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WHAT ABOUT THE ACTORS INVOLVED IN NEWS ABOUT POVERTY?

Disrupting Determinist Accounts

Isabel Awad

Media and communication scholarship depicts the news coverage of poverty as a distinctly homogeneous and stable genre, almost unconditionally aligned with the interests of the powerful. People living in poverty, according to this literature, “are either rendered invisible or portrayed in terms of characterological deficiencies and moral failings” (Bullock et al., 2001, p. 231) and thus blamed for their situation and further marginalized from the rest of society. Journalists, in turn, are described as obliviously committed to established routines and norms that disable them to “deal with other realities except the ones provided and framed by those in power” (Lugo-Ocando, 2015, p. 58). And, although there is some evidence that news about poverty can change under specific circumstances, changes are discussed as short lived, superficial and ultimately not really relevant (e.g., Bullock et al., 2001 Erler, 2012; Gilens, 1999; Lugo-Ocando, 2019).

This chapter identifies a deterministic bias in this literature. It argues that our knowledge about news and poverty is limited by a problematic understanding of the relation between the structural conditions within (and against) which media representations are produced and the agency of both journalists and people living in poverty. Informed by practice theory, I underscore the need to recognize these as actors whose perspectives and practices do not simply respond to structural constraints, even if they are always “enmeshed within relations of power, inequality, and competition” (Ortner, 2006, p. 131).

As explained below, acknowledging the agency of the actors involved in representations of poverty in the news (and elsewhere) is in itself an act of justice. It is also epistemologically productive in that it allows us to learn about aspects of the relation between news and poverty largely neglected until now. Disrupting deterministic accounts also allows us to attend to variation and variety, as well as to possibilities for resistance and change.

The chapter proceeds by examining the common and notably passive roles that research attributes to people living in poverty and to the journalists who cover poverty. Drawing from contemporary debates in poverty knowledge and in journalism studies, I challenge this generalized approach. I then discuss what an alternative conceptualization can look like both in theory and in research practice, and what it has to offer.

“The Poor” in News and Poverty Research

Feminist political theorists since the late 1980s have stressed the necessary relation between (material) redistribution and (symbolic) recognition (e.g., Butler, 1997; Fraser, 1998, 2003; Young, 1989, 1990,

2000). Specifically in relation to poverty, Lister (2004, 2013, 2015) has made repeated calls to policy makers, scholars and society at large to acknowledge that the problem is not just that some people lack the resources others have. The problem is also one of communication; it has to do with the “othering” mechanisms through which inequalities are sustained. “Othering legitimates ‘our’ privilege — rooted in superiority — and ‘their’ exploitation and oppression — rooted in inferiority,” Lister (2004, p. 102) explained. Thus, poverty needs to be addressed as a matter of material *and* of symbolic injustice. Fighting it also means fighting dominant “social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication” (Fraser, 2003, p. 13).

In a first reading, this understanding of poverty may seem to echo key tenets and practices of communication scholarship. The field relies on the conviction that the sphere of the symbolic is relevant for the “real” material world. Specifically, research on media and poverty shows the close interrelation between how poverty is represented and how people understand it, whether they fight it and how they do it. Thus, there is little doubt among scholars that news plays a significant role in shaping public support (or lack thereof) for social policies to reduce poverty (Entman, 1995; Gilens, 1999; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Iyengar, 1990; Redden, 2014).

However, a closer examination of media and poverty research until now reveals that the call from Lister (2004, 2013, 2015) and other contemporary social-justice scholars to take recognition seriously remains largely ignored. In other words, a field that is uniquely positioned to attend to the communication dimensions of poverty falls short in dealing with them. The problem, I argue, is the field’s reliance on an oppositional understanding of the relation between structure and agency, one that assumes that structure removes agency and vice versa. As a result, well-intended scholarship may end up contributing to the very phenomenon it condemns; that is, the *othering* of people living in poverty. To clarify this point, I review how research on media and poverty commonly approaches “the poor” and the rationale behind this prevalent approach.

