

When Race Matters: What Newspaper Opinion Pieces Say About Race and Poverty

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This article investigates discussions of race and poverty in newspaper opinion pieces during a period of welfare reform debates in the United States, 1994–2010. Results show that, often, the poor are identified as deserving of societal support, and outside entities (external causes) are identified as the source of their hardship. However, when the poor are identified by race, how contributors say poverty should be remedied shifts. When identified as African Americans, poor individuals are blamed for their poverty and solutions obviate structural explanations. Our research advances dialogue around the racialization of poverty and creates an opportunity to understand the relationship between public discussions of race and poverty and shifts in policy.

Keywords: race and ethnicity, political communication, poverty, culture of poverty theory, news media

Since the official end of American enslavement, the problem of a disproportionate poverty rate among Black Americans has remained a persistent social problem in the United States (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). With poverty rates of 20% or higher for Blacks in 43 states and 35% or higher in Iowa, Maine, Mississippi, and Wisconsin,¹ African Americans are also more likely than Whites to experience hardships that are often connected to poverty, including overincarceration and inconsistent employment (Alexander, 2012; Macartney et al., 2013). The release of the Moynihan Report in 1965 sparked a bitter controversy among social scientists, politicians, and the general public about the causes of poverty in general and Black, urban poverty in particular. At the heart of the report was the idea of a “culture of poverty”—a culture of pathological, dysfunctional values that the poor pass on to their children from generation to generation.

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¹ Rates taken from Macartney et al. (2013) represent the period 2007–2011.

The culture of poverty model ignores problems of access to wider opportunities. Thus, as sociologist William Ryan (1976) argued, cultural explanations of poverty “blame the victim,” a phrase Ryan himself coined. In other words, blaming continued or chronic poverty on the poor’s own culture is to blame the poor as opposed to their circumstances and the structures out of which their poverty arises.

Since then, the culture of poverty debate—poverty as internal to the culture of the impoverished versus poverty due to structural factors such as lack of opportunity or prejudice—has waxed and waned with different policy decisions and national circumstances. For example, after waning in the late 1970s, the debate picked up again in the 1990s as the Clinton administration proceeded to abolish welfare as it had been known. Today, as opinion columnists Patricia Cohen (2010) and Charles Blow (2013) note in *The New York Times*, cultural explanations for poverty have returned. One example of the return is sociologist Orlando Patterson’s (2006) opinion piece in *The New York Times* alluding to a “poverty of the mind” (p. 13), implying again a cultural explanation for poverty.

One thing, however, has changed. With the so-called cultural turn in sociology, sociologists (see, e.g., Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986) now tend to combine the notions of culture and structure so that it is more difficult to separate the two (Porpora, 2015). Exceptions to this trend are sociologists such as Wilson (2010) or even Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010), who continue to resist accounts of poverty that are entirely cultural.

How sociologists approach that question is one thing; the purpose of this article is to examine how poverty has been approached in the media, specifically on the opinion pages of American newspapers. When poverty is discussed in opinion pieces (both unsigned editorials and signed op-eds), and particularly when it is discussed in connection with race, do the explanations tend to be in terms of individual actors, of culture, or of objective structural circumstances? That is the main question we sought to answer. Specifically, we examined the terms—individual, culture, or structure—in which opinion pieces tend to explain the poverty of African Americans.

Three Ways of Explaining Poverty

As indicated, poverty is explained in three main ways. The first and most common way is to blame poor individuals themselves for their poverty. The second explanation is cultural or based in the culture of poverty theory, which blames the poor one step removed: Instead of blaming poor individuals directly, what is blamed is the culture they imbibe and pass onto their children. Alternatively and finally, poverty may be explained objectively, not in terms of what is inside people’s heads but in terms of the material opportunity structure they confront. The appropriate explanation for poverty may involve all three factors, but policy will depend on their proportional contribution. The question then is which, if any, of these factors is the main cause of poverty.

