

Media Portrayal of Individuals in the Lower Class and
Its Effects on Attributions of Educational Hardships

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

By

Krista Burke
March 2014

Julia K. Woolley

Senior Project Advisor

Signature

Date

Dr. Bernard Duffy

Department Chair

Signature

Date

Table of Contents

Abstract.....3

Introduction.....4

Literature Review.....6

Cultivation Theory.....6

Stereotyping.....8

Priming & Framing.....10

Cognitive Dissonance Theory.....12

Attribution Theory.....13

Rationale and Research Question.....14

Method.....16

Sample.....16

Procedure.....16

Independent Variable.....17

Dependent Variable.....18

Results.....19

Discussion.....20

Purpose and Findings.....20

Implications.....21

Limitations.....22

Future Research.....24

References.....25

Appendix.....28

Abstract

This study investigated how media portrayals of individuals in the lower class affect people's beliefs about educational hardships in lower socioeconomic areas. Specifically, this study looked at the attributions of these hardships to determine if media consumption had an effect on the internality of attributions. It was hypothesized that increased media consumption would be related to an increased tendency toward internal attributions. It was hypothesized that increased media consumption would lead to lower support for policy changes regarding education. A survey was distributed to assess media consumption habits and attitudes toward educational hardships in the lower class. Correlation results yielded no support for the predicted relationships. However, results showed a nearly significant relationship between number of certain films seen and policy support. Theoretical implications are presented, along with limitations and suggestions for future research.

Media Portrayals of Individuals in the Lower Class and
Its Effects on Attributions of Educational Hardships

Beggars on street corners with cardboard signs, images of drug abuse and violence in impoverished neighborhoods, and gang affiliation among minorities, are a few of the images we may commonly associate with the lower class. Most of these images, however, would not be nearly as convincing without the reinforcement of stories told in the media. Almost anybody can recall seeing a movie showing students in poverty spending time playing sports or partying with their gang instead of studying at home. When the lower class is depicted in the media it is generally as a statistic, portrayed as a result of their own life choices, or twisted to fit into the social issue frame of the media's story. When the truth is left out of the media, people in our society bear the consequence.

Students in low-income areas fall prey to these media portrayals. While the media tells a story of a helpless and hopeless lower class, it ignores realities of flaws in the educational structure. In 2011, Shana Pribesh, Karen Gavigan and Gail Dickinson found that students attending schools with the "highest concentrations of students living in poverty – had the fewest school library resources to draw on" (Pribesh et al. 2011). William Elliot (2013) conducted a study in 2013 which found that the educational system is divided into two systems that provide higher income families with an advantage over low-income families (Elliott 2013, p. 461-471). In order to change these inequalities, governmental policies can be changed or created. However, policies regarding education are currently being pushed aside.

Jared Bernstein (2014), Obama administration economist argues, "policy choices matter more than we have been taught to think." With "differences in educational success between high- and lower-income students [growing] substantially", the time to act is now (Bernstein, 2014). In

2014, journalist Sabrina Tavernise with *The New York Times* finds that “the income divide has received far less attention from policy makers and government officials” (Tavernise, 2014).

These widening gaps in educational success will not go away if we believe the story told by the media. If we believe this gap is due to personality traits of low-income individuals, we will have no reason to look for a solution. Attributing the existence of this gap to the internal traits of individuals will only prevent us from searching for solutions to this problem. The ever-presence of media and its growing impact in our world makes it a very powerful resource.

Media is present within our communication in interpersonal relationships, as a community, as a culture, and as a human race. Many authors have theorized the way in which mass media consumption can change the ways in which we perceive the world around us. The authors of these theories recognize that media not only changes our perceptions of the world, but consequently how we think and behave. These theories make studying the effects of media increasingly important because of the real world impact this form of communication can have. If media can blind us to the issue of the educational gap, we can learn to reverse the effect and create a solution.

This study will focus on the effects of media communication specifically pertaining to poverty and education. The media tells a story of a lower class that does not value education. The focus on internal flaws among the impoverished takes away from the structural flaws in the educational system. The purpose of this study is to discover a relationship between media consumption and negative internal attributions to individuals within the lower class.

The purpose of discovering this relationship is to outline the potential danger of negative or inaccurate information within the media. Attitudes and beliefs shape support for public policy. Structural flaws in the educational system and external factors in lives of the poor cause

increased educational hardships for those in the lower class. However, if the media creates a world in which the general attitude suggests these hardships are due to traits of the poor and not structural flaws, there will be no cause for action. A solution may exist, but if we believe the problem is out of our hands, we will have no reason to try and find that solution.