Structural Response against “Blaming the Victim” Narratives

The relation between structure and agency has traditionally been at the core of research on media and poverty. In what is arguably a classic book on the topic, Golding and Middleton’s 1982 *Images of Welfare*, for example, survey respondents’ explanations for poverty are categorized as either individualistic or structural. Likewise, Iyengar (1990) identified “episodic” and “thematic” as the two alternative frames used in representations of poverty. The episodic frame treats poverty “in terms of particular victims, for example, poor people”; the thematic frame treats it “primarily as a societal or collective outcome” (pp. 21–22). This dualistic approach — individualistic *vs.* structural; episodic *vs.* thematic — continues to play a decisive role in this area of research. It not only provides key analytical categories but also a normative standard. In the opposition between stories that “invoke psychological/moral narratives that attribute poverty to personal moral failings” and stories that “view poverty as the result of a lack of opportunities or the consequence of broader economic trends and conditions outside of the individual’s control” (Erler, 2012, p. 184), the only socially responsible possibility — for both researchers and media producers — appears to be the latter.

Media/communication and other scholars have good reasons to prefer a structural over an individualistic approach to poverty. U.S. anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s (1963) popularization of the notion of “culture of poverty” in the 1960s has been exemplary in this respect. Lewis came up with dozens of individual traits, which together defined a “culture of poverty.” Despite his own “social democratic commitment to combating poverty” (Bourgois, 2001, p. 11904), Lewis’s “culture of poverty” concept has been widely interpreted as a justification for blaming people living in poverty for their situation (Lister, 2004) and used, among other things, to design moral rehabilitation programs for children (Bourgois, 2001).

The “culture of poverty,” and, more generally, representations that attribute responsibility for poverty to those living in poverty, constitute what Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin (2010) called the “conservative narrative” in poverty knowledge. Especially in the last decades, media and communication scholars have strongly positioned their work against this narrative. Lugo-Ocando (2015), for example, used the expression *Blaming the Victim* as the title of his monograph subtitled “How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty,” in which he argued that one of journalists’ key failures is precisely uncritically preferring the “individualist perspective” over the structural one (p. 57). Likewise, in a review chapter, Macek (2019) criticized news coverage of urban poverty because it “typically fixates not on the structural or institutional causes for rising inequality and deprivation, but on the deviant behavior and allegedly defective values of the disadvantaged themselves” (p. 446).

The problem here is not the disavowal of accounts that blame those in poverty, but the limited conceptualization of alternatives. If we avoid individualistic representations — the “culture of poverty” included — what are we left with? Writing about the social sciences in general, Bourgois (2001) condemned common answers to this question. In his view:

most of the hostile academic responses to Lewis’s culture of poverty concept have limited themselves to contradicting Lewis’s empirical assertions, rather than to critiquing theoretically his psychological reductionism, his sloppy use of the culture concept, and his failure to link in a dynamic manner macrostructural political and economic forces.

(p. 11905)

In research on media and poverty, contradicting Lewis (1963) has commonly meant adopting the “structure/context counter-narrative” (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010). Already visible in some of the examples mentioned above, this approach assumes that structure- and agency-centered explanations exhaust the possibilities for representing poverty. Faced with this duality, it opts for structure as something that is “impervious to human agency” and yet determines it, an approach Sewell (1992) criticized for reducing social actors “to cleverly programmed automatons” (p. 2). Paradoxically, then, structural accounts aimed at defending those in poverty can be dehumanizing. Turned into passive objects of research, “the poor” are made silent and invisible (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Lister, 2004).

A more productive critique of the “blaming the victim” formula should thus not only challenge the “blaming” part of it, but also the part that defines people living in poverty as helpless “victims” of their circumstances. This is actually what is underscored in the need for recognition: What needs to be recognized, first and foremost, is agency. People in poverty —like everyone else — should be recognized as having the capacity to think, to act, to speak. They should be recognized as “full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2003, p. 29). Media scholarship acknowledges this in its recurrent criticism of news coverage for silencing those in poverty (e.g., Bullock et al., 2001; Devereux, 1998; Illouz, 1994; Lugo-Ocando, 2015), but, for the most part, fails to translate the principle of recognition into its own research practices (see Cohen, 1997).

