

Deconstructing the Welfare Queen: Towards a Standpoint Theory of Poverty

Cindy S. Vincent
Department of Communications
Salem State University, Salem, MA

ABSTRACT

Depending on what region of the country you are from the Welfare Queen could be black, white, Latina or any other ethnicity. In most of the U.S., however, she is usually depicted as African American. One question that comes to mind when thinking of the double bind of the Welfare Queen is: What do the differences between the mass media depiction of the Welfare Queen and the lived experiences of women dependent on the welfare system say about the status of poor women in a capitalist economic society? Within this question I see the double bind for women struggling with poverty where capitalism creates a system of dependency for women living on welfare while simultaneously condemning them for being dependent on it. To analyze this double bind, this paper conducts a qualitative analysis of the citizens' media welfare mothers create through the organization POOR Magazine. This data is analyzed through a feminist lens that includes the theory of intersectionality and standpoint theory to argue for a standpoint theory of poverty that provides a more accurate representation of women living in poverty.

Keywords: welfare queen, standpoint theory, poverty, representation

INTRODUCTION

Momma Welfare Roll

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips
Where bones idle under years of fatback
And lima beans.

Her jowls shiver in accusation
Of crimes clichéd by
Repetition. Her children, strangers
To childhood's toys, play
Best the games of darkened doorways,
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of
Other people's property.

Too fat to whore,
Too mad to work,
Searches her dreams for the
Lucky sign and walks bare-handed

Suggested citation: Vincent, C. (2013). Deconstructing the Welfare Queen: Towards a Standpoint Theory of Poverty. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Conference. Washington, D.C. November 2013.

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

Into a den of bureaucrats for
Her portion.
'They don't give me welfare.
I take it.'

--*Maya Angelou (1996)*

Depending on what region of the country you are from the Welfare Queen could be black, white, Latina or any other ethnicity. In most of the U.S., however, she is usually depicted as African American (Gilens, 1999), despite the fact that research has shown African American females account for only slightly more than 10 percent of all welfare recipients (Gilliam, 1999). Researchers have addressed the problem of this stereotype and stigma (Gilens, 1999; Hancock, 2004) but few have delved further into the double bind that exist for women in general who are dependent on the welfare system. When looking at this from a larger perspective, the mainstream media can be seen as playing a large role in the construction, dissemination, and acceptance of this fallacy. Which makes one ask: How is the image of the Welfare Queen constructed in American mainstream media and why are mainstream media recipients so apt to believe it?

Another question that comes to mind when thinking of the double bind of the Welfare Queen is: What do the differences between the mass media depiction of the Welfare Queen and the lived experiences of women dependent on the welfare system say about the status of poor women in a capitalist economic society? Within this question an underlying double bind for women struggling with poverty exists where capitalism creates a system of dependency for women living on welfare while simultaneously condemning them for being dependent on it. This is a problem for a country that is one of the richest in the world yet fails to address the ever-widening gap of poverty and system-dependence of its citizens. To address this double bind a more accurate investigation into the lives of welfare recipients and the idea of the Welfare Queen will be conducted to better understand poverty through the eyes of the welfare recipients, not the mainstream media's portrayal of them.

When theoretically approaching this double bind this paper uses a feminist theoretical lens inclusive of black feminist perspective (theory of intersectionality) to address the deconstruction of the mainstream media portrayal of the African American Welfare Queen, a Marxist feminist perspective to address the double bind of female dependency on the welfare system, and the lens of standpoint theory to cultivate a standpoint theory of poverty to address the realistic experiential knowledge of welfare participants. In Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), Crenshaw articulates the double bind of African American/Women subsumed in oppression of race and gender. For the African American Welfare Queen, she is not just woman and not just African American; she is also poor, and maybe disabled, elderly, homosexual, etc. Crenshaw's theory helps to address the conundrum faced when one falls within multiple areas of marginalization and how to accurately take the standpoint of and understand the double bind of women within this space. In trying to understand the double bind of

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

the Welfare Queen we must first understand her perspective through an intersectional lens.

When viewing this phenomenon from a Marxist/Socialist feminist perspective it is important to take into account the political economic nature of the American society. What about the nature of capitalism creates the necessity for a system of welfare? How does this system self-perpetuate a system of dependency for recipients? What role do the media play in cultivating marginalization, racism, and denigration for system-dependents? Through a Marxist/Socialist lens we can better answer these questions and start to make progress towards a standpoint theory of poverty.

