

Martin Gilens: Thank you. I want to talk about how news coverage of race, poverty and inequality differs from what we might want it to be, and why. I won't try to cover all of that in 10 minutes -- I'll talk about two specific things, two specific ways in which news coverage distorts reality and in which news coverage of these topics generates misperceptions among the public which are harmful to the interests of poor people, the interests of African-Americans, and--I would argue--the interest of all Americans.

And these two distortions stem from two very different kinds of causes. The first grows out of a specific kind of racism among generally well-meaning and sympathetic journalists. And the second kind of distortion stems from a kind of anti-racism among those same journalists.

The first distortion that I want to talk about involves the way that race and poverty are linked in the pictorial representation of poor people. Social scientists have confirmed the old adage about a picture being worth a thousand words, although in the social science version, it's a thousand words plus or minus three percent.

(Laughter.)

Martin Gilens: Studies show that when readers or viewers are presented with statistical information in a news story -- information like the racial composition of poor people -- and also with specific examples of individual poor people, that it's the individual examples that people remember, and it's the individual examples which shape their overall perceptions.

So with that in mind, I took a look at how pictures were used to illustrate stories on poverty on National network news and weekly news magazines from 1950 to the early 1990's.

And my focus in this work was on racial representation, particularly, whether individuals used to illustrate these stories were blacks or non-blacks. We can talk in the discussion maybe about why I focused on that particular racial division, but what I found was first of all that African-Americans were dramatically over-represented -- I'm sure this won't be a surprise to any of you -- dramatically over-represented in news stories about poverty. So in the early nineties, for example, when about 30 percent of all American poor people were black, 65 percent of poor people in TV news and news magazine stories on poverty were African-American.

But more importantly, I found that blacks were actually under-represented in sympathetic stories about poverty. So, when stories turned to coverage of things like child poverty, old age assistance, medical care for the poor -- there I found few black faces. But when the coverage was about the underclass or about welfare, that's where you get overwhelmingly images of African-Americans in the news stories.

I also found a similar pattern with regard to changes over time during that 40-year period that I looked at. The proportion of African-Americans in news coverage of poverty stories varied quite substantially from one year to the next, or one era to the next, and in a way that consistently associated black faces with the undeserving poor.

So, for example, in the early seventies news discourse on poverty was very negative with a lot of focus on welfare, and the problems with welfare. Both McGovern and

Nixon were proposing reforms to the welfare system, and so on. And during those years, about 70 percent of the poor people used to illustrate poverty stories were black.

In contrast, the early 1980's, during the Reagan Recession, there was a very sympathetic discourse on poverty -- at least in the national elite news media. There was a lot of attention to cutbacks and safety net programs, to high unemployment rates and so on. And during that time, instead of 70 percent black, what I found was 70 percent of those people were white.

Now, the true proportion of African-Americans among the poor didn't change between the early seventies and the early eighties, and in fact, hasn't really changed much since the 1950's. So why is it that we find this consistent association of black Americans with the undeserving poor?

Well journalists, and especially those who work at the elite media, have a widespread and well-deserved reputation as being politically liberal, and this is borne out by numerous surveys of journalists and their political attitudes and voting histories and so on. And while it's true that people do sometimes express political views that they don't really hold on race, as well as on other topics, it's just not plausible that the negative distortions in how the poor are represented in pictures in these news stories comes from a conscious, deliberate effort, a conscious, deliberate expression of the beliefs of the journalists who are putting these stories together.

In fact, I don't think that these representations stem from a deliberate expression at all. What they reflect, instead, is journalists' sub-conscious stereotypes. Stereotypes that liberal journalists share with other liberal Americans, stereotypes of blacks as being lazy, uncommitted to the work ethic and undeserving.

Now, psychologists have shown that people do hold a variety of beliefs which can influence their behavior, but of which they are typically unaware, and they've devised all sorts of clever ways of tapping into some of these beliefs, for example, by flashing words or images on a screen so quickly that you can't consciously make out what they are. They show that by doing this sort of thing and, for example, cuing people to think about a situation in terms of race, that they can change the way people will react to that situation, even when the people in these experiments aren't aware of the fact that they've been cued into this.

What these experiments show is that there are widespread stereotypes, not just racial stereotypes, but stereotypes of many social groups which are widespread among the population and most importantly which are held by and influence the behavior of even people who consciously reject those stereotypes, or consciously know them not to be true.

When people act deliberately, when they're attending to what they're doing, their conscious beliefs tend to guide their behavior. But when they're working in circumstances where they either don't have the inclination or the resources or the opportunity to monitor their behavior and to behave in a more conscious and deliberate way, then those are the conditions under which these sub-conscious stereotypes can influence behavior. And these are exactly the conditions that journalists often find themselves working under -- with a lot of time pressure, and typically with little explicit attention to how, in this case, a

set of images across stories over a period of months or years are representing different social groups.

So as one photo editor that I spoke with at one of the news weeklies said, only some kind of subtle racism can explain these negative and distorted racial representations of poor people in the news.

Well, if one specific kind of racial distortion can be attributed to a kind of subtle racism among journalists, there's another kind of distortion that I want to briefly touch on, which stems from an anti-racist impulse among journalists. And that is the untold story of the black middle class.

I did my own search of news archives and if you look at television news, there's an archive at Vanderbilt University that goes back to 1968 and in the however many decades that is since then, I found 18 stories about the black middle class on all three network news shows. Three of those were about South Africa. And, of course, people don't watch all three networks, if anything they watch one, so that works out to about one story per network every eight years.

Now, the black middle class has expanded tremendously since the time of the Kerner Commission. In the late sixties about one out of ten African-Americans could be classified as being middle class; using the same criteria, it's now one out of three. That's a lot of progress. It doesn't mean that there's isn't still inequality or that those inequalities are going to be easy to erase, but the black middle class has grown in the last few decades at about twice the rate of the white middle class.

If you look not at income but at educational gaps, or if you look at occupational differences, you see the same thing. You see substantial progress and substantial remaining inequalities.

Now, as someone who studies the bases of Americans' political attitudes, I can tell you that perceptions of individuals' and social groups' character and motivation is key to understanding the kinds of social policies that the public will support.

And people infer character and motivation by observing circumstances. All too often the news media are presenting the public with images of blacks as mired in poverty despite declines in discrimination, declines in segregation, the rise of affirmative action and so on over these four decades. And non-blacks who see these stories often infer from these images that blacks are not really trying.

So it is, I think, vitally important to show both the continuing obstacles that African-Americans and other minorities face -- ongoing discrimination and inequality -- but also to show the success of African-Americans and others in overcoming those obstacles and joining the American middle class.

So why is it that there's such a paucity of news coverage of the black middle class? Well, as I suggested, I think it's kind of an anti-racism. There's a fear there, a fear that affirming black achievement will undermine support for policies that address continuing inequality and discrimination.

And while I think that fear is perfectly understandable, its consequences are undesirable. The most powerful narratives are those which show African-Americans

overcoming obstacles. In stories that portray their success not as a universal characteristic of the black experience, but as part of a broad movement of black Americans into the mainstream of middle class American life.

Now, as an academic outsider to the practice of journalism, you know, my job is to sort of point out and study how specific kinds of coverage have specific kinds of consequences for public attitudes and American politics. But your job as journalists, and it's a much harder job, is to figure out how to fix it.