

# RAGS-TO-RICHES, WELFARE QUEENS, AND BROKEN FAMILIES:

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Media representations of poverty and their  
impact on audiences

**ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH LANDSCAPE**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public understanding of poverty in the United States is limited and shaped by the stories, or narratives, that are shared across a culture and spread through media messages. In a 2019 report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, GOOD, Inc. identified a set of six dominant narratives — *character, system, greed, meritocracy, fate, and culture* — each of which frames public perceptions of those living in poverty, as well as causes of and solutions to poverty. When mass media perpetuate flawed or misleading narratives about poverty, they can limit the audience’s ability to understand the causes of poverty and develop effective solutions. The report summarizes existing research on mass media representations of poverty through the lens of six GOOD narratives, and discusses the influence of these media narratives on audiences.

## Media Narratives of Poverty

**Meritocracy narratives**, which suggest that through hard work, anyone can achieve financial success, are dominant.

- News coverage of poverty generally uses *episodic framing*, which focuses on individual choices, obscuring the systemic factors that contribute to poverty.
- Entertainment TV and film often rely on meritocratic narratives that blame the poor for their failures to achieve success. Scripted TV shows about the working class, like *The Middle* and *Raising Hope*, and unscripted programming, such as *Duck Dynasty* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, reinforce meritocratic and neoliberal themes about hard work and competition.
- Some suggest the invisibility of poverty in news and entertainment may be because poverty conflicts with the vision of America as the “land of opportunity.”

**Character narratives** emphasize the role of individual flaws and characteristics in negative outcomes. Closely related to character narratives, **greed narratives** frame those in poverty as selfish or corrupt.

- People living in poverty are underrepresented overall in entertainment, but often appear in unscripted TV, daytime talk shows, and crime-based reality TV as lazy, unintelligent, or drug addicted.
- Character narratives are evident in representations of poverty across races, but greed narratives introduce a strong racial component through the “welfare queen” trope, which is common only to representations of Black women in poverty.

- The “welfare queen” trope activates negative racial and gender stereotypes in relation to social welfare programs, and perpetuates racialized ideas about deservingness.
- Immorality, irresponsibility, and sexual deviance are evident in the trope of the young, White “teen mom.”
- White people living in poverty are also frequently portrayed as “hillbillies” or “rednecks,” as in *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.
- Blue-collar working men are presented as buffoons, bigots, and slobs, such as Ralph Kramden (*The Honeymooners*) and Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*).

**Culture narratives** suggest communities in poverty have a different culture or value system that maintains and perpetuates poverty.

- These narratives appear in news and entertainment media predominantly in representations of “broken families.”
- The television show *The O.C.* depicts poor people as products of their circumstances who escape poverty by renouncing their poor families.

**System narratives** highlight the systemic nature of poverty and represent an opportunity to counter meritocracy and other flawed narratives.

- System narratives rely on *thematic framing* that highlights the systems and institutions in which individuals are embedded. Although thematic framing has increasingly been used in news depictions of poverty, system narratives are less common in both news and entertainment than meritocracy narratives.
- Historically, thematic framing has been used to garner support for systemic reforms in the U.S., such as The Great Society anti-poverty policies of the 1960s.
- News frames are also influenced by real-time events like new anti-poverty initiatives and shifts in public opinion toward poverty. The 2008 Occupy Wall Street protests brought system narratives to the forefront of social movements and their media coverage, albeit temporarily.

We did not uncover any existing research on media narratives of poverty that align with GOOD’s **fate narrative**.

## Narrative Impact

- *Episodic framing* invites people to make *internal attributions*, placing responsibility for societal problems on those most in need, thereby blaming those living in poverty for their own situation.

- *Thematic framing*, on the other hand, invites *external attributions* of responsibility, which are associated with public support for broader systemic policy changes, such as increased federal spending on social services.
- When media narratives combine individual responsibility with social or structural causes, this *hybrid frame* tends to elicit more empathy from audiences than episodic or thematic framing alone.
- Hybrid framing can be effectively harnessed to address the role of government in addressing poverty.
- Racialized representations of poverty may cause people to default to harmful stereotypes and can impact public support for systemic solutions.
- *Race-class narratives*, which explicitly address the linkages between race and class, can be a particularly effective messaging strategy.
- Entertainment can be especially effective in engaging the public in social issues, breaking down social barriers, providing new information, increasing empathy and, for those living in poverty, improving self-esteem and efficacy.

## Implications for Poverty Messaging

- Audience segments relate to poverty issues differently, and messages should be targeted based on demographics, values, and beliefs.
- Advocates can amplify anti-poverty messages through non-traditional partnerships and messengers or by partnering with people who experience poverty to tell their own stories.
- Advocates can foster audience empathy by using language that emphasizes interconnectedness and highlights the broad societal benefits of poverty-related reforms.
- Mass media have the potential to build audience efficacy by using solutions-based messaging that explains the systemic roots of the problem and potential ways to rectify it.

## Recommendations for Content Creators

- Tailor messages to key audience segments with different values and motivations.
- Humanize the poverty story. Tell real, personal stories about those who continue to struggle to escape poverty despite hard work.
- Use *hybrid framing* to embed individual choices within a broader systemic context.
- Avoid racialized framing, but explicitly discuss the links between race and class.
- Highlight actionable solutions that can increase the audience's confidence in their ability to make a difference.

- Focus on society's interconnectedness and build a shared narrative that success for one is success for all.

## **Questions for Researchers and Advocates**

- How do different audience segments respond to different message frames and formats around poverty?
- How can we effectively balance mass appeal messages with those tailored to more specific audience segments?
- Can system narratives of poverty in mass media be connected to any concrete policy outcomes?
- What are the most effective strategies for developing entertainment narratives about the systemic nature of poverty?

# INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty was launched by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (the foundation) and the Urban Institute with the goal of identifying solutions and strategies for increasing economic mobility on a mass scale. Within this broader initiative, a focus began to emerge on shifting the cultural narratives about poverty that inform Americans' knowledge and attitudes. As part of this "narrative change" effort, the foundation commissioned GOOD, Inc. (2019) to conduct research on public perceptions and narratives of poverty. This research identified a set of six dominant meta-narratives that frame the public's perceptions of those living in poverty. GOOD concludes that several of these narratives are false, misleading and incomplete, and as a result, limit our ability to understand the causes of poverty and effect meaningful solutions.

- **CHARACTER:** Character narratives endorse common biases and stigmas related to the qualities and characteristics of those living in poverty. These include the belief that poor people are dishonest, dirty, and lack intelligence, that they are a drain on society, and that they are personally responsible for their situation.
- **SYSTEM:** System narratives recognize the structural forces and societal influences that create conditions that keep people in poverty, including systemic racism and discrimination in hiring practices, housing options, job opportunities, and barriers to educational attainment.
- **GREED:** Greed narratives view those in poverty as selfish and dishonest, looking for "handouts," gaming the system, or committing fraud against government support programs.
- **MERITOCRACY:** Meritocracy narratives align closely with the American Dream myth — the idea that everyone starts out on a level playing field and has the same opportunities for success.
- **FATE:** Fate narratives imply that by default, someone has to be poor in society.
- **CULTURE:** Culture narratives suggest there is a *subculture* or value system among those living in poverty that maintains and perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

As these narratives about poverty permeate our culture, they are also transmitted through mass media. Research shows that media narratives have a unique capacity to connect with audiences, and that media messages have the power to shape social norms, attitudes, and behaviors (see

Stacks et al., 2015, for a review). This landscape analysis by the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center is part of a Gates Foundation-funded initiative to understand how narratives of poverty play out in mass media and how they shape audiences' perceptions and misconceptions of poverty and economic mobility.

The report draws upon academic publications and grey literature (e.g., white papers, technical reports) to understand how mass media representations of poverty align with the GOOD narratives. We further summarize the literature on the impact of messages on poverty-adjacent topics on audiences and discuss the implications of these findings for developing effective media messages to communicate these topics. We conclude by proposing strategies and recommendations for content creators to counter existing flawed narratives of poverty and note potential avenues for future research.

# MEDIA NARRATIVES OF POVERTY

As narratives spread through culture and conversation, they are also transmitted through mass media, including news stories, and television and film characters and storylines. Here, we discuss research on the nature and content of mass media narratives of poverty, contextualized within GOOD's narrative framework.

## Meritocracy Narratives

Meritocracy narratives, which imply that everyone has the opportunity to achieve the American Dream, dominate the media landscape. Inherent in this narrative is the belief in equal opportunity: that all Americans can attain success, wealth, and a good education by virtue of their own merit and grit. Also captured within this framework are the characteristically American narratives of rugged individualism and the role of personal choice in one's success or failure. Meritocracy strongly aligns with the popular cultural narrative of neoliberalism — an ideology that focuses on the decisions of individuals while valuing competition, consumer choice, and personal responsibility. Like meritocracy, neoliberalism presumes a level playing field, while attributing financial successes to personal strengths and efforts (Dobson & Knezevic, 2017; Healey & Barish, 2019).

Mass media employ different types of framing in discussing poverty and related issues, which can serve to amplify or counter meritocratic narratives. *Episodic framing* refers to a focus on individual-level stories and actions. *Thematic framing*, on the other hand, highlights the broad social trends, systems, and institutions in which individuals are embedded. News coverage generally uses episodic frames when talking about social issues (Iyengar, 1991). Television news, in particular, relies on episodic framing of poverty more than print news, due to its story- and event-driven format (Kim et al., 2010). Though the emphasis on personal stories and experiences can humanize the issue of poverty, episodic framing tends to obscure the systemic causes and context in which poverty arises (Kendall, 2011). By inviting scrutiny of poor people's individual character, choices, and actions, episodic frames closely align with the meritocracy, character, and greed narratives of poverty.

*Exceptionalism framing* is a particular subtype of episodic framing that further contributes to meritocracy narratives of poverty. This type of framing refers to the tendency to highlight inspirational stories about people who escape from poverty through hard work and dedication

(Kendall, 2011). Exceptionalism framing perpetuates the *rags-to-riches* trope by suggesting that anyone can escape poverty and achieve financial success, obscuring the fact that economic mobility is out of reach for the majority of poor Americans (Poo & Shafir, 2018).

Beyond news media, entertainment television and film often contribute to meritocratic narratives by blaming poor and working-class characters for their failures to achieve upward mobility (Holladay, 2015; Murphy, 2014; Williams, 2014). Holladay's (2015) content analysis of four shows about working class families (*The Middle*, *Raising Hope*, *Duck Dynasty*, and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*) found that neoliberal frameworks — which emphasize individualism and financial success — shape character depictions on both scripted and unscripted shows. This includes the valorization of competition and hard work to explain a character's success or lack thereof. For instance, in one episode of *Duck Dynasty*, the family's patriarch attributes the success of their family business to “competition, sibling rivalry...and working hard” (Holladay, 2015, p. 125). Murphy's (2014) analysis of three scripted TV programs (*My So Called Life*, *The O.C.*, and *Shameless*) found that characters' personal choices reinforce the notions of deserving versus undeserving poor. Williams' (2014) analysis of the narrative arc in the film *Precious* illustrates how the title character's rejection of her mother's welfare-dependent life depicts the neoliberal concept of personal responsibility.

Media depictions of the wealthy also reinforce meritocratic narratives. Kendall (2011) identifies three distinct frames that frequently appear in portrayals of wealthy people on television. The *consensus* frame suggests that the wealthy are just like everyone else, so if we earned and saved our money in the right ways, we could all be rich. The *admiration* frame portrays the wealthy as generous, philanthropic, and compassionate. The *emulation* frame implies that rich people are exemplars of the American Dream and others should strive to be more like them. All three frames serve to deflect criticism of the wealthy and lay the burden of responsibility on the poor to better themselves. When applied to wealthy individuals, meritocratic narratives suggest that they earned their wealth through hard work and making the right choices, while obscuring the systemic factors that allowed for the creation and maintenance of that wealth.