In Patricia Hill Collins' 1989 article, Collins starts her article by discussing the black feminist standpoint. Although feminist standpoint theory (Wood, 1993) stems from standpoint theory, black feminist standpoint theory makes an important distinction from the others: not only does a subordinate group experience a different reality than the dominant group and "interpret that reality differently than a dominant group" (Collins, 1989, p. 746) but as Collins points out, "while an oppressed group's experiences may put them in a position to see things differently, their lack of control over the apparatuses of society that sustain ideological hegemony makes the articulation of their self-defined standpoint difficult" (Collins, 1989, p. 749). Collins also asserts that groups who are unequal in power are also unequal in access to resources to disseminate their viewpoint beyond the group. Keeping this in mind, I will attempt to expand on this theory of standpoint to address the specific marginalization and symbolic annihilation women struggling with poverty face in their daily lives. In doing this, this paper will argue that a specific standpoint theory of poverty is necessary to address the social class marginalization many people struggling with poverty endure within their own race and gender, which lend them to very distinct experiences of oppression.

To analyze this double bind, this paper conducts a qualitative analysis of the citizens' media welfare mothers create through the organization POOR Magazine. This data will be analyzed through a feminist lens that includes the theory of intersectionality and standpoint theory to help construct a standpoint theory of poverty that provides a more accurate representation of women struggling with poverty. The first section of this paper will examine the current research on mainstream media depictions of Welfare Queens and how citizens' media can be used to empower Welfare Queens to speak back to negative dominant depictions. The next section will discuss the data analysis through a feminist theoretical lens. This paper ends with a conclusion and implications for this study.

Research that Deconstructs the Welfare Queen

To begin a review of relevant literature that looks at how the double bind of the Welfare Queen has been researched as well as ways in which the mainstream media have contributed to this double bind, one must first turn to the media theory of agenda setting and how media come to set the agenda the mass public consumes. Although never using the specific term agenda setting, Bernard Cohen (1963) formulated the initial ideas that would later become known and applied as agenda setting theory. According

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

to Cohen, the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). In addition to Cohen’s initial formulation of the idea of agenda setting, McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) empirical research on agenda setting helped to confirm just how the media go about doing this. In their study on the 1968 presidential election coverage, McCombs and Shaw interviewed registered voters on their views of presidential candidates. They then compared this data to media coverage of the election occurring within the same time frame and found “the media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voters’ judgments of what they considered the major issues of the campaign” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 180).

This theory and the preliminary empirical findings are helpful in examining the relevant body of research regarding the double bind of the Welfare Queen as researchers have noted similar findings with respect to what the media convey about welfare recipients and public opinion regarding welfare recipients. Although Gilens’ 1999 research found that “public support for means-tested programs that benefit only the poor is just as high as support for similar universal programs that also benefit the middle class and the affluent” (p. 4), Limbert and Bullock found in their 2009 study conflicting results regarding public support for welfare programs. Limbert and Bullock conducted a discourse analysis of 284 newspaper articles that examined media framing on the issue of the Bush administration’s welfare reauthorization proposal and the 2003 dividend tax cuts. Their study found that “dominant issue frames favored reduced support for progressive welfare policies and increased support for tax cuts” (Limbert & Bullock, 2009, p. 57). In their analysis, Limbert and Bullock found that when addressing welfare reform the media framed the issue in a negative light, proposing instead “tough love” programs for welfare recipients and framed tax cuts in a way that viewed the wealthy as hardworking Americans who didn’t deserve a “double taxation” (Limbert & Bullock, 2009, p. 75). The authors concluded, “Race, class, and gender became vehicles through which socially sanctioned messages about the deservingness of diverse groups were delivered” (Limbert & Bullock, 2009, p. 76).

Other research has shown the effects of priming negative stereotypes conveyed through media on personal perceptions, bias, and judgments. In Monahan, Shtruliss, and Brown Givens’ (2005) research on female African American stereotypes (mammy, jezebel, Welfare Queen), the researchers found that the Welfare Queen stereotype yielded the strongest media effect of the three types (i.e. Welfare Queen job applicant would be most suitable for seasonal or temporary work versus a long-standing career). The researchers concluded that some explanations for this include a high reliability for this stereotype versus the others, but more likely that this stereotype was more accessible than the other stereotypes to the audience because of its prevalence throughout a variety of media (i.e. evening news and *Jerry Springer Show*). Another study conducted showed that not only does priming stereotypes through media induce those stereotypes when analyzing other situations, but media priming of stereotypes has a negative effect on welfare program support (Johnson, Nelgy, Gibson, Reed, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2009). This study showed that when priming audiences with negative stereotypes regarding female African Americans through media, audience members are

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

more likely to call on those stereotypes when making decisions in other situations, like choosing to support welfare reform policies. All of these studies show the impact the mass media have on audience's perception of minorities as well as how these perceptions influence decision-making later on for important issues like welfare reform.