Individual Blame

Research shows that what one thinks of the poor tends to depend on one’s belief in the American income structure as a meritocracy, that is, as a system that allocates economic rewards based on

individual merit. Given America's strong individualism, people tend to associate poverty with a lack of personal responsibility (Epstein, 2004; Gilens, 2009; Hunt, 1996; Shaw & Shapiro, 2002). Thus, if Americans tend to hold negative images of the poor and those on welfare, it is because they tend to attribute poverty less to unequal social opportunities than to individual deficiencies (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Epstein, 2004; Iyenger, 1991). However, as explored in the concept of "laissez-faire racism," the idea that individual merit affects one's status in life does not square with the continued structural inequalities between Black and White in the nation (Bobo & Kluegel, 1997); extra ideological work must be done to understand the special circumstances of the Black individual and Black poverty.

As the current study demonstrates, the tendency to blame poverty on the poor is compounded when race is involved. Media scholars such as Gilens (1996) and Entman and Rojecki (2001) have established that although a plurality of welfare recipients are White, the media overrepresent the poor as ethnoracial minorities and in particular as African American. The studies of media scholars thus echo the findings of sociologists: Because media representations of public assistance recipients continually depict them as racial minorities, many Americans feel that the poor mostly are racial minorities who are lazy and unwilling to support themselves (Busselle & Crandall, 2002; Feagin, Tilly, & Williams, 1972; Gilens, 1996, 2009; Sotirovic, 2001, 2003). Such views reinforce an understanding of African American poverty as due mostly to individual or to culturally transmitted lack of initiative.

Cultural Explanations

Traditionally, cultural explanations of poverty represent variations of what is called the *culture of poverty theory*. The culture of poverty theory originated with the ethnographic work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959/1975, 1963/1998, 1966). Lewis argued that however the poor originally became poor, they go on to develop a culture of poverty that maintains their condition even when opportunities eventually are afforded them. The poor, he argued, are locked in what he called a *culture of poverty*.

The culture of poverty theory moved into public discourse with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) U.S. Department of Labor Report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. The report provided a distinct line of reasoning for why poverty continues to plague poor, urban Blacks. Although it cited structural conditions as the initial cause of poverty, Moynihan's report more or less suggested that the problem of unequal opportunity had been rectified. Thus, like Lewis, Moynihan ultimately concluded that dysfunctional cultural patterns among the Black poor were the primary cause of continued poverty. In a famous phrase, Moynihan maintained that the Black, urban poor were caught in a "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan, 1965, p. iv) wherein the values and the culture of the poor were shaped by a dysfunctional family structure that continued their disadvantage.

Because, as mentioned, the media tend to associate the poor with minorities, the public develops what Dixon (2011) and Lule (2001) call cognitive short cuts to understand poverty as a racial issue. That explanation, in turn, fosters support for cutbacks in public assistance (Alexander, 2012; Callanan, 2012; Dixon, 2008; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Lee, 2009; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009; Wise, 2010). According to Gilens (2009), allusions to a culture of poverty, such as the infamous references to "welfare queens," were particularly prevalent during the Reagan administration

and designed to lower public support for social safety nets. Not only did the welfare queen become the conservative poster child for the elimination of public welfare, she seeped into the minds of even liberals to represent what was wrong with the welfare system as it then existed. It was the framing of welfare as a coddling mechanism for the lazy and undeserving that legitimated the retrenchment of economic safety nets as a part of government policy (Orloff, 2002).

Opportunity Structure

An alternative, more liberal, way of explaining poverty is to attribute it to social structure, specifically the opportunity structure. The opportunity structure refers to the relations between jobs and job seekers: Are there enough jobs to go around? How well do they pay? Are poor people qualified to take them?

Studies show that the jobs available to the poor are disproportionately low-paying positions in the service sector that may come with a number of other risks, including underemployment, job insecurity, and little or inadequate health care insurance (Bartik, 1994, 2002). The opportunity structure is so skewed against the poor that, as Bartik (2002) argues, policies designed to help former welfare recipients end up displacing nonparticipants, thereby just shifting who is unemployed rather than reducing unemployment overall:

In most labor market models, this increase in labor supply will decrease wage rates. The jobs obtained by those welfare recipients added to the labor market will reduce job vacancies, making it harder for nonparticipants to find jobs, thereby increasing the unemployment rate of nonparticipants. (p. 668)

Such considerations suggest that, in general, the poor do not have enough access to opportunities that alleviate poverty. Specifically, the problem is jobs.