People living in poverty are largely absent from news and entertainment coverage—a phenomenon scholars have described as invisibility (Bullock et al., 2001; Kendall, 2011; Owen, 2016). Kendall (2011) theorizes that the poor are underrepresented in mass media because depictions of poverty may activate cognitive dissonance for upper and middle-class audiences. In other words, an awareness of the pervasive nature of poverty in the U.S. conflicts with the vision of America as the “land of opportunity.” Journalists and other media makers may shy away from the topic to avoid arousing ambivalent emotions, fears, and feelings of contradiction among the higher classes. This phenomenon renders the poor largely invisible in mass media discussions.

## Character and Greed Narratives

Both *character* and *greed* narratives pertain to perceived flaws and failures of individuals living in poverty. They are closely related to the meritocracy narrative, through which laziness is implied by failure to succeed. In GOOD's formulation, these are distinct narratives. *Character* narratives stereotype the poor as dirty, lazy, dishonest, and unintelligent, and tend to view the poor as drug addicted or mentally ill. *Greed* narratives also disparage those in poverty, but characterize them as selfish, entitled, or dependent on handouts. Greed narratives also call into question deservingness of public benefits, because the poor are perceived as unscrupulously exploiting the system. In mass media, these two narratives are closely intertwined. However, while character narratives are ascribed to poor people of all races, greed narratives are weaponized against low-income communities of color, and Black people in particular.

Character narratives are most evident in the ways in which mass media emphasize the character flaws of the poor and homeless and focus on their own role in their life circumstances (Kendall, 2011). In a content analysis of newspaper articles from five American cities, Truong (2012) found that stories about homeless people were predominantly negative; they were often described as drug abusers, mentally ill, or criminals. In coverage of policy debates about anti-homeless ordinances, news stories tended to highlight individual behaviors (e.g., panhandling, sleeping outdoors) rather than the economic and systemic causes of poverty (e.g., lack of affordable housing, rising costs of living, employment barriers). This individualistic frame in news is not unique to homeless people; character narratives appear in coverage of other low-income communities. Vorsino (2015) found that in news commentary, poor students and their families are often portrayed as a strain on the educational and welfare systems. The poor as a burden or a "drain on society" (GOOD, 2019) is a recurring theme in both character and greed narratives.

The poor are underrepresented in all forms of entertainment media, but they appear more frequently in unscripted television, such as daytime talk shows and crime-based reality TV, than in scripted programming. Bullock et al. (2001) identified stereotypical treatment of poor people of color as lazy, unintelligent, or drug addicted in these unscripted shows. These stereotypes merge in the racialized trope of the "welfare queen."

### The Welfare Queen

The image of the "welfare queen" originated in response to legislation and spending programs spearheaded by President Johnson in the 1960s known as The Great Society, designed to tackle poverty and inequality. Beneficiaries of these early welfare programs tended to be poor Black women, and the media narrative soon shifted. Prior to these reforms, the prevailing media image of poverty in this country was one of White Appalachians and jobless factory workers (Owen,

2016). Soon, however, mass media began portraying low-income women, and especially Black women, as lazy, greedy, sexually irresponsible, and undeserving opportunists (Owen, 2016; Van Doorn & Bos, 2017). The “welfare queen” (and its male equivalent of the “welfare bum”) has become a quintessential poverty trope, popularized by former President Ronald Reagan. Its use in news media and entertainment illustrates how easily the term can activate negative stereotypes on race and gender in relation to social welfare programs (Owen, 2016; Van Doorn & Bos, 2017).

Greed narratives reflect long-existing racial stereotypes about Black people specifically. These narratives perpetuate racialized ideas about who is deserving of sympathy and support. Clawson and Jett’s (2019) study found that news magazine articles on popular social safety net programs (Social Security and Medicare) depict White beneficiaries in a positive and sympathetic manner, as hard working and deserving of government support. In stark contrast, media coverage of poor Black welfare beneficiaries is less sympathetic and reinforces racial stereotypes. The authors argue that this conceptual link between whiteness, deservingness, and hard work is what has helped generate further public support for these safety net programs over time. Other social programs, such as unemployment and food stamps, may experience less public popularity due to the media’s reinforcement of these racialized associations, which question the deservingness of poor, Black welfare recipients.

The 2009 film *Precious* illustrates a particularly racialized example of the welfare queen trope in entertainment (Williams, 2014). The film centers on the titular Black character, Precious, and her mother (Mama) as they struggle to support themselves on welfare in New York City. Mama is greedy, violent, abusive, and cheats the welfare system. There is little to no development of her character, nor are her actions given any historical or structural context, which ultimately “reinforces the pathology of the Black welfare mother” (Williams, 2014, p. 64).

## **Representations of White Poverty**

According to Owen (2016), the “welfare queen” trope has more recently been repackaged into the trope of the “teen mom” (notably featured on the reality TV series, *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*), which depicts young, lower-class mothers as immoral, irresponsible, and uneducated. Whereas the “welfare queen” is traditionally portrayed as Black and urban-dwelling, the image of the “teen mom” is more often White and rural, though underlying both tropes is the theme of gendered deviant sexuality (Owen, 2016). Both tropes are supported by character narratives of poverty, but only the “welfare queen” bears the hallmarks of a racialized greed narrative.

Character narratives also appear in other tropes about White people living in poverty. The image of the “hillbilly” on television represents a popular depiction of rural poor people (typically White Southerners) as ignorant, lazy, and unclean, who embrace their “redneck” lifestyle to comic effect

(Owen, 2016). Notable examples of hillbillies on television include the fictional characters in *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971) and more recently the stars of the reality TV series *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014). Hillbilly or redneck tropes are categorized as “White trash” depictions (Kendall, 2011). According to Owen (2016), these portrayals periodically arise during periods of economic turmoil in the U.S. when the middle-class projects problems onto the perceived backwardness of the redneck lifestyle in order to feel superior about their own social position.

