

CHAPTER 5

Race Matters

The Impact of News Coverage of Welfare Reform on Public Opinion

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Since the passage of national welfare reform legislation in 1996, media coverage of welfare has been remarkable in at least two respects. First, given the usual tendency for the media to give short shrift to public policy, news coverage of welfare reform policy has been comparatively intense (e.g., Clawson and Trice 2000). Second, and more important, the tone of coverage has been much more positive.¹ In contrast with the negative focus on welfare “problems” in past decades, many news accounts of welfare reform have already declared it a success, with President Clinton and Republican congressional leaders competing to claim credit for “ending welfare as we know it.” Notably, the emphasis in these stories has been on the decline in welfare rolls and the number of women moving from welfare to work, with very little attention to the problems of the newly working poor who continue to struggle to make ends meet.

With more positive news coverage, one might optimistically expect more favorable public attitudes toward welfare and welfare recipients. New evidence of a poverty program that actually puts people to work could revamp traditional public views of welfare as a government “hand-out” that undercuts the work ethic. Any such optimism would be premature, however, for news coverage of welfare reform is similar to that of an earlier era in one very important respect: news stories about welfare

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continue to be illustrated with African Americans images and exemplars (Clawson and Trice 2000). And if past research is any guide, such a pattern of media coverage is likely to reinforce public cynicism about welfare rather than reverse it.

In this paper, we examine the various ways that whites' political attitudes are influenced by news coverage of welfare reform. Based on content analyses of news coverage of welfare, several scholars have made the forceful argument that the news media tends to "racialize" welfare policy by disproportionately using images of African Americans to accompany news stories on poverty (e.g., Entman and Rojecki 2000; Gilens 1999; Clawson and Trice 2000). Not only are welfare recipients more likely to be depicted as being African American, but negative coverage of poverty tends to be illustrated with pictures of blacks, while the faces of the poor in more positive stories are predominantly white. As suggested by prior research, the consequences of such coverage are potentially severe: by creating the inaccurate impression that a majority of welfare recipients are black, public support for welfare is likely diminished and negative stereotypes of African Americans as the "undeserving poor" are doubtless reinforced.

But while we know that news coverage of welfare is racially biased, we do not know whether and how such imagery actually affects public opinion. In addition, given the more positive tone of many news stories on welfare reform, it is especially important to investigate the way that racial portrayals interact with the tone (i.e., content) of the story in affecting public opinion. Such questions obviously cannot be answered with the analysis of news content alone. To investigate the impact of biased news portrayals of welfare, we employ an experimental design where we manipulate the content of newspaper stories about welfare reform as well as the photographs that accompany them. The news stories describe welfare reform in either a positive or a negative light, whereas the associated photograph depicts either a white or a black former welfare mother. Our results suggest that identical news stories are interpreted in radically different ways depending on the race of the welfare mother portrayed in the story, with important consequences for public attitudes toward welfare recipients and welfare reform.

We begin with a closer look at research documenting the tendency of the news to overrepresent African Americans in its portrayals of poverty. We then turn to an examination of research on media effects that lends both empirical and theoretical support to the hypothesis that racial portrayals of poverty affect public attitudes toward welfare and welfare

recipients. We then test this hypothesis with data from a survey experiment where respondents are randomly assigned to read different versions of a news article on welfare reform that varies both racial imagery and the content or tone of the story. We conclude with a summary of our results and implications for studies of racial bias in the news and its effects on public support for welfare.

Media Portrayals of Poverty

Several studies have documented the tendency for the mainstream news media to disproportionately portray poverty as a “black” problem. In their investigation of television news portrayals of poverty in the 1990s, for example, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that black people were the dominant visual images appearing in stories about poverty, prompting the authors to conclude that “the imagery of television news suggests poverty is concentrated among blacks, so much so that merely showing a black person on the screen appears to be a code for the involvement of poor people” (105).²

Taking a longer historical perspective, Gilens (chap. 4, this volume) examined media portrayals of the poor from 1950 to 1992. He found that African Americans have generally dominated news media depictions of the poor since the late 1960s. About two-thirds of the poor people pictured in major news magazines and network news broadcasts were black—about twice the true proportion of blacks among the nation’s poor. Just as importantly, black faces are unlikely to be found in media stories on the most sympathetic subgroups of the poor (e.g., the working poor and the elderly), just as they are comparatively absent from media coverage of poverty during times of heightened sympathy for the poor (e.g., during economic hard times).

Clawson and Trice (2000) extended Gilens’s work by examining media portrayals of the poor between 1993 and 1998, during a time when welfare reform was high on the nation’s agenda. Like Gilens, they found that pictures of blacks were disproportionately used in news magazine portrayals of the poor, particularly in stories on topics that were not very popular with the public (e.g., welfare reform and pregnancy, public housing, and the welfare cycle of dependency). On the other hand, blacks were less often associated with more sympathetic topics (e.g., welfare reform and children and job training).