In addition to the role the mainstream media play in setting agendas and priming decisions, studies have shown that the mainstream media are also very influential in perpetuating racial stereotypes and discrimination. In her book *The Politics of Disgust*, Hancock (2004) analyzes media descriptions and portrayals of welfare recipients and how their reporting biases public opinion in a way that turns public opinion against the welfare recipients, not the welfare system. In her content analysis of mainstream media publications, to include the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, she found two perpetuating stereotypes with regard to media framing on the issue of welfare and the identity of the Welfare Queen: hyperfertility and laziness. She also found that the mainstream media framed welfare recipients as abusing the welfare system. Hancock concluded her content analysis by stating:

The "Welfare Queen" public identity is a coherent construct of stereotypes and moral judgments based on the perceived social construction of welfare recipients as single, poor African American mothers. The strong presence of this public identity and its association with policy options dominates the discourse; of the 149 articles and thousands of text units coded for this project, only one text unit in one document characterized welfare mothers as *Good Mothers*. Clearly, the 1995-1996 welfare reform debate was marked by the second characteristic of the politics of disgust: a communicative context of gross inequality. (Hancock, 2004, p. 86-87)

Gilens (1999) found similar results in his content analysis of the portrayal of African Americans in the media. His study showed that African Americans were largely ignored in the media throughout most of the media's history but that in recent times this has changed where African Americans figure prominently in discussions of the poor (Gilens, 1999). According to Gilens (1999), this change led to the racialization of poverty within the media where the majority of today's stereotypes regarding the poor and African Americans inevitably stem.

One critique of this research may be the recentness of the analyses and the applicability towards today's society. However, current research has upheld the validity of this research by confirming that today's media continue to perpetuate racial stereotypes and discrimination. In her journal article *Bounds* Littlefield (2008) argues that the media serve as a system of racialization, where negative imagery of African American women are perpetuated through mainstream media along with ideologies of new racism. In this research *Bounds* Littlefield shows how the Jezebel stereotype of African American women is still prevalent and pervasive in today's media, especially in music videos. However, Bailey Woodard and Mastin (2005) show in their 2005 study that there are factions of mainstream media that are working to fight the propagation of stereotypes and perpetuation of discrimination. One such example is the magazine *Essence*. In their research, Bailey Woodard and Mastin (2005) found that the magazine, in addition to serving its primary goals of addressing the cultural and

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

emotional needs of African American women, simultaneously succeeds at dispelling negative stereotypes of African American women. Unfortunately, this example is but one in an overwhelming number of mainstream media channels that continue to disseminate and perpetuate racial, gender, and class stereotypes.

Using the theory of intersectionality as a theoretical lens to address the oppression and marginalization of poor women, scholars (Gilens, 1999; Hancock, 2004) have sought to explore the reasoning behind the opposition to welfare recipients and the role of the mainstream media in perpetuating opposition. Hancock (2004) attempts to address this in her analysis of the public identity of the Welfare Queen. Hancock argues that political institutions and political culture, drawing on a history of frameworks of welfare recipients, focused solely on the race, gender, and class of the recipients during the 1990s, which in turn formulated the public identity of the "Welfare Queen." This image was in turn perpetuated through mainstream media dissemination and circulation of the image to the mass audience of the American people. In his book *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, Gilens (1999) addresses some of the reasons for opposition to welfare, which include perceptions of welfare recipients that also paint the picture of welfare recipients as undeserving poor people and black recipients as lacking a commitment to a proper work ethic. This framing of the Welfare Queen image has established a commonly held opposition to welfare recipients in Americans in general, which still holds true today. This opposition has in turn created a marginalization and oppression for recipients based on their race, class, and gender. The next section will address how alternative forms to mainstream media, specifically citizens' media, help empower marginalized groups like African American women and welfare recipients to create their own media in response to these stereotypes and discrimination.

Citizens' Media: Re-appropriation of Power and Voice

Media scholars have analyzed the dialectical struggle between mainstream media and alternative media for decades (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Kidd, Barker-Plummer, & Rodríguez, 2005; Rodríguez, 2001). When analyzing this, researchers have focused on a power struggle that occurs where mainstream media serve as the dominant reinforcement of elitist ideology and alternative media (forms of media that are not mainstream media) seek to reinstate the balance of power between the mass media and the mass public. One key theorist of power that has been useful in looking at this dialectic is Karl Marx. In his attempt to theorize power, Marx addresses the concept of class struggle and ideological oppression. In Marx's view those who control the mode and the means of production also control the ideologies that are disseminated to the laborers, thus maintaining the status quo and preventing any type of structural change (Marx, 1978). According to Marx (1978), ideology created by the dominant class serves to control people's ideas. If the people in power can control how the people without power perceive themselves and their role in social life, then those with power will continue to have power over and dominate those without. However, if those people who struggle for power re-appropriate the mode and the means of production then they can overturn the status quo and alter systems of oppression. When applying this concept to community media (media that community members make), we see an exchange of power occur where dominant, commercial media are no longer the only

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

voices disseminating messages and instead community media re-appropriate power to serve as a venue for community voice. This can be applied to the double bind of the Welfare Queen, where a community of welfare mothers gathers to create their own media, as the media content to be analyzed for this paper will show.