Although the othering of people living in poverty is probably the most troublesome risk of research on news and poverty, there is a comparable problem with the conceptualization of journalists. I discuss this in the section that follows to then focus on how news and poverty research can overcome these limitations conceptually and empirically.

Journalists in News and Poverty Research

Like academic research about news more broadly, studies on news and poverty overwhelmingly rely on the analysis of texts (Cotter, 2010). Although valuable in many ways, this research carries some limitations for our understanding of discourse in general (Blommaert, 1999; Schröder, 2007)

and news discourse in particular (Bird, 2010; Cotter, 2010; Philo, 2007; Richardson, 2008). As Schrøeder (2007) explained,

The media text as it appears on the newspaper page, or on the TV screen, or on the website, reveals very little about the multiple discursive constraints and opportunities affecting, on the one hand, the team of people producing it in the complex division of labor of the contemporary media, and on the other hand the multiple interpretative repertoires at work when the recipients make sense of the verbal and visual features in contexts of everyday life.

(pp. 81–82)

What is needed, Schrøeder (2007) and others (e.g., Cotter, 2010; Philo, 2007) have suggested, is research that pays attention to the text in relation to processes of production and consumption. Their critique clearly applies to news and poverty research. Our understanding of this topic is limited by the relative absence of efforts going beyond the text, as well as of a reflection on what is being left aside when the text is the single focus of analysis. As discussed above, a crucial element left aside is the agency of people in poverty. Here, I turn to the limited ways in which those who report and produce poverty news are conceptualized.

From Guessing Their Drives to Turning Journalists into “Sociological Beings”

Research on news and poverty offers an image of journalists that tends to be one-dimensional and poorly grounded. Consider, for example, Entman’s (1995) analysis of visual images of poverty in television news. He found that the few stories dealing with poverty in terms of inequality and lack of wealth relied on particularly unattractive images. In trying to come up with an explanation, Entman pointed to journalists: “Perhaps journalists consider another report documenting poverty old and relatively dull news, only meriting perfunctory treatment” (p. 144). A comparable inference about journalists’ views based on the analysis of news content is put forward in Sei-Hill et al. (2010). Their framing analysis of television and newspaper stories revealed more stories dealing with poverty as a social problem than what they expected given the individualistic U.S. culture. The authors speculated — but could not verify — that journalists’ relatively liberal politics might partly account for this result.

Aware of these limitations, some researchers have combined the analysis of news content with interviews with producers. Already in their 1982 *Images of Welfare*, Golding and Middleton referred to the need to avoid “conspiracy theory” interpretations by taking into account the perspective of news producers. “We should never forget that news production, like all other social activities, involves real people doing real jobs about which they are able to reflect and over whose content they often have considerable autonomy,” Golding and Middleton argued as a justification for interviewing journalists (p. 112). This approach fits into an important tradition of sociological research in journalism studies, one that relies on in-depth interviews and other ethnographic methods to enquire more directly into “how journalism works” (Zelizer, 2017, p. 123). Although relatively rare in the study of news and poverty, this approach is not only visible in Golding and Middleton, but also in a number of more recent studies (e.g., Devereux, 1998; Devereux et al., 2011, 2012; Redden, 2014).

Combining the analysis of stories with interviews with producers has led to valuable insights into how poverty news comes about and into the complexities of journalistic practice. There is no doubt that reporters are compelled to comply with organizational demands to produce stories that are attractive and commercially viable. However, interview data also reveal that a significant number of reporters do more than that and that media production is not an inexorable process. We learn that news is shaped by ongoing tensions within newsrooms, as well as by journalists’

own agendas and interests. In their case study of a stigmatized Irish neighborhood, for example, Devereux et al. (2011, 2012) found journalists who tried (and sometimes managed) to cover positive stories about the neighborhood and to place them more prominently in the paper. Redden (2014), in turn, found that, behind some of the “individualizing stories” she analyzed, there were journalists making “a deliberate attempt to humanize in order to enable a better understanding of poverty and immigration” (p. 84).