From a psychological perspective, the discussion of poverty's causes can be related to attribution theory. According to attribution theory, people offer different explanations for failure depending on whose failure it is (Hewstone, 1990; Malle, 2011; Malle, Knobe, & Nelson, 2007). In fact, what psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error" (Sanderson, 2010, p. 118) is to overemphasize personality-based explanations of failure over situational factors. That tendency is accentuated when it is "failures" of out-group members that are being discussed. Individual and cultural explanations of Black poverty by White Americans would certainly fit this pattern (Hewstone, 1990).

The Sociological Reconception of Culture and Structure

Since the so-called cultural turn in the 1980s (Ray & Sayer, 1999), sociologists have tended to collapse structure into culture. Of course, in doing so, they also redefine culture so that it no longer emphasizes values but rather repertoires, scripts, and patterns of behavior (Sewell, 1992; Swidler, 1986). According to Porpora (2015), one problem with sociology's current conflation of structure and culture is that even if the culture of poverty is no longer thought of as comprising dysfunctional values, it still might

be that the culture of the poor is passing down to new generations' dysfunctional repertoires, procedures, and scripts. Now, however, there is no distinct concept of structure with which to articulate a counterperspective.

Whatever academic sociologists may think, with persistent and even new levels of poverty in the United States, cultural explanations have resurfaced in public discourse. Cultural scholars are again advancing cultural arguments to claim that inequality requires a change in the poor or their culture rather than a change in the opportunity structure (Anderson, 2000; Murray, 2012; Patterson, 2006).

In his op-ed piece in *The New York Times* "A Poverty of the Mind," Patterson (2006) distinctly connects poverty among African American males to their dysfunctional culture. He argues,

socioeconomic factors are of limited explanatory power. . . . A cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness addresses not simply the immediate connection between their attitudes and behavior and undesired outcomes, but explores the origins and changing nature of their attitudes, perhaps over generations, in their brutalized past. (p. 14)

He goes on to suggest that the creation of a "cool-pose culture" among young Black men has created a social and cultural trap that puts them on the margins of larger society:

The cool-pose culture of young black men was simply too gratifying to give up. For these young men, it was almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture. . . . I call this the Dionysian trap for young black men. . . . For young black men . . . that culture is all there is—or so they think. Sadly, their complete engagement in this part of the American cultural mainstream, which they created and feeds on their pride and self-respect, is a major factor in their disconnection from the socioeconomic mainstream. (p. 14)

Similarly, although Anderson (1999) does not address poverty specifically, his general cultural approach to the poor neighborhood he studies and his distinctions between "decent" Blacks and "street" Blacks suggests a cultural explanation of poverty.

Just how pronounced, however, are these various kinds of explanation of poverty in popular discourse? Do individual and cultural explanations tend to dominate in popular media? In this study, we examined these questions in relation to newspaper editorials and opinion pieces. Specifically, we examined who and what opinion pieces blame for poverty (i.e., individuals, culture, government policy, or the opportunity structure) and which groups opinion pieces tend to associate with poverty (i.e., African Americans, working-age adults, immigrants, or children).

Method

The study period was between January 1, 1994, and December 31, 2010. The newspapers we examined were *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Los Angeles Times*. These sources reflected major urban areas, news markets that addressed urban, multiracial populations, regional concerns, and both conservative and liberal voices. The search terms for selection were *welfare*, *poverty*, and *poor*, and we included in our corpus all pieces that substantially addressed poverty. That process resulted in 342 pieces.

Most of our papers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, and *The Boston Globe*—were published in the East and liberal. At a reviewer's suggestion, we wanted to broaden the geographical base and test for ideological difference in newspaper source. We added *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Tampa Bay Times*, and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Unfortunately, we received no cases from *Tampa Bay Times* and only one from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Thus, although we did broaden our geographical base with the *Los Angeles Times*, our sample of conservative pieces came largely from *The Wall Street Journal*. Fortunately, *The Wall Street Journal* pieces were conservative enough to provide enough statistical power for significant results.