Related but distinct from these “White trash” portrayals are depictions of blue-collar workers in entertainment TV — specifically (White) men — who are portrayed as “buffoons, bigots, and slobs” (Kendall, 2011, p. 119). These male characters are typically presented as ignorant and irresponsible slackers in contrast to their more sensible TV wives. Prominent examples of these blue-collar TV characters include Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956), Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and Doug Heffernan in *King of Queens* (1998-2007).

## Culture Narratives

*Culture* narratives are distinct from *meritocracy*, *character*, and *greed* narratives, which blame individuals in poverty for their own plight. They are nonetheless flawed, however, in that they focus responsibility on poor communities for perpetuating cycles of poverty and fostering a victim mentality, rather than the institutions that hold power. In GOOD’s formulation of culture narratives, poverty is viewed as a “persistent subculture” in the U.S. that contributes to poor people’s perceived bad decisions, mentality, and values. The concept is not well-defined in terms of underlying beliefs, but further research by GOOD associates terms such as “victim,” “mentality,” “welfare,” and “birth control” with these narratives. The emphasis on values aligns closely with sociologist William Ryan’s decades-old analysis of *culture of poverty* narratives (Ryan, 1971). According to Ryan, culture of poverty logic asserts that poor communities have a “deviant” value system that includes sexual irresponsibility, nontraditional family structures, welfare dependency, and perceived lack of interest in education and health, which perpetuate a “cycle of poverty” over generations (Ryan, 1971, p. 5).

Culture narratives are less common in media than meritocracy, character, and greed. They are evident in news and entertainment primarily through discussions of “broken families” — families with single parents, divorce, teen pregnancies, promiscuity, and too many children (Kim et al., 2010). Kim et al.’s study on U.S. news coverage of poverty from 1993 to 2007 found that “broken families” was the single most commonly cited cause of poverty, in both print and television news. The second most frequently mentioned cause was lack of education.

The teen drama *The O.C.* tells the story of a poor, White teenager named Ryan as he navigates his new life among the wealthy of Orange County, California. According to Murphy (2014), the series implies a connection between single parenthood, poverty, and criminality. The pilot episode depicts Ryan's criminality (stealing a car) as a response to his dysfunctional family life with a single, alcoholic mother. The show follows Ryan as he rights his life course — despite his “broken family” origins — thanks to the guidance of upper-class adoptive parents, who represent the ideal nuclear family with a respectable value system. As such, Ryan's character arc represents a manifestation of the culture narrative. By moving out of a familial and community environment where perceived wrong choices (e.g. sexual irresponsibility, substance abuse, and criminal activities) are normalized, Ryan is able to escape the “persistent subculture” (GOOD, 2019) of poverty and its associated value system.

Culture of poverty arguments minimally acknowledge the influence of systemic issues like educational access, health inequities, and racial discrimination. However, “the stigma, the defect, the fatal difference, though derived in the past from environmental forces, is still located within the victim, inside his skin” (Ryan, 1971, p. 7). In other words, culture narratives may be more sympathetic to the challenges faced by members of marginalized communities, but still place responsibility on the communities themselves to overcome these challenges. Relative to system narratives, culture narratives tend to take on a patronizing tone, where the focus is on changing the behaviors and values of those in poverty (e.g. teaching them to value education, health, or the nuclear family unit), without addressing the structural conditions that perpetuate poverty in these communities.

## **System Narratives**

Whereas *culture* narratives blame poor communities for perpetuating a cycle of poverty, *system* narratives shift the responsibility to the institutional and structural factors that impede economic mobility. These include workplace discrimination and limited access to education, affordable housing, and job training. System narratives explicitly address the relationships between race and poverty, and the ways that systemic racism intensifies discrimination against poor people of color (GOOD, 2019). Stories highlighting the systemic nature of poverty can counter inaccurate narratives and challenge dominant public and policy conversations on the issue (e.g., Poo & Shafir, 2018; Mazelis & Gaughan, 2014; Borden, 2013).

System narratives have begun to emerge in news and entertainment media, but the individualistic narratives of meritocracy, character, greed, culture still predominate. As discussed previously, episodic framing that focuses on individual stories is most common in media coverage of social issues, and tend to—even inadvertently—advance narratives of personal choice. Research has found, however, that news stories are increasingly shifting to thematic framing (Gollust et al.,

2019; Kendall, 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Owen, 2016; Sheese, 2017). Thematic framing lends itself to system narratives of poverty by focusing on the broad social and structural context of the issues.

Thematic framing has historically been used to garner support for anti-poverty policies in the U.S. (Guetzkow, 2010). In the 1960s, proponents of The Great Society used thematic framing to highlight structural solutions to poverty, such as the government's responsibility to create job training programs. This discourse style shifted in the neoliberal era of the 1980s with episodic framing of discussions of poverty that minimized the government's role in addressing these issues (Guetzkow, 2010).

Analyses of media coverage have identified another recent shift in discourse about poverty. Sheese (2017) examined U.S. news media discussions on homelessness from the 1980s to 2010, and found these stories have increasingly shifted toward an emphasis on structural causes of and solutions to homelessness. Kim et al.'s (2010) study of U.S. TV and print news from 1993 to 2007 found news media generally focused on causes and solutions of poverty at a societal, rather than a personal level — a finding that even surprised the researchers, given the presumed strong influence of neoliberalism. The authors' explanation was that news frames of poverty can be influenced and reactive to real-time events like natural disasters or announcements of new anti-poverty initiatives (Kim et al., 2010).

One example of media narratives shifting in response to real-time events is in relation to the 2008 Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protest movement against economic inequality. According to Mazelis and Gaughan (2014), in the month after OWS protests began, stories in U.S. newspapers using terms like "inequality" and "richest one percent" tripled. OWS's messaging permeated conversations in mass media and directed journalists' and therefore the public's attention to corporate special interests and social inequalities for that moment in time. Though that trend was fleeting, it again illustrates a social movement's ability to shift media framing.