However, this sociological tradition also has some shortcomings. Its key problem is the overwhelming focus on structural constraints. As Zelizer (2017) explained:

Sociology established the ideas that journalists function as sociological beings, with norms, practices and routines ... that they exist in organizational, institutional and structural settings ... that they invoke something akin to ideology in their newswork ... and that their activities have effects.

(p. 123)

Although all very important, these ideas have arguably turned into what Cottle (2000) described as an “orthodoxy” constraining, rather than opening, research possibilities (see also Belair-Gagnon & Revers, 2018). A key blind spot of this orthodoxy is the agency of journalists and, thus, possibilities for variation and change (Cottle, 2000, 2007; Peterson, 2003). Journalists may be asked questions, but that does not necessarily mean that they are being heard. As Peterson (2003) explained, media production researchers “often seek to demystify production, deliberately rejecting the ‘native’s point of view’ to show readers ‘what is really going on’” (p. 161). Too frequently and consistently, what is *really going on* in this sociological research tradition is that journalistic action is determined by structural constraints (see also Cottle, 2007).

This structural bias is visible in studies combining textual analysis and interviews with journalists covering poverty. Thus, despite Golding and Middleton’s (1982) statement against “conspiracy theories” and about the need to acknowledge the autonomy of news producers, understanding that autonomy and what it enabled was not a goal in their study. In contrast, they interviewed journalists “to discover the limits of such autonomy and how it is used,” guided by a research question asking for “the routine processes that make news about social security the way it is” (pp. 112–113). Something comparable happened with Devereux et al. (2011). They found “a media organisation which made a conscious decision to eschew the repetition of stereotypes” of the stigmatized neighborhood they focused on (p. 132). However, they did not consider the conditions and/or possibilities for other journalistic outlets to make similar decisions. Instead, their discussion about “opportunities for changing [a neighborhood’s stigmatized] reputation” (pp. 137–139) focused almost exclusively on PR initiatives. Also Redden (2014) seemed to dismiss too quickly interviewees’ views on the value of individualizing stories. For example, she cited a reporter saying that these stories were better than general ones to “engage the reader in a discussion about poverty,” a quote she interpreted as evidence that personalization is a standardized and time-saving “narrative tool” meant to make news more attractive and efficient (p. 83). Arguably missing here is more serious consideration of whether and under which conditions these attempts to engage audiences become possible, meaningful and effective (or not).

A Practice Theory Approach to News and Poverty Research

Until now, this chapter has reviewed the role attributed to “the poor” and to journalists in research on news and poverty. Even though this review has been presented in the form of two separate discussions, each led by different scholars and informed by different intellectual trajectories, it concurs in pointing to the relative neglect of these actors’ agency: People in poverty are

commonly treated as passive victims of the news and reporters are largely assumed to uncritically comply with given organizational norms and routines. There is little (if any) room in this literature to reject individualistic accounts, which blame people in poverty for their situation, and, at the same time, recognize their agency. Likewise, it seems impossible to acknowledge journalists' capacity to reflect and act as autonomous beings without neglecting the market-driven and growingly precarious working conditions of most contemporary journalistic work. In both cases, the relation between structure and agency appears as an irresolvable paradox.

To resolve this paradox and understand the roles of people in poverty and journalists in more productive ways, this section draws on practice theory. In the words of anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2006):

The basic assumption of practice theory is that culture (in a broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform — and usually some of each — the culture that made them.

(p. 129)

This is what practice theorists call a dialectical understanding of the relation between agency and structure (Ahearn, 2001; Ortner, 2006; Sewell, 1992¹). Basically, structure and agency “pre-suppose each other” (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). From this perspective, that people in poverty and journalists have agency does not imply that they have full control over their situation and working conditions. Having agency “means to be capable of exerting *some* degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to *some* degree” (Sewell 1992, p. 20, emphasis added). “Some degree” is important here: It reminds us that agency does not cancel structure, or, as Ahearn (2001, p. 114) explained, agency should not be equated with “free will.” Constraints, and thus power, remain important, but so are “the processes that produce and reproduce those constraints” (Ortner, 2006, p. 2).

