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# FRAMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR POLITICAL ISSUES: The Case of Poverty

Shanto Iyengar

How people think about poverty is shown to be dependent on how the issue is framed. When news media presentations frame poverty as a general outcome, responsibility for poverty is assigned to society-at-large; when news presentations frame poverty as a particular instance of a poor person, responsibility is assigned to the individual. Similar framing effects are documented in the 1986 General Social Survey where the amount of public assistance deemed appropriate for a poor family varies with the description of the family. In concluding, the implications of framing for the study of public opinion are considered.

Public opinion research rests on the presumption that beliefs, opinions, and attitudes are innate traits of individuals. Differences among individuals' life experiences, group memberships, psychic needs, utility functions, and personality types explain their political opinions. Since this paradigm represents an inherently *dispositional* view of opinion formation, researchers posit stability and consistency as the hallmarks of "true" opinions. Because opinions are thought to be intrinsic to individuals, unstable opinions must represent "nonattitudes" or other distortions of measurement (for illustrative research, see Achen, 1975; Zaller and Feldman, 1988).

There can be no denying the influence of dispositional factors on political opinion. However, circumstantial or contextual forces are equally relevant. Just as individual behavior is characterized by variability across situations (e.g., Mischel, 1968; Nisbett, 1980; Kenrick and Funder, 1988), so too are political opinions dependent on the particular circumstances in which these opinions arise.

An important class of circumstantial cues relates to the presentation or definition of the opinion object or stimulus. What psychologists call

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“framing”—the specific concepts and terms used to present choice or decision options—has been found to exert powerful effects on judgment and choice. When economic choices are described in terms of potential gains, individuals follow a risk-averting strategy; but when the equivalent choice is described in terms that suggest a potential loss, individuals follow a risk-seeking strategy (see Kahneman and Tversky, 1982, 1984). Framing effects occur in a variety of domains. For instance, physicians and patients alike were considerably less attracted to cancer surgery when the statistics describing the results of such surgery were presented in terms of *mortality* rather than *survival* rates (McNeil, Parker, Sox, and Tversky, 1982). Similarly, as Thaler has pointed out, it is no accident that the petroleum industry prefers to label the reduced price of gasoline for cash-paying customers a cash *discount* rather than a credit card *penalty* (for this and other examples of framing effects in consumer behavior, see Thaler, 1980).

The importance of framing effects on public opinion are clear. Political stimuli are inherently ambiguous; in matters of principle or fact, political issues are characterized by a multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives. As Lane’s pioneering studies showed (Lane, 1962), ordinary people express considerable uncertainty and even stress when describing their political views and they often offer what appear to be contradictory positions on related issues. More recently, researchers have begun to show that alterations to the wording and form of survey questions produce dramatic variations in answers (for an overview of question wording research, see Schuman and Presser, 1981). Thus, Americans are more tolerant of dissent when survey questions frame dissent as a general democratic right; they are significantly less tolerant of dissent when questions direct their attention to specific dissenting groups (see Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982). Similarly, the percentage of respondents favoring more generous federal assistance is markedly higher if the recipients are described as “poor people” rather than as “people on welfare” (Smith, 1987).

As is true with framing, question wording effects are not symptomatic of weakly held preferences or naive respondents. To the contrary, these effects emerge across a wide range of subject-matter sophistication and expertise (see Schuman and Presser, 1981; Achen, 1975; Kahneman and Tversky, 1984). As Kahneman and Tversky put it (1984, p. 223), “In their stubborn appeal, framing effects resemble perceptual illusions rather than computational errors.”

While there is as yet no well-developed theory of framing effects, it seems quite likely that these effects occur because the terms or “frames” embodied by a stimulus subtly direct attention to particular reference points or considerations. In most social judgment and question answering tasks, the number of relevant considerations is very large and certainly

outruns the cognitive capacity of humans. Which considerations will be taken into account and which will be ignored depends on their relative accessibility, that is, the ease with which they come to mind (for an overview of accessibility effects in social judgment, see Fiske and Taylor, 1984; for evidence concerning the role of accessibility effects in political judgment, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1986; Iyengar, 1989a).

In the area of public affairs, which considerations are more or less accessible depends heavily on prevailing patterns of news coverage. Sociological analyses of the news production process reveal that media coverage of public affairs is characterized by a limited number of dominant news frames (see Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978; Cohen, 1981). Television news, for instance, is an inherently "episodic" or event-oriented medium: Televised news reports focus on concrete acts or "live" events at the expense of general contextual material. Television coverage of the protests against the Vietnam War was, for instance, more likely to focus on specific demonstrations than on the policy issues that spawned the protests (Gitlin, 1980). A similar pattern has been noted in news coverage of nuclear energy (Gamson and Modigliani, 1986) and terrorism (Altheide, 1987); for both issues, ample news accounts of specific events are not matched by coverage of underlying historical, social, or economic antecedents.