To see how power structures and ideological control are shown in critical media research, the conceptual framework of citizens' media helps best explain how community members can use media to speak back to the mainstream media, like in the case of the Welfare Queen. Citizens' media function as a potential resource for community activists to engage people and build community and civic engagement. According to Clemencia Rodríguez (2001), marginalized peoples can re-appropriate power through strategic use of alternative media. Through this re-appropriation, citizens can then engage other community members. This engagement happens when citizens create their own media and broadcast their own histories, voices, and cultures. As community broadcasts enter the mediascape, these voices become available to the larger dominant society. The new audibility of these voices can then begin processes of increasing the power of these previously silent populations.

In her work examining citizens' media and participatory action in Latin communities (both internationally and within the U.S.), Rodríguez (2001) uses Mouffe's theory of radical democracy as a theoretical foundation while referencing Marxist concepts of power distribution and Gramscian concepts of hegemony. In her book, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media*, Rodríguez (2001) describes the role and value of citizens' media for marginalized communities dissenting oppressive structures. In this research, she found:

Most citizens' groups which are involved with media production experiences are situated in subordinate relationships with respect to hegemonic social forces. As a result of their status as subordinate communities, these groups' cultural identities are "pushed" to the margins, systematically ignored, distorted, or caricatured by hegemonic media institutions. (Rodríguez, 2001, p. 153)

In this work, Rodríguez shows that although dominant power structures work to silence or marginalize groups that are outside of the status quo through hegemonic processes, these groups can still dissent through the process of creating their own media. Citizens' media help these groups to use their power against hegemonic forces by educating them on how to produce media and articulate their voice in the dominant public sphere. The data analyzed for this study will examine the media products of Welfare Queens through their use of citizens' media, to be further explained in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative analysis of citizens' media created by "welfareQUEENS" working with the community media group, POOR Magazine. POOR Magazine is a poor people/indigenous people led grassroots, non-profit arts organization dedicated to providing revolutionary media access, education, arts and advocacy to youth, adults and elders in poverty. POOR is located in San Francisco, CA, and works to promote social change in favor of citizens whose lives are marked by their struggle with homelessness, poverty, sexism, racism, classism, disability, immigration, incarceration,

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

and discrimination in general. In its efforts to engage and build power with its demographic audience, comprised of underrepresented, misrepresented and silenced communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, POOR provides PeopleSkool/Escuela de la Gente, an educational initiative designed to teach community media production. Through this program, POOR Magazine provides media education and media access to people living in poverty. Thanks to POOR Magazine, community members are able to voice their stories, ideas, and opinions in a variety of media including books, radio programs, blogs, online videos, and news articles on the POOR website and in local publications. Through these initiatives POOR Magazine works to create change models for long-term economic sustainability and attempts to facilitate agency for people in struggle from many different cultures, races and generations.

In the summer of 2010 I worked as an intern for POOR Magazine as part of ethnography on community media organizations and civic engagement. While there, I worked with several women dependent on the welfare system who struggled through a series of budget cuts that detrimentally impacted the welfare stipend they needed to support their families. During this time the mothers worked on a blog project entitled: "Working to Feed Our Children." This initiative was a series of blogs written by the welfare mothers in response to the welfare budget cuts in California at the time. As part of the "Working to Feed Our Children" series, welfare mothers wrote blogs that presented their perspective in direct response to mainstream media coverage that had recently aired and in response to the impending budget cuts in California. The blogs were part of an in-class assignment that asked students to write a personal blog detailing how their lives would be impacted if the American Jobs and Closing Tax Loopholes (HR4213) (which included a community jobs program many of the women participated in) was cut from the state budget. As part of this effort I worked with the women to draft a letter that was sent to local legislators directing their attention to the blogs to raise awareness of the Welfare Queen perspective. In response, POOR Magazine received an official response from Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi's office that she was grateful for the insight into the welfare mothers' struggles and that she would work hard to prevent the budget cuts from further impacting their lives.

