

“Blind, Deaf & Dumb”



The media, the middle-class and the
construction of poverty

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Questions...

- In this paper we consider how the Irish broadcast and print media construct stories about poverty.
- Our work draws upon research undertaken in the periods 1992-1996 and 2000-2001.
- It stems from an ongoing interest in the ideological role played by the mass media and draws upon a neo-Marxist theoretical framework.
- How media discourses about poverty change over time?
- While we recognize the power of audiences we also recognize the power of the mainstream media to set agendas and shape public discourse.

Changing Contexts...

- 1992-1996 Study
- High rates of relative poverty.
- High rates of unemployment and long-term unemployment (18%+)
- The 1994 *LiS* Survey found that between 9 and 15% of households experience poverty.
- 2000-2001 Study
- In the wake of unprecedented economic growth rates.
- Lowering of overall unemployment levels.(3.7%)
- The 1997 *LiS* Survey showed persistent long-term unemployment & high rates of relative poverty.
- Growing dependency in labour market on non-nationals.

God's or Devil's Poor?

- All of the published research on attitudes to poverty in Ireland reveal two main kinds of constructions within public discourse:

The Deserving Poor (*God's Poor*)

The Undeserving Poor (*Devils's Poor*)

God's Poor and Devil's Poor

Davis et al (1984)

Irish are strongly fatalistic about causes of poverty.

57% of sample agreed that 'lack of ambition is the root of poverty.'

53% agreed that 'the majority of people on the dole have no interest in getting a job.'

60% believed that 'Itinerants' were untrustworthy, careless, excitable and noisy.

23% believed that the unemployed had these characteristics.

Eurobarometer (1990)

Public opinion in Ireland, Denmark and the UK was found to be negative in terms of public beliefs about the poor making it through their poverty.

In Ireland, while structural explanations for poverty were strong, ones which blamed individuals for their poverty were also in abundance – e.g.

Alcoholism/drugs: 39%

Broken families: 33%

Too many children: 19%

Laziness: 16%

McGreil (1977) & (1996)

The former study points to negative public attitudes to both the Travelling Community and the Unemployed.

The more recent study(1988-89 period) argues that negative public attitudes to Travellers have intensified. They were shown to have lessened where the unemployed were concerned.

11.8% of McGreil's sample in 1988-9 agreed with the statement 'The poor person is generally responsible for his/her own poverty.'

Ireland in 1998: Areas of Concern



To what extent do you feel concerned about the living conditions of:

<i>Elderly</i>	<i>80.7%</i>
<i>Disabled</i>	<i>79.6%</i>
<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>48.5%</i>
<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>27.4%</i>

Ireland in 1998: Areas of Response

Would you be prepared to do something practical to improve the conditions of:

<i>Immediate Family</i>	<i>95.5%</i>
<i>Elderly</i>	<i>80.8%</i>
<i>Disabled</i>	<i>81.5%</i>
<i>Community</i>	<i>72.3%</i>
<i>Immigrants</i>	<i>34.0%</i>

Devils and Angels Study 1992-96

- Study of RTE's coverage of poverty on RTE1 and Network 2 channels.
- Combined critical content analysis with an ethnographic approach.
- Examined factual, fictional and fund-raising television.
- It had a particular focus on the ideological construction of poverty stories.
- The study concluded that poverty coverage on television is constructed in such a way as to be non-threatening to the *status quo*.

Devils and Angels Study 1992-96

- Devereux (1998) argued that RTE's television coverage of poverty was based upon dominant ideological explanations.
- Coverage was reductive; it relied upon a liberal rather than a critical discourse; the poor were largely voiceless and invisible across the range of genres analysed; poverty was decontextualised and stories about the poor relied upon personal and individual rather than structural explanations; the *mode of address* of much of this coverage was to a presumed comfortable middle-class audience.
- The dichotomy of the deserving/God's poor and undeserving/Devil's poor needed to be added to with a new categorization the Angels or saviours of the poor. Following Propp (1928) and Sorenson (1991) we can say that the Angels are mythologized into heroic characters who become synonymous with assisting the poor.
- The new poor of the early 1990s were the middle-class.

The new poor

- *Six-One News* December 1992.
- ‘The New Poor’
 - The rise of unemployment into the middle-classes.
 - The rise in mortgage interest rates.
 - Newsworthiness?
 - The novelty factor.
 - Their level of organisation/articulacy.
- Discourses around the new poor?
 - They have become economically poor because of forces outside of their control.
 - Cause of new poverty is structural & not for individual/personal reasons as in stories concerning the ‘old poor’.

'These people have made a go of life...'

- Story: The problems facing mortgage-holders in Galway City.
 - The crisis facing the middle-classes of Galway 'will cause bigger problems than the activities of moneylenders this Christmas.'
 - They are 'the poor of the PAYE sector and they have no medical cards...they have never had to go to the St. Vincent De Paul. These people have made a go of life and tried to keep it there...they are forced into being the new poor.'
 - Immediate political action is demanded in the form of full mortgage tax relief. They have fallen into poverty through no fault of their own.
 - The task at hand is to save the new poor from losing their houses and to 'try and keep their dignity together.'
- Structure of news report:
 - Opening shot of a prosperous Galway housing estate with large houses.
 - Houses are bathed in a late evening fog.
 - Interview with a representatives from the St. Vincent De Paul and the Combined Resident's Association in Galway.
 - No representative examples of the new poor.

The Devil in the Details

- Changing Circumstances 1996-2000
- In the context of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy
- Poverty effectively disappears from the media
- Who are the (undeserving) poor today?

Headlines

- 5000 Refugees Flooding into Ireland
- Floodgates Open as a New Army of Poor Swamp The Country
- Gardai Increasingly Worried About Refugees in Street Crime and Prostitution
- A New Determined Style of Beggar
- Refugees Flooding Maternity Hospitals
- Refugee Rapist on the Rampage
- Tax- Payers Face Bills of £20m +
- Crackdown on 2000 Sponger Refugees

Group Comparison: N of Stories

	Refugee/ Asylum	Refugee	Asylum Seekers	Travellers
Lead	0	(1) 1	0	2
Letters	1	4	7	7
Feature	0	(2) 3	(1) 4	3
News	3	(45) 70	(21) 64	(1) 77
Terror	0	(18) 18	0	0

Group Comparison: Story Size

News Stories Only, Mean Word Count

	Refugee/ Asylum	Refugee	Asylum Seekers	Travellers
All	495	362	396	380
Domestic	369	404	371	379
Foreign	746	338	446	442

Selection of Headlines w/ WordCount

- International Day Against Racism 1133
- Travellers' encounter compared to Braveheart 582
- Travellers seek money to leave industrial estate 576
- Travellers camp at gates of sailing club 486
- 6,000 Travellers still live on unserviced sites 97
- German Nazis stab Refugees 64
- Travellers live shorter lives 54
- Anti-Traveller Bias Plan Launched 45

Conclusions

- Media coverage ignores poverty OR focuses on marginal issues, not systemic ones
- The new poor in Ireland are Immigrants (2001)
- Immigrants & Travellers conflated
- Both groups covered in marginal terms
- No systemic evaluation of cause of poverty
- Coverage can be very negative (*pace* length)
- Media content reflected in public opinion.