While news media have made strides in its use of thematic framing on poverty issues, entertainment lags behind, still largely resorting to individualistic stories (Owen, 2016). Further, TV news is less likely than print news to focus on systemic and institutional causes of poverty and is more likely to assign individual blame (Kim et al., 2010). Liberal-leaning newspapers also make more references to systemic causes and solutions to poverty than conservative-leaning ones.

# NARRATIVE IMPACT

What types of narratives and message frames around poverty are most effective at shifting attitudes toward a more systemic understanding and fostering support for government interventions? What does existing research say about how mass media narratives of poverty affect audiences? The evidence presented in this section provides insights into framing strategies that can shed light on the broad systemic factors that both force people into poverty and keep them there.

## Episodic and Thematic Framing

*Attribution theory* can be used to understand how media frames shape public perceptions of the causes and solutions to poverty and other social issues (Niederdeppe et al., 2008). This theory describes how individuals assign responsibility for behavior and events. *Internal attributions* are inferences that locate the cause of behavior in personal character traits or choices squarely within the control of individuals. *External attributions*, on the other hand, are inferences that locate the cause of behavior in external factors outside of an individual's control. How Americans make sense of poverty depends on the extent to which they attribute the causes of these outcomes to internal factors such as laziness and other character flaws, or external systemic forces such as discrimination.

Episodic framing of social issues fosters internal attributions, placing responsibility for societal problems on the affected groups. When media coverage focuses on individuals living in poverty, audience explanations for poverty subsequently concentrate on individual characteristics and shortcomings, such as lack of motivation, education, or job skills (Iyengar, 1987). When media stories use thematic framing, highlighting poverty as a structural issue or focusing on poverty relief policy interventions, the audience is more likely to make external attributions. These patterns and associations persist even after controlling for partisan attitudes, political ideology, and socioeconomic status (Iyengar, 1987).

Internal attributions for poverty can undermine policy support for systemic interventions. Iyengar (1989) found participants' attributions of internal versus external responsibility for poverty were associated with their willingness to support federal spending and policies to address the issue. Specifically, people who made external attributions for poverty were more likely to support reduced defense spending and increased spending on social services. These relationships have been replicated by more recent research on perceptions of the poor (e.g., Applebaum, 2001). Consistent with Iyengar's findings, when Applebaum's (2001) fictional poor character was

presented as personally responsible for their poverty, participants were more likely to endorse policies aimed at reducing government benefits. But when the character was portrayed as experiencing economic hardship as a result of societal causes, participants were more likely to recommend policies to extend government assistance.

Episodic framing does not inherently involve a negative portrayal of the subject, and is frequently used to cast poor people in a sympathetic light by revealing their struggles as emblematic of a larger group of people (Kendall, 2011). However, it tends to result in increased stigma and victim blaming, while reducing empathy for those affected by societal problems (Saguy et al., 2014; Savani et al., 2011). For example, when messages frame people in poverty as “vulnerable,” this type of language can be “othering” and affirm stereotypes of the poor as incompetent, helpless victims dependent on society to solve their problems (FrameWorks, 2018; Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010). These “savior and victim” stories reinforce the notion that helping the poor is either a sacrifice or a no-win situation, promoting victim-blaming and fatalistic thinking about the nature of poverty (Kendall-Taylor, 2020; FrameWorks, 2018).

## **Limitations of Thematic Framing**

Though thematic frames are more effective than episodic frames at challenging individualistic poverty narratives, thematic framing is not a perfect solution. Some researchers suggest that as currently, it may be too abstract and dispassionate and ignores the humanity in poverty (Kendall, 2011; Owen, 2016). Media reports on trends, statistics, and government interventions that give context to the scale of poverty may promote ideas of the poor as powerless victims of systems (Kendall, 2011; Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Owen, 2016; Poo & Shafir, 2018). This may lead to fatalistic thinking among poor people and their advocates (FrameWorks, 2018) or misconceptions that the poor are indifferent to their situation (Duchsherer, 2015). The impersonal nature of thematic framing also may limit its effectiveness to persuade via influencing audience emotions (Abril et al., 2014; Antonetti et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2015). Experts interviewed by Rockne (2018) propose that using personal stories about people — especially children and seniors — living in affordable housing can humanize poverty. Although focusing on specific groups may risk representing them as especially deserving of sympathy, and imply that other groups are less deserving of support (Viladrich, 2019), humanizing stories about those in poverty may help increase the empathy of audience members (Rockne, 2018).

## Hybrid Framing

An alternative approach combines stories about individual people with the structural or contextual factors in which their behaviors and choices are embedded; we term this *hybrid framing*<sup>1</sup> (Weinstein et al., 2020). Research suggests this type of framing may help overcome the limitations of telling stories about poverty using thematic or episodic framing alone.

While there is little research on hybrid framing in the context of poverty specifically, this strategy is becoming common in messaging around health equity, and the web of social and environmental forces—including poverty—that influence health outcomes. Frames that embed stories about individual health in a broader systemic context tend to elicit more empathy from audiences (Churchill, 2019; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). When media content employs this type of frame, audiences are more open to the idea that society is partly responsible for health outcomes (Carger & Westen, 2010) and are more supportive of public policies that address health inequities (Gollust et al., 2019), relative to content that uses thematic framing of health messages alone (Gollust & Cappella, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2008; Niederdeppe et al., 2015).

Research suggests this type of framing works especially well for conservative audiences as it aligns with some of their political values and may cushion the impact of introducing new ideas about systemic inequality (Carger & Westen, 2010). Messages that acknowledge the role of personal choice in health outcomes, while still highlighting social and environmental factors, result in less anger and debate among Republican audiences (Gollust & Cappella, 2014).