Thus, findings from studies covering different media and different

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time periods converge on a single conclusion: news portrayals of welfare and poverty tend to “racialize” welfare by disproportionately using images of blacks to illustrate the most negative stories about poverty. The consequences of these distortions are held to be severe. Clawson and Trice (2000, 63), for example, conclude that photographic images of poor people in mainstream news magazines “do not capture the reality of poverty; instead, they provide a stereotypical and inaccurate picture of poverty which results in negative beliefs about the poor, antipathy toward blacks, and a lack of support for welfare programs.”

Media Effects and Racial Cues in the News

Why are racial portrayals in news coverage of welfare assumed to be so consequential for public opinion? Admittedly, little direct evidence exists at this point. Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidence appears compelling. Most generally, we know that the news media in the United States play a crucial role in shaping the political opinions and behavior of the mass public. Although early studies concluded that the media had only “minimal effects” on public opinion because they did not alter existing attitudes in an obvious way, an avalanche of recent research has shown that news coverage affects public opinion through a variety of more “subtle” pathways. These more subtle effects include agenda setting and framing, both of which can be illustrated with examples of news coverage of welfare policy.

Agenda setting refers to the process whereby the amount of attention the media devotes to an issue or event affects the public’s priorities among issues and the problems they want government to solve. Soon after the passage of TANF, for example, a flurry of news stories appeared on welfare reform, making it likely that welfare would be viewed by the public as an important issue. The subtlety of agenda setting is captured best by Bernard Cohen’s (1963, 13) famous statement: the press “may not be successful in telling its readers what to *think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.”

Most importantly for our purposes, the media also exerts a subtle effect on public opinion through the way it *frames* news stories (e.g., Iyengar 1991). A news frame is a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). Citing Entman’s (1993) work, Nelson and Kinder (1996) write that “frames spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about, and may

go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done about it” (1057). Thus, the way reporters frame stories on welfare reform is likely to affect the way the public thinks about the problem. Welfare could be framed as a temporary means to allow the disadvantaged to help themselves, or as an unearned handout to people who don’t want to work (Gamson and Lasch 1983). Obviously, the former frame is more likely to encourage support for welfare than the latter.

Against this backdrop of strong media effects, it is easy to appreciate how racial images in news coverage of welfare can be so consequential for public opinion. A considerable body of media research points to the power of visual images to trump auditory and text messages. Moreover, media imagery helps to *frame* media content. Visual images in the news, for example, tend to be more vivid, salient, and memorable than auditory or textual information (e.g., Graber 1990; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Gamson and his colleagues (Gamson 1992; see also Gamson and Lasch 1983) argue that visual images play an important role in defining and illustrating particular *issue frames*. In other words, images or pictures help to frame the content of the news. In their study of issue framing of affirmative action policy, for example, Nelson and Kinder (1996) found that photographs of blacks versus whites represented different issue frames that affected attitudes toward affirmative action. According to Clawson and Trice (2000, 55), “[News] photographs are symbolic of the “whole mosaic” [of the story], . . . providing texture, drama and detail, they illustrate the implicit, the latent, the “taken for granted” and the “goes without saying.”

Especially relevant here is the growing body of experimental research that shows the race of an individual pictured in the news is a salient and powerful cue in affecting public opinion. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder (1987), for example, found that when people are presented with a television news story about unemployment that featured a black individual, they were significantly less likely to think that unemployment is a pressing national issue than when the story features a white person. In another experimental study Iyengar (1991) found that racial imagery in a news story about poverty affected the kinds of solutions people proposed to deal with unemployment. After watching a story about a poor black person, people suggested poor people need to work harder, while societal solutions were recommended after watching a similar story about a poor white person.

In the related domain of crime policy, experimental research demonstrates that negative images of blacks have the power to influence public

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opinion toward criminal suspects and crime policy (e.g., Peffley, Shields, and Williams 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). Crime, like welfare, is an ostensibly race-neutral issue that has become racialized, in part, by news coverage that portrays the average criminal as African American (Entman 1992). Experimental evidence suggests that even a brief visual image of a black male in a typical nightly news story on crime is powerful and familiar enough to activate viewers' negative stereotypes of blacks, producing racially biased evaluations of black criminal suspects (Peffley, Shields, and Williams 1996). In their experimental studies manipulating the skin color of a male perpetrator in a local news broadcast, Gilliam and associates (Gilliam et al. 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000) found that when the perpetrator was African American, more subjects endorsed punitive crime policies and negative racial attitudes after watching the news broadcast.

