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The media whiteness of Social Security and Medicare

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ABSTRACT

The mass media often represent black Americans in negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate ways. Scholars know much less about how the media characterize white citizens and the implications of these depictions for public opinion and public policy. In this research, we examine the whiteness of two popular social welfare programs—Social Security and Medicare. We argue that at least part of the popularity of these policies stems from their construction as programs serving white Americans. The media whiteness of these programs creates a positive depiction since many citizens perceive whites as hard-working, intelligent, and deserving of benefits. To examine the portrayal of Social Security and Medicare, we analyze media coverage of these programs in five news magazines between 2007 and 2017. We demonstrate that news magazines portray these well-liked social programs by overwhelmingly highlighting white beneficiaries. Further, the media often depict these white recipients in a sympathetic and positive manner. This is in sharp contrast to media coverage of poor people that disproportionately, inaccurately, and unsympathetically focuses on black citizens.

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Mass media; whiteness; racial politics; social welfare policy

Introduction

The mass media often represent black Americans in negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate ways. Social scientists have demonstrated, for example, that the media link blacks to crime, drugs, and violence (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Oliver 1994; Reeves and Campbell 1994). Further, several studies show that the media disproportionately represent blacks in coverage of poverty and welfare, even more so in unsympathetic stories on the poor (Clawson and Trice 2000; Gilens 1999; van Doorn 2015). Scholars know much less about the portrayal of white Americans in the media and have dedicated limited attention to the implications of these white images for public opinion and public policy.

Too often scholars equate the study of race with the study of blacks, and as a result, media representations of whites are not scrutinized in the same way as media representations of blacks. Whiteness goes unnoticed, unanalyzed, and unseen. Whiteness is invisible, universal, and normalized. As a consequence, political scientists have only recently grappled with the power of whiteness and white identity to shape political attitudes and behavior (Jardina 2014; Schildkraut 2017).

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In this research, we examine the whiteness of two popular social welfare programs—Social Security and Medicare. We argue that the media's portrayal of these programs as ones serving white recipients bolsters support for the policies. It is not simply the universal nature of these programs that lead to their popularity; it is the way in which the media wrap these programs in whiteness that boosts their appeal. The white recipients are portrayed as sympathetic and positive and therefore deserving of government assistance. This is in sharp contrast to the disproportionate focus on black Americans in media portrayals of poverty and welfare. The images of poor black citizens reinforce racial stereotypes of black laziness that in turn lowers white citizens' support for welfare programs serving the poor (Gilens 1999).

Our research is significant because it makes whiteness visible. Moreover, this study is important because it highlights the centrality of visual images in political communication (Grabe and Bucy 2009; Schill 2012). Scholars have long recognized the importance of visual images for conveying messages, yet they have dedicated much more attention to investigating media text than media images. Here we emphasize the power of white images to define and construct social welfare programs in a positive, sympathetic way.

Representations of race

The research on racialized media coverage tends to focus primarily on depictions of black Americans. Many studies show that blacks are portrayed regularly in negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate ways. For example, scholars have found that blacks are linked to crime, drugs, violence, and poverty in the media (Dixon and Linz 2000; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Gilens 1999; Oliver 1994; Reeves and Campbell 1994; Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau 1998). These findings are largely consistent across the literature, although a recent analysis of crime news by Dixon (2017) shows that local television news in Los Angeles has improved since the 1990s. Specifically, Dixon demonstrates the depiction of blacks as perpetrators, victims, and officers between 2008 and 2012 are comparable to reality as measured by crime reports and official records.

The most recent scholarship on media coverage of poverty shows the media continue to draw a clear connection between being poor and being African American. Studies of news magazines, television news, and college textbooks find that blacks are disproportionately, and often overwhelmingly, represented among the poor (Clawson 2002; Clawson and Hurst 2013; Clawson and Kegler 2000; Clawson and Trice 2000; Gilens 1999; van Doorn 2015). Moreover, blacks are even more prominent in the most negative and stereotypical stories on poverty, such as stories on welfare reform and pregnancy; the underclass; or urban problems and renewal (Clawson and Trice 2000; Gilens 1999). In addition, van Doorn illustrates that blacks are even more overrepresented during good economic times when people are more likely to attribute poverty to a lack of effort or laziness rather than structural barriers.