I analyzed this data using a feminist theoretical lens. The blogs were analyzed through open coding, consisting of a close textual reading line by line to determine portions of text that could develop potential themes. Throughout this process a constant comparison of categories was conducted in which each new code was compared against former codes to ensure consistency of coding and reliability in data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). At this point, codes transitioned from the previous descriptive form of coding to a more analytical/theoretical coding process by re-examining the data under a feminist theoretical lens (Singer, 2009). The following section details the results and findings of this analysis. Through this method I hope to be able to identify common themes that will help to build an argument for a standpoint theory of poverty that reveals the perspective and struggle of women living in poverty.

Deconstructing the Welfare Queen Through a Feminist Lens

The double bind of the Welfare Queen can be examined through a Marxist feminist lens

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

to identify the role historical materialism plays in the continuation of the subjugation of women. However, Marxist feminism is limited in its application to the double bind of the Welfare Queen because most Marxist feminists focus on the social stratification of women based on gender, disregarding class and the interconnection of class and gender. An area of research that helps resolve this issue stems from economics in the primary and feminism in the secondary. The area of feminist economics helps to understand the double bind of the Welfare Queen when looking at class and gender.

One of the leading feminist economists of our time is Barbara Bergmann. In her research, she examines women's revolutions not in terms of changing ideologies but in terms of the transformation of economic developments and the growing value of women's labor. In the second edition of her book, *The Economic Emergence of Women*, Bergmann (2005) addresses the economic struggle of the single mother by examining the welfare system and the cycle of dependency it creates. Bergmann identifies the unique position American single mothers face as women in a capitalist economy who, on average, earn less than their male counterparts, yet are still expected to carry the majority of the burden for raising their children when fathers leave the family and do not pay their portion of child support. In the "Working to Feed Our Children" (WtFOC) blog series, one mother attests to this in her statement:

Para una madre sola es mas dificil salir adelante porque el trabajo para ella nunca acaba. Despues del trabajo se va a la casa hacer de comer, hacer los trabajos domesticos, acostarse tarde, levantarse temprano, llevar los ninos a la escuela. La mujer nunca para de trabajar y les damos a saber esto para que nos entiendan un poquito de todo el esfuerzo y el sufrimiento por que una mujer fuerte vale por dos esos es lo hace a una mujer. (*Translation on blog: For a single mother the work never ends. After work a mother has to go home and cook dinner, then take care of all the house work. She goes to bed late. She wakes up early, then takes the kids to school. This woman never stops working. I let you know this so that you might understand a little about the strength and the suffering because a strong woman is worth two.*)

In this excerpt we see one mother's struggle trying to balance the economic burden of supporting her family as well as the physical burden of maintaining the home and the emotional strength needed to succeed at everything. This is reminiscent of the "superwoman" standards many working mothers feel the need to achieve in order to financially, physically, and emotionally support their families. Unfortunately, this standard is becoming a social norm for working mothers instead of recognized as an impossible feat to achieve.

Single mothers also face difficulties with regard to their time as many lose potential employment opportunities they have when a child falls sick or has trouble in school and the mother must take time off work to care for the child. Bergmann views the cycle of dependency on welfare as a "poverty trap" for women where the cost of leaving welfare to earn a living is higher than staying dependent on the system (Bergmann, 2005, p. 165). Bergmann argues the cycle begins through the enticement of benefits for single mothers.

Many single mothers, particularly the ones with poor job prospects, felt the best

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

they could do was to 'cop out' from the rigors of a harried state of independence and go onto welfare. When they did, they accepted a sentence of extreme poverty and a pariah status in return for an assured stipend, medical care, and the time to attend to the needs of their children in a relatively leisurely way. (Bergmann, 2005, p. 165)

As a result, women become accustomed to a certain lifestyle and when the time limitation for benefits neared, would be forced to give up certain benefits beyond money (like healthcare, bonding time with children, personal time, etc.) and accrue new expenses like childcare, transportation, and clothing for employment if they took on new employment. This in turn creates a perpetuating cycle of dependency for women to return to the welfare system or sink further into poverty.

In the WtFOC blog series, welfare mothers speak to the system of dependency welfare creates; however, they also address the empowerment that results through employment programs and stimulus packages. As one mother states, "As a welfare mom I recently had the blessing of being given work experience for pay." This mother goes on to further describe the confidence she gained through this experience and how it has "boosted my self-esteem and truly helps me realize that I am working for myself and the betterment of my child." Although Bergmann identifies ways in which welfare can be a "poverty trap" for some mothers, these mothers have found it to be a source of empowerment. However, mainstream media depictions rarely, if ever, show this side of the welfare story and instead focus on the stereotype of mothers as being lazy and unmotivated to work.