Contemporary News Coverage of Welfare Reform

Clearly then, prior research provides strong support for the hypothesized effects of racially biased news portrayals of welfare. As suggested by extant research, illustrating negative news stories about welfare with African Americans is likely to diminish whites' support for welfare programs as well as reinforce pejorative beliefs about blacks and the poor. But this hypothesis needs to be reconsidered in light of contemporary news coverage of welfare reform. Because while blacks continue to be overrepresented in news stories about poverty, news coverage of welfare reform (since the passage of the welfare reform act) has been more positive, emphasizing the success with which people have moved from welfare to work. Like most political news, stories about welfare reform tend to rely heavily on "official sources," and in this case a bipartisan consensus quickly emerged hailing welfare reform as a success. President Clinton, who signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 with some misgivings, later was adamant in proclaiming welfare reform a success and, of course, taking credit for it. In a speech in August 1997, for example, he concluded, "A lot of people said that welfare reform would never work. . . . But a year later, I think it's fair to say *the debate is over. We now know that welfare reform works*" (*Washington Post*, August 13, 1997; emphasis added).

The standard for success in this case is the much-heralded drop in the welfare rolls and the increase in the number of people moving from welfare to work. More equivocal evidence bearing on the success of welfare

reform legislation has received scant attention in the news. The fact that many women moving from welfare to work continue to live in poverty or struggle to make ends meet has been virtually ignored. Moreover, the role of the surging economy in shrinking welfare rolls, independent of any effect of welfare reform legislation, is rarely considered in such news coverage. It may be understandable for journalists to emphasize what's "new" about welfare, but, as many scholars point out, the real test of any poverty program occurs during an economic downturn when more people are in need of assistance, not during one of the longest economic expansions in U.S. history.

The important point for our purposes is that, in the contemporary context, the tone as well as the racial imagery of the story is likely to affect public opinion. Indeed, one can imagine a number of different paths through which racial imagery and story content could affect public opinion. Race and tone, may, of course, have independent, additive effects. A more interesting possibility is suggested by research on framing. If visual cues tend to frame stories on welfare reform, identical stories are likely to be interpreted very differently depending on whether the story is illustrated with a black welfare mother or a white welfare mother. A white mother in a story about the problems of welfare reform may suggest the hardships of a struggling family, while the same story illustrated with an African American may generate an unsympathetic response to a "less deserving" individual.

Methods, Data, and Estimation

In the study that follows, we provide a more direct test of how the race of the individual depicted in a news story about welfare reform—as well as the tone of the story—affects whites' evaluations of welfare and its recipients. We embedded a news story experiment into a nonprobability survey of 603 nonstudent white adults interviewed by trained college students in the spring of 2000.³ Respondents were randomly assigned to read one of four different versions of a newspaper article evaluating welfare reform (see the appendix). They were then asked several questions about the woman in the article as well as various background questions.

Experimental Manipulations

For the experimental treatment we use a two-by-two design, independently varying both the race (either *black* or *white*) of the woman (and

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her child) depicted in the article and tone of the article (either *success* or *problems*). Thus, a random half of the respondents read an article with an accompanying photograph of a *white* woman (Mary Ellsworth) and her child and the other half read an article with a photo of a *black* woman (Lashanda Washington) and her child. In addition, a random half of the respondents read an article that described welfare reform as a *success* (“Welfare Reform’s Triumph Is Affirmed”) while the other half read about the *problems* of welfare reform (“Welfare Reform’s Problems Are Confirmed”).⁴ In both the *success* and the *problems* versions of the article, the woman featured has moved from welfare to work and is described as “the perfect example” of welfare reform. In the *success* version, however, the mother reports that she is now able to provide for her family on her own, while in the *problems* version she reports that since leaving the welfare rolls she is having problems providing for her family. The body of the article cites a comprehensive study by the “Urban Institute” that either “highlights the economic problems experienced by former welfare recipients” (in the *problems* condition) or “affirms the early optimism” of the program’s authors (in the *success* condition).

This difference in tone is characteristic of the debate surrounding the effects of welfare reform. Critics do not deny that the welfare rolls are decreasing; rather, the debate revolves around the question of whether the conditions of those leaving the welfare rolls are actually improving after joining the ranks of the “working poor.” The articles also reflect the way the media tend to cover welfare reform. Most articles tend to combine elements of episodic and thematic frames in discussing welfare reform (Iyengar 1991) by leading with a featured exemplar that introduces a more thematic discussion of welfare reform.

It is also worth noting that while the tilt of the article favors either a positive or a negative evaluation of welfare reform, there is some attempt to give the appearance of “balance” at the end of the article by briefly touching on the “problems” of welfare reform in the *success* version and the successes of the reforms in the *problems* version.

Dependent Variables

After reading one of the four news articles, respondents were asked to make evaluations of the woman in the story, of welfare reform, and of welfare in general. Two questions were used to tap evaluations of the woman’s work ethic in the article. The first item, Blame Mother, asks

respondents, “If you learned that the woman in the article lost her job, would you guess that it was due more to the failure of the woman” (at point 1), or “to the failure of welfare reform” (7) on a seven-point scale. The second item, *Back on Welfare*, asks respondents to rate on a seven-point scale the degree to which, “If the woman in the article lost her job,” she would be more likely to “try hard to look for a new job” (1) or “try to go back on welfare” (7).