By finding a relationship between media consumption and internal attributions to educational hardships in the lower class, I aim to uncover a flaw in the story we've come to know as truth. Previous studies have discovered the significance of media in shaping our beliefs and actions. The story told through the media creates the world we live in. If this story is false, we are responsible for uncovering the truth. Cultivation theory, Stereotyping and Priming within the media, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Attribution theory all outline the importance of studying media communication. Combining these theories and previous studies, I aim to discover a truth that needs to be revealed through the media.

Literature Review

Cultivation Theory

The importance of studying media effects grows when we realize that our perceptions of the world don't necessarily match reality. George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory helps to explain this phenomenon (Gerbner et al. 1985 p. 17). Gerbner's theory argues that as a central storyteller, television skews our perception of reality to match the reality portrayed in the media. Gerbner argues that "the longer we live with television, the more invisible it becomes," and the more our ideas of reality reflect the reality portrayed through media (Gerbner et al., 1985 p. 18). Our view of the world becomes reflective of what is communicated through media and as a result shapes the way we behave. Gerbner argues that media affects our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and therefore shapes our world.

In 1996, Martin Gilens conducted a study that supports Gerbner's theory and the way in which media can affect political standing on issues of poverty. Gilens' study looks at news articles (and pictures) that discuss poverty in general. He then compares the news articles to reality *and* public opinion. His study finds that the news media under-represents the elderly and working poor (the most sympathized with groups) and over-represents the unemployed working-age and African Americans (the least sympathized with groups), compared to real-world statistics. Gilens (1996) finds that these representations decrease the public's sympathy for the impoverished and that those with the most distorted view are most likely to oppose welfare. Gilens quotes Lippman in 1960, "It is the pictures in our heads that shape our feelings and actions, and these pictures only imperfectly reflect the world that surrounds us" and these "reports about the world come primarily through the mass media" (p. 515). This study can be used to show that media coverage has an impact on public opinion *and* their support for related policies such as welfare. Gilens' study proves the importance of media portrayals by showing that opinions formed have a true effect on the world.

In 2011, Leo W. Jeffres and his coauthors conduct an interview of 304 adults asking about media usage, perceived portrayals, and actual values. In connection with Cultivation Theory, Jeffres et al. (2011) study the way in which personal values are included in the story told through media. The authors find that "real-life values are related in complex ways to perceptions of values portrayed in the media" (p. 111). Through the media we learn what is important and what is not. Using central themes and one underlying story, the media creates the world we live in and the values we hold. In this way, the media also has the power to shape the policies we support and reject. The impact of media in this way has a very direct impact on the lives we live every day.

These studies support Cultivation Theory and help determine that Gerbner's basic conclusions are almost undeniable. The implication of these findings is that media is a powerful form of communication that can have both positive and negative effects. The effects of media can be particularly negative when illegitimate stereotypes are formed that portray certain groups of people in a negative way. This study aims to show the negative effect the media currently has on the widening education gap between income levels.

Stereotyping

Through the media, people learn to associate certain traits and behaviors with individuals and groups that may not accurately represent who they are (Clawson & Trice 2000, Jeffres et al. 2011, Speak & Tipple 2013). This becomes especially harmful when we apply these beliefs and allow them to shape how we behave. Research has shown that media portrayals have real-life consequences when it comes to making decisions on policy and political action (Coleman 2003, Gilens 1996, Speak & Tipple 2006).

Rosalee Clawson and Rakuya Trice conducted a study in 2013 looking at photographs in the media that portrayed impoverished people and compared the implications of those photos to reality. Clawson and Trice (2013) find that the magazine photos (a total of 149 pictures depicting 357 poor people) don't depict reality, but rather closely follow the stereotypical traits and behaviors of lower class individuals. The article focuses on the overrepresentation of blacks and women along with the exploitation of welfare. The traits of loose morals, drunkenness, and criminality were all overly portrayed in the photos and blacks and women were disproportionately portrayed as poor people that adhere to the stereotypical traits. In their evaluations of beliefs about the poor, the survey shows that people were indeed influenced by the photographs, and based their beliefs around what they observed.

Suzanne Speak and Graham Tipple (2006) examine the ways in which homeless people are portrayed in various countries. Using content analyses of media, their study examines how homeless people are treated in each country and how the public views them. The article concludes that homeless people are associated with very few positive attributes across nations. Speak and Tipple (2006) find that homeless people are viewed as detrimental to business competition, unworthy, dirty or repulsive, and helpless. While other factors come in to play, the authors argue that it is the language used in media that impacts the way in which these people are viewed and discussed. The authors suggest that negativity toward homeless and impoverished is a reflection of the way these people are portrayed in the media.