Images of blacks in the media, and the stereotypes they spawn, are not without consequence. A variety of research demonstrates their effects on public opinion (Gilliam et al. 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Iyengar 1990; Peffley, Shields, and Williams 1996). Gilens, for example, demonstrates that the "belief that black Americans lack commitment to the work ethic is central to whites' opposition to welfare" (Gilens 1999, 172). Similarly, Iyengar's (1990) experimental work on attributions of responsibility shows that subjects are

more likely to say black single mothers should take responsibility for their own plight compared to white single mothers.

Scholars have directed less attention to media portrayals of white Americans. The studies that focus on minority representation illustrate that whites are more likely than blacks to be shown as victims of crime or in pro-social roles as police officers and helpers (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Oliver 1994; Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau 1998). The recent Dixon article (2017) that shows improvement in coverage of blacks in crime stories also emphasizes that whites continue to be overrepresented as victims and officers, as the "good guys" in other words (also see Dixon and Linz 2000). Clawson and Hurst's (2013) analysis of news magazine coverage of the poor documents the only poor people shown working are white.

Research on advertising demonstrates that whites are particularly prominent in "ads for products that are luxurious, frivolous, and fantasy-related" (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 166). Entman and Rojecki argue that advertisers use white faces to hawk expensive goods because they want a "positive value transfer" to occur (2000, 166). That is, advertisers hope consumers' positive affect towards whites will spill over onto their products, leading them to spend prodigious amounts of money. In sum, although we have a limited number of studies on which to draw, the existing evidence suggests that media images of whites are much more positive and sympathetic than the typical representation of blacks.

Whiteness and the popularity of programs

Social Security and Medicare are two of the most popular social welfare programs in the United States (Baggette, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1995; Huddy, Jones, and Chard 2001; Jacobs and Shapiro 1998; Pew Research Center 2017). Citizens demonstrate strong support for these strands of the social safety net and hold recipients of the programs in high esteem. Recipients are viewed as worthy and deserving of government assistance (Cook and Barrett 1992; Schneider and Ingram 1993). The popularity of these programs has largely been attributed to their universalism (Skocpol 1995). The programs purportedly appeal to citizens' sense of fairness and desire for equitable treatment in contrast to means-tested or race-specific programs that are "group exclusive" (Sniderman et al. 1996, 35).

We put forth a different argument to explain the popularity of Social Security and Medicare.[1] We propose that the widespread support for these programs stems at least in part from their construction as programs serving white Americans. Given the demographic makeup of the elderly, the universal nature of Social Security and Medicare means that whites are by far the largest group of recipients. We suspect the media will accurately reflect the racial characteristics of recipients and as a result will firmly associate Social Security and Medicare with whiteness. By connecting whiteness with these programs, the media frame the policies positively.

It is a positive construction because many people perceive whites as hard working, intelligent, and peaceful, committed to strong families, and committed to fair and equal treatment of all groups in society.[2] As a result, the media emphasis on white recipients stimulates the popularity of the programs. Moreover, we expect that not only will journalists select white recipients to represent the programs, but that the depictions will be

sympathetic and compassionate, further perpetuating positive white stereotypes and the appeal of the programs. Thus in the same way that the connection of certain welfare programs with blacks diminishes their popularity (Gilens 1999), the association of whites with Social Security and Medicare boosts the attractiveness of these policies. In other words, just as welfare for the poor is "race coded" through its linkage with blacks, Social Security and Medicare are "race coded" through their association with whites, and therefore draw upon a deep reservoir of support.

Research design

To investigate media coverage of Social Security and Medicare, we analyzed portrayals of these two social welfare programs in mainstream news magazines that appeal to a broad audience. We examined every story on Social Security and Medicare between January 1, 2007, and December 31, 2017, in five news magazines: *Bloomberg Businessweek*,[3] *New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*.[4] These magazines all have a national readership and serve an audience who is better educated, wealthier, and older than the average American (Tree 2016). *Newsweek*, for example, touts itself as the magazine "of choice for the sought-after thought-leader audience."[5] Although all five magazines provide some economics-focused journalism, *Bloomberg Businessweek* differs in that its primary aim is reporting in-depth business and financial news.[6] As you will see below, *Bloomberg Businessweek* is the magazine most likely to report on Social Security and Medicare.