In assessing evaluations of welfare reform, the *Limit Welfare* item asks respondents to rate on a seven-point scale whether the five-year lifetime limit for receiving welfare benefits, “[u]nder the current law,” is “much too short” (1) or “much too long” (7). Lifetime limits on the maximum number of years recipients are eligible to receive assistance marks one of the key differences between the former welfare system under AFDC and the current system under TANF.

Finally, we use two questions to assess evaluations of welfare in general. The first item, *Without Welfare*, asks respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree on a seven-point scale with the following statement: “Most people on welfare could get by without it if they really tried.” The second item, *Welfare Spending*, asks respondents whether they would rather see spending on welfare decrease (1), increase (7), or kept the same (4).

Independent Variables

The race of the mother depicted in the photograph is indicated by a dummy variable, *Race*, coded 1 if the mother is black and 0 if the mother is white. The *Tone* of the article is coded 0 if respondents were assigned to the success condition and 1 if they were assigned to the problems condition. Because the way respondents react to the tone of the article is likely to be affected by the race of the mother in the article, we created an interaction term, *Race* × *Tone*, by simply multiplying *Race* times *Tone*.

Estimation

Two models are estimated for each dependent variable, with the first examining the additive effects of *Race* and *Tone* and the second model including the interaction term. In addition, party ID, Ideology, and several demographic variables (education, gender, income, and age) were included in the model.

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Results

Evaluations of the (Former) Welfare Mother

Table 5.1 displays the OLS results obtained from regressing evaluations of the former welfare mother on the Race and Tone of the story, along with the other predictors. Looking first at results for the Blame Mother question, the first column of coefficients reveals that neither Race nor Tone has a significant additive effect on evaluations of whether the mother or welfare reform is more to blame if the woman loses her job. As revealed by the second column of coefficients, however, the interaction between Race and Tone is highly significant.

How should this interaction be interpreted? The upper panel of figure 5.1 displays the predicted values of blame for each of the four versions of the article.⁵ Clearly, when welfare reform is described as a success, the race of the welfare mother has no effect. When welfare reform is described as having problems, however, substantial differences emerge in the evaluation of the welfare mother, depending on her race depicted in the photograph. In this context, the black woman is more likely to be blamed if she lost her job, while blame is more likely to be directed at the problems of welfare reform when the woman is portrayed as being white.

TABLE 5.1. Effects of Race and Story Content on Evaluation of Former Welfare Mother

Predictors	Evaluation of Former Welfare Mother			
	Blame Mother		Back on Welfare	
Race (1 = Black Mother)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.15 (0.18)	0.51*** (0.14)	0.66*** (0.20)
Story Tone (1 = Still Problems)	0.05 (0.13)	0.39** (0.18)	1.78*** (0.14)	1.93*** (0.20)
Race × Tone		-0.71*** (0.26)		-0.32 (0.28)
Constant	3.21*** (0.51)	3.06*** (0.51)	3.24*** (0.12)	3.16*** (0.13)
Adj. R ²	0.017	0.025	0.289	0.289
N	512	512	513	513

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Each regression equation included Party ID, Ideology, Education, Gender, Income, and Age.

** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

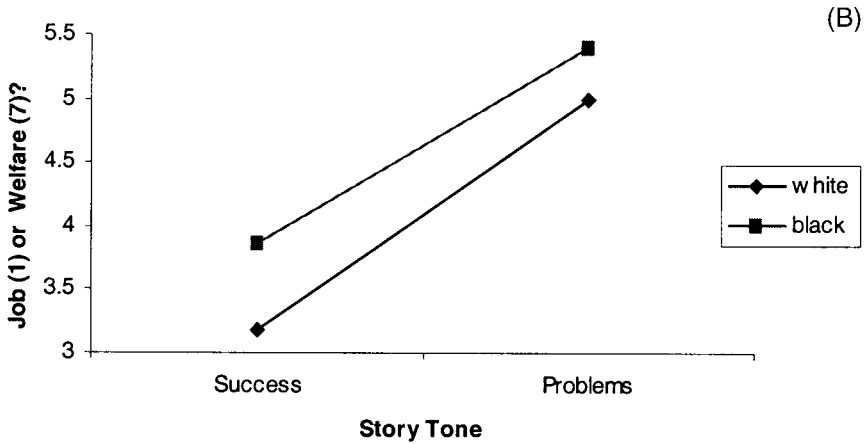
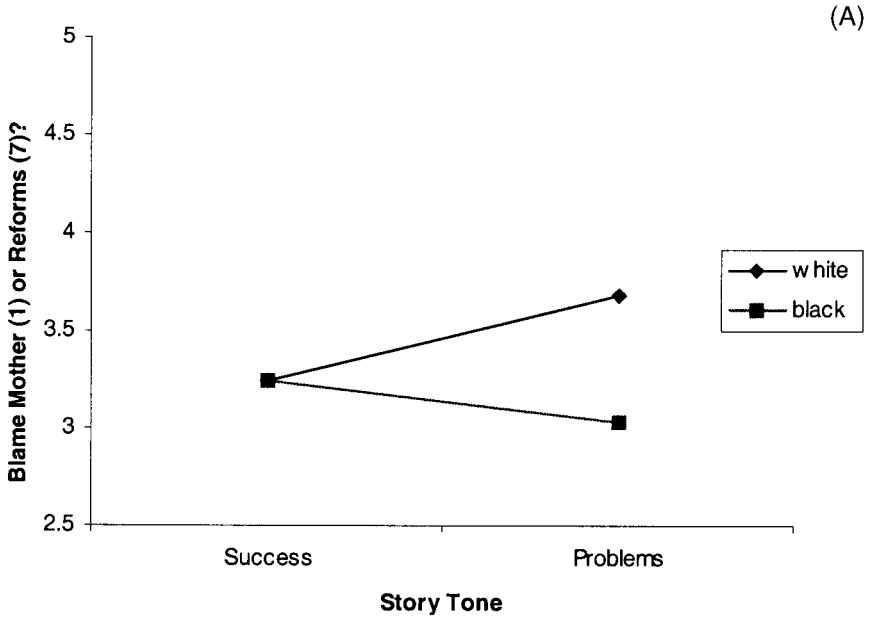