Poverty and lower class individuals are a group that is greatly affected by this form of media supported stereotyping. Research shows that the depiction of homeless and impoverished is not only unrealistic, but also vastly negative. Studies find that people in poverty are portrayed as villains, beggars, helpless, and immoral loners (Speak & Tipple, 2013). Speak and Tipple find that even philanthropic agencies aiming to help the homeless unintentionally frame them as helpless in hopes of “extract[ing] sympathy...rather than empowering them to improve their self-image and recognizing their contribution to society” (Speak & Tipple, 2013, p. 177). Furthermore, the media tends to portray impoverished as disproportionately black and depicts a higher number of unemployed working-age adults that elicits the least sympathy from viewers (Gilens, 1996).

In 2013, Paul Gorski finds that media depictions have caused us to form 5 basic stereotypes regarding the poor. Through a meta-analysis of various studies and findings, Gorski (2013) finds that stereotypes have been developed that portray poor people as lazy, substance abusing, linguistically deficient poor communicators, who do not value education with

ineffective and inattentive parents. This story told throughout the media creates a world in which people in poverty are at fault for their situation.

Stereotyping is a method we use to organize the world around us. Because we cannot observe every detail about the world, we rely on stereotypes to give us information in order to make sense of the things we encounter. Stereotyping, however, can also have vastly negative effects if inaccurately applied. We tend to forget that “the content of stereotypes is only partially organic, only partially based upon a measured consideration of the totality of our experiences,” and forgetting this makes stereotypes dangerous (Gorski, 2013). However, stereotypes play a much bigger role when we consider the impact of media priming and framing in addition to stereotyping.

Priming and Framing

Media priming and framing theories further emphasize the power of media in shaping perceptions of poverty. The basic idea of each theory argues, “media tells us what to think about.” In 1974, Erving Goffman theorized the idea of framing. His findings indicate that how a story is told influences how an audience will “understand or evaluate” the given information (Cited in Smith, 2011). Priming is the idea that “media provide a context for public discussion of an issue, setting the stage for audience understanding” (Smith, 2011). Developed by Shanto Iyengar, Mark Peters and Donald Kinder in 1982, their research on priming shows that “television news programs profoundly affect which problems viewers take to be important” (Iyengar, Kinder, & Peters, 1982). In sum, these theories suggest that the story portrayed in the media influence what we believe to be important and how we interpret the issue.

Stephanie Moller (2008) uses the work of Diana Kendall of the University of North Carolina, who writes of the idea of framing and finds ways in which it influences our perception

of the lower class. Kendall argues that “media constructs reality and this construction determines the media of class” (Cited in Moller, 2008, p. 1348). Based on a quantitative analysis of entertainment shows and newspaper articles, Kendall finds that while the “media rarely discusses class explicitly, their portrayals of the classes generate perceptions that influence behavior.” The media frames the upper class positively with images of “individuals who are generous and caring.” The lower class, is “often ignored in the media” yet when they are portrayed, they are “frequently depicted as violating middle-class values” (Cited in Moller, 2008). Kendall’s study finds the way media frames class. With these depictions, an audience adjusts their beliefs to match those portrayed and consequently their behaviors reflect these beliefs.

Heather Bullock, Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy Williams (2001) find that media frames reinforce stereotypes and neglect structural issues that affect the lower class. Their article *Media Images of the Poor* observes and quantitatively analyzes various images, ranging from print to television, and their depictions of the poor. The authors find, “by dedicating very little broadcast time or print space to stories that openly discuss class privilege, class-based power differences, and inequalities, the poor are either rendered invisible or portrayed in terms of characterological deficiencies and moral failings” (Bullock et al., 2001). Analyses such as these demonstrate how mere existence in the media and common portrayals create ideas about the world we adhere to.

Max Rose and Frank Baumgartner in 2013 conduct a study focusing on media coverage and U.S. policies regarding poverty. Their study consists of a qualitative analysis of media portrayals of poor individuals and compares it to policy decisions that are related to the poor. When media framed conditions in lives of the poor as an issue that needs attention, support for welfare increased. Contrarily, with today’s lower class framed as socially undesirable citizens,

support for welfare has decreased. This study shows how media depictions and frames create real world responses that greatly affect the lives of individuals in the lower class.

These studies and the theories of Priming and framing support the idea that if the media does not focus on the issue of the income gap in education, the audience will not consider its importance. Furthermore, if the media emphasizes negative traits of the lower class, the audience will be inclined to attribute educational difficulties to these negative traits. These concepts are further complicated when we consider our tendency to look for examples in the real world that support our previously held beliefs defined through media.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

When we neglect to recognize outside influences on our beliefs, we accept concepts and ideas as truth when we have little real world evidence to support such ideas. Cognitive consistency is the theory that we will search for evidence to support the beliefs we've accepted as truth. Leon Festinger, in 1957 writes of his theory that there is a "consistency between what a person knows and believes and what he does" (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive Dissonance Theory proposes that our motivation "to maintain cognitive consistency can give rise to irrational and sometimes maladaptive behavior" (McLeod, 2008). As Cultivation Theory would suggest, the story told through media creates our beliefs about the world. We then aim to maintain cognitive consistency by searching for real world examples to support the stories we're told through the media instead of observing the world through an unbiased lens.