In short, mass media news presentations loom as powerful vehicles for political framing effects. For virtually all Americans, political issues are defined primarily through news reports, and since news coverage is inevitably expressed in particular frames, the influence of the media on public opinion can be significant. Analogously, variations in the wording and arrangement of public opinion surveys can also serve to frame political issues. In this article, I focus on the issue of poverty. Using both an experimental design and secondary analysis of a national survey I will show that how television news stories and survey questions frame poverty significantly influences how people assign responsibility for poverty.

## THEMATIC VERSUS EPISODIC NEWS FRAMES

To identify the ways in which television news frames the issue of poverty, every network news story broadcast between 1981 and 1986 making reference to poverty, hunger, the homeless, welfare, food stamps, and other similar key words was identified and content analyzed. The objective of this search was to identify the frames in which television news embeds the issue of poverty.

A total of 191 stories were identified as relevant to poverty in the United States. These stories fell into two distinct categories. One set described poverty primarily as a societal or collective outcome while the other

described poverty in terms of particular victims, for example, poor people. In the *thematic* frame, the news might consist of information bearing on general trends (e.g., the poverty rate, the number of states experiencing significant increases in hunger, changes in the government's definition of poverty, etc.), or matters of public policy (the Reagan administration's proposals to curtail various social welfare programs, allegations of fraud in welfare programs, etc.). These are essentially background or "takeout" stories in which the object of the coverage is abstract and impersonal. In the *episodic* frame, by contrast, poverty is covered in terms of personal experience; the viewer is provided with a particular instance of an individual or family living under economic duress.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 shows the number of stories in which the dominant frame (defined as the frame receiving the most time within each story) was either thematic or episodic. With the exception of 1981, when news of the dramatic budget cuts proposed by the new administration outnumbered all other news items on poverty, the episodic frame was clearly dominant. In probabilistic terms, the typical viewer of network news over this period would have been nearly twice as likely to encounter news about a particular instance of a poor person than news about poverty as a collective outcome (for a more detailed examination of these data, see Iyengar and Lenart, 1989). From the perspective of television news, poverty is clearly an individual-level rather than a societal phenomenon.

How might these diverging frames influence how people assign responsibility for poverty? Prior psychological research demonstrates that

**TABLE 1. Thematic and Episodic Frames in Network Poverty Coverage, 1981-1986**

Year	Type of Coverage	
	Thematic Stories	Episodic Stories
1981	55 (12)	45 (10)
1982	24 (2)	75 (6)
1983	31 (12)	69 (27)
1984	45 (13)	55 (16)
1985	29 (10)	71 (24)
1986	28 (15)	72 (39)

Entries are percentages; numbers of stories are in parentheses.

questions of cause and treatment are ingrained in the way people think about responsibility (for illustrative discussions see Fincham and Jaspars, 1980; Shaver, 1985; Iyengar, 1989b). To be held responsible for some outcome is, in good measure, to be seen as a *cause* of the outcome. Moreover, the importance of causal attributions as attitudinal and even behavioral cues has been amply documented in the psychological literature (see Iyengar, 1989b, for a brief review). There is virtually no aspect of life in which attribution of causal responsibility does not significantly influence attitudes and behaviors.

When assigning responsibility for outcomes, people also consider the question of *control* or *treatment*.<sup>2</sup> Those held responsible (whether individuals or institutions) are those seen as empowered to control the outcome. While causal responsibility looks primarily to the past, treatment responsibility is essentially future-oriented and problem-solving in nature, that is, questions of treatment responsibility seek to establish what can be done to prevent recurrence of the outcome.

In an initial experimental study, it was found that causal responsibility for poverty was significantly influenced by media framing. When poverty was described in thematic terms, individuals assigned responsibility to societal factors—failed governmental programs, the political climate, economic conditions, and so forth. Conversely, when news coverage of poverty dwelled on particular instances of poor people, individuals were more apt to hold the poor causally responsible (these results are presented in Iyengar, 1987). This divergence in attribution of causal responsibility proved to be politically consequential because evaluations of President Reagan were significantly (and independently) lowered among individuals with a stronger sense of societal responsibility.

The research reported here was designed to replicate and elaborate upon this initial study. Specifically, I investigate the impact of thematic versus episodic news frames on perceptions of responsibility. I then show that the manner in which survey questions frame poverty significantly affects the amount of public assistance Americans deem appropriate for poor people. Finally, I assess the degree to which attributions of responsibility for poverty structure political attitudes.

## STUDY 1: MEDIA FRAMING EFFECTS

### Design

Residents of the Three Village area of Suffolk County (New York) responded to newspaper advertisements offering \$10 in return for participation in media research. This method of recruitment yielded a

reasonable approximation of the local community (as shown in the Appendix). When participants arrived at the Media Research Laboratory, they were given an instruction sheet in which the study was described as an investigation of "selective perception." They then completed an informed consent form and a short pretest questionnaire probing their personal background, media usage, level of political activity, and so on. Participants were then taken to one of several viewing rooms where they watched a twenty-minute videotape containing seven news stories. The tape was described as a representative sample of news stories aired during the past year. Typically, the viewing session was made up of two individuals since the advertisements encouraged prospective participants to bring along someone they knew.

