

Communicating About Poverty and Low-Wage Work: A New Agenda



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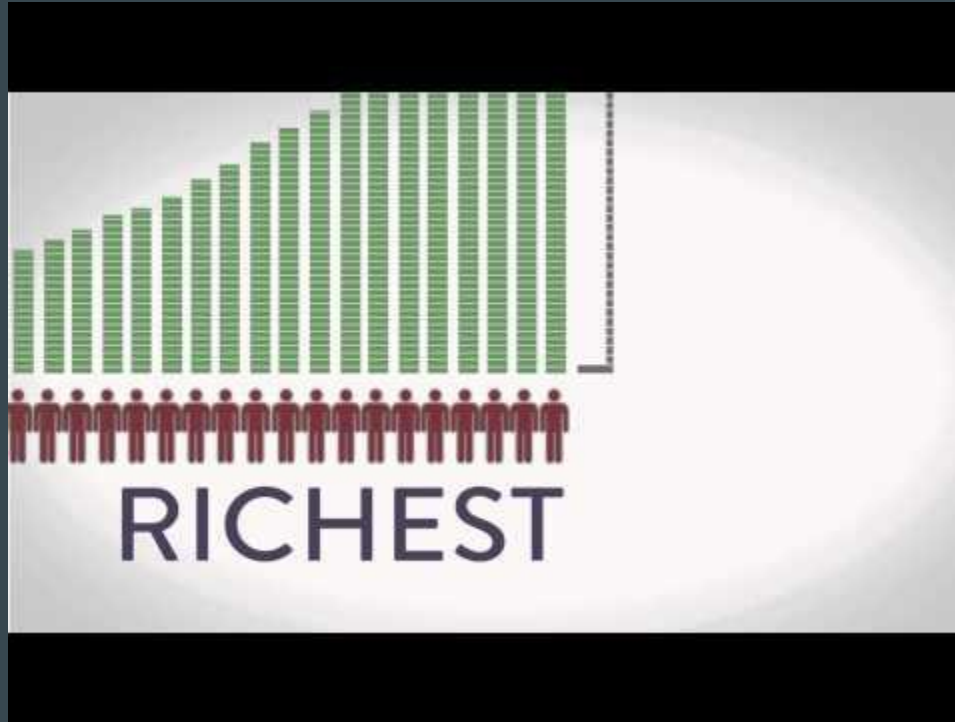
Agenda

- 1) The Issue
- 2) Core Values, Strategies, and Patterns in the Media
- 3) Research About Poverty
- 4) “Framing”: Developing a New Framework for Poverty Policy
- 5) Recommendations
- 6) Discussion Questions

The Issue

- 1 in 3 jobs in the US pay low wages (35 million Americans)
- The discourse surrounding poverty policy uses the “language of poverty”
- The language places the roots of poverty in the same problematic mental boxes related to race, individualism, and moral failings, as opposed to structural factors

The Issue



Source: "Global Wealth Inequality" by therules.org

Core Values, Stereotypes, and Patterns in Media

- Competing Values : Individualism and Humanitarianism
- US National Election Study: Different Responses
- The question of “Deserving” and “Undeserving” Poor
 - Deserving: widows with children, people with physical disabilities and illnesses
 - Undeserving: teen mothers, single moms, and able-bodied men

(Nisbet, 6)

Core Values, Stereotypes, and Patterns in Media

- Racist stereotypes are very present in poverty discourse, for example: “blacks are poor and lazy” (Nisbet, 7)
- 1985-1991 : amount of black people who were poor stayed roughly the same, whereas “media portrayals of black poverty increased” (Nisbet, 7)
- Portrayal of “black welfare queen” as “lazy, sexually promiscuous, law breakers, and undisciplined” (Nisbet, 7)

Core Values, Stereotypes, and Patterns in Media

- Focus on “responsibility and blame” (Nisbet, 8)
- TV and the News influence who is targeted
- “Episodic” rather than “Thematic” news coverage : Focus on specific incident rather than the structural issues that cause poverty

Research About Poverty

- Conservatives pre-Welfare Reform used Welfare as an explanation for factors associated with poverty due to perceived “lifelong dependency on government assistance” (Nisbet, 9)
- Welfare reform under Clinton focused on “welfare to work”(Nisbet, 9) which was more focused on individualism in the form of responsibilities to try and get more public support
- Did not change attitudes towards Welfare

“Framing”: Developing a New Framework for Poverty Policy

- The way an issue is framed affects public opinion/support - “interpretative schema”(Nisbet, 13)
- 1996 Bill issued titled : “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act” → Personal Responsibility
- Need to develop a framework that shows "the linkages between their everyday lives, their specific values, and the problems associated with poverty”(Nisbet, 12)

“Framing”: Developing a New Framework for Poverty Policy

- Certain frames can “activate the core values of either individualism or humanitarianism” (Nisbet, 14)
- In developing policies to deal with poverty, avoiding these triggers may be beneficial

Framing: Example

"Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare reform should expand work requirements or increase aid to low-income families. Welfare critics argue that recent welfare reform legislation doesn't go far enough to require recipients to work for their benefits. They would like to see tougher work requirements on welfare benefits."

V.S.

"Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare should expand work requirements or increase aid to low-income families. Welfare supporters and defenders warn that further restrictions on welfare benefits would hurt children and the poor. They argue that welfare reform should aim to reduce poverty and assist needy families."

(Nisbet, 14-15)

“Framing”: Developing a New Framework for Poverty Policy

- “Sympathy for the Poor” V.s. “Responsible Economic Planning”
- Prioritization of the economy makes this frame more effective
 - E.g: Focusing on “economy, jobs, and the future of prosperity” rather than “poverty, the poor, and the working poor” (Nisbet, 19)

Conclusion - Key Recommendations I

Do the research

Employ focus groups, experiments, and surveys to further identify and test alternative messages and frameworks.

Stay on message

Conservatives have perpetuated narrow frameworks about the issues, so progressives should aim to fund and investigate new messages about poverty and low-wage work through national communication summits on these issues, for example.

(Nisbet, 22-24)

Conclusion - Key Recommendations II

Break the tyranny of the news peg

What types of news events and story pitches successfully generate both print and television news attention, result in an emphasis on preferred frames, and reach key targeted audiences?

Sponsor social media campaigns

Put a public face on policy debates, build activist networks, and catalyze social action.

Facilitate incidental exposure

News coverage and social documentaries will reach an attentive public, so it is important to seek coverage at entertainment outlets.

(Nisbet, 22-24)

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are your thoughts on and experiences with poverty discourse? What problems have you identified?
- 2) Do you find that some groups might be more responsive to personalizing issues of poverty than others, for example those who have experienced poverty? What impact do you think this may have on research and poverty discourse?
- 3) Does framing poverty policy as “responsible economic planning” fully address the issue of race or intersectionality? How can this be achieved?
- 4) Do you think the recommendations are comprehensive enough? If so, why? If not, what would you add?

Thank you for your attention.