Michael Tagler and Catherine Cozzarelli (2013) published a study that measures the influence of cognitive consistency on a person's stance on public policy. Tagler and Cozzarelli study attitudes toward the poor and intentions to give help. Tagler and Cozzarelli (2013) measured 198 participants' attitudes and feelings toward the poor and their beliefs about the

causes of poverty. The authors found, “attitudes predicted welfare allocations and volunteering to help the poor...feelings toward the poor were consistent with their beliefs about the causes of poverty” (Tagler & Cozzarelli, 2013 p. 523). The participants were consistent in their feelings on poverty and their support for policy change. This study demonstrates how the ideas held about the poor have a significant impact on people’s actions and political stances.

To avoid cognitive dissonance, we accept media portrayals, and we allow the media to have real-world effects on policy decisions. We observe the beggars placed in movies, we see the ghettos filled with drug-addicts, we watch movies of gangs, filled with obscenities and acts of violence and we take these media depictions and create a story of the world. We take this story and find evidence in the world to support it and accept it as an absolute truth.

Attribution Theory

In 1991, Researchers Susan Fiske and Shelly Taylor describe Attribution Theory in their book *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*. Fiske and Taylor’s (1991) theory examines the way a “social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations” for why people behave the way they do (Cited in McLeod, 2008, p. 2). This theory is supported by the work of Fritz Heider in 1958 which finds that “functioning in the social world require[s] some means of understanding the behaviors of others” (Heider, 1958, p. 39). Heider finds that when “we explain the behavior of others we look for enduring *internal attributions* such as personality traits.” On the other hand, “when we try to explain our own behavior, we tend to make *external attributions*, such as situational or environment” (Cited in Mcleod, 2010, p. 2). Media depictions that focus on the flaws of low-income individuals, as opposed to flaws within a system that create these habits, cause us to attribute negative traits to the low-income individuals themselves. This attribution

causes people to believe that changes within a system will not change the way these individuals are.

The story told by the media causes us to maintain negative beliefs about the poor that cause us to attribute their struggles to internal flaws as opposed to structural ones. Political frames have shifted from “structural causes of poverty... to portrayals of the poor as cheaters and chiselers and of welfare policies doing more harm than good. As frames have shifted, policies have shifted” (Rose and Baumgartner, 2013, p. 47). The media’s inaccurate representation of lower class individuals causes viewers to have decreased sympathy and an increased resistance to welfare and other social changes that could potentially help this social group.

In his article Leo Jeffres (2011) finds that media is linked to determining values of a culture. If media has the power to determine the values of a certain group of individuals, we must consider the impact this will have when certain values are eliminated from or nonexistent in media. An income gap in the education system can be observed. The media argues that its existence can be attributed to the individuals in the lower class who do not value education. If we accept this argument as truth, we will have no reason to search for policies for change. However, we must decide if the media’s argument is accurate, are educational hardships a result of individual characteristics in the lower class, or is there a larger issue the media isn’t revealing?

Rationale and Research Question

These previous studies have shown that media has a direct impact on viewers’ beliefs and subsequent behaviors. The purpose of this study will be to determine if media consumption has an impact on attributions of educational hardships in the lower socioeconomic classes. Based on predictions of Cultivation Theory, media stereotyping, priming and framing, Cognitive

Dissonance Theory, and Attribution Theory, I have reason to believe media consumption plays a role in shaping an individuals' explanation for the income gap in the education system.

Using an analysis of past research, and an online survey, I hypothesize a relationship between media exposure and policy positions, mediated by internal attributions and negative stereotypes. I predict the media's lack of attention to education in portrayals of the lower class, combined with negative personality traits of the poor, cause people to believe individuals are the issue. I hope to simply argue that negative media portrayals are exacerbating the issue of educational struggles in poor communities. I predict that media consumers attribute lower-class educational failure to the internal traits of individuals. I hope to point out that depictions in the media, and the resulting attributions of viewers have real-life consequences in political decisions, affecting the lives of all those involved.

Combining Cultivation Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Attribution Theory, and the findings of previous researchers, this study aims to point out the relationship between media viewing and attributions of poor education in low-income communities. Based on the given rationale, the study aims to support the following hypotheses:

H1: An increase in media consumption will be positively correlated to internal attributions of educational hardships.

H2: An increase in media consumption will be negatively correlated to support of policy changes regarding the educational system.