The fourth story on the tape constituted the experimental manipulation; depending on the condition to which they were assigned (random assignment was used throughout), participants watched either a thematic or episodic (individual-victim) depiction of poverty. On completion of the videotape, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire (in separate rooms) that included various measures of their beliefs and opinions concerning poverty (and various other issues). Finally, participants were debriefed and paid.

Three separate conditions depicted a thematic frame: increased unemployment in the manufacturing sector, increases in the number of Americans meeting the government's definition of poverty, and a report on food emergencies (households requiring emergency food aid) across the nation. All three news stories were edited in advance so as to exclude any reference or glimpse of an individual victim of poverty.

The episodic manipulation was more elaborate. Participants either watched an unemployed male, an unmarried adult mother, an elderly widow, a young child, or a teenage mother described their economic difficulties. These five groups account for most Americans receiving public assistance (see Committee on Ways and Means, 1985). Within each of these five victim groups, the race of the individual was varied. Thus, the unemployed male was either black or white. The purpose here, of course, was to assess whether news stories describing particular instances of poverty in the U.S. evoke racial stereotypes that influence individuals' understanding of poverty.

In all individual-victim presentations, the general level of economic distress was held at a roughly uniform level. Thus, all the victims depicted in the news stories had access to modest housing, appeared reasonably well-clothed and healthy, and so forth. In short, the individual victims did not differ visibly in the severity of their poverty.

Finally, all thirteen conditions were characterized by an absence of

explicit information concerning the causes of poverty. Any segment in the original story suggesting some particular reason for increases in poverty nationwide or for the particular victim's present circumstances was deleted.

### Measures

Attributions of causal and treatment responsibility were elicited with open-ended survey questions. Specifically, individuals were asked, "In your opinion, what are the most important causes of poverty?" They were then asked, "If you were asked to prescribe ways to reduce poverty, what would you suggest?" Up to four separate responses were coded for each question.<sup>3</sup>

Causal responsibility was either assigned to the poor themselves or to general societal factors. Individual responsibility included the themes of character deficiencies and inadequate education. Societal responsibility encompassed the state of economic conditions and inadequate governmental/societal efforts. This last category included references to the actions of the Reagan administration, such as budgetary cuts in social welfare programs, as well as references to general institutional or cultural barriers to economic mobility, such as racial discrimination, Social Darwinism, and public apathy.<sup>4</sup>

Participants' treatment responses revealed the same individualistic-societal continuum. Responsibility was assigned either to the victim or to society-at-large. Approximately one-third of all treatment responses were directed to actions by the poor, such as hard work and the acquisition of education/skills, while the remaining responses pointed to actions by government or society in general, such as improved economic conditions, lowered institutional barriers to economic mobility, and strengthened or improved governmental efforts to assist the poor.

### Avoiding Demand Characteristics

In any experimental procedure it is imperative that the researcher guard against the effects of demand characteristics—cues in the experimental situation or procedure that suggest to participants what is expected of them (see Orne, 1962). Several such precautions were undertaken here including a plausible cover story that disguised the true intent of the study. In addition, the treatment stories were compiled using studio-quality editing equipment so that participants could not have been aware of the alterations to the news reports. Finally, the aura of the research laboratory was reduced by inviting participants to come in pairs with a spouse, friend, or colleague. The average session size of two means that typically participants watched the videotape with someone they knew. The concern over experimental



demand also dictated the choice of a posttest-only design. Had participants been asked questions about causal and treatment responsibility for poverty both before and after watching the videotape, they would have had a clear cue as to the researcher's intent.

## Results

I computed the proportion of responses falling into the societal and individual response categories of causal and treatment responsibility. The use of a standardized measure neutralized possible individual differences in verbal skills or loquacity. The three separate thematic frames proved equivalent; there were no significant differences between them in any of the individual response categories. These three conditions were therefore pooled. The differences in causal and treatment responsibility between the pooled thematic frame and the episodic conditions are summarized in Table 2.

Participants were generally least apt to hold individuals causally responsible and most apt to consider society responsible when poverty was framed thematically. The mean index of societal causal responsibility reached .70 in the thematic frame, which differed significantly from the elderly widow, adult mother, and teen mother frames. In addition, there were significant differences among the episodic, individual-victim conditions. The single-mother frames elicited a particularly high level of individual causal responsibility and differed significantly from the poor child

**TABLE 2. Framing Effects on Causal and Treatment Responsibility for Poverty**

	Condition					
	Thematic Coverage (1)	Children (2)	Unem-ployed Worker (3)	Elderly Widow (4)	Adult Mother (5)	Single Mother (6)
Societal causal responsibility	.70 <sup>*6, ***5</sup>	.64 <sup>*5</sup>	.67 <sup>+6, **5</sup>	.56	.49	.51
Individual causal responsibility	.28 <sup>**5, 6</sup>	.33	.31 <sup>+5, *6</sup>	.39	.43	.46
Societal treatment responsibility	.66 <sup>+6, ***5</sup>	.62 <sup>*5</sup>	.61 <sup>*5</sup>	.58	.46	.52
Individual treatment responsibility	.26 <sup>**5, ***6</sup>	.32 <sup>*6</sup>	.26 <sup>**5, 6</sup>	.35	.43	.47
N of subject	49	43	38	39	49	26

\*\*\* significantly different from indicated conditions at .01 level by two-tailed *t* test; \*\* different at .05 level; \* different at .10 level; + different at .15 level, e.g., condition 1 differs from conditions 5 and 6 at the .05 level in individual causal responsibility.

and unemployed man frames where societal causes outnumbered individual causes by nearly 2:1.

