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The 'Welfare Queen' Experiment

How Viewers React to Images of African-American Mothers on Welfare

By Franklin D. Gilliam Jr.

How we come to understand the world around us, according to Walter Lippmann, is a function of the "pictures in our heads." Lippmann hypothesized that the news media plays a critical role in the formation of these images. In the three-quarters of a century since the publication of Lippmann's "Public Opinion," a wealth of scholarly literature has supported his original formulation.

It is now commonly believed that the news media generally, and television in particular, are the primary sources for most Americans in shaping their views about public issues. Thirty or so years of communications research shows that the media can influence what issues people pay attention to (their agenda-setting role). How the media highlight issues can lead readers and viewers to make judgments about politicians and policies (their so-called "priming" role). And finally, it is clear that qualitative aspects of news reporting determine how people think about public problems and their remedies (their "framing" role). In short, as we all recognize, news coverage influences public opinion.

One of the more controversial issues on the American domestic agenda is social welfare policy. The near unanimity surrounding the "Great Society" programs and policies of the mid-to-late 1960's has given way to discord and dissonance. Conservative thinkers and politicians first launched attacks on the "welfare state" in the aftermath of the civil rights disturbances of the late 1960's and early 1970's. While Barry Goldwater, George Wallace and Richard Nixon charted the course, Ronald Reagan encapsulated the white majority's growing unease with the perceived expansion of the social welfare apparatus. In particular, Reagan was able to forge a successful top-down coalition between big business and disaffected white working-class voters. The intellectual core of the movement was a well-funded punditry class that offered a theoretical vision for the "New Right." While this perspective touched on the cornerstones of American political philosophy individualism and egalitarianism it also carried with it a heavy undercurrent of gender and racial politics.

In the midst of this evolving political landscape on which new debates about welfare ensued, the news media played and continues to play a critical role in the public's understanding of what "welfare" ought to be. Utilizing a novel experimental design, I wanted to examine the impact of media portrayals of the "welfare queen" (Reagan's iconic representation of the African-American welfare experience) on white people's attitudes about welfare policy, race and gender.

My assumption going into this study was that the notion of the welfare queen had taken on the status of common knowledge, or what is known as a "narrative script." The welfare queen script has two key components welfare recipients are disproportionately women, and women on welfare are disproportionately African-American. What I discovered is that among white subjects, exposure to these script elements reduced support for various welfare programs, increased stereotyping of African-Americans, and heightened support for maintaining traditional gender roles. And these findings have implications both for the practice of journalism and the development of constructive relations across the lines of race and gender.

The 'Welfare Queen' as a Narrative Script

Social psychologists developed the notion of scripts to refer to "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer." The utility of

scripts lies in their ability to distill information, thus aiding in quicker comprehension. Scripts set up predictable roles and actions that, in turn, offer clear indicators of what is most likely to follow from them.

The narrative (or storytelling) script for the welfare queen has two central features. First, it tells us that the majority of welfare recipients are women. Of course, the data show otherwise. The largest single group "on welfare" is children about one in every four kids under the age of 18 receives welfare benefits. Nonetheless, given this script, most of the public connects welfare to gender. For instance, the "feminization of poverty" is a common explanation of American poverty rates.

This script then leads people to the next step in this association, what could be called a "gender narrative" poor women choose to be on welfare because they fail to adhere to a set of core American values. From this perspective, single motherhood, divorce, desertion and a failure to hold the family unit together become the causes of their impoverished condition. In short, welfare dependency is a function of the moral failings of poor women. Their unwillingness to adhere to the principles of hard work, family values and sexual control thus deem them as undeserving.

The second key image that emerges from the welfare queen script is that most women on welfare are African- American. While African-American women do represent more than one-third of the women on welfare, in census data released in 1998 they accounted for only a bit more than 10 percent of the total number of welfare recipients.

This narrative script skillfully locating the "intersection" of race and gender was given its most public voice by then-candidate Reagan on the 1976 campaign trail. During that election Reagan often recited the story of a woman from Chicago's South Side who was arrested for welfare fraud. "She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names." David Zucchino, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, spent a year with two welfare mothers in Philadelphia and wrote "The Myth of the Welfare Queen." According to Zucchino, "[T]he image of the big-spending, lavish-living, Cadillac-driving welfare queen was by then thoroughly embedded in American folklore."

The implicit racial coding is readily apparent. The woman Reagan was talking about was African-American. Veiled references to African-American women, and African-Americans in general, were equally transparent. In other words, while poor women of all races get blamed for their impoverished condition, African-American women commit the most egregious violations of American values. This story line taps into stereotypes about both women (uncontrolled sexuality) and African-Americans (laziness).