Twelve variables were included in the study. The first four coded for the factors blamed for poverty: culture of poverty; government policy; economic or structural inequality; and the individual, poor people themselves. We also coded for a range of variables measuring the social categories associated with poverty: African Americans, immigrants, children, and the elderly. We likewise coded for distinctions between working and nonworking and deserving and undeserving poor. These frames were not mutually exclusive; opinion pieces could, for example, blame more than one factor for poverty and associate poverty with more than one social category. Although we coded for race of writer, there were too few African American contributors for any type of quantitative analysis. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution for all of the other variables.

Generally, the coding was straightforward. If a piece mentioned a way that associated poverty with one of the characteristics, whether the columnist endorsed it or not, the piece was coded as mentioning that connection. We provide some examples here. Although we also coded it as blaming individuals, Robert Samuelson's (1996) article "The Jobs Are Out There" additionally blames poor Black culture for poverty. Samuelson begins by criticizing the counterview of William J. Wilson: "Wilson contends that a lack of jobs explains the black 'underclass'"; Samuelson then goes on to argue, "shifts in popular culture seem to hurt blacks the most. . . . If men aren't responsible for their children, they feel less pressure to work" (p. A23). Although Samuelson emphasizes the role of culture, he simultaneously holds the individual responsible, in this case, Black men who constitute the underclass.

Table 1. Frequency and Coding Reliability of Variables.

Variable	Frequency of mention (%) (N = 342)	Reliability I	
		Upper bound (n = 30)	Lower bound (n = 30)
Argument holding the government responsible	52	0.80	0.69
Argument blaming the culture of poverty	35	0.80	0.64
Social structure or economic system blame	29	0.92 ^a	0.78 ^a
Argument blaming poor individuals	21	0.90	0.78
Children mentioned as the poor	55	0.87	0.74
African Americans mentioned as the poor	21	1.00	1.00
Distinguishes between deserving and undeserving	14	1.00	1.00
Urban/inner-city residents mentioned as the poor	12	1.00	1.00
The elderly mentioned as the poor	12	1.00	1.00
Immigrants mentioned as the poor	12	1.00	1.00

^an = 20.

Given that he is also clearly talking about Blacks, Samuelson's (1996) piece was also coded for identifying the poor as African American. Similarly coded for identifying the poor as Black was Sowell's (1998) "Time to Stop Living in Past." Sowell cites what he calls outdated arguments to explain intergenerational poverty among Blacks, and he chastises Black leaders for failing to acknowledge the real problems in the Black community, such as the declining quality of education, that continue the cycle of poverty and violence. Because Benin Dakar (2004) speaks of "legions of blacks being left far behind in inner cities" (p. 9), his piece was coded for both associating poverty with African Americans and the inner city.

In contrast, Herbert's (2003) opinion piece "There's a Catch: Jobs" examines the current state of the economic opportunity structure. He argues that opportunities for the unemployed and underemployed are decreasing and calls on government elites to make better decisions in support of working Americans:

The administration can spin its "recovery" any way it wants. But working families can't pay their bills with data about the gross domestic product. They need the income from steady employment. And when it comes to employment, the Bush administration has compiled the worst record since the Great Depression. The jobs picture is far more harrowing that it is usually presented by media. (p. A21)

We coded this piece for blaming both the government and the economic structure.

To test for interrater reliability, an independent coder unaffiliated with the research recoded 45 randomly sampled pieces in the corpus. In terms of percentage agreement, all variables scored 80% or higher; for agreement controlling for chance, we used Perreault and Leigh's (1989) *I* value for which the lowest value was 0.64 for mention of culture of poverty, followed by 0.78 for individual blame. All other *I* values were high (see Table 1).

We actually had trouble initially trying to code reliably for mention of social structure. Part of the problem was that we were trying to distinguish between explicit and implicit mentions of that concept. When we collapsed the two, we reached 85% agreement.