Virtually identical framing effects were obtained in the area of treatment responsibility. In general, participants in all conditions were as willing to assign society the responsibility for treating poverty as they were to consider society causally responsible. The two single-mother conditions, however, pulled the highest proportion of individual treatment responses and the lowest proportion of societal treatment responses. In both respects the single-mother frames deviated significantly from the thematic frame. The single-mother frames also differed, though to a lesser degree, from the poor child and unemployed man frames.

Combining the results for causal and treatment responsibility, three patterns emerge. The thematic frame elicits what Brickman and his associates have termed the "medical" model of responsibility (Brickman et al., 1982): Poor people are seen as neither responsible for causing nor treating their predicament. Responsibility is assigned solely to society or government. Among the individual-victim frames, poor children and unemployed men also tend to fit this pattern. Single mothers elicit a more divided sense of responsibility featuring society and individuals equally. Finally, elderly widows elicit a relatively high degree of individual causal responsibility and a high level of societal treatment responsibility. In Brickman's scheme this particular combination is referred to as the "enlightenment" model since individuals are seen as causal agents but are absolved of treatment responsibility.

Turning to the effects of the victim's race on viewers' beliefs about responsibility, the indices of societal and individual causal and treatment responsibility were subject to a five-by-two analysis of variance (corresponding to the five victim types and two races). Table 3 presents the relevant results.<sup>5</sup>

Race provided only a weak cue when individuals considered the question of causal responsibility. Both the main effects of race were nonsignificant, but there were faint traces of racial differences for the index of societal causal responsibility ( $F = 1.29$ ;  $p < .25$ ).

The effects of race were more pronounced in the area of treatment responsibility. Irrespective of condition, black poor people elicited more frequent references to individual responsibility ( $F < .05$ ) and less frequent references to societal responsibility ( $F < .10$ ). Within this general pattern of differences, race was most prominent in the adult single-mother frame; in comparison to the white mother, the black mother elicited twice the proportion of individual treatment responses.

All told, the evidence suggests that beliefs about responsibility for poverty are influenced by the race of the individual depicted in the news

**TABLE 3. Individual-Victim and Racial Differences in Causal and Treatment Responsibility**

	Condition										
	Children		Unem- ployed Worker		Elderly Widow		Adult Mother		Single Mother		
	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	W	B	
Societal causal responsibility	.66	.62	.75	.62	.54	.59	.57	.45	.58	.50	
											<i>F</i> victim n.s. <i>F</i> race n.s. <i>F</i> victim × race n.s.
Individual causal responsibility	.30	.37	.25	.37	.36	.40	.44	.43	.43	.49	
											<i>F</i> victim n.s. <i>F</i> race n.s. <i>F</i> victim × race n.s.
Societal treatment responsibility	.65	.59	.71	.51	.55	.59	.57	.40	.57	.48	
											<i>F</i> victim n.s. <i>F</i> race 2.86 < .10 <i>F</i> victim × race n.s.
Individual treatment responsibility	.22	.41	.23	.39	.34	.35	.26	.52	.43	.51	
											<i>F</i> victim 1.69 < .15 <i>F</i> race 5.91 < .05 <i>F</i> victim × race n.s.
<i>N</i> of subjects	24	19	20	18	20	19	30	19	12	14	

W = white; B = black; n.s. = nonsignificant.

reports. Poor blacks are only marginally more likely than poor whites to be seen as causal agents rather than as victims of forces beyond their control. The degree to which societal intervention is considered an appropriate remedy for poverty, however, is significantly higher when the poor person depicted is white whereas the responsibility for treating poverty is assigned to the poor person when the person depicted is black.

To summarize, what people take to be the causes and cures of poverty depends significantly on the manner in which television news presentations frame the issue. When poverty is defined as a general phenomenon, responsibility is assigned quite differently than when poverty is defined as a specific instance of a poor person. People hold government responsible to a greater degree when the media frame is thematic rather than episodic. These results suggest that the well-documented tendency of Americans to consider poor people responsible for poverty (see Feagin, 1975; Goodban, 1981) may be due

not only to dominant cultural values (e.g., individualism, self-reliance, etc.) but also to news coverage of poverty in which images of poor people predominate.

## STUDY 2: POVERTY FRAMES IN THE 1986 GSS

### Design

As part of the 1986 General Social Survey, the National Opinion Research Center included a vignette about a family receiving public assistance. The vignette provided a capsule description of the family and was varied along several dimensions. That is, depending on the particular version, the number of children in the family, the marital status of the mother, the employment status of the parents, and several other characteristics were altered (for a detailed description of these characteristics, see NORC, 1987). Each respondent in the GSS was given seven different vignettes.