Using the online *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, we located all stories on the subject of Social Security and Medicare in the five news magazines.[7] There were 152 stories in total. We then identified those stories that included pictures of Social Security or Medicare recipients, family members of recipients, or citizens concerned about the future of these programs.[8] To be concise, we will simply refer to these people as Social Security and Medicare recipients. We did not code people in these pictures who were journalists, policymakers, health care professionals, or other individuals portrayed as experts on the topic.

In total, we identified and coded 53 people in 38 pictures in 30 stories. This constitutes the population of recipients pictured in stories on Social Security and Medicare in the five news magazines between 2007 and 2017. The extent of Social Security and Medicare portrayals varied across the five magazines ranging from the economics-oriented *Bloomberg Businessweek* running 10 stories with pictures of recipients and the *New York Times Magazine* carrying only one such story during the 11-year period. See Table 1 for the distribution of stories, stories with pictures of recipients, pictures, and recipients by magazine.

Table 1. The portrayal of Social Security and Medicare by magazine, 2007–2017.

	Bloomberg Businessweek	*New York Times Magazine*	*Newsweek*	*Time*	*U.S. News & World Report*	Total
Number of stories	63	10	17	38	24	152
Number of stories with pictures of recipients	10	1	6	4	9	30
Number of pictures of recipients	13	1	6	9	9	38
Number of recipients	21	1	8	13	10	53

In terms of stories by year, the most stories—seven—were carried in 2008. There were no stories in 2013. The modal number of stories per year was two. We documented key information about each article, including the date of publication, the story title, and the general topic of the story.

At the individual level, we coded the race/ethnicity, gender, and age of each recipient in these images. To analyze race/ethnicity, we coded whether an individual was white, black, Latino/a, Asian American, Native American, or don't know. To make that assessment, we used information from the caption of the picture as well as our understanding of how racial and ethnic groups are socially constructed and categorized in the U.S. context.[9] Because Americans commonly use skin tone, hair texture and style, and facial features to categorize individuals into racial and ethnic groups, we used those same markers to code the race/ethnicity of people pictured in these images.[10] We take this approach because we are interested in how Americans *perceive* race/ethnicity as they are processing visual cues in the media. We cannot and do not try to make any claims about how the individuals themselves identify in terms of race or ethnicity. We approach the coding of gender and age in the same way. We are measuring perceived gender, not the gender identity of the people pictured, and perceived age, not the individuals' actual age. We coded gender as male, female, or don't know and age as young (18 or under), middle-aged (19–64), or old (65 and over).

We collapsed our race/ethnicity variable into white, black, and other. As we will discuss below, the other category ends up consisting of only Latino/as. Asian American and Native American recipients were absent from media portrayals of Social Security and Medicare.

Both authors coded race/ethnicity, gender, and age of each recipient pictured in the stories. Using the percent agreement, we calculated the intercoder reliability. Of the 53 people coded, there were 3 disagreements on race, for an intercoder reliability of 94.4%. For both gender and age, there were four disagreements for each variable, for an intercoder reliability of 92.5%. In all cases, any disagreements were from a substantive category (i.e., White or Female) to "I don't know." We discussed each coding discrepancy and agreed upon the correct code to create the final data set.

To compare the magazine portrayal to the true characteristics of Social Security and Medicare recipients, we used data from the U.S. Social Security Administration (2007–2015). The Social Security Administration reports racial breakdowns in terms of white, black, American Indian, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian/other for Social Security and white, black, all other races, and unknown for Medicare. To facilitate comparison with our magazine data, we collapsed these data into three categories: white, black, and other. We used data from the Social Science Administration's Annual Statistical Supplement to calculate the average proportion for each group across a 9-year period (2007–2015) to come up with estimates of the true racial characteristics to compare with the magazine data (U.S. Social Security Administration 2007–2015).[11]

Research findings

Our analysis of these five news magazines between 2007 and 2017 demonstrates that white faces are overwhelmingly used to portray Social Security and Medicare recipients (Table 2). Fully 87% of the recipients pictured are white. Moreover, during this time period,

Table 2. The whiteness of Social Security and Medicare portrayals, 2007–2017.