A person's capacity for agency is thus constitutive of their humanity. Yet, this does not mean that we all, always, have and exercise the same form(s) of agency. Once again, Ahearn (2001) made an important distinction in this respect: Agency is not necessarily resistance. “Oppositional agency is only one of many forms of agency” (p. 115). This is also why scholars advocating for the recognition of the agency of “the poor” warn against the risk of romanticizing them (e.g., Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Lister, 2015). Both romanticizing and demonizing people in poverty follow the same dualistic logic, which treats agency as the absence of structure and which fails to account for tensions and contradictions (Ahearn, 2001, p. 110). Responsible and nuanced research, argued Lister (2015), should instead “navigate the fine line between acknowledgement of the agency of people in poverty, including their capacity to make mistakes and ‘wrong’ decisions, just like the rest of us, and blaming them for that poverty” (p. 145).

People in Poverty and Journalists as Agents: Evidence from Research

The study of agency and structure as presupposing each other — in general, and in the news coverage of poverty, in particular — implies questioning what Ortner (2006) called “the unmodified ‘cultural studies’ or ‘media studies’ temptation — the fantasy that one can understand the workings of public cultural representations solely by interpreting or deconstructing the representations” (p. 81). Avoiding this temptation encourages us to rethink dominant methodological approaches and extend and diversify research efforts to examine news coverage in relation to practices of production and reception. This section provides evidence of the advantages of such methodological rethinking. But it also underscores that — independently of the methodological

tools — what is crucial is the conceptual shift proposed earlier; namely, the need to stop treating agency as something (some) human beings are deprived of. Making that shift opens up productive venues to ask about the *forms* that agency — including that of people in poverty and journalists — can take within specific social contexts.

A study by Conway et al. (2012) is exemplary in this respect. The study was purely based on the analysis of content; specifically, ten years of newspaper coverage and one public radio show about Fatima Mansions, a then-stigmatized public housing development in Ireland. The authors did not only acknowledge that interviews with journalists would have enriched their research, but also relied on previous studies for insights into the views of residents. Most important, they aimed to identify possible changes in news coverage between 1998 and 2008 — the period of Fatima Mansions' urban renewal — and interpret them in relation to the efforts of local community leaders and to journalists' receptiveness to these efforts. All combined, the newspaper data seemed to point in the direction of traditional studies: “personal troubles' stories” (p. 558) prevailed, and the most frequent sources were official ones. Nevertheless, a periodized examination revealed significant variation throughout the decade, including a decrease in negative stories, increasingly appealing pictures and growing presence of residents' perspectives. The radio show, in turn, appeared to result from a collaboration between media producers and residents. Significantly, this collaboration was described as based on:

a mutual respect for the constraints impinging on them. On the media side, the constraint was to put across a story in a short period of time and in a way that upheld the personality-driven rather than issue-driven nature of the radio programme. On the resident side, there was an explicit desire to desensationalise media coverage of the estate without sanitising the problems experienced by it.

(p. 566)

This mutual recognition of constraints and interests shaped media content that could not be simply attributed to the triumph of agency over structure or the other way around. Instead, Conway et al. (2012) confronted us with the practices of real human beings trying to maneuver — more and less successfully — diverging forces in relation to each other. From the perspective of practice theory, this is unsurprising. In contrast, the findings were “counterintuitive” and even “unique” in relation to the literature on journalistic work in general and on the coverage of poverty in particular (Conway et al., 2012, pp. 555, 568).