After respondents read each vignette, they were asked, "What should this family's weekly income be? Include both the amount of money already available from sources other than government and any public assistance support you think this family should get. Remember that changes in the amounts spent on public assistance programs could lead to changes in the taxes you pay." Respondents used a line chart with \$50 increments that ranged from 0 to \$600 to indicate what the family's weekly income should be. For each vignette, the line chart included two markers: One was fixed at \$400 and labeled "average U.S. family income"; the second varied from \$50 to \$300 and was labeled "amount already received by this family." The amount of financial assistance respondents considered appropriate can be taken as a rough indicator of the degree of ascribed governmental treatment responsibility for poverty.

### Results

In order to assess the impact of the vignette manipulations in the amount of weekly assistance "awarded" to the family, the seven vignettes were "stacked," that is, responses to each vignette were treated as separate respondents. This procedure effectively multiplied the sample size by seven since each respondent completed seven vignettes. The vignette data were then merged with the regular GSS data, thus permitting investigation of the degree to which any framing effects exerted by the vignette descriptions were independent of respondents' socioeconomic status, political ideology, and other potential antecedents of their beliefs (for a more detailed description of the stacking and merging procedure, see NORC, 1987). Specifically, the equation for predicating the amount of weekly public assistance respondents felt the family should

receive included (in addition to the various characteristics manipulated in the vignettes) respondents' level of education, sex, occupation, race, attitudes toward welfare, party identification, liberal-conservative orientation, and political involvement. The framing effects are thus independent of these antecedent factors.<sup>6</sup> The regression coefficients estimating the impact of the vignette manipulations are shown in Table 4.

Several characteristics of the family proved to be significant determinants of the level of public assistance deemed appropriate by GSS respondents. The most important piece of information conveyed in the vignette was the family's current level of income, which respondents tended to use as an anchor for determining the amount of public assistance. In effect, respondents used current income as indicative of the appropriate level of assistance; the higher the level of current income, the higher the amount of assistance considered appropriate.

In addition to the family's current income, three other general

**TABLE 4. Framing Effects in GSS Vignette Study\***

Dimension	Impact on \$ Amount of Assistance
Number of children	6.19 (.40)
Current weekly income	33.29 (.97)
Father physically disabled	23.27 (2.73)
Father unemployed/looking for work	9.18 (2.72)
Father unemployed/not looking for work	-9.31 (2.69)
Mother unemployed/looking for work	6.50 (3.04)
Mother unemployed/not looking for work	-9.09 (2.98)
Mother unemployed/not looking—no transportation	-9.47 (3.05)
Mother unemployed/not looking—low wages	-18.25 (3.04)
Mother's education/low	4.31 (2.53)
Mother's education/high	-8.78 (2.56)
Adjusted $R^2$	.20
N	9555

\* Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Effects of control variables are not shown.

dimensions portrayed in the vignettes proved significant in influencing the degree of governmental responsibility. The first was *economic need*: The greater the number of dependent children, the greater the amount of assistance. Similarly, if the male parent was physically disabled, the level of aid was boosted considerably (by \$23).

The second dimension was *motivation*, particularly the desire to work. Depending on whether the father was described as either looking or not looking for employment, the swing in the weekly assistance awarded was \$18. For the mother, the same difference was \$17.

The vignettes incorporated a more detailed set of categories describing the economic situation of the mother. In addition to “unemployed, looking” and “unemployed, not looking,” other categories provided respondents with a specific reason for the mother’s not seeking employment. These included the cost of child care, lack of transportation, and lack of jobs that pay more than the minimum wage. Mothers who chose not to work because of transportation problems were penalized by \$9 per week while mothers who refused to work for the minimum wage were penalized \$18 per week. When the reason cited was the cost of child care, respondents did not penalize the mother for not seeking work.

It is interesting to note that when the vignette provided *no explanation* for the mother’s not seeking work, respondents reduced the amount of assistance by as much as when a specific reason was given. This reduction suggests that respondents inferred a “worst case” scenario when informed that the mother was not seeking employment.

In general, the effects of the mother’s economic situation were primarily adverse. That is, with the exception of the “looking for work” condition, all other significant effects served to reduce the amount of assistance deemed appropriate. Respondents did not see fit to “reward” mothers who worked either part-time or full-time. This finding is striking since the family’s current income was known and respondents could not, therefore, have inferred that working mothers were financially better off or less in need.

The mother’s level of education also served as an influential cue: College graduates were granted less whereas mothers with a grade-school education were granted more. Respondents may have felt that a college degree represents significant employment skills and that a college graduate on welfare is thus particularly lacking in motivation or initiative.

