

R&R: Framing the Poor: Media Coverage and US Poverty Policy, 1960-2008

The authors are to be commended for making considerable changes to this paper in response to some of the reviewer comments. This new paper is a serious response and is subsequently now more sure of its contribution: documenting changes in framing of poverty and showing a corresponding change in government spending on the poor (using their new measure of poverty). Because of this, the article no longer reads as two papers being forced together. The linkage is clear.

The authors have not, however, responded to one of the two major critiques originally offered. The literature does not suggest that the “disorder” and “underclass” frames should be understood as promoting more generous means-tested programs. The relationships are much more nuanced, contextual, and temporally drawn. For instance, Richard Fording showed in his 1997 AJPS article that the effect of protest (“disorder”) is contingent upon the strength of the insurgent group and electoral conditions. Thus, disorder can regularly lead to cutbacks in means-tested programs not generosity. In addition, as Gans (1995), Schram (1995), Katz (1989), Gilens (1999) and others have suggested, the meaning of “underclass” term changed over the very course of the author’s analysis in ways relevant to expanding or pulling back means-tested social welfare programs. In the 1970s, the underclass term and associated discussion was primarily economic but in the 1980s and 1990s “underclass” and underclass behavior became a more explicitly behavioral and evaluative. It came to symbolize “all that was wrong” with poor people. This article then properly frames articles on underclass behavior in the 1970s as pushing for more generous social welfare programs. From the early 1980s on, however, the articles coded as “underclass” should be placed in the “stingy” category. This issue was brought forth in the original review.

As to coding and inter-coder reliability, the author’s summary page correctly notes that selection of articles for inclusion need not be subjected to inter-coder reliability scores as they are using the NYTimes search terms and followed an iterative process in developing these. However, I am not convinced that the search terms listed in Table 2 can be proxies for reading the articles (or abstracts) to determine the frames. Rather, the authors should each code the content of article in one of two fashions:

- (1) Read all article uncovered, code for one of the 5 frames inductively derived (and subframes), and then check inter-coder reliability scores between coders. A sampling approach for one of the coders to assess inter-coder reliability, and hence reliability and validity, is also acceptable.
- (2) Provide a systematic check using inter-coder reliability scores that the search terms used to place the articles in frame categories are, indeed, reliable and valid. Here each coder would take the same sample of articles without knowing where their search terms “placed the frame” to see if their frame search terms match what actually reading the article produced as a frame category. The authors may already have these scores but they are not in the article.

As is obvious from two strategies outlined, the fact that the authors did not read the content of all articles (or abstracts) to place in frame categories is troubling. I can be convinced with the

strategies above but, as written, this basic tenet in most content analyses of newspaper articles is missing. Inter-coder reliability scores are vital to assess reliability and validity using one of those two fashions.

Small point: cut the literature areview on measures of poverty substantially. The points can be made more succinctly and the length of that review loses steam in connecting the two major empirical potions of the paper.