I predict that viewers attribute poor education habits to internal factors of individuals in the lower class and neglect to see structural flaws within the educational system. Discovering this would allow me to develop a call for change. If flaws in the system could be addressed and make a difference in the way low-income individuals receive and value education, policy changes need

to be made to address these structural flaws. However, if we, with direction from media, focus primarily on the internal characteristics of the poor, we will never see these structural flaws, and will not feel the need for change. This study aims to reveal a need for change.

Methods

Participants (N=88) were given a link to an online survey via Facebook or Email. The Facebook post and Email requested that each individual take part in this study to assist in the completion of my senior project. The survey consisted of questions concerning each individual's demographics, media habits, and beliefs about poverty. Demographic and media-habit questions asked for specific details including age, income, name of school, the type of media consumed, the number of hours spent viewing certain media, and more. Belief questions were measured on a Likert-Type scale from 1-5, 1 being "strongly disagree," and 5 being "strongly agree." The six-page survey asked participants to report media consumption habits along with their beliefs about education in lower socioeconomic schools and their views on educational policy.

Sample

Participants were recruited via Facebook and Email, and voluntarily participated in the online survey. The convenience sample includes participants of ages ranging from 18-83 years old, with the most common age being 23 years old, with a standard deviation of 13 years and a mean of 28 years old. A total of 88 participants completed the study with 52 females and 36 males. 94% of participants were currently enrolled in or graduated from college.

Procedure

The survey was created using a personal Google Drive and was administered as an online survey. The link to the survey was distributed on a personal Facebook page, made available to 'friends'. The Facebook post encouraged friends and family to share the link with others to

obtain a larger sample. The link was emailed to a number of Cal Poly students, encouraging all to share the link if possible. The study was then emailed to professors at Cuesta Community College and Shasta College asking for their participation along with any form of distributing the link further. Once opened, the link directed each individual to the online survey and results were transferred onto a spreadsheet with no connection to email or personal information. All participants were anonymous and all participation was voluntary.

Independent Variables

Media consumption was measured using a simple ask and report method. Participants were asked to report how many hours they consumed of various types of media. Media options given include television series, non-series television (news and sports), movies, and other. Television series, non-series television, and movies were focused on primarily because of previous research done to show these types of media and their portrayals of lower class individuals.

All participants entered amounts for the three given media types while only some entered information in the 'other' box. In order to equally compare the amount of media consumption, only the reported numbers of television series, non-series television, and movies were used. The reported hours from each of these three genres was added to find a total number of media consumption hours per week. Three extreme outliers were removed from the data set in order to produce more statistically accurate results. Media was operationally defined as the total number of hours each individual reported consuming within these three categories. With the outliers removed, the mean for Total Media Consumption was 9.52 hours per week with a standard deviation of 6.87 hours.

Participants were then asked to check which movies they had seen from a list of movies that were related to education in low-income societies. 'Number of Films' was based on the number of movies participants had seen on a given list of movies (see Appendix). Movies were taken from Erin Ash's doctoral dissertation on Mass Communication and were chosen for themes revolving around education in lower income minority groups. The movies listed were; Freedom Writers, Slumdog Millionaire, The Blind Side, Coach Carter, Lean on Me, and Akeelah and the Bee. To test this measure for correlations with dependent variables, each participant was given a score from 0-6 based on the number of films they had checked as seen.

Dependent Variables

Beliefs about educational hardships in lower socioeconomic areas were measured using a scale based on the extent to which participants agreed or disagreed with various statements. Statements measured participants' adoption of stereotypes regarding low-income individuals, beliefs about the educational structure, policy stances, and reasoning for educational hardships in the lower class. These statements intended to measure whether the participant would attribute educational failure in the lower class to internal or external factors.

Agreement with stereotypes regarding low-income individuals and statements putting an individual at fault for educational failure, were measured as internal attributions. Agreement with statements arguing a need for reform in the educational system and statements supporting policy change were measured as external attributions. For examples of each type of statement see Appendix. Each participant was assigned an overall score based on the agreement level they gave to internal and external attributions. Answers were recoded so that a '1' on all statements signified an external attribution and a '5' signified an internal attribution. Each participant's responses were then added and divided by the number of statements (22) so their average score

reflected if they were more likely to attribute hardships internally or externally. Statements were grouped and proved as a reliable test of overall attribution tendency with a Cronbach's α of .802. A subcategory titled 'Total Policy' was developed using the mean value of all statements dealing with policy. Statements testing for policy were grouped and proved reliable with a Chronbach's α of .76. 'Total Value' was measured using the mean value of all statements regarding the value placed on education by members of the lower class (Chronbach's α of .69). 'Total Communication' represents the mean value of all statements measuring beliefs about communication abilities in the lower class (Chronbach's α of .69). A number of correlation tests were ran using these categories (see Table 1) and the following results were observed.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted that an increase in media consumption would be positively correlated to tendencies of internal attributions. To test this hypothesis, a test for correlation was conducted using IBM's SPSS software. The test for correlation showed no significant relationship between Total Media Consumption and Total Attribution ($r = .028, p = .799$). These results do not support the first hypothesis. However, a more significant relationship was found between Number of Films viewed and Total Attribution ($r = -.134, p = .223$). While this correlation was still not statistically significant, implications of the higher correlation can be made.