	Whites	Blacks	Others
Social Security and Medicare Magazine recipients ($N = 52$)	87%	0%	13%
True Social Security Recipients	86%	9%	4%
True Medicare Recipients	84%	8%	7%
Poor People, 2009–2012 (Clawson and Hurst 2013)	29%	63%	8%

Source for true data: U.S. Social Security Administration. (2007–2015).
NOTE: Due to rounding, the percentages may not sum to 100%. We could not identify race for one individual pictured, so this analysis is based on the 52 recipients for which we were able to code race.

the news magazines depict *zero* blacks as recipients. Thirteen percent fall into the "other" category, and they are all Puerto Ricans pictured in one story on Medicare and Medicaid in the November 16–22, 2015, issue of *Bloomberg Businessweek*. The Puerto Ricans were not older individuals; they were middle-aged or children. Thus if we restrict our analysis to only those over 65, the recipients are 100% white.

We compare the magazine portrayal of Social Security and Medicare recipients to the reality of these programs by drawing on true data from the Social Security Administration (Table 2). We find that the magazine representation of whites is accurate with whites making up 86% of Social Security recipients and 84% of Medicare recipients. Thus the magazine portrayal of whites mirrors the proportion of whites among actual Social Security and Medicare recipients. In contrast, blacks make up 9% of Social Security recipients and 8% of Medicare recipients, whereas blacks are notably absent in the magazine portrayal of these popular social welfare programs. Because of the accuracy of the white representation and the complete lack of blacks, these news magazines create a world in which Social Security and Medicare are white programs. We argue this whiteness constructs these issues in a positive way given the favorable stereotypes many citizens have about white Americans.

In addition to the positivity of white images in and of themselves, the white recipients are often shown in favorable and sympathetic ways. White recipients are depicted engaged in recreational activities and portrayed with compassion. The images emphasize the deserving nature of these recipients, such as their work ethic as well as their medical needs and retirement lifestyle. In this representation of Social Security and Medicare, recipients are middle-class, white individuals who have worked their whole lives to earn the medical assistance and financial support these programs provide for their retirement. Many white images underscore this deservingness perspective and the possibility that cutting these programs will undermine vital and earned benefits.

For example, the portrayals in the article, "Fear and Loathing in Boca Over Budget Cuts" from *Bloomberg Businessweek's* July 25–31, 2011, issue demonstrate several of these key points. The first picture shows a white senior citizen on a motorized scooter in a recreational area with tennis courts in the background and a bicyclist in the foreground. The weather is pleasant, the flowers are blooming, and the senior citizen is quoted saying, "Social Security is one of the few … programs that actually work." The second picture shows the white owner of a bagel shop in his store, and he is quoted saying, "It's very sad, this idea that you can take away money from the elderly who've worked for 40 or 50 years." These images convey the argument that hardworking beneficiaries earned their Social Security benefits and these benefits allow industrious individuals to live a good life in retirement.

In another article, "Home of the Future," the backdrop is a Florida trailer park described as a "superb place to grow old in" for the residents who own their lots and mobile homes. This article from *Time* magazine's April 3, 2017, issue features two pictures of retired individuals at leisure. The first image is of a white, older man who is floating in a pool with a pink noodle, sunglasses, and a hat to keep off the sun. The second picture includes a white couple playing shuffleboard in a brightly lit recreational facility. These white images suggest a leisurely retirement for retirees who live in a location that caters to elderly well-being. With this positive depiction of aging, the media link Social Security and Medicare programs with caring for the elderly and providing for their happiness.

