pejorative comparisons of welfare recipients to animals were a recurring theme. For example, an ABC story that aired on January 12, 1995, cites Senator Newt Gingrich

stating, "The current welfare system is turning children into young animals and they are killing each other. There's a level of barbarism in this society we wouldn't have dreamed of when we were children." Despite the offensive nature of the statement and the lack of any empirical data to support it, the statement, when aired, was left unchallenged. As McChesney (1999) has stressed in his work, the failure to present counterpoints to important and controversial issues blunts the multidimensionality of complex issues and may tend to give greater weight to the viewpoints presented.

An ABC story (March 24, 1995) on the repeal of AFDC and reform of the PRWOR features a Florida Congressman with a sign reading "Don't Feed the Alligators." A representative is heard saying, "We post these warnings because unnatural feeding and artificial care creates dependency." Next, a Wyoming representative compares recipients to caged wolves, stating, "Just like any animal in the species, any mammal, when you take away their freedom and dignity, and their ability, they can't provide for themselves."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how network television news covered welfare reform in the 1990s. Based on prior research, the expectation was that the news media might use negative gender and race images of welfare recipients in their coverage. More specifically, we expected to find stereotypes of unwed, black mothers, tied to welfare due to personal characteristics highlighted as reasons for welfare reform, while white female mothers who successfully left welfare due to personal initiatives shown as proof that a new form of welfare would work. We found in our study that for our chosen timeframe (1993-2000), a majority of the news stories regarding welfare in the United States fell into the first period of 1993 to 1996. Thus, it appears that welfare was more of a major news coverage issue during the pre-legislation period. This suggests the issue was not deemed significant enough to cover once the new welfare programs were in place. Furthermore, we found through our content analysis of the news stories that the news media tended to depict the typical welfare recipient as being female and black. While it is true that governmental data show that most of welfare recipients are female, blacks do not make up the majority. In fact, the percentages of black recipients and white recipients from 1993 to 2000 were comparable (Administration of Children and Families, 2003). It should also be pointed out that according to governmental data, for the years under study, only 6 to 7 percent of the adult recipients were teenagers (Administration of Children and Families, 2003). Our analysis of the television news stories found that over 27 percent of the adult welfare recipients were shown as teens, therefore, potentially adding force to the stereotype of the welfare recipient as being black, female, and a teenager.

The content analysis also revealed that attributional biases did exist in terms of how the welfare status and welfare exit of blacks and whites were

explained. While the welfare status of blacks were often attributed to personal characteristics, the reasons for welfare receipt among whites were attributed to situational reasons. Black recipients depicted in the news stories were often shown as responsible for their welfare status, with little acknowledgement of structural forces or the environment that might have been responsible for their welfare status. With regard to the successful exit from welfare, the news stories tended to attribute situational reasons for both whites and blacks; however, they were more often providing personal characteristics to explain a white individual's success in leaving welfare than they were for a black individual. Thus, although, overall, the journalists were inclined to give social institutions and programs credit for helping to reduce welfare numbers, they were more likely to give credit to a white recipient for successfully leaving welfare than they were to a black recipient.

The qualitative portion of this research buttressed the above findings by illustrating how news stories frequently showed black female welfare recipients as unwed, raising several children "alone," and often in less than desirable living conditions. In contrast, the stories showed white females living in more pristine surroundings, having successfully pulled themselves out of welfare through conscientious effort and a new social welfare system. Complex structural and social issues involving why these women and their children were poor and reliant upon welfare either went unrecognized or were down played.

The implications of the news media framing of welfare recipients as found in this research are formidable. The possibility exists that they not only reinforce the negative schemas the American public has had regarding women and blacks over the years, they also influence public opinion about the necessity of welfare programs. For past studies (Gilens, 1995; Iyengar, 1987, 1991; Iyengar & Simon, 1993) have shown that how a particular social group or issue is framed by the news media affects how the public reacts to that group or issue. By feminizing the poor, showing them as predominantly black, associating negative connotations with the poor, and ignoring systemic causes for poverty, the news media make it easier for individuals, as well as legislators, to dismiss programs that may improve social structures to aid the poor.

Certain limitations do, however, exist with this study. One limitation is the use of a sample of news stories from one medium to represent news media framing of public assistance recipients. Ideally, we would want to examine the visual and narrative images presented through newspapers, radio, and the Internet to provide a more comprehensive picture. Yet it is recognized that most Americans now rely on the television medium as its primary source for news and information (Straubhaar & LaRose, 2000). For the average American, it is still the medium that potentially has the greatest impact in terms of opinion formation.

A second limitation lies in our concentration on network news. The first aspect of this limitation is that local news and other cable news programs were not included in the sample. Of course, during the timeframe of our study, cable

television was not as widespread as it is now. Since the late 1990s, however, cable television has taken a steady share of network television audiences (National Cable Television Association, 2004). Therefore, it would be reasonable now to do a study that compares news content between cable news versus traditional broadcast television news. The second aspect of this limitation lies in the fact that entertainment programs were not considered. Although we might speculate that the images in such programming are likely to be consistent with those presented in the news, we collected no data to support that speculation. Future studies should perhaps concentrate on how the poor or the issue of poverty are depicted in entertainment-oriented programs.

One of the strengths of our research is that we approached the subject in a systematic manner. Past studies pertaining to the images of poverty or public assistance have tended to rely on anecdotal evidence. With attribution theory serving as a guide, we systematically looked at the reasons provided for welfare receipt and successful welfare exit. In addition, we examined not only news framing of black welfare recipients, which past studies have tended to focus upon, but also the framing of white welfare recipients. By doing so, we were able to make comparisons based on differences and similarities found in their news portrayals. A future study might examine the influences that attributional framing has on viewers in terms of their degree of sympathy for the individuals depicted in the news stories and their likelihood of supporting social welfare programs. Investigating the effects of race/ethnicity and news framing, in terms of presenting personal characteristics versus situational reasons for explaining welfare receipt, would make for an interesting study.

Another strength of our research is that, through a systematic sampling method, we were able to represent the major network news programming during the welfare reform years and make a pre and post legislation period comparison. Unfortunately, our findings showed that the sample size was too small during the second period to make reliable conclusions about any perceived differences between how welfare recipients were covered before and after the passage of the PWORA. As mentioned earlier, however, these findings do suggest that without a major legislative action taking place, welfare or poverty, in general, is not considered a significant issue by the news media.

Finally, in this research, we were able to highlight the use of racialized and gendered imagery of welfare recipients by the news media. Through our literature review and our present findings, we demonstrated the close intersection between the political rhetoric used by the welfare reformers and the news media imagery of the poor and welfare recipients. The possibility that the news media may improve the accuracy of representations of the poor and their experiences is grim. With the trend toward media conglomeration and global capitalism showing no signs of slowing, it is unlikely that corporate-owned news media operations will devote the necessary time and resources to produce more balanced and equitable images. Regardless of the fact that journalists are trained to be objective and carry

out the watchdog role of representing the public interest, it appears the mainstream news media will continue to effectively shut out the very voices they purport to represent.

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