The second hypothesis predicted that an increase in media consumption would be negatively related to support for policy change regarding educational issues. This hypothesis is not supported since no statistically significant relationship was found between Total Media Consumption and Total Policy ($r = -.025, p = .818$). A stronger correlation was found between Number of Films and Total Policy. Although not statistically significant, given the sample size,

this relationship approaches significance and is the most significant relationship found ($r = -.191$, $p = .080$). The correlation between Total Policy and Number of Films shows that perhaps certain movies have the strongest impact on policy and attribution tendencies when compared to more generic forms of media. This relationship supports the idea that films with themes centered on educational hardships in the lower class, may impact support for educational policy. With a larger sample size and perhaps a larger number of movie choices, a relationship may have been found between these two variables. Table 1 shows results for correlation tests ran between the complete list of dependent and independent variables.

Table 1

Correlations Between Measures

Measure	Value	Attribution	Total Policy	Total Communication
Number of Films	- 0.007	- 0.134	- 0.191	0.030
Non-series TV	0.096	0.043	- 0.008	0.114
TV Series	- 0.090	- 0.090	0.002	- 0.032
Movies	0.027	0.092	0.026	0.021
Total Media Consumption	0.007	0.008	0.005	0.047

* Numbers represent Pearson Correlation (r value).

With multiple tests ran, the strongest correlations were between ‘Attribution’ and ‘Number of Films’ and ‘Total Policy’ and ‘Number of Films.

Discussion

Purpose and Findings

This study sought to point out real world consequences of media enforced stereotypes. The aim was to find a relationship between media consumption and beliefs and attitudes of

individuals. Furthermore, it aimed to show that media portrayals led to more negative internal attributions of educational hardships in the lower class. Although this study did not produce any statistically significant results, previous studies and communication theories suggest that the hypotheses have elements of validity. The relationship between Number of Films and Total Policy is an example of media's influence on the issue of education in the lower class. This relationship demonstrates the importance of the content of specific media and its impact on attitudes and beliefs.

Implications

As Cultivation Theory, Attribution Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Media Priming, Framing, and Stereotyping suggest, media has a real world impact on our everyday lives. The findings of this study cannot support the specific hypotheses with the given data. However, the limitations of this study make it difficult to conclude any solid implications. While no relationships were found statistically significant, we cannot say the general argument is undermined completely. It cannot be determined that there is no relationship between media and attitudes of educational hardships in the lower class. Because so much previous research would support the premise of the hypotheses, the lack of relationship can most likely be attributed to the limitations of the study.

The variable of Number of Films was not initially distinguished as a significant variable in either of my hypotheses. However, the most significant findings both included this variable. The implications of this may demonstrate the importance of content in media such as films. While people may be consuming various types of media at various consumption levels, perhaps a more significant aspect is the content of the variable.

This specific variable may have been most significant because the themes of the films were all centralized around educational hardships in the lower class. Each film depicted a member of the lower class struggling with education. *Blind Side* tells a story of a high school football player from a lower class family who struggles to earn grades high enough to play. *Slumdog Millionaire* tells of a boy learning the answers to a game show only through his life in the slums. *Freedom Writers* illustrates a teacher's struggles with encouraging her low-income students to participate in school assignments. The themes of these movies, and the relationships found, suggest that this particular survey may have been too broad and more significant findings may have been found if different variables were used.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study involves the collected sample. With a total of 88 participants, the sample size was decent but may not accurately capture or portray beliefs of most individuals. While the sample was completely voluntary and convenience based, it did not provide the most diverse range of participants. Most participants (97%) had some college education. Because this study deals specifically with educational hardships, this could be limiting due to the fact these participants have either made it through any hardships, or not experienced any. Furthermore, of the participants who revealed their annual income 3 (.03%) reported incomes that would qualify as within the poverty threshold of a 3-person family, according to the US Census Bureau. Because this survey dealt with beliefs about individuals in lower socioeconomic classes, participants may not have encountered these lifestyles and hardships, or may have been hesitant to make conclusions and explicitly relay their feelings.

The second limitation involves these explicit measures of attitudes. Because the stereotyping of lower class individuals is a sensitive topic, some individuals may not have felt

comfortable explicitly stating their opinions or beliefs about their attributions to educational hardships. The sensitivity of the topic and the explicit measuring tactics may have caused the results to be less significant than they could be in reality. Thirdly, the wording of the questions may have exacerbated the effects of the second limitation. Because the measurements were explicit and the statements involved strong stereotypes, people may have been even more reserved in their answers.