Fig. 5.1. Effects of race and story tone on evaluation of former welfare mother. (A) If lost job, due to failure of woman or reform? (B) if loses job, likely to look for new job or back on welfare?

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Thus, in the story about the problems of welfare reform, altering the race of the welfare mother in the photograph appears to affect the way the story is framed by many of our white respondents. For the white welfare mother, there is more of a tendency to deflect blame for a job loss onto welfare reform, whereas responsibility is targeted more to the black welfare mother even after problems with welfare reform are highlighted in the article.

The right-hand side of table 5.1 displays the results of a similar model, Back on Welfare, this time explaining evaluations of whether, in the event the former welfare mother loses her job, she is more likely to “try to find a new job” or “try to go back on welfare.” In this case, both race and story tone have significant additive effects on evaluations. In other words, as one might expect, people are more optimistic about the former welfare mother looking for another job after reading the article describing welfare reform as a success; a more pessimistic assessment follows from reading about the problems of welfare reform. The mother’s race also has a significant, albeit smaller, effect on such evaluations, with white respondents expecting the black woman to be more likely to try to go back on welfare than the white woman. In the next column of coefficients, we see that the interaction between Race and Tone is not significant, a result that is confirmed by inspection of the lower panel of figure 5.1, which displays the predicted values for the Back on Welfare question for the four different versions of the article.

Evaluations of Welfare

Although one may expect a news story to affect evaluations of the individual featured in the story, research by Gilens and others suggests that visual portrayals also influence support for welfare *policy*. In table 5.2, we examine the effects of Race and Tone on evaluations of welfare reform (the Limit Welfare question), general attitudes toward welfare recipients (the Without Welfare question), and support for welfare spending (Welfare Spending). Focusing first on evaluations of welfare reform, perhaps the single most important difference between AFDC and the current system under TANF is the new limit on the maximum number of years families are eligible to receive assistance. As can be seen by the first column of coefficients for the Limit Welfare equation, the race of the woman depicted in the article significantly affects evaluations of whether a five-year lifetime limit on welfare benefits is judged to be too

short or too long. Overall, white respondents are more likely to view the five-year limit as being *too long* when the *black* (former) welfare mother is portrayed in the story.

Interestingly, the interaction between race and tone is also significant (the second column of coefficients for the Limit Welfare question). To interpret this interaction, we turn again to the predicted values for the different versions of the article displayed in the upper panel of figure 5.2. Here we see that the race of the mother makes no difference when welfare reforms are described as a success. But when the reforms are described as having *problems*, people are more likely to think the lifetime limits on receiving welfare are *too long* when the mother is *black*. When a *white* former welfare mother is portrayed as facing hardships, however, respondents are more likely to view a five-year limit as being *too short*. These results are similar to those of the Blame Mother question in table 5.1, where the complexion of the former welfare mother also appeared to shift the frame of the story. Not only was the black woman held more responsible for losing her job (table 5.1), but she prompts a different policy remedy for the general problems of welfare reform that she portrays: eligibility for assistance needs to be tightened when the exemplar is black, but expanded when the exemplar is white.

Racial portrayals of poverty are also hypothesized to affect more gen-

TABLE 5.2. Effects of Race and Story Content on Evaluation of Former Welfare Mother

Predictors	Evaluation of Welfare Reform		Evaluation of Welfare in General			
	Limit Welfare		Without Welfare	Welfare Spending		
Race (1 = Black Mother)	0.31*** (0.12)	0.02 (0.17)	0.23* (0.14)	0.34* (0.20)	0.10 (0.11)	0.14 (0.15)
Tone (1 = Still Problems)	0.11 (0.12)	-0.17 (0.16)	-0.003 (0.14)	0.11 (0.20)	0.06 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.15)
Race × Tone		0.58*** (0.23)		-0.23 (0.28)		-0.09 (0.22)
Constant	4.36*** (0.10)	4.47*** (0.11)	4.51*** (0.12)	4.43*** (0.13)	3.90*** (0.41)	3.88*** (0.41)
Adj. R ²	0.053	0.062	0.102	0.102	0.163	0.147
N	512	512	513	513	508	508

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Each regression equation included Party ID, Ideology, Education, Gender, Income, and Age.