Patricia Hill Collins, a leading feminist scholar, professor and author of the book "Black Feminist Thought," outlines this script when she observes: "[S]he is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. The welfare mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality."

It does appear fair to conclude that the welfare queen narrative script has succeeded in imprinting stereotypic racial and gender images in the minds of many Americans.

Welfare Attitudes and the News Media

There is little doubt that the media contributed to conveying the narrative script about the welfare queen. An exhaustive content analysis of welfare stories in newsmagazines and network television news was done by Yale political scientist Martin Gilens. The content analysis of print

covered the 1960's through 1992; the TV content analysis covered 1988-1994. The studies, which were published in 1996 and 1997, found the following:

- Sixty-two percent of poverty stories that appeared in TIME, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report featured African-Americans.
- Sixty-five percent of network television news stories about welfare featured African-Americans.
- Fewer African-Americans are portrayed in "sympathetic" stories about poverty and welfare
- Newsmagazines depict almost 100 percent of the "underclass" as African-Americans.

Gilens concludes, "Clearly then, the overrepresentation of African-Americans found in weekly newsmagazines is not unique to this particular medium but is shared by the even more important medium of network television news."

Thus, as seen through the eyes of the media, there are more blacks than whites who live in poverty. Gilens also found that the public dramatically overestimates the number of African-Americans in poverty and similarly, in our surveys, we find that people underestimate the number of poor whites.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the type of coverage that Gilens found does have an impact on public opinion about race and welfare. For example, in a series of laboratory experiments, Shanto Iyengar found that by seeing a black welfare mother in the television news, viewers were more likely to attribute the cause of her poverty to individual failings, rather than to any public policy. Given the lack of meaningful inter-group interaction, most white Americans learn about blacks (and other minorities) through the lens of a distant camera. What this camera focuses on, who it gives voice to, and what it excludes all influence how people think about race-related issues.

Television News: Race, Gender and Welfare Coverage

In our recent experiment to evaluate how these ingredients of race, gender and welfare coverage intersect and interact, we conducted an experiment in which the only difference between what two groups of viewers saw involved images of race and gender. Participants watched one of four television news stories about the impact of welfare reform on a woman we named Rhonda Germaine. In the story that we created for our experimental news broadcast, Rhonda worries about the impact of the new welfare laws on her ability to care for her children. A still picture of Rhonda appears at two points in the story; each time it appears, it remains on the screen for about five seconds.

Our viewers were randomly assigned to one of four groups. The first watched this news story with Rhonda cast as a white woman. The second group saw the same story with Rhonda depicted as an African-American woman. The third group watched the welfare story without seeing any visual representation of Rhonda. The final group was a control group that did not watch any TV news broadcast about welfare.

Each viewer watched an 11-minute videotaped newscast, including commercials, to make this experience as realistic as possible. Our report on welfare was inserted into the middle position of the newscast following the first commercial break. We described the segment as having been selected at random from a news program broadcast during the past week.

This study was administered at a major shopping mall in Los Angeles. Those people who agreed to participate were given instructions in terms of how the process would go, and then each completed a short questionnaire concerning their social background, political ideology, level of

interest in political affairs, and media habits. They then watched the videotape of the newscast. At the end of the videotape, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire probing their political and social views. After completing this questionnaire, they were debriefed in full (including a full explanation of the experimental procedures) and were paid the sum of \$15.

The post-test questionnaire explored respondents' attitudes on a wide range of issues related to welfare, race and gender.



Gilliam altered the race of the woman portrayed in a welfare reform TV story to test viewers' perceptions of gender and race.

Three different categories of attitudes were addressed. The first pertained to their attitudes about the causes of and solutions to welfare. I was able to measure the number of people who believe that individual failings were the cause of welfare. On their questionnaires, this group of viewers indicated that they believe welfare recipients cheat and defraud the system, that they abuse the system by staying on too long, that welfare undermines the work ethic, and that welfare encourages teenagers to have kids out of wedlock. They also tend to indicate a high level of opposition to various public assistance programs (e.g., AFDC, food stamps, subsidized housing and health care).

The second set of attitudes is related to racial beliefs. I was able to determine the percentage of people who endorsed negative stereotypes about African-Americans. I did this by eliciting responses about perceptions that African-Americans are lazy, sexually promiscuous, not law-abiding and undisciplined. I also computed the percentage of participants whose views and attitudes were described in more subtle terms. Included in this category were phrases such as "blacks don't try hard enough," "they should pull themselves up by their bootstraps," and "there is not much discrimination nowadays."