Another explanation for the cyclical nature of the welfare dependency system is the concept of the feminization of poverty. This concept and area of study acknowledges that women experience higher incidences of poverty at greater depths than their male counterparts, they suffer through poverty longer than men and their rates of enduring it are rising faster than men, and women face more obstacles in leaving poverty and overcoming related adversities than men (Chant, 2008). In the WtFOC blog series, one mother describes her experiences surviving an abusive relationship that left her trying to support her child as a single mother. For this mother, leaving her abusive relationship actually created more obstacles for her and her child that created a path through homelessness, resulting in a life of poverty.

Both of these areas of economic study help enlighten this discussion on the double bind of the Welfare Queen. However, an adequate Marxist feminist or feminist economic theoretical lens to analyze the double bind of the Welfare Queen is still in need. The next feminist theory I will discuss will help to create the foundation for an appropriate theoretical lens to analyze the struggle of women in poverty.

Hartsock's (1997) standpoint theory stems from a critique of Marxist feminism by asking the question can one "discover a feminist standpoint on which to ground a specifically feminist historical materialism?" (p. 463). Through a feminist standpoint theory, Hartsock argues feminists can understand patriarchal systems "as perverse inversions of more humane social relations" (Hartsock, 1997, p. 463). According to this

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

theory, the perspective we are cultivated in shapes who we are and how we view the world. In order to achieve a more objective view of the world we must undertake the perspective of the marginalized group (women). According to this theory, marginalized people have a greater understanding of their own perspective and the dominant group's perspective they must adhere to. For example, in order to navigate through a capitalist world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, poor people must understand the rules and norms of the capitalist society in order to survive. They also understand their own perspective as the marginalized group that is demonized and ignored by the mass society. Due to this dual understanding, poor people have a stronger objectivity about capitalism and poverty than the law makers and politicians who create the laws that impact poor people (like welfare requirements) but who have never experienced poverty themselves.

The blogs in the WtFOC series display this standpoint by soliciting legislators and lawmakers to empathize with their plight and try to take their perspective as welfare recipients. For example:

Yo quisiera que se pusiera por un momento en mis zapatos y si usted sobreviviria con una cantidad de \$600.00 al mes. Si le alcanzaria para pagar su apartamento pagar gas, baby city ropa y zapatos para sus hijos. Asi es que pongase apensar un momento que persona sobreviviria con una cantidad aso. Porque yo no. (*Translation on blog: I wish you could for just one moment take a walk in my shoes and see if you would be able to survive on \$600 a month. If the money would be enough to pay the rent on your apartment, to pay for gas, your babies [sp] clothes, and shoes for your kids. So please think for one moment how could someone survive on such pay. I can not [sp].*)

In this excerpt we see one welfare mother helping her audience see her perspective by describing her struggles in poverty and experiences as a mother in poverty. Wood (1993) argues that marginalized people have little motivation to support the status quo that marginalizes them because even though they understand how to navigate their world they do not want to knowingly be complacent in their own oppression. In this same blog post, this mother also describes in detail her experiences navigating the community jobs program, addressing the need for her target audience to take action on her behalf as she acknowledges her limitation in creating legislative change. Through this identification of her position in the welfare process this mother displays a critical consciousness of her role in the power exchange for the community jobs program.

One common theme that emerged in these blogs was the need welfare mothers felt to argue against Welfare Queen stereotypes. One mother wrote:

As of now people in the government don't consider those who receive public aid as being worth, or deserving of this opportunity. Many believe in the false image of the welfare queen, sitting on her butt and collecting money. But the truth is, and as a mother I can testify, that we work for every dollar we receive.

This mother directly confronts the negative stereotypes she is inundated with on a daily basis. In this example we see the power of citizens' media to speak back to a system of marginalization to provide the perspective of the oppressed. Although, as the previous literature review has shown, many Welfare Queen stereotypes revolve around African

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

American women, many of the welfare mothers who participated in this blog series are Latina and felt those stereotypes directed towards them as well. For example, one mother wrote:

No porque dicen que uno es peresoso, no es pore so si no porque si queremos trabajar, no importa el trabajo que que sa lo importante es que haya trabajo. Porque nosotros los Latinos hacemos el trabajo que sea nunca nos quejamos que lo podemos hacer. Porque los imigrantes NO somos peresosos! (*Translation on blog: The reason we want the program is not because like some say that we are lazy but because we want to work no matter what the work[.] what is most important is that we are working. We are Latinos and we do any work and we don't complain. We are NOT lazy!*)

This mother speaks to Monahan, Shtrulis, and Brown Givens' (2005) findings that many Welfare Queen stereotypes speak to the temporal nature of welfare mothers' ability to continue a long-standing career. Another mother speaks to this stereotype, addressing the willingness of welfare mothers to perform work that many other members of society are unwilling to perform in her blog statement, "[the community jobs program] will be the moving force behind filling necessary jobs such as sanitation workers, nursing assistance, home health aid workers, etc. All the low level shit jobs none of the higher level snob people want to do." Through these arguments the welfare mothers conveyed their standpoint of women living in poverty and the marginalization they endure as they navigate the welfare system.