* $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

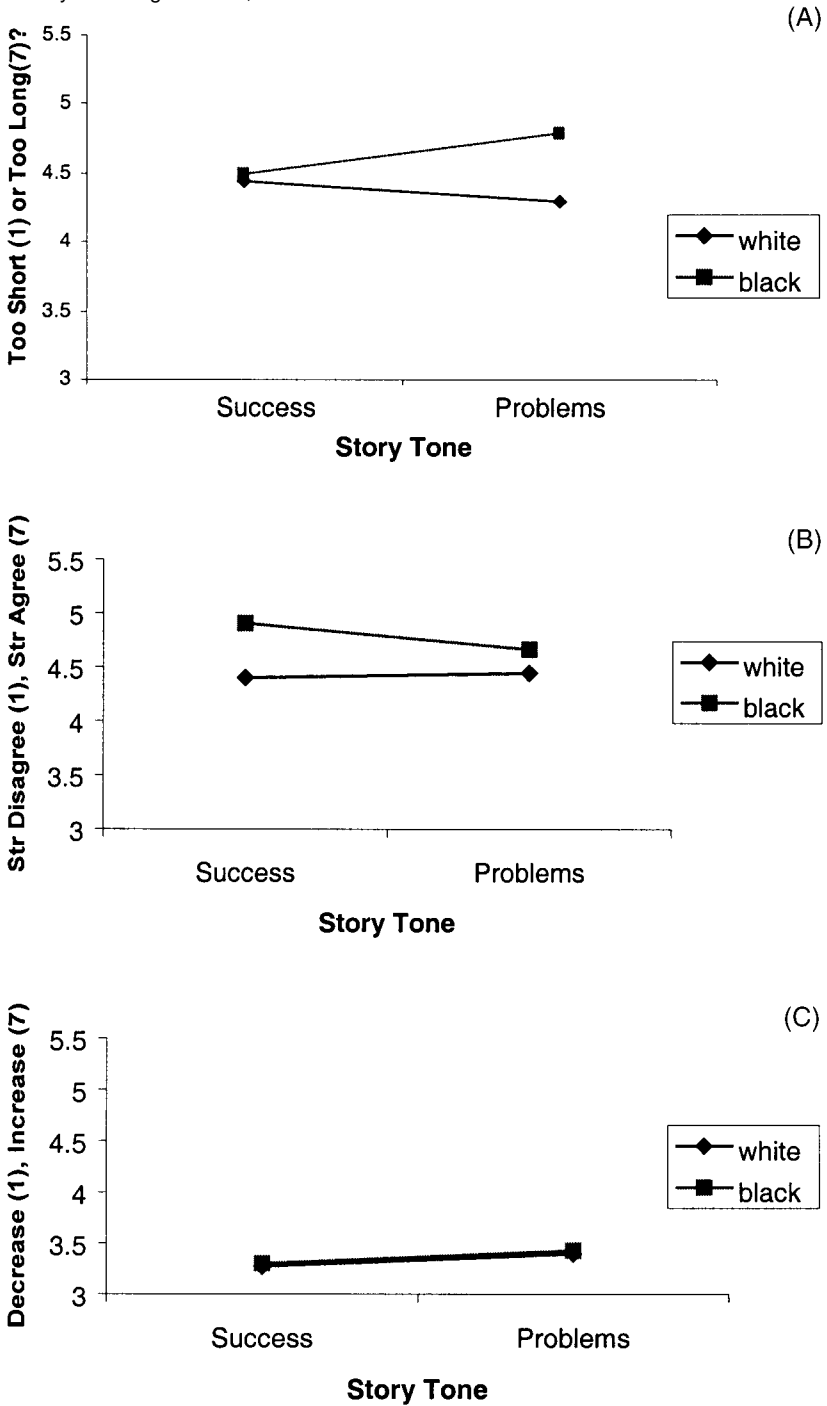


Fig. 5.2. Effects of race and story tone on evaluation of welfare policy. (A) Five-year limit too short or too long? (B) most people could get by without welfare? (C) spending on welfare?

eral attitudes about welfare recipients and support for welfare. In the third column of coefficients in table 5.2 (the Without Welfare question), we use the same predictors to explain agreement with the general belief that “Most people on welfare could get along without it if they tried.” Race is a significant predictor of such attitudes in the additive model, but only at the .10 level. Although the interaction between Race and Tone is not statistically significant either (the fourth column of coefficients), the middle panel of figure 5.2 suggests a slight tendency for racial imagery once again to alter the interpretation of the article. This time, however, the race of the woman has a greater impact for the story describing welfare as a success. When the black woman is portrayed in a story about welfare reform being a success, respondents are more likely to agree that “most people could get by without welfare.” In other words, describing welfare reform as a success more strongly encourages conservative attitudes on welfare when the woman is black than when she is white.