A hybrid messaging strategy can be used specifically to highlight the role and responsibility of government in addressing systemic poverty (FrameWorks, 2018; Opportunity Agenda, 2014). When the government is framed as broken or inept, the public may default to individualistic narratives that favor charity, nonprofits and individual acts of kindness as poverty solutions (Kendall-Taylor, 2020). Messages that highlight public support systems, like public education, transportation, and infrastructure are more successful in boosting audience members' sense of collective efficacy—confidence in the ability to carry out positive changes on a societal level (FrameWorks, 2018). Previous qualitative research shows that the general public lacks a concrete understanding of the specific roles and responsibilities of government (FrameWorks, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> Our conceptualization of “hybrid framing” is drawn from Churchill (2019), who uses the term to summarize a thread of health communication research suggesting the effectiveness of introducing the element of personal responsibility into health equity messaging (see Carger & Westen, 2010; Gollust & Capella, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). However, we use the term more broadly to refer to messages that combine elements of episodic framing (individual choices/responsibility) and thematic framing (structural context). This use of hybrid frames is conceptually different from Brüggemann & D’Angelo’s (2018) conception involving a combination of generic and issue-specific news frames.

Therefore, identifying and naming government services can help citizens concretize the role of government and tap into the government's responsibility for addressing poverty.

Hybrid frames can also be used to place individual choices in their proper structural and economic context. Anti-poverty messaging can address gaps in public understanding of policies that restrict economic mobility (FrameWorks, 2018). In one study, the metaphor of “reprogramming the economy” helped respondents understand the economy as designed/programmed, and thus capable of being redesigned to meet the needs of the public. It also increased respondents' understanding of the role of policy and their sense of collective efficacy relative to a control group (FrameWorks, 2018).

## **Racialization of Poverty**

Conscious and subconscious racial biases shape public attitudes toward poverty; individuals with prejudice against people of color are more likely to oppose anti-poverty policies (Opportunity Agenda, 2014). When media portray people of color as poor with little context or explanation, audiences often default to harmful racial stereotypes to justify their economic situation and perceived shortcomings (Kendall-Taylor, 2020; El-Burki et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2009; Opportunity Agenda, 2016; Ryan, 1971). In a 2010 public opinion poll, nearly half of Americans agreed with the statement that “African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than White people because most African Americans don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves up out of poverty” (Opportunity Agenda, 2014, p. 4). Narratives about African-American single mothers living in poverty may unintentionally activate negative stereotypes about Black people and shift attributions of responsibility for poverty to individual decisions (Iyengar, 1991). Portraying Black or Latinx communities as devastated by poverty, even when accurate, can reinforce flawed narratives and contribute to victim-blaming (El-Burki et al., 2016; Iyengar, 1991; Ryan, 1971; Savani et al., 2011).

Mass media's racialization of poverty can have real and devastating effects on public support for structural poverty solutions. Hannah and Cafferty (2006) found that both White and Black participants exposed to television news clips depicting White poverty were far more likely to support funding antipoverty programs and services than those exposed to news depicting Black poverty. Given that African Americans are overrepresented in news media images of poverty (Clawson & Jett, 2019; Van Doorn, 2015), Hannah and Cafferty suggest that existing media coverage may negatively influence public support for policies to address racial disparities in poverty. Moreover, research reveals that opposition to welfare programs stems from the public's perceived racial stereotypes that welfare beneficiaries are poor Blacks who are undeserving (Gilens, 1999; Kim et al., 2010; Owens, 2016).

## Alternatives to Colorblind Narratives

In an effort to avoid evoking racial stereotypes, content creators may try to avoid the topic of race altogether or feature mostly poor Whites in news and entertainment (Carretero, 2017; Owen, 2016). Research suggests, however, that such a colorblind approach is ineffective. In an empirical test, Demos (2018) found that political messages that overtly adopted a *race-class narrative* — discussing race openly, identifying racial scapegoating as a tactic used to divide, and linking racial justice to economic success for all — are more effective at mobilizing progressives and persuading undecided voters. Explicitly adding race into voter messaging consistently outperforms colorblind narratives and lessens support for messages endorsing meritocratic beliefs. Drawing attention to racist attacks on communities of color also inoculates against *greed* and *character*-oriented tropes about race and welfare dependency.

Messages about housing equity that highlight the value of “collective prosperity” — or show how solving racial inequities benefits all communities — strengthen the audience’s sense of shared responsibility for the problem (O’Neil et al., 2018). These messages increase public support for progressive policies to address racial disparities in access to affordable housing. Messages that highlight facts about racial inequities and offer solutions are more effective than messages addressing racial disparities or problem-solving strategies alone (Kendall-Taylor & Callen, 2020).

Race-class narratives link racial justice to economic justice and populist ideas, and help create solidarity with members of the White working class, who also are victims of economic inequity (Demos, 2018). Additionally, strategically highlighting race in messaging may capitalize on recent attitudinal changes among the U.S. public due largely to the Black Lives Matter movement and highly publicized incidents of police brutality. Polling research suggests that Americans are significantly more aware of racial inequality in recent years, and are more receptive to the idea that racial discrimination creates structural barriers (Opportunity Agenda, 2016).

Asset framing — which emphasizes the strengths of people of color and the benefits of investing in communities of color — is another potential strategy to combat racialized narratives of poverty (Shorters & Hudson, 2016). Existing media narratives often portray Black men as absent fathers, criminals, and drug abusers and reinforce disparaging stereotypes. Spotlighting the strengths and resilience of Black men in the media can counter the *deficit* framing (one that defines people by their needs, deficits, or problems) that stigmatizes the Black community. More research is needed to empirically test the effects asset framing on target audiences, including assessing the public, content creators, and policymakers’ reactions to these types of frames.

## Effects of Entertainment Storylines

Existing literature shows that entertainment narratives have a unique capacity to connect with audiences (Singhal et al., 2003). Although the topic of poverty is primarily found in news broadcasts, entertainment TV and documentaries can also be useful in reaching mass audiences. For example, research shows comedy can engage the public in social issues like poverty, helping to break down social barriers, providing new information, reducing the tendency to counter argue, and encouraging audiences to share that information with others (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017; Campo et al., 2013). Research shows that audiences seek out civically focused comedy—including political satire programming (e.g., *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*)—not only to be amused, but also to better understand serious issues (Young, 2013).