Finally, attitudes about gender were numerically measured by the percentage of people who preferred women to play more "traditional" gender roles. These attitudes emerged from responses to such statements as "the husband should be the achiever outside of the home," "working women do not have as close a bond with their children as mothers who stay at home," and "a preschool child is likely to suffer if mom works."

The Results

The first finding is that the welfare queen script has assumed the status of common knowledge. When white subjects were asked to recall what they had seen in the newscasts, nearly 80

percent of them accurately recalled the race of the African-American Rhonda. On the other hand, less than 50 percent accurately recalled seeing the white Rhonda.

As expected, people were extremely accurate in their recall of the race and gender of the recipient. For example, only three of 136 people in this part of the study recalled seeing a man.

When I then assessed the effects of television news on viewer opinions, I compared the responses of white participants who did or did not watch a story about welfare. The only effect was on attitudes surfaced in terms of views about gender roles. Those who saw our stories about welfare were 12 percent more likely to support women's traditional roles.

I also contrasted responses among subjects who viewed the welfare story and did not have a visual cue and those who saw our welfare story featuring Rhonda Germaine (either a white or African-American image of a woman). I expected that participants who saw a woman in the story would be more likely to endorse traditional women's roles, oppose welfare spending, and cite individual causal attributions.

Not only was my expectation wrong but two other results emerged. First, seeing a woman in the news story actually decreased opposition to welfare spending. Second, exposure to a welfare queen in the news significantly increased support for negative characterizations of African-Americans by an average of 10 percent.

Finally, I examined the racial effects by comparing those white viewers who were exposed to the white Rhonda and those who watched the welfare story featuring the black Rhonda. The general expectation was that exposure to the quintessential welfare queen script (i.e. the black Rhonda) would increase anti-black sentiments, heighten opposition to welfare spending, and lead more people to cite individual failing as the cause of welfare.

The results were somewhat mixed. True to form, exposure to the full confirmation of the script (i.e. black Rhonda) increased opposition to welfare spending by five percent and showed a 10 percent rise in an attribution of cause to individual failings. Likewise, white participants who watched the welfare story with the black Rhonda were more likely to hold negative views of African-Americans than those who did not have a visual cue. Contrary to expectations, however, exposure to the white Rhonda produced the biggest increase in anti-black sentiment. That is, watching a story with the white Rhonda increased negative depictions of blacks by 12 percent compared to the black Rhonda and by 23 percent over the story without a picture.

One speculative explanation builds on results from other parts of this study. For instance, white subjects who watched the white version of the welfare story compared to those who watched the black version were most likely to see women as violating the "family ethic" of the story. Thus, in a perverse way, white women were "privileged" or valued in a way that African-American women are not.

Most interestingly, people who espouse the most "liberal" views about gender roles turn out to be the most hostile to blacks when they are exposed to the white Rhonda. Put differently, the most gender-liberal white participants appear to be most likely to implicitly blame African-Americans for the plight of their racial peers, and there is early evidence to suggest that this tendency is most pronounced among women.

This welfare queen experiment yields several important insights that pertain to media coverage. First, there is no doubt that there exists a narrative script about welfare that has taken on the imprimatur of common knowledge.

Second, when this script is fully realized (i.e., with the black woman shown as the image) it leads viewers to oppose welfare spending, cite individual attributions as causes for social problems, and endorse negative characterizations of African-Americans.

And gender plays an intriguing role in all of this. Seeing any welfare story apparently makes viewers more supportive of traditional gender roles for women. But it is exposure to the white version of the welfare story that heightens support the most. Depictions of white welfare queens also seem to induce whites who describe themselves as having liberal views about gender roles to arrive at extremely harsh views of African-Americans.

These findings that exposure to this script encourages viewers to perceive welfare as being caused by individual shortcomings, to oppose federal spending on welfare programs, and to prefer that women play traditional gender roles have implications for the practice of journalism.

First, broadcasters should be encouraged to more accurately reflect the real world of welfare. Most welfare recipients are children and most welfare recipients are not African-American. Second, the knee-jerk response of simply showing more white women on welfare would not reduce polarizing racial effects. The evidence from this study suggests that exposure to white welfare mothers actually makes white viewers feel more negatively toward blacks. Third, the welfare script, as seen frequently on broadcast news, contributes to racial hostility.

These findings should, by themselves, prompt journalists to become ever more vigilant in assessing the potential consequences of the visual cues they send out.

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