As a final test of the power of racial portrayals to affect support for welfare, we present estimates for a third dependent variable in table 5.2, the Welfare Spending question. In this case, neither Race nor Tone significantly affects the general desire to increase or decrease spending on welfare. None of the coefficients in table 5.2 are significant, a “nonfinding” that is confirmed by the third panel in figure 5.2. It may be that the impact of the manipulated elements of the story diminish as the focus shifts to more general evaluations of welfare (Without Welfare and Welfare Spending) with less direct relevance to the article respondents read. Treatment effects decline as the focus of evaluation shifts from evaluations of the mother (i.e., the Blame Mother and Back on Welfare assessments in table 5.1) to welfare reform (Limit Welfare) to welfare in general (Without Welfare and Welfare Spending).⁶ Overall, despite these “nonfindings,” the effects of reading a single story on evaluations of welfare and welfare recipients seem impressive by almost any standard.

Conclusions

Summary and Implications

One conclusion of our study stands out from our findings: racial portrayals of poverty in the media clearly do matter. Studies of media portrayals of poverty have consistently documented a tendency for the media to “racialize” welfare policy by disproportionately using images of African Americans to accompany news stories on poverty. Our experi-

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mental study shows that this racially biased imagery is not without consequence. By randomly varying the race of the woman depicted in identical stories about welfare reform, we were able to show conclusively that racial imagery has a powerful effect on the way whites respond to the news articles. Generally speaking, respondents who read a story with an accompanying photograph of a black (versus a white) woman and her child were decidedly more harsh in their evaluations of welfare recipients and welfare in general. This finding is very much in keeping with the hypothesized effects of racial portrayals in content analysis studies.

Our findings also demonstrate that the content of the story affects readers' reactions, as well. Content analysis studies have documented a clear pattern for journalists to use photographs of African Americans to portray negative stories about poverty that are likely to generate unsympathetic responses from the public. To estimate the effects of the tone of the story in addition to racial imagery, we also randomly assigned respondents to read either a story describing welfare reform as a *success* in moving women from welfare to work or as creating *problems* for the newly working poor who continue to struggle to make ends meet. We found the tone of the story to exert a simple additive effect on assessments of the work ethic of the former welfare mother portrayed in the article. Thus, in the Back on Welfare model, reading about the success of welfare reform prompted more optimistic assessments of the former welfare mother's ability to hold down a job without going back to welfare. And in the Blame Mother model, reading the story about the successes of welfare reform led respondents to place more of the blame on the mother if she lost her job. Based on these results, we might speculate that the tendency of the media to portray welfare reform as an unmitigated success may convince the public that governmental assistance is not needed in light of the opportunities for employment greeting women who leave welfare.

On the other hand, in most cases the story content failed to exert a simple additive effect on respondents' evaluations of welfare and welfare recipients. Rather, the tone of the story was found to interact with racial imagery in shaping responses to welfare and welfare recipients. Depicting the woman as black or white appeared to alter drastically the frame of the story. Thus, stories identical in content or tone had very different effects on political evaluations depending on the race of the mother and her child depicted in the story. Consistent with the arguments of content analysis studies, associating a black woman with a story about the problems of welfare tended to produce the most cynical public evaluations of

welfare recipients and welfare policy. When a black woman is placed in the stigmatizing context of a story about the problems of welfare reform, she is held more responsible for losing her job (Blame Mother model), and respondents are more likely to favor more stringent eligibility limits for welfare assistance (Limit Welfare). Because research finds that African Americans are more likely to be used by journalists to portray the problems of welfare (Gilens, chap. 4, this volume; Clawson and Trice 2000), our findings confirm that such portrayals tend to produce the most cynical responses to the poor and to welfare programs. Though journalists may intend to create a more sympathetic public response with their stories, our findings suggest that such news stories are likely to have just the opposite effect on their audience.

Caveats

Several caveats about our findings are in order. In the first place, while our experimental design offers a useful balance between internal and external validity, it is by no means perfect. Although our sample is large and diverse in comparison with most laboratory studies, it was not selected randomly, and so we lack the benefit of being able to generalize our findings to a known population. In addition, while respondents were asked to read the news story as they would any newspaper article, respondents may have paid more attention to the content of the story than they would in a more natural setting. It may be that in a low-attention setting, visual images are weighed more than story content in determining responses to the news. Alternatively, neither image nor story content may affect responses as much as the did in our study, where respondents were asked to read a news story. In addition, our respondents read a single news story, while the effects of racially biased news portrayals of poverty may emerge after being exposed to a pattern of bias in dozens of news articles over a period of years. The fact that we did not find powerful effects of race in every single instance, therefore, should not be viewed as a refutation of the power of news to affect public opinion. Rather, the fact that a single news story had such important consequences should give one pause. Repeated exposure to a similar pattern of news stories can only reinforce the racialization of welfare over the longer haul.