Extensive research shows that TV (e.g., Gillig et al., 2018; Rosenthal et al., in press) and film (e.g., Blakley, Huang, Huh, et al., 2016; Blakley, Huang, Nahm, et al., 2016) can be effective strategies of changing hearts and minds about social issues. In a study of a documentary film on homelessness and mental illness, Hodgkins (2018) found the film increased the audience's compassion toward those affected by homelessness and mental illness. Pairing entertainment narratives with instructional information and calls-to-action — such as making a donation or signing a petition — can be a particularly effective advocacy tool (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017; Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Entertainment narratives can also have a positive impact on those directly affected by poverty, increasing their sense of agency, self-efficacy, and activism (La Ferrara, 2016). After watching a Black history documentary, low-income Black male youths had improved self-esteem, sense of racial identity, and self-efficacy (Stubbins, 2016).

Online video games can also help players develop empathy about social issues through vicarious experiences (Braley et al., 2019). *BROKE: The Game* was designed to simulate the lived experiences of the poor, thereby enabling players to experience the financial constraints and emotional stress of poverty, in addition to learning accurate terminology like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Initial qualitative results found that players expressed more nuanced understandings of poverty after playing *BROKE*, including recognizing that lack of resources constrains poor people's choices, rejecting the idea that poor people are lazy, and acknowledging the need for more robust discussions about poverty (Braley et al., 2019).

# IMPLICATIONS FOR POVERTY MESSAGING

Some of the research findings discussed previously come with important caveats and considerations, such as differential effects across different audiences. In other areas, such as interconnectedness framing, evidence is limited, but exploratory research suggests potential strategies for crafting effective poverty messages.

## Tailoring Messages to Different Audiences

Different audiences may respond in different ways to the same poverty message. Storytellers and advocates should target and craft messages according to the segment they seek to reach. Opportunity Agenda (2014) recommended that messaging should begin by prioritizing “the base” of progressives, African Americans, and Latinos with calls to action; while targeting “undecided” audiences (millennials, women, independent voters, and people of faith) who are aware of the moral, racial, and economic implications of poverty. Willer et al. (2015) found that men and women react differently to anti-poverty messaging. Men generally express less compassion towards the poor than women do, though men tend to be persuaded by poverty relief efforts that are framed to align with their self-interest and benefit society as a whole. These messages, however, may produce negative effects for women who already express more empathy on poverty issues. It is also important to understand the preconceived opinions held by the target audience members toward the poor and poverty issues. For example, those who believe the poor have agency and capacities to improve their situations are more likely to donate money, volunteer and vote (Funke et al., 2012; Luengo Kanacri et al., 2016).

For young, educated audiences, research shows that messages evoking fear, sadness, or guilt can capture their attention and bring home the seriousness of the issue. This audience is also sensitive to *loss-framed* messaging — which emphasizes the negative outcome over a positive one — so campaigns that highlight the loss of lives or shelter can be more galvanizing (Abril et al., 2014). Loss-framing can also persuade this audience to support public policies on poverty issues when the message evokes negative emotions (Antonetti et al., 2018). Antonetti et al. caution, however, that some negative emotions such as guilt can evoke resentment and anger at the message source, and may be counterproductive.

## Finding Messengers and Partnerships

Identifying messengers and forming non-traditional partnerships can amplify anti-poverty messaging (Ellwood & Patel, 2018; FrameWorks, 2018; Hopkins, 2009). When conservative opinion leaders deliver anti-poverty messages, right-leaning audiences are more likely to be open and receptive to them. For example, Evangelical Christian organizations can deliver messages that draw on moral and religious tenets, reaching new audiences and helping destigmatize perceptions of the poor (Ellwood & Patel, 2018).

More than income and education level, local political attitudes predict how Americans think about poverty (Hopkins, 2009). Anti-poverty advocates should study their target audience's dominant media sources and political leanings (Hopkins, 2009). By understanding the local political and media landscape, advocates can better develop values-oriented communications with messengers who can break through ideological divides (FrameWorks, 2018; Hopkins, 2009).

Anti-poverty campaigns can also work directly with those living in poverty, giving them a platform to share their experiences and opinions. Giving voice to the poor builds efficacy, empowers them as storytellers, and provides nuanced and authentic stories that make for compelling content to move the general public (Ellwood & Patel, 2018; Funke et al., 2012; Vincent, 2014). Engaging with and empowering people in poverty raises their own awareness of the structural causes and solutions, and their ability to effect change (Opportunity Agenda, 2014). Media education and production programs have been shown to increase poor and homeless people's agency and confidence to change their situation and communities (Vincent, 2014). Furthermore, research that provides a theoretical framework for effective hybrid counternarratives of poverty highlights the importance of elevating the role of the poor as agents of their own change, without obscuring the significant systemic and structural barriers they face (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010).

## Using Interconnectedness Messaging to Foster Audience Empathy

Media narratives often use extreme and at times exploitative imagery, sometimes referred to as "poverty porn," to elicit strong emotions from audiences. This kind of storytelling stigmatizes the poor and can evoke unproductive frames of "us" versus "them" that undermine public support for welfare (Patrick, 2017). Portraying poverty issues as someone else's problem undercuts the interconnectedness of systemic social issues and can contribute to public mindsets focused on "I" instead of "we" (FrameWorks, 2018).

The FrameWorks Institute recommends that poverty-related messages embody a more universal perspective: a problem affecting society at large, with a collective responsibility to solve it. Rather than identifying the poor as a vulnerable subgroup within the larger community and creating policies to target their particular needs, broad collective goals that reflect poverty as a societal problem should be developed (Kendall-Taylor, 2020; Powell et al., 2019). Further, according to FrameWorks, interconnection should be portrayed as a strength instead of liability. Messaging should feature the benefits of collective efforts instead of suggesting that some must make sacrifices for others. They suggest appealing to shared societal values such as compassion and justice to position poverty as a moral issue. Likewise, the Opportunity Agenda (2014) recommends creating a common narrative that affirms the American values of equal opportunity and community.