Another limitation involves the media that was measured. In today's society with media penetrating ever-growing aspects of our lives, measuring media consumption based on television and movies may have been outdated. Although it was not included in the findings, many participants reported a significantly higher amount of media consumption via Internet and mobile devices. If the survey had included questions asking about consumption of these types of media, the results may have looked different. However, because this media is so new and rapidly growing, there is little research that has been done specifically examining the impact of media on stereotypes of the lower class.

Finally, my findings may have been limited by the amount of time I had to collect findings and data, and type of distribution tactics I used to deliver my survey. Data was collected a week after distribution, limiting my sample size. A few participants responded after data had been analyzed and if results were collected for a longer period of time, a larger sample could have been collected. Furthermore, because no incentives were given, response to the survey was purely of good will or convenience. Accounting for these limitations and making appropriate changes is suggested for further research.

Future Research

In hopes of finding more significant results, future research can adjust, according to the limitations of this study. First and foremost, a sample should be collected with much more diverse participants from all socioeconomic classes and educational backgrounds. A larger and more random sample would hopefully produce more diverse and representative findings. Future research should not be limited to primarily college-aged students and should measure beliefs of individuals who have completed various levels of education.

More changes can be made to the type of study conducted and the means of measurement. Due to the importance of content, an *experiment* that allows for participant priming may produce more significant results and would allow for more substantial conclusions to be made. Furthermore, if possible, a test using implicit measures may produce more accurate results if sensitive topics are being studied. Finally, using incentives and allowing more time for responses would hopefully allow for different, more comprehensive results.

Because this study was limited to traditional media effects on stereotypes, a suggestion for future research may be to discover relationships in new media. With its use growing daily, new media has an endless number of new impacts on our social world. While some of the same theories (Cultivation Theory, Attribution Theory, etc.) may still be applied to new media, new theories have room for discovery and development. Creating these new theories and conducting research and experiments to support them would only allow for more contemporary and more applicable studies and findings. With media reaching more of our lives every day, its effects on society are continuously developing and growing further.

References

- Ash, E. (2013). *Emotional responses to savior films: Concealing privilege or appealing to our better selves?*. (Doctoral dissertation). Pennsylvania State University.
- Bernstein, Jared. "Education and Wealth." *Politics*. Huffington Post, 29 Apr 2013. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.
- Bullock, Heather E., Karen Fraser Wyche, and Wendy R. Williams. "Media Images Of The Poor." *Journal Of Social Issues* 57.2 (2001): 229. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.
- Clawson, Rosalee A., and Rakuya Trice. "Poverty As We Know It." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64.1 (2000): 53-64. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Nov. 2013.
- Coleman, Renita. "Race And Ethical Reasoning: The Importance Of Race To Journalistic Decision Making." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80.2 (2003): 295-310. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Nov. 2013.
- "Communication Studies." *College of Liberal Arts*. Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Web. 2 Dec 2013. <<http://www.coms.calpoly.edu/>>.
- Elliott, William. "The effects of economic instability on children's educational outcomes." *Children and Youth Services Review*. 35.3 (March 2013): pages 461-471. Web. 13 Feb. 2014. <<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.12.017>>.
- Festinger , Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. United States: Row, Peterson and Company, 1957. Web.
- Fritz, Heider. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1958. Web.

- Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli. "Living With Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process." Trans. Array 17-39. Print. <http://wiki.comres.org/pds/CultivationTheory/LivingWithTelevision_TheDynamicsoftheCultivationProcess.pdf>.
- Gilens, Martin. "Race And Poverty In America." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60.4 (1996): 515. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Nov. 2013.
- Gorski, Paul C. *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*. New York: Teachers College Columbia University, 2013. Web.
- Iyengar, Shanto, Donald R. Kinder, and Mark Peters. "Experimental Demonstrations of the "Not-so-Minimal" Consequences of Television News Programs." *American Political Science Review*. 76.4 (Dec. 1982): 848-858. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.
- Jeffres, Leo W., et al. "Media Influences On Public Perceptions Of Ethnic Groups, Generations, And Individuals." *Howard Journal Of Communications* 22.1 (2011): 101-121. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Nov. 2013.
- McLeod, Saul. "Cognitive Dissonance Theory." *Simply Psychology*. 2008. Web. 13 Feb 2014.
- McLeod, Saul. "Attribution Theory." *Simply Psychology*. 2010. Web. 13 Feb 2014.
- Moller, Stephanie. "Framing Class: Media Representations Of Wealth And Poverty In America." *Social Forces* 86.3 (2008): 1347-1349. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.
- Poverty data- poverty thresholds* . (2013). Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/>