The limitation of feminist standpoint theory to the analysis of the double bind of the Welfare Queen is that this theory implicitly assumes that women experience oppression and marginalization the same way. Black feminist standpoint theory helps to correct this by addressing the intersectionality of multiple oppressions. Kimberle Crenshaw expounds upon this idea in her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (Crenshaw, 1991). In this article, Crenshaw looks at the identity politics of female domestic violence victims and argues that the concept of identity politics, although highly popular in feminist and race movements, fails to address the difference *within* groups, which creates difference *among* groups. Crenshaw asserts this difference is attributed to the multiple aspects of women's lives that shape their experience and self concept. For example, "in the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Crenshaw further argues that identity politics force women to choose which identity they want to identify as, even though they may identify with multiple identities simultaneously.

In her article, Crenshaw (1991) proposes the theory of intersectionality as a response to the problem of identity politics. Crenshaw analyzes the phenomenon of domestic violence against Black women, arguing that the act of domestic violence reflects both sexism and racism towards Black women and that feminist and anti-racist rhetoric alone inadequately address the phenomenon. "Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

or the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Instead of fitting women who fall under multiple areas of oppression into just one box, Crenshaw argues we must take into account the full experience of the individual and analyze their experience from their perspective. In the WtFOC blogs, welfare mothers attempt to help readers understand their experience of multiple areas of marginalization by addressing what the potential impact of losing the community jobs program would be on them and their families. With regard to the community jobs program,

Porque como familia nos ebeneficiamos a poder agarra un poquito mas de dinero para podero brindarles una mayor clase de vida a mis hijos. Yo como madre me beneficio de este programa porque soy la que trabaja por medio del programa y apenas tengo un mes de estar trabajandoy realmente necesito este trabajo para poder pagar mis duedas. (*Translation on blog: The benefits allow us just a little bit more money in an attempt to offer our children a better life. As a mother this program benefits me because it allows me to work. With just under a month working in this program I have the hope to be able to earn enough to pay off my debt.*)

In this example, the mother describes her perspective as both a mother and a woman living in poverty, which is foundational for the Welfare Queen experience. This perspective yields a unique experiential knowledge that lends itself to being understood by those who fall within the Welfare Queen category, yet may not be understood by women in general or people in poverty in general.

Crenshaw acknowledges that although her article solely focuses on the intersectionality of race and gender, many individuals traverse various areas of marginalization, to include class and sexuality. To address the idea of intersectionality further, Cynthia Edmonds-Cady states in her article, “While a particular social location such as gender can serve as an embraced individual level identity, it also must be understood in relation to the way it intersects with one’s social class, race, and sexuality, and how oppressed or marginalized statuses in these other categories will affect how one experiences gender” (Edmonds-Cady, 2011, p. 175). For the welfare mothers who participated in the WtFOC blog series, they highlight the intersection of poverty, gender, and race through their activist attempt to create change via citizens’ media. As one mother states, “I am a single mom who is trying to do the right thing and I am not asking for a hand out I am asking for a [sp] opportunity to be able to work for myself and my child.” This statement expresses how these welfare mothers view their role in this intersection. They do not want to be seen as victims or system abusers but instead as strong women capable of empowerment if given the chance. This blog series highlights that the intersection of poverty, race, and gender yields the unique standpoint of the Welfare Queen. By analyzing the words and experiences of the welfare mothers themselves we are able to look beyond the mainstream media’s depictions and denigrations of welfare mothers and understand their perspective and experiential knowledge more accurately.

Implications & Conclusion

In an attempt to heed Crenshaw’s call to not just look at the differences that exist outside the group but also acknowledge the differences within, this paper has analyzed

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

the blogs of welfare mothers to understand how the intersection of race, gender, and class yields a unique perspective of the Welfare Queen. From this data, a standpoint theory of poverty could be supported that speaks to the unique perspective of those living within poverty. Although poverty itself is a temporary condition, the perspective of those living in poverty is informed through an experiential knowledge unique to those who have endured this condition. As shown in the analysis above, it is necessary for mothers living in poverty to not only understand their class perspective but also the perspectives of others in different classes (i.e. poor vs. rich) in order for them to navigate class systems like welfare. In a dialogic attempt to subvert oppressive power structures, these welfare mothers use citizens' media to confront the negative stereotypes targeting their situation and provide a tangible alternative to mainstream media depictions of the Welfare Queen. The use of citizens' media invites outsiders to engage in an empathetic exercise and take the perspective of the mothers living on welfare. Through this invitation the mothers share their struggles, concerns, and hopes for social change, where they acknowledge that their liberation is tied to the liberation of others and that everyone in the system must work together in order for them to become empowered to leave the welfare system. Unfortunately, the standpoint of women in poverty is not as accessible to the mass public as mainstream representations; however, through the use of citizens' media this marginalized group is able to disseminate their perspective and create a dialogue for social change.