Though limited, emerging research supports the effectiveness of interconnectedness messaging, focusing on how everyone is affected by poverty and will benefit from its solution (Opportunity Agenda, 2014). Willer et al. (2015) found that although men have less empathy for those in poverty than women do, interconnectedness messaging can highlight the bigger picture, such as the ways in which poverty and joblessness hurt the economy and affect everyone. Messages that connect audiences with common human experiences and break down the “us versus them” distinction are more likely to be effective (Kendall-Taylor, 2020).

Highlighting societal benefits of poverty-related reforms and intentionally using language that emphasizes interconnectedness is key. Rockne’s (2018) interviews with messaging experts suggest affordable housing messages focused on community-level benefits—such as the creation of construction jobs and reduced traffic—could be particularly effective at eliciting audience support for low-income housing. Additionally, experts advise that when portraying or discussing homelessness, storytellers should consider how audiences perceive and speak of their own homes. Replacing unemotional terminology like “affordable housing” with relatable language like “a place to sleep” can increase empathy for homeless people by breaking down othering and “us vs. them” distinctions.

## **Using a Solutions Focus to Build Audience Efficacy**

Researchers also highlight the importance of explaining why the problem is happening and presenting systemic solutions to the issue (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor, 2016; Rockne, 2018). This is because narratives can build audience members’ self-efficacy — their confidence in the ability to carry out certain actions. Messages that both explain social problems and provide plausible solutions are especially effective at increasing audience interest and engagement. Moreover, stories with positive outcomes and focus on solutions, such as implementing curricula in low-

performing schools that improve academic achievement, reframe the problem of poverty as more environmental and systemic, rather than cultural (Dudley-Marling, 2015).

The majority of news stories and nonprofit advocacy messages present the problem without explaining why the issues persist; therefore, Americans remain largely uneducated about effective solutions to poverty (Opportunity Agenda, 2014; Rockne, 2018). Solutions-based messages are often more persuasive (Manuel & Kendall-Taylor, 2016; Rockne, 2018). Opportunity Agenda (2014) recommends that messages highlight anti-poverty policies and programs that produce demonstrable, positive results that impact the broader community.

In the context of news reporting, this is sometimes known as “solutions journalism,” which provides news consumers with actionable responses to social problems that can increase the audience’s self-efficacy (Curry, 2014). News consumers prefer messages that include some kind of actionable direction or a ‘set of principles’ to guide meaningful action (Carger & Westen, 2010). Moreover, solutions journalism can be used to reach low-income communities and strengthen their sense of individual and collective agency as they become the part of solution (Wenzel et al., 2018).

# CONCLUSION

The objective of this landscape analysis was to synthesize existing research on mass media narratives related to poverty and economic mobility, and the effects of these narratives on audiences. This analysis was conducted alongside in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the entertainment industry, as well as academia and advocacy organizations. Insights from this analysis have informed our research activities, including a qualitative analysis of the messages and frames employed by poverty content in scripted TV and film, and a national audience survey examining the relationship between media preferences and poverty-related attitudes and values.

## Recommendations for Content Creators

We propose the following evidence-based strategies to counteract the tropes and stereotypes evident in *character*, *greed*, *culture*, and *meritocracy* narratives and strengthen *system*-oriented counternarratives.

### **Tailor messages to audience values and motivations and choose messengers strategically.**

For audiences that tend to have lower empathy for the poor, including men, highlight the ways in which alleviating poverty aligns with their self-interests and those of society as a whole. For young, educated audiences, use *loss-framed* messages focused on the negative effects of poverty to increase support for humane public policies. Activate progressive audiences with calls-to-action. Turn to religious leaders or conservative politicians who can drive home the moral implications of poverty for undecided and right-leaning audiences.

**Humanize the poverty story.** Tell authentic, personal stories by and about people in poverty who, despite hard work, competence, and will, still struggle to achieve financial success. This strategy may be especially effective for audiences who adhere strongly to meritocracy narratives. Create opportunities for poor people to share their own stories, which can boost their sense of empowerment, and speaks to the authenticity of poverty struggles.

**Embed individual choices within a broader systemic context.** Use *hybrid framing* to reveal the structural causes of poverty while still recognizing the human experience. Research suggests this approach can increase the empathy of audience members, compared to focusing on systemic or individual factors alone. Systemic explanations should emphasize the roles of government in addressing the needs of everyone in society, and illuminate how flawed economic policies have contributed to income inequality and exacerbated poverty.

**Explicitly discuss the links between race and class.** Emphasize the ways in which race contributes to economic inequality. Do not ignore race in favor of a colorblind approach. Messages using a *race-class narrative* that explicitly links race with economic inequality consistently outperform traditional progressive, race-neutral narratives of poverty. Further, use asset framing to describe low-income communities of color as strong, resilient, capable, and worthy of support.

**Highlight actionable solutions.** Focus on solutions and concrete actions that the audience can take. This approach can increase the audience's confidence in their ability to make a difference. News outlets can adopt a solutions journalism approach to storytelling, emphasizing solutions to problems rather than the problems themselves.

**A high tide raises all boats. Focus on society's interconnectedness and build a shared narrative that success for one is success for all.** Highlight the interdependence of members of a community. Avoid portrayals of those living in poverty as monolithic and vulnerable, which can have the effect of "othering" the poor and activating a "saviors and victims" mentality. Focus on narratives that affirm the American value of equal opportunity, and appeal to aspirational societal values like compassion, community, and justice.

## Questions for Researchers and Advocates

Future research could expand the existing literature by examining the following:

- How do different audience segments respond to different message frames and formats around poverty?
- How can we effectively balance mass appeal messages with those tailored to more specific audience segments?
- Can systemic media narratives around poverty be connected to any concrete policy outcomes?
- What are the effective strategies (genre, character, plot, etc.) for creating entertainment narratives about the systemic nature of poverty?

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