Finally, respondents were influenced by indicators of *moral behavior*. The vignettes varied the marital status of the parents. The categories included “parents married,” “mother divorced,” and “mother never married.” This last category proved to be a significant cue: Unwed mothers (who make up a disproportionate share of the population receiving public welfare) were awarded a somewhat smaller level of assistance. Apparently, respondents considered

conformity with conventional morality to be relevant in determining the level of welfare assistance to be received by the family.

In short, several of the vignette manipulations exerted independent effects on beliefs concerning the appropriate level of public assistance to be granted to poor people. When the survey description of a poor family raised the perceived level of economic need, the level of assistance was increased; when the descriptions contained cues suggesting that poor people are somehow lacking in motivation or morality, the amount of assistance was decreased.

### ATTITUDINAL CONSEQUENCES OF CAUSAL AND TREATMENT RESPONSIBILITY

That people are sensitive to framing when they assign responsibility may be of little consequence if attributions of causal and treatment responsibility exist in a vacuum. To the degree that these attributions prove contagious, however, the framing effects documented here may be of considerable significance. In the final phase of the analysis, the extent to which attributions of responsibility for poverty serve as cues for a variety of opinions and attitudes is considered.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. I first assess the degree to which attributions of responsibility influence poverty-related attitudes and opinions. These include preferences concerning government spending on defense and social services, evaluations of President Reagan's performance concerning poverty and the federal budget, and evaluations of business leaders' contributions to easing poverty. In effect, this stage of the analysis indicates the degree to which issue responsibility attribution is a *domain-specific* attitude cue. I then assess the contributions of causal and treatment responsibility to more general evaluations of government. In effect, this stage of the analysis will indicate how well attribution of responsibility performs as a *global* attitude cue.<sup>7</sup>

The equation for predicting each of these attitudes (OLS estimation was used in all cases) also included measures of party identification, liberal-conservative placement, and the respondent's race and level of education so as to incorporate partisan, ideological, and socioeconomic differences in public opinion.<sup>8</sup> The estimated effects of treatment and causal responsibility are shown in Table 5.

Attributions of causal responsibility were clearly powerful domain-specific cues. Evaluation of business leaders' and President Reagan's issue performance and preferences on government spending for defense and social welfare all were contingent on causal responsibility. When society was causally implicated, evaluations of issue performance were more negative, and individuals opposed defense spending and favored spending on social

TABLE 5. Responsibility for Poverty as a Domain-Specific Opinion Cue

	Issue Performance Evaluations			Govt. Spending Preferences	
	Reagan/ Budget	Reagan/ Poverty	Business Leaders	Defense	Social Services
Index of causal responsibility	-.25*** (.10)	-.41*** (.07)	-.18** (.14)	-.51*** (.14)	.41*** (.15)
Index of treatment responsibility	-.17* (.10)			-.24* (.13)	.26* (.14)
Liberals	-.49*** (.17)			-.51** (.27)	
Conservatives		.32** (.16)		.66** (.31)	
Democrats					.35+ (.24)
Republicans	.55*** (.16)	.65*** (.14)	.27** (.13)	.45* (.26)	
Information			.12** (.06)		
N	223	226	220	225	234

Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients (OLS) with standard errors given in parentheses; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$ ; +  $p < .15$ ; blank entries indicate nonsignificant coefficients.

services. In fact, the index of causal responsibility for poverty was the only antecedent factor to exert significant effects on all five poverty opinions.

Treatment responsibility proved less influential and exerted marginally significant effects in three of the five domain-specific tests. The more societal individuals' view of treatment responsibility, the more critical their evaluations of the president's budget performance, the greater their opposition to defense spending, and the greater their support for social welfare spending.

Partisanship and liberal-conservative orientation also provided strong cues for poverty opinions. Republicans and Conservatives viewed the president's issue performance positively while Liberals (but not Democrats) viewed his performance more negatively. A similar division prevailed for defense spending preferences. Finally, factual knowledge about poverty was generally unrelated to individuals' poverty opinions. In summary, attributions of cause and treatment are potent domain-specific opinion cues. Individuals' opinions toward poverty differ significantly depending on how they assign causal and treatment responsibility for the issue.<sup>9</sup>

To what degree do attributions of responsibility for poverty influence general evaluations of government? This test is more stringent of the political significance of framing effects since it requires individuals to extend



their reasoning about the causes and treatments of national issues beyond the topical domain of these issues. Respondents were asked to indicate their assessments of the president's overall performance, his competence, and his trustworthiness.<sup>10</sup> In addition, respondents indicated the degree to which they considered public officials and institutions responsive to popular will.<sup>11</sup> Table 6 presents the appropriate results.