Recent trends in the makeup of the welfare population are likely to magnify racial biases in news coverage of welfare. Welfare rolls are becoming increasingly skewed toward people of color (Zedlewski and

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Alderson 2001). In 1998, white families made up only 33 percent of the nation's welfare caseload, down from 42 percent in 1997. Black families, however, made up 46 percent of the nation's caseload in 1998, up from 34 percent in 1994. As the caseload under TANF becomes less white, African Americans are increasingly likely to be used by the media to portray the problems associated with welfare. The results of our paper strongly suggest that if this trend continues, public evaluation of welfare recipients and welfare policy are likely to become even more racialized and more negative.

APPENDIX

News Treatments

Success

Welfare Reform's Triumph Is Affirmed

By Staff Reporters

Wednesday, February 2, 2000; Page A1

[Photo of white (black) woman and child goes here]

Mary Ellsworth (Lashanda Washington), a former welfare mother of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, describes herself as a living example of the success of welfare reform. The welfare reform law, passed by Congress and signed by the President in 1996, ends assistance after a maximum of five years. "Today, I'm working as a machine operator, providing for my family," Ms. Ellsworth (Washington) said. Pointing to her three children, she said, "Now I tell my kids that this is what you get when you do your homework."

Almost four years after a radical overhaul of the nation's welfare system, the most comprehensive independent study to date confirms that Ms. Ellsworth (Washington) is not alone: nationally, the welfare rolls have fallen more dramatically than anyone expected. Conducted by the Urban Institute, this first thorough national assessment of welfare reform in many respects affirms the early optimism of the program's authors. According to the Urban Institute, there are now some 7.3 million people on welfare nationally—down from 12.2 million when President Clinton signed the Republican-drafted welfare overhaul in August 1996. That experiment is proving largely successful in its early stages, according to the Urban Institute review.

The Urban Institute study, however, also includes some warnings about the precarious position of the poor at a time of general national prosperity, and suggests that many people who leave public assistance remain trapped on the lower rungs of the economy. Nevertheless, Mary Ellsworth (Lashanda Washington),

and many other former welfare mothers like her, are examples of the many women who have made the successful transition from welfare to work.

Problems

Welfare Reform's Problems Are Confirmed

By Staff Reporters

Wednesday, February 2, 2000; Page A1

[Photo of white (black) woman and child goes here]

Mary Ellsworth (Lashanda Washington), a former welfare mother of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, describes herself as a living example of the problems with welfare reform. The welfare reform law, passed by Congress and signed by the President in 1996, ends assistance after a maximum of five years. "Today, I'm off welfare and working full time, but I have more trouble finding money for rent, food, and medical things for my kids," said Ms. Ellsworth (Washington), pointing to her three children.

Almost four years after a radical overhaul of the nation's welfare system, the most comprehensive independent study to date confirms that Ms. Ellsworth (Washington) is not alone: while the welfare rolls have fallen, many of those leaving welfare for the work force struggle to afford basic life essentials. Conducted by the Urban Institute, this first thorough national assessment of welfare reform highlights the economic troubles experienced by former welfare recipients. After interviewing thousands of women who reported leaving the welfare rolls after the reforms were passed, the Urban Institute concluded that "most people who leave public assistance remain trapped on the lower rungs of the economy." In particular, most women who leave welfare are working in low-wage service jobs, and a significant minority say they have trouble providing food and medical care for their families or paying rent, the study concludes. According to the Urban Institute, there are now some 7.3 million people on welfare nationally—down from 12.2 million when President Clinton signed the Republican-drafted welfare overhaul in August 1996. While that experiment was initially hailed as a success in its early stages, cases like Mary Ellsworth (Washington) are sobering examples of the many problems with welfare reform.

NOTES

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1. Although our content analysis of welfare reform stories is in its early stages, on balance, more stories appear to be characterized by a positive tone (noting the successes of reform) than a negative one (focusing on the problems of reform).

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2. See also Entman 1992, 1995.
3. While an examination of the effect of racialized media coverage of welfare reform on attitudes among African Americans would be a worthy undertaking, the limited number of African American participants in our study does not allow us to do so here. Thus, this chapter is specifically interested in the attitudes of whites.
4. Portions of the fictitious articles describing the problems and success of welfare reform were taken from Rosin and Harris 1999.
5. Predicted values were computed based on the interactive model in table 5.1, varying race and tone and holding the control variables at their means.
6. It may also be that describing welfare reform as a success (versus having problems) is less relevant for the specific question of whether spending on welfare, in general, ought to be cut. For some respondents, a successful program to reform welfare may suggest welfare (and welfare spending) is a good program that helps put people back to work and therefore deserves an increase in spending; for others, a successful welfare reform effort may imply that welfare (i.e., assistance) could be cut without serious consequences for people who really want to work.