The purpose of this paper has been to conduct research that will help substantiate a standpoint theory of poverty. Feminist theories like intersectionality, black feminist standpoint theory, and feminist standpoint theory help us to see the struggles that many women face as marginalized individuals that are subsumed in multiple categories of oppression. There is currently an area of feminist research lacking in addressing the struggles and perspectives of women struggling with poverty. Although areas like feminist economics help to start to address this deficiency, a more rigorous approach needs to be taken in order for feminists to recognize the oppression we create in our own group against those who have been silenced amongst us. This study helps to make progress towards that by identifying the voice and perspective of women in poverty. This study also has larger implications as a feminist perspective that can be applied in broad areas of poverty studies to include perspectives of men and children struggling with poverty as well. A constant reminder we need as feminists is that although we are quite familiar with the perspective of the oppressed, we are also quite capable of viewing the world from the perspective of the oppressor. In order to gain stronger objectivities in our research we need to include the voice and perspective of those who have been marginalized within our own group as well: the poor.

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

REFERENCES

- Angelou, M. (1996). Momma welfare roll. In C. O'Keefe (Ed.), *Mother: Famous writers celebrate motherhood with a treasury of short stories, essays, and poems* (pp. 26–27). New York: Pocket Books.
- Atton, C. (2002). *Alternative media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bailey Woodard, J., & Mastin, T. (2005). Black womanhood: Essence and its treatment of stereotypical images of black women. *Journal of Black Studies*, 36, 264–281. doi:10.1177/0021934704273152
- Bergmann, B. R. (2005). *The economic emergence of women* (2nd ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bounds Littlefield, M. (2008). The media as a system of racialization: Exploring images of African American women and the new racism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51, 675–685. doi:10.1177/0002764207307747
- Chant, S. (2008). The “Feminisation of Poverty” and the “Feminisation” of anti-poverty programmes: Room for revision? *Journal of Development Studies*, 44, 165–197. doi:10.1080/00220380701789810
- Cohen, B. C. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (1989). Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives. *Signs*, 14, 745–773.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded Theory procedures and techniques*.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Downing, J. (2001). *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Okas, CA: Sage.
- Edmonds-Cady, C. (2011). A view from the bridge: Insider/Outsider perspective in a study of the Welfare Rights Movement. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11, 174–190. doi:10.1177/1473325011401467
- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gilliam, F. D. (1999). *The “Welfare Queen” experiment: How viewers react to images of African-American mothers*. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.
- Hancock, A.-M. (2004). *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hartsock, N. C. M. (1997). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In D. T. Meyers (Ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader* (pp. 462–483). New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, J. D., Nelgy, O., Gibson, N., Reed, W., & Ashburn-Nardo, L. (2009). Priming media stereotypes reduces support for social welfare policies: The mediating role of empathy. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35, 463–476.
- Kidd, D., Barker-Plummer, B., & Rodríguez, C. (2005). *Mapping democracy from the ground up: Mapping communication practices in the counter public sphere*. Social Science Research Council. Retrieved from

DECONSTRUCTING THE WELFARE QUEEN

- <http://mediaresearch.ssrc.org/media-democracy-from-the-ground-up-mapping-communication-practices-in-the-counter-public-sphere/attachment>
- Limbert, W. M., & Bullock, H. E. (2009). Framing U.S. redistributive policies: Tough love for poor women and tax cuts for seniors. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 9, 57–83.
- Marx, K. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Second.). New York: WW Norton Co.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176–187.
- Monahan, J. L., Shtrulis, I., & Brown Givens, S. (2005). Priming welfare queen and other stereotypes: The transference of media images into interpersonal contexts. *Communication Research Reports*, 22, 199–205.
- Rodríguez, C. (2001). *Fissures in the mediascape: An international study of citizens' media*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Singer, J. B. (2009). Ethnography. *J&MC Quarterly*, 86(1), 191–198.
- Wood, J. T. (1993). Gender and Moral Voice: Moving from Women's Nature To Standpoint Epistemology. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 15, 1–24.