The years before 2006 accounted for 61% of the opinion pieces and 2006 and after accounted for 39% of the pieces. A plurality (40%) of the pieces came from *The Washington Post* and another 15% came from *The New York Times*; 13% were from the *Chicago-Sun Times* and 10% were from *The Christian Science Monitor*. The others were below 10%. The overwhelming majority (85%) of pieces were written by men and 23% were unsigned editorials.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1, somewhat surprisingly, in our corpus, government (52% of mentions) was most often blamed for poverty. Of course, that figure obscures the fact that the government was blamed for opposing reasons: not doing enough (31%), doing too much or "coddling" (16%), or paradoxically both (5%).

An example of government blame is Dionne's (1997) opinion piece "Letting the Poor Take Care of the Poorer." Dionne begins his piece saying,

Here's news we're supposed to be happy about: Now that the federal government has shucked off responsibility for the poor to the states, state governments are shucking off responsibility to counties and cities. Soon nobody will be responsible for helping the poor. (p. A21)

In his opening lines, Dionne makes a clear connection between bad or irresponsible policy decisions and poverty as a social issue. It is surprising that there were so many mentions of the government not doing enough, but as we will see, that is related to time period.

Blaming government was followed by blaming a culture of poverty, with 35% of mentions, with much blame as well to the poor themselves personally (21% of mentions). But strikingly, the economic system or structure was also blamed, with 29% of mentions. Herbert's (1995) piece "In America: Don't Call It Welfare Reform" is an example of a piece containing structure blame. Specifically, Herbert states,

The problem is not welfare, it's poverty. It's the absence of work, not the refusal to work. It's the growing inability of this society to provide meaningful employment for

those citizens who want to work as the middle class is finding out through harsh experience. (p. A15)

Again, surprisingly, direct mentions of race were uncommon. Only 26% ($n = 90$) of the articles identified the race of those identified as poor. On the other hand, in many of the articles, nonracial associations with race did appear, such as references to urban or inner-city poverty. Such reference was observed in 12% ($n = 42$) of the articles. In Table 2, we see that 57% of the time the poor were identified as urban and they are also identified as Black. It is possible that this tendency follows what Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Wise (2010) identify as covert reference to race in more race-neutral language as part of the social and political trend toward colorblind postracial dialectic choices.² Finally, among the cases in which race was mentioned, 80% ($n = 72$) identified the poor as Black, whereas only 20% ($n = 18$) identified the poor as White. We will see the importance of this finding in a moment. Only 14% of pieces made an explicit distinction between deserving and underserving poor. In many of the pieces, however, the poor, defined as children (55%) or as elderly (12%), were implicitly deserving.

Table 2. Relationship Between Black and Urban Identifications of Poor.

Variable	Blacks identified (%)
Urban not identified ($n = 300$)	16
Urban identified ($n = 42$)	57

$F(1) = 41.9, p < .001.$

We also looked at immigrants because, depending on the economic climate of the time, immigrants are more or less salient. During times of economic upturn, Americans see this category as hard workers in need of support to accomplish the American dream; during economic downturns, Americans see immigrants as “infesting” the country and taking opportunities from native-born Americans (Santa Ana, 1999). In our corpus, however, only 12% ($n = 41$) of articles identified the poor as immigrants.

So far, we found that, in general, poverty was associated more with government and economics than a culture of poverty. What happens, however, when we look specifically at how pieces speak of poverty among African Americans?

The Connection Between Race and Blame

To put a previous finding in different terms, whereas Whites were specifically identified as poor in only 5% of our opinion pieces, African Americans were so identified in 21% of cases. This disproportionate pattern coincides with a general link to poverty and race (see Alexander, 2012; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Gilens, 1996, 2009; McDonald, 2001; Orloff, 2002; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Quadagno, 1996; Steinberg, 2011; Wise, 2010).

² See Hall, 1992, for a more detailed discussion of social codes

At this point, the effect of the racial link becomes dramatic, as we see in Table 3, which reports the result of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). When the poor were not identified as Black, individuals themselves were blamed for their poverty only 19% of the time. In contrast, when the poor were identified as Black, individuals were blamed for their poverty nearly twice as often (39%). As for the culture of poverty, the effect of the racial link was even greater. When the poor were not identified as Black, only 29% of the time was poverty blamed on a culture of poverty. In contrast, when the poor were identified as Black, then a culture of poverty was blamed fully twice as often—61% of the time. In other words, in the case of poverty among African Americans, a culture of poverty was mostly blamed.