The noteworthy exception to this positive and sympathetic portrayal of Social Security and Medicare recipients is found in a November 16–22, 2015, *Bloomberg Businessweek* story titled "The Isle of Disenchantment." This article includes two photos and focuses on the federal government's attempts to address the debt crisis in Puerto Rico. One image shows Puerto Ricans with their backs to the camera and hands raised with a caption reading "protesting cuts in federal spending for the Island's Medicaid and Medicare programs." Another picture shows a single mother with two young daughters with clothes hanging on a clothesline in the background.

These images stand out for several reasons. First, the story is about Puerto Ricans upset about and protesting against cuts to Medicare and Medicaid. This is the only picture of protest during the 11-year period under examination. This contrasts with the more positive images of whites that dominate the coverage. Second, the image of the Puerto Rican single mom is consistent with racialized rhetoric used in discussions of welfare reform policies that undermine the social safety net (Hancock 2004). Third, this is a story about Medicare *and* Medicaid. This pattern of coverage implies that whiteness is reserved for Medicare alone, but people of color are appropriate representatives when government assistance for the poor is the issue at hand. In sum, these are the only pictures that portray non-whites, and these images are qualitatively different from the typical depictions of white Social Security and Medicare recipients.

Finally, to drive home our point about the whiteness of coverage of Social Security and Medicare recipients, we compare their portrayal with the depiction of poor people in the same five news magazines. Specifically, we compare our Social Security and Medicare data to a study of news magazine coverage of poor people pictured in stories on the "poor," "poverty," or "welfare."[12] The same coding procedures and rules were used for coding the poor people as were used for coding Social Security and Medicare recipients in this analysis. See the bottom row of Table 2.

Clawson and Hurst (2013) demonstrate that black faces are commonly used to portray poor people between 2009 and 2012 with 63% of the poor shown as black. This representation vastly overstates the proportion of blacks among the poor, nearly tripling the true proportion (22%). This pattern of coverage is fundamentally different from the glaring absence of blacks depicted among Social Security and Medicare recipients. Furthermore, the accurate representation of whites among Social Security and Medicare recipients is not reflected in the news magazine coverage of white poor people. The true proportion of whites among the poor is 44%, but only 29% of the poor are depicted as white between 2009 and 2012.

We also note that our analysis sheds light on one argument about what causes news magazines to overrepresent blacks among the poor. Gilens (1999) concluded that

journalists' subconscious stereotypes drive this pattern of coverage. Not surprisingly, journalists resisted the proposition that racist stereotypes may be driving their behavior.[13] During a discussion of Gilens's work on *CNN*'s Reliable Sources in 1997, journalists put forth an alternative explanation. They asserted that the media focus on blacks in their coverage of poverty because news bureaus are located in major metropolitan areas with large minority populations, and therefore blacks are simply convenient to cover. One of the commentators, Martin Schram, suggested it is easy for photographers to take pictures of people who are "three blocks away from the station" who just happen to be black.

If it were the case that the ease of photographing blacks in the areas immediately surrounding news headquarters drives the racialized coverage of poverty, then wouldn't we also expect blacks to be disproportionately represented in articles on Social Security and Medicare (and on every issue for that matter)? This is obviously not the case. Editors and journalists have no problem identifying whites to illustrate their stories on two popular social welfare programs all the while ignoring black Social Security and Medicare recipients at their doorstep.

Conclusion

In sum, news magazines between 2007 and 2017 put a white face on Social Security and Medicare. This racial portrayal of Social Security and Medicare recipients is quantitatively accurate to be sure, but it stands in sharp contrast to the depiction of poverty and welfare, which focuses disproportionately on black citizens. News magazines show white Social Security and Medicare recipients in positive or sympathetic ways, constructing a deserving image of whites leisurely enjoying their retirement, reaping the rewards of their hard-earned benefits, and receiving the medical assistance needed in their old age. This pattern of coverage is systematic. Journalists and editors select whites to represent Social Security and Medicare recipients, whereas they disproportionally select blacks to represent poor people.

By examining the visual images representing Social Security and Medicare in news magazines, we show these programs are steeped in whiteness and argue that this media construction boosts the popularity of these policies with the public. In future research, we intend to explore the power of these white images to shape attitudes toward Social Security and Medicare policies. This will be an especially important line of research as demographics of the United States change, and these programs serve fewer and fewer white Americans. Will elite opponents of government assistance try to associate these popular programs with people of color, and will the media's construction of these programs as white issues change in response? And if so, what will be the impact on public support for these programs?