Causal responsibility for poverty did provide an important cue for evaluations of President Reagan. Societal responsibility induced a more critical assessment of Reagan's overall performance, competence, and trustworthiness. The effects of causal responsibility on evaluations of governmental responsiveness were also robust. Beliefs about treatment responsibility for poverty, however, dissipated entirely as attitude cues. The index of societal treatment responsibility provided no independent impetus whatsoever to general evaluations of President Reagan or governmental institutions. Partisanship and political ideology were the paramount cues for evaluations of the president with Republicans and Conservatives viewing the president most positively.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experimental and survey evidence together demonstrate clearly that beliefs about who or what is responsible for poverty vary considerably,

**TABLE 6. Responsibility for Poverty as a General Opinion Cue**

	Evaluations of the President			
	Overall Performance	Competence	Integrity	Government Responsiveness
Societal causal responsibility	-.41*** (.10)	-.33*** (.12)	-.49*** (.14)	-.40** (.17)
Societal treatment responsibility				
Liberals	-.45*** (.20)	-.97*** (.25)	-.54** (.27)	
Conservatives	.45* (.20)	.42+ (.26)	.68** (.28)	.75** (.36)
Democrats				
Republicans	.70*** (.16)	.70*** (.21)	1.13*** (.25)	
Information				.19* (.12)
N	238	215	198	204

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors given in parentheses; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*  $p < .10$ ; +  $p < .15$ .

depending on how poverty is framed. In the case of television news coverage, the thematic frame engenders a stronger sense of societal responsibility, whereas the episodic frame engenders a stronger sense of individual responsibility. In the case of survey questions, inclusion or exclusion of particular individuating information produces significant changes in the amount of governmental assistance respondents are willing to award to poor people.

All told, these results suggest that the context in which political issues appear is critical to how people think about these issues. When poverty is expressed as a collective outcome, it is understood quite differently than when it appears in the form of a specific poor person. Similarly, news coverage of different instances of poor people or reference to different personal traits and behaviors in survey questionnaires has the effect of raising or lowering the degree to which Americans hold government responsible for assisting the poor.

These results are especially striking given that poverty is a familiar issue that is closely intertwined with mainstream values such as self-reliance, the work ethic, and related themes (Feldman, 1983; McCloskey and Zaller, 1984). American culture thus provides ample cues concerning responsibility for poverty (see Kluegel and Smith, 1986; McCloskey and Zaller, 1984). That framing effects can emerge in the face of such long-term learning influences is indeed striking.

Race appears to be a meaningful contextual cue when Americans think about poverty. (It is indeed unfortunate that NORC saw fit not to vary the race of the poor family in their vignette design.) Our sample of white, middle-class Americans was sensitive to the color of a poor person's skin. When the poor person was white, causal and treatment responsibility for poverty were predominantly societal; when the poor person was black, causal and treatment responsibility were more individual. The fact that race was relevant does not imply that participants were overtly anti-black. If this were the case, the racial differences should have been consistent across the differential individual victims. That the observed racial differences fluctuated with the particular victim suggests that race more effectively evoked stored knowledge concerning responsibility for poverty when it was paired with particular demographic categories. The particular combination of race, gender, age, and marital status (e.g., black adult single mothers) was particularly evocative of individual responsibility. This particular demographic combination represents the largest segment of poor people in the U.S. (see Committee on Ways and Means, 1985). In this sense, the most "realistic" individual-victim frame has the most inhibiting effect on societal conceptions of responsibility.

In providing our participants with stories involving black victims of poverty, it is possible that we may have unintentionally provided an

additional frame, namely, racial inequality. Watching poor blacks may have prompted some participants to ponder explanations and cures of racial inequality rather than poverty. Research by Sniderman and others (Sniderman and Hagen, 1985; Apostle, Glock, Piazza, and Suelzle, 1983) has shown that the most favored explanation of racial inequality is individualist in nature: Blacks and minorities are seen as exerting insufficient effort to succeed. It is only a small conceptual leap from attributing racial inequality to individual factors to viewing poverty in similar terms.

Like race, a poor person's gender also appears to activate a more individual and less societal conception of responsibility for poverty. It is not possible to determine from the experimental design that is a gender per se that is the critical cue since viewers were not given information concerning an unemployed woman or a male retiree. What the evidence indicates is that single mothers are seen as particularly blameworthy and less deserving of governmental support.

There are important political consequences to the fact that individuals' beliefs about who or what is responsible for poverty are susceptible to framing effects. Societal conceptions of responsibility are associated with a less sanguine view of political leadership and the political process and with greater support for governmental social welfare programs. These results thus convey significant policy implications. To the degree that individuals hold society responsible for poverty, they favor active governmental efforts to assist the poor. Yet the national debate over social welfare policy has traditionally been formulated in terms of specific beneficiary groups such as children, women, minorities, or the disabled. The results reported here suggest that framing welfare policy in terms of particular beneficiary groups will weaken rather than strengthen public support for welfare. More generally, as William Gamson has argued (Gamson and Modigliani, 1986), the framing of political issues is a powerful form of social control.

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## NOTES

1. Stories were coded as either thematic or episodic depending on the amount of space devoted to individual victims or general/abstract information in the transcribed abstracts of the new stories. As such, we do not have a precise count of the amount of actual air time devoted to individual victims. In the case of CBS News, however, each story was viewed and the amount of news time devoted to thematic and episodic coverage was tabulated. The amount of time and the number of stories corresponded closely. (For additional details concerning these data, see Iyengar and Lenart, 1989).