My own research about mainstream television news in Santiago, Chile, in 2012 (Awad, 2014) went a step further by combining the analysis of news stories with interviews with the journalists who produced them and fieldwork in Bajos de Mena, the neighborhood in poverty they covered. Significantly, the news coverage alone seemed to confirm the idea that journalists opted for negative and sensationalizing stories that further stigmatized already marginalized communities and their residents. However, by talking with reporters and with community leaders and by spending time in the neighborhood, I learned that this coverage was not the unequivocal result of the numerous constraints both Chilean television reporters and Bajos de Mena residents faced. Instead, journalists and community leaders engaged in conscious and carefully planned practices to collaborate in news production. They did not have the freedom to produce any kind of story about Bajos de Mena, but managed to make significant room for stories that would serve their strategic goals, including pressuring the government to invest in better housing and offering reporters the opportunity to address issues of poverty and injustice while attracting large audiences. Notably, what I had initially read as simply stigmatizing news constituted a much more complicated category in the eyes of both reporters and residents. For them, there could be value in some forms of stigma.

Like Conway et al. (2012), in Awad (2014), I reflected on the uniqueness of the case I studied. In my view, what I observed with respect to Bajos de Mena in 2012 suggested that previous research on news and poverty “has unduly overlooked the role of marginalized citizens and of journalists and thus their possibilities for collaboration and for taking advantage of commercially attractive news” (p. 1082). However, a non-deterministic approach is also one that *historizes* practice (Ortner, 2006, p. 8). Thus, the relationship between reporters and Bajos de Mena residents in 2012 needs to be placed and understood within a particular context, one that can be broadly described as neoliberal. Specifically, I interpret the findings in relation to Chileans’ widespread use of marketing techniques; well-documented changes in Chilean television news, with longer stories and increasing presence of ordinary sources (CNTV, 2011; Etchegaray & Matus, 2015); and an intense and widespread social debate about the country’s social inequalities.

Changes in the news coverage of Fatima Mansions throughout the early 2000s (Conway et al., 2012) and mainstream television’s news coverage of Bajos de Mena in 2012 (Awad, 2014) are in many ways unique. However, their uniqueness only becomes visible and intelligible through research processes that adhere to a dialectical understanding of the relation between structure and agency. Moreover, that these cases are not generalizable does not mean that they do not provide valuable insights for the study of news and poverty and for journalism studies more broadly. Indeed, researchers’ recognition of people in poverty and journalists can contribute to the growing scholarly attention to ordinary citizens as news actors and sources (e.g., Palmer, 2013, 2017; Peter & Zerback, 2020), to the broader “changing dynamics between journalists and sources” (Broersma et al., 2013, p. 388), and to critical debates about the meaning and implications of audiences’ expanding practices of participation in the news (Awad et al., 2013; Carpentier, 2012).

Agency as Key to Understanding Power and Possibilities for Change

This chapter has critically reviewed existing scholarship on news and poverty by focusing on the roles attributed to both journalists and “the poor.” It has argued that, to the extent that research keeps conceiving structure and agency as oppositional categories, it will fail to do justice to people in poverty and to journalists as human beings with desires and with the capacity to think and act creatively. Moreover, research will continue to risk falling into determinism and assuming homogeneity, whereas it could otherwise identify valuable nuances, tensions and contradictions.

The task at hand, then, is to attend to agency without losing sight of power; that is, keeping in mind that agents “are always involved in, and cannot act outside of, the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed” (Ortner, 2006, p. 130). This is not only valid for people in poverty and journalists, but also for the other, more and less powerful, actors involved in the news coverage of poverty. Indeed, although this chapter has focused on reporters and “the poor,” it should not be read as assuming that these are the only relevant actors in poverty news. A non-exhaustive list also includes the audiences, who make sense of the news; media managers and editors; politicians; social servants; representatives of think tanks, and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Based on an oppositional understanding of structure and agency, we would be tempted to treat the most powerful — those at the top of political and media organizations — as monopolizing agency. If people in poverty and journalists were “cleverly programmed automatons” (Sewell, 1992, p. 2); editors, media managers and politicians would be those who program and control them. A dialectical understanding, instead, would enable us to examine the practices of these more powerful actors — including their relations with others — as structurally enabled *and* constrained. This, in turn, could lead to novel insights into the power relations that shape and reshape news about poverty and thus to potentially valuable strategies for change.

Note

- 1 These authors build on the work produced in the 1970s and 1980s by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Marshall Sahlins, among others, as the foundation of their approaches to practice theory.

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