Table 3. Relationship Between Race and Blame, in Percentages.

Variable	Blacks specifically		F(1)	Significance
	Blacks not identified (n = 270)	identified (n = 72)		
Person blame	19	39	11.2	.001
Culture blame	29	61	26.9	<.001
System blame	27	41	6.0	.015

Curiously, we also see that even system blame showed up more when Blacks were identified as the poor. First, we tried to understand why by running person blame, culture blame, government blame, and system blame against newspaper ideology. The ANOVA analysis we conducted is presented in Table 4. As can be seen, only culture blame and system blame were statistically significant, but with regard to both culture and system, there were dramatic differences between the liberals and conservatives in the expected directions. Although liberals as well engaged in a fair amount of culture blame (an interesting finding in itself), the conservatives did it more. On the other hand, whereas 32% of liberal pieces also blamed the system, the conservatives hardly did at all.

Table 4. Relationship Between Source Ideology and Blame, in Percentages.

Variable	Liberal	Conservative	F(1)	Significance
	(n = 314)	(n = 25)		
Person blame	23	24	0.012	.91
Culture blame	34	56	4.76	.03
Government blame	52	48	0.191	.67
System blame	32	4	8.7	.003

The second thing we did was run the ANOVA displayed in Tables 5 and 6. Table 5 displays the results of a two-way ANOVA in which culture blame was each run against Black identification of poor and news source ideology; Table 6 shows ANOVA results for system blame.

Table 5. Pieces Blaming Culture of Poverty by Source Ideology and Black Identification, in Percentages.

Source	Blacks not identified as poor (<i>n</i> = 216)	Blacks identified as poor (<i>n</i> = 51)
Liberals (<i>n</i> = 216)	27	61
Conservatives (<i>n</i> = 51)	53	63

Note. *N* = 267. Black identification significant at $p = .04$; source ideology not significant at $p = .19$.

Table 6. Pieces Blaming System by Source Ideology and Black Identification, in Percentages.

Source	Blacks not identified as poor (<i>n</i> = 267)	Blacks identified as poor (<i>n</i> = 72)
Liberals (<i>n</i> = 314)	28	47
Conservatives (<i>n</i> = 25)	6	0

Note. *N* = 339. Black identification not significant at $p = .54$; source ideology significant at $p = .001$.

In Table 5, we see the results for culture blame. Beginning with the conservatives, we see that they were somewhat more prone toward culture blame when the poor were identified as Black. What is remarkable is the dramatic shift among liberals from 27% blaming culture of poverty when race was not identified to 61% blaming culture when the poor were identified as Black. These data suggest that cultural explanations of poverty have today made successful inroads among liberals.

Although liberals may now be more willing to concede cultural sources of poverty, that does not mean they have abandoned structural explanations. That much is apparent from Table 6. We already knew that the conservatives did not engage structural explanations in any event, so the absence of structural blame among conservatives is not the interesting part of the table. The interesting part of the table is the liberals. Whereas we found that the system blamed 28% of the time when race of the poor was not identified, it was blamed 47% of the time when the poor were identified as Black. Putting the results from Tables 5 and 6 together, it seems (1) that it was only Black poverty rather than poverty per se that needed to be explained; and (2) that when liberals attempted to explain poverty among Blacks, they were as willing to resort to culture as the structural explanations.

We can make one more related observation. Ryan (1976) argued that to blame poverty on a culture of poverty is essentially to blame the victim one step removed. Because the source of the problem is still considered internal and does not require any modification to the larger social structure, blaming a culture is still about changing the victim and not the social reality. Our data provide dramatic confirmation of that thesis. In our data, when there was no blame on a culture of poverty, only 22% of the time were poor people mentioned as blameworthy themselves. Yet, when a culture of poverty was blamed, poor people themselves were also cited as blameworthy 87% ($p < .001$) of the time.