2. The terms *control* and *treatment responsibility* are used synonymously in the psychological literature. I will use the latter from this point on.
3. Both sets of open-ended questions were coded independently by two coders. The agreement level exceeded 85% for both causal and treatment responsibility. The use of open-ended questions to assess beliefs about responsibility is warranted on several grounds. First, they are relatively obtrusive. Second, there is little prior evidence on which to construct rating-type items. Finally, there is evidence in the attribution literature suggesting the superiority of open-ended over fixed-choice measures of causal responsibility (see Russell, McAuley, and Jerico, 1987).
4. For essentially similar distributions of causal responsibility using closed-ended indicators and national samples, see Feagin, 1975; Goodban, 1981; Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Lewis and Schneider, 1985).
5. Random assignment generally proved successful in nullifying compositional differences among the conditions. Participants in the thirteen separate conditions did not visibly differ in political ideology, partisanship, indicators of political interest, or the total number of causal and treatment responses. The only exception concerned education where participants in the poor child/black condition were visibly more educated whereas participants in the elderly widow/white condition were visibly less educated than other participants. The race manipulation is therefore somewhat confounded with education. This infraction is relatively minor, however, since education is only weakly correlated with attribution of responsibility and the direction of the correlation is in the opposite direction to that of the racial differences. If anything, therefore, this one failure of random assignment works against the observed experimental differences.
6. The demographic controls included race, occupation, education, size of the town and the region in which the respondent grew up, whether the respondent was born abroad, whether the respondent had ever received welfare assistance, and the amount of daily television viewing. Attitudinal control variables included party identification, liberal-conservative placement, attitudes toward equality, a composite index of attitudes toward the effectiveness of welfare, respondent's judgment concerning the smallest amount of money needed to "get along" in his/her community, and respondents' level of political participation.
7. Composite indices of societal causal and treatment responsibility were computed by subtracting the proportion of individual responses from the proportion of societal responses.
8. Party identification was measured by asking participants, "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?" Participants were also asked, "Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be liberal or conservative on political issues?" A five-point scale was provided that ranged from strongly liberal to strongly conservative. Political information was measured using three questions concerning the national poverty rate, specific welfare programs, and the groups most likely to be poor. The coefficients for education and race are not shown in the table because their effects were irregular.
9. Tables 5 and 6 present ols estimates, thus ignoring problems of simultaneity. I do not mean to imply that partisan attitudes such as evaluations of President Reagan do not influence attributions of responsibility, but rather that the latter are independent cues. There is experimental evidence to bolster the decision to consider issue responsibility an exogenous variable. If the criterion attitudes are broken down into the thematic and episodic conditions, the pattern of differences closely resembles the results obtained for causal and treatment responsibility. For instance, in comparison to the pooled episodic conditions, participants in the pooled thematic condition were significantly less approving of President Reagan and were also significantly less efficacious.
10. Evaluations of Reagan's overall performance were gauged with a five-point scale that ranged from "very good" to "very poor." Assessments of his competence and trustworthiness were measured with a battery of trait ratings. In the case of competence, respondents were asked

to rate how well (using four response options that ranged from "extremely well" to "not well at all") the traits "knowledgeable," "hard working," "intelligent," and "experienced" described Mr. Reagan. Responses were dichotomized and summed. The average intercorrelation ( $r$ ) of the four individual items was .68. The trait terms making up the trustworthiness index included "fair," "compassionate," "honest," and "sympathetic." The average interitem correlation for this set was .48.

11. The items (agree, disagree) used to gauge perceptions of institutional responsiveness were:
  1. Generally speaking, those we elect to Congress lose touch with the people pretty quickly.
  2. Public officials don't care much about what people like me to think.
  3. The federal government is run for the benefit of a few special interests without regard for ordinary people.

Participants indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with the above items. The average interitem correlation ( $r$ ) was .38.

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**APPENDIX. Demographic Profile of Suffolk County Sample (in percentages, except age)**

	Study Participants	1980 NES Sample	1980 Suffolk County
Female	60	57	51
Nonwhite	9	13	8
Median age	33	41	30
High school education	39	63	64
Some college	30	20	18
College graduates	31	17	18
Employed full-time	72	56	58
Unemployed	7	8	6
Retired	5	13	*
Housewives	8	18	36
Students	8	3	*
Blue collar	24	37	27
White collar	50	31	48
Professional	26	22	26
Protestant	41	63	*
Catholic	45	23	*
Jewish	14	3	*
Voted in last presidential election	74	62	*
Republican	26	22	37
Democrat	32	41	23
Independent	29	24	23

\* Not available; Suffolk County data provided by Long Island Regional Planning Board. For purposes of assessing the representativeness of the Suffolk County data, the demographic and political profiles of study participants are compared to respondents in the 1980 National Election Study and to the population of Suffolk County. As the above data indicate, the major divergences between the study participants and the county/national baselines concern education and religion. Study participants are significantly more educated and more apt to be Catholic and Jewish. Brookhaven Township, where the research was conducted, includes a very high proportion of professional and white-collar workers, while Suffolk County as a whole, includes a large Jewish population.