We also plan to explore the causal direction of the relationship between white images and popular social welfare programs in future studies. Here we argue the media images are white and therefore lead to greater support for Social Security and Medicare. But perhaps it is the popularity of these programs that lead to the white images. Disentangling these effects would shed important light on the power, and perhaps limits, of the media to shape public discourse and perceptions of public policy. Many questions remain, but we hope our analysis of the media coverage of Social Security and Medicare draws

attention to the need for greater scrutiny of media coverage of white Americans and whiteness and its potential impact on public opinion and public policy.

Notes

1. Also see Winter (2006) who proposes that race is fundamental to support for Social Security. He argues that race influences Social Security attitudes because of the way in which a racial schema coincides with a social insurance frame linking Social Security to individual efforts.
2. Analysis of stereotypes of whites based on 2012 and 2016 data from the American National Election Studies. Analysis of perceptions of whites' commitment to strong families and fair and equal treatment based on data from the 2000 General Social Survey (Smith et al. *General Social Surveys, 1972–2016)*.
3. Note that *Bloomberg Businessweek* has had that title since 2010. In 2009, the magazine was called *Businessweek* (one word), and prior to that it was titled *Business Week* (two words). Here we will refer to the magazine as *Bloomberg Businessweek* since that is its current title.
4. Taken as a whole, these five magazines had a paid circulation of over 7 million during the time period under study: *Bloomberg Businessweek* reached 1,009,973 people; the *New York Times Magazine* had a circulation of 1,147,892; *Newsweek* had an audience of 1,528,081; *U.S. News & World Report* had a circulation of 1,269,260 in 2009, and *Time* had the largest readership with 3,032,581 subscribers (Alliance for Audited Media 2012, 2016; Association of Magazine Media 2009; New York Times Corporation 2015). *U.S. News & World Report* ended their traditional print magazine in 2010. See Matsa and Shearer (2015) for a general discussion of news magazine sales and circulation.
5. Newsweek Sales 2017. https://www.newsweek.com/sites/www.newsweek.com/files/newsweek_mediakit2017.pdf (accessed November 18, 2018).
6. Bloomberg Media Distribution. https://www.bloomberg.com/distribution/products/magazines/ (accessed November 18, 2018).
7. Specifically, we used these instructions to conduct the *Reader's Guide* search: "Do advanced search for 'social security' or Medicare as the SU. Click on Boolean/Phrase, Apply related words, and Apply equivalent subjects."
8. Approximately 20% (30/152) of the stories in these five magazines had pictures of recipients. See the top row of Table 1. Of the 8% of the stories on Social Security or Medicare that did not have pictures of recipients, some stories had no visual images at all, whereas others contained charts or pictures of non-recipients, such as politicians, experts, or doctors. We only coded visual images of recipients as defined in the text. Although stories with pictures of recipients make up only one-fifth of the total stories, we believe they are critical to examine because of the power of these visual images and because we have identified the population of such images in these stories.
9. For a short, but informative piece on the social construction of race, see Hodson (2016).
10. For more on the politics of appearance, see Brown (2014) who examines the ways in which skin tone and hair texture and style influence the experience of Black women state legislators.
11. The data we used to calculate the true characteristics of Social Security recipients are provided in Table 3.C7a of each year's Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin (U.S. Social Security Administration 2007–2015). The data we used to calculate the true characteristics of Medicare recipients are provided in Table 8.B4 of each year's Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin (U.S. Social Security Administration 2007–2015).
12. The poor/poverty/welfare search terms are not entirely parallel to the very specific policy search terms we use for Social Security and Medicare. Earlier research demonstrates that blacks are even more disproportionately represented in welfare-focused pictures than those on other more sympathetic topics (Gilens 1999, 128) and in stories on welfare compared to stories on the poor in general (van Doorn 2015, 154). Therefore, we do not think the differences in search terms undermine our argument.
13. "Who Put the Black Face on Poverty?" *CNN* Reliable Sources, 24 August 1997.

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