- Pribesh, Shana, Karen Gavigan, and Gail Dickinson. "The Access Gap: Poverty and Characteristics Of School Library Media Centers." *Library Quarterly* 81.2 (2011): 143-160. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 7 Feb. 2014
- Rose, Max, and Frank R. Baumgartner. "Framing The Poor: Media Coverage And U.S. Poverty Policy, 1960-2008." *Policy Studies Journal* 41.1 (2013): 22-53. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 7 Feb. 2014.
- Smith, Ron. "Agenda-Setting, Priming, & Framing." *Strategic Planning for Public Relations*. Buffalo State College. New York, Buffalo. 2011. Lecture.
- Speak, Suzanne, and Graham Tipple. "Perceptions, Persecution And Pity: The Limitations Of Interventions For Homelessness In Developing Countries." *International Journal Of Urban & Regional Research* 30.1 (2006): 172-188. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Nov. 2013.
- Tagler, Michael J., and Catherine Cozzarelli. "Feelings Toward The Poor And Beliefs About The Causes Of Poverty: The Role Of Affective-Cognitive Consistency In Help-Giving." *Journal Of Psychology* 147.6 (2013): 517-539. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Feb. 2014.
- Tavernise, Sabrina. "Education Gap Grows Between Rich and Poor, Studies Say." *New York Times* 09 Feb 2012, Education. Web. 17 Feb. 2014.

Appendix

Media, Poverty, and Education

Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible.

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Other

Age

In numerals (must be 18 or older)

Highest level of education completed

- Some High School
- High School or equivalent
- Some college
- College graduate
- Some Graduate school
- Completed Graduate school

Name of school if currently attending

Annual family income (optional)

If a dependent student, use the combined income of your parents (in numerals).

Media, Poverty and Education

How many hours of each type of media do you consume per week?

Please use an estimate to the nearest number of hours in numerals.

Non-series Television

Such as News and Sports.

Television Series

Watched on TV or online, including Netflix, Hulu, AmazonPrime, etc.

Movies

Other

Please specify what form of media with number of hours.

Please mark which of the following movies you have seen

- Freedom Writers
- Slumdog Millionaire

The Blind Side
 Coach Carter
 Lean On Me
 Akeelah and the Bee

Media, Poverty and Education

Please indicate, on the scale provided, the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

Please understand that all of the following statements aim to measure your personal opinions and beliefs.

Individuals in higher socioeconomic classes prioritize education more than individuals in lower socioeconomic classes.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Governmental restructuring of the educational system would provide more of an equal opportunity to higher education for all individuals.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

People of lower socioeconomic status have a harder time communicating intellectually than those of higher socioeconomic status.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

People of lower socioeconomic status, tend to exert less effort in obtaining a college degree.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Hardships in the lives of the poor make it more difficult for them to pursue a college degree.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

People of lower socioeconomic status tend to be more linguistically deficient than upper or middle class individuals

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

All individuals have an equal opportunity to attend college but those in the lower class tend to not take advantage of these opportunities.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

The use of slang in the lower class can demonstrate a lack of value for education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Hardships with communicating professionally make it difficult for people of lower socioeconomic status to excel in education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

When given the same quality of education as people in higher socioeconomic classes, people in the lower class don't usually use it for further educational success.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

All individuals have the same access to the means needed to obtain a college degree.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Low test scores in schools with predominately low-income households demonstrate a lack of value for education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Unequal access to governmental funds hinders the ability of lower class citizens to gain a proper education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

People in lower socioeconomic classes are more likely to abuse illegal substances than people in

higher socioeconomic classes.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

The education system needs reform.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

The education system gives people of a higher socioeconomic status a better chance of succeeding in school.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Substance abuse leads to a higher rate of high-school dropouts in schools with predominately lower socioeconomic households.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

A person's economic status does not influence their educational success.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Only a select few individuals of lower socioeconomic status are motivated enough to be successful in education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Increased difficulty in education is often a result of an individual's lack of motivation.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Given more resources, people in lower socioeconomic classes would still rarely value education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Flaws in the education system usually make it difficult for people in lower socioeconomic

classes to succeed.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Lower class individuals tend to not use the opportunities they are given to succeed in school.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

If it weren't for excessive drug use, the lower class would be more successful in school.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

As citizens of a democracy, it is our duty to make sure all individuals have equal access to education.

1 2 3 4 5
Strongly disagree Strongly agree

Add item

Debriefing

The purpose of this study was to examine how media consumption affects people's attitudes toward the educational system in the lower class.

I hypothesized that increased media consumption would lead to viewers attributing educational hardships to internal factors of individuals in the lower class.

If you have any questions, comments, or would like the results of the study, please feel free to contact me at kburke02@calpoly.edu

Thanks so much for your participation!