Conclusion

Our findings were somewhat surprising. We anticipated that we would encounter an overrepresentation of the poor as African Americans and explanations that looked primarily to either poor persons or the culture of poverty as the cause for poverty. We did not. Instead, the poor were largely characterized as groups deserving of support and sympathy and the economic structure and the government were seen as more blameworthy.

There are a number of possible reasons for these results. First, the results could be connected to the framing of poverty as a social issue at various points across the time period of our analysis (1994–2010). During this period, modifications created by welfare reform were new, somewhat untested, and part of a public debate on intergenerational poverty and welfare dependency (Orloff, 2002). Many of the adjustments of welfare reform had the potential to impact the largest group of welfare recipients: children and those on welfare who were about to be required to work as a condition of public assistance support and would become, at least for a time, the working poor (Orloff, 2002). Therefore, we find it reasonable that talk of poverty centered on a public discussion of how the adjustments to welfare policies would impact children and the nonworking poor.

Second, in our study, many of the contributors seemed take a “liberal” approach to understanding poverty. Notable figures such as E. J. Dionne, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Jesse Jackson often wrote about the hardships faced by the most “deserving” groups of the poor as a means of discussing their frustration about changes in policy. Perhaps a different group of writers or publications would have resulted in a different outcome. Although we did reconfigure our analysis to incorporate more variety in terms of newspaper source ideology (i.e., *The Wall Street Journal*), the overwhelming majority of newspaper sources were liberal. In the future, it would be worthwhile to do a more thorough investigation of the impact that the political leanings of the writers and the publications have on the results.

Last, studies show that today racial commentary tends to be more covert than overt (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Wise, 2010). The outright characterization of the poor as Black is no longer politically correct. And, although critics would argue that welfare reform was largely racialized, descriptions of poverty as an issue that is connected to race are longer normalized in the way that they once were (Wise, 2010). We conclude that contributors and publications may have responded to this shift in public sphere discourse by focusing on social groups deemed appropriate for debate on poverty, such as children and the poor.

Most important to our understanding of the racial dynamics of opinion pieces on poverty was the fact that although the conversation in opinion pieces largely evoked sympathy and collective social responsibility, our analysis produced results more in line with our expectations. Characterization of the poor as African American clearly changed how poverty was framed. When the poor were identified as African American, it was much more likely that poverty would be blamed on a culture of poverty or poor individuals themselves.

It was a surprise to us to see such a significant shift toward person blame and culture blame among liberals when discussing poverty among African Americans. Although liberals have not abandoned structural explanations of poverty, after decades of debate, it seems that they are more willing to add personal and cultural dimensions to the explanation. Conservatives, it should be said, were not similarly as willing to concede structural causes in Black poverty.

Whether the liberal concession to personal and cultural factors represents an ideological shift or a warranted empirical assessment is a question for sociologists. And yet, the persistence of the notion that Blacks, in particular, remain blameworthy for their poverty, either as individuals or as a culture group, especially when economy plays such a big role in the aggregate findings, is a disturbing indicator of the persistence of bias in American labor politics. Throughout the history of the nation, Whites have drawn on manipulations of the labor market to favor their conditions of employment and employability (Gould, 1977). As the aforementioned work on immigrants mentions (Santa Ana, 1999), immigrants are blameworthy for poverty during hard economic times, but are understood as good people when their work is in demand; likewise, in hard times, racial minorities are sometimes seen as taking away the jobs of White people (Royster, 2003). Elements of this logic perhaps underpin conservative editorials that mention structure, especially when there are claims that jobs are out there, but the poor will not take them. In these events, the quality and desirability of the jobs are not factors to be mentioned, unless the editorial writer is avowedly liberal (i.e., Herbert, 2003). Further work might untie the complex relationships between emergent public discourse over the job market, quality employment, ideologies of the United States as meritocracy, and race.

The results are indicative of the continuing power of race to change the way that we frame poverty in particular and social issues in general. Racially differential attributions of blame can represent a way to remove sympathy from what may otherwise evoke sympathy. And, as colorblind theorists would argue, it rationalizes persistent inequality and injustice. Perhaps future research should look at how African American newspapers or journalists themselves report on this matter.

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