THOUGHTS ON POVERTY

Constructing Problems by Promoting Solutions: Corporate Advertisements about U.S. Poverty

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During the 1980s and 1990s corporations publicized their “social responsibilities” in popular print media. These ads make claims about issues such as the environment, consumer protection, neighborhood revitalization, education, arts and entertainment, and health. We examine a set of these ads and analyze the ways in which they construct social problems. We focus on ads about poverty, assessing the meaning and impact of business discourse about poor people and economic inequality. In showing that ads typically construct poverty by promoting quick-fix solutions for particular individuals, we argue that corporations play a unique role in obfuscating the structural causes of poverty and in shaping our understanding of the problem more broadly. As a new channel for claims making, such corporate ads complement and contradict the messages of other media, uniquely establishing corporate authority and influencing public discourse.

KEYWORDS poverty, advertising, social responsibility, corporations, social problems

Corporate advertisements are a rich and accessible, though largely unexplored, source for investigating how social problems are conceptualized in
public discourse. Over the past several decades, “social issue” ads have proliferated in the mainstream media, ads that convey messages not only about products and services but also about social problems. Our aim in this article is to explore how these ads contribute to the construction of social problems (Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). In asserting that social issue ads make claims that contribute to public discourse about poverty, we seek to broaden the scope of what counts as claims making (Miller & Holstein, 1993), and augment understanding of the range of claims makers in the contemporary media.

We use frame analysis to unpack and categorize ad messages, and we then compare corporate ad frames to those used by the news media. Frame analysis investigates how claims makers highlight certain dimensions of a problem, obscure others, and consequently present a powerful narrative about the problem’s severity, causes, and remedies. Frames provide audiences with ways to understand a problem that seem credible because they draw upon what audiences already believe to be true about the problem (Entman, 1995).

We focus on one particular issue: advertised images of the poor. The current study illustrates that corporations construct poverty not by moralizing about the severity of the harm, as is the norm among the news media and other claims makers; rather, corporations promote a set of solutions around a morality tale about uncomplicated solutions. We argue that constructing poverty by promoting solutions enables companies to play a powerful, yet veiled, role in contributing to the prevailing individualistic ideology concerning poverty in the United States.

CORPORATIONS AND THE FRAMING OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Framing studies often investigate the work of the news media, an appropriate focus given the power of journalistic reports to give meaning to events (Gitlin, 1980) and the news media’s influence on public beliefs about social problems (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). Corporations have become tightly linked to the media, because most news organizations are owned by just a handful of Fortune 500 companies (Bagdikian, 2004). Yet framing scholars have generally overlooked how corporations are an influential source of social problems claims making apart from their role in news making. Corporate advertising is a salient illustration. It is certainly the most visible and arguably the most powerful medium of corporate persuasion (Ewen, 1998; Kilbourne, 1999), exerting an enormous influence on tastes and desires (Ewen & Ewen, 1992). Moreover, advertising does not merely shape people’s consumption behaviors, as Vance Packard’s classic The Hidden Persuaders (1957) so aptly demonstrated. The secondary role of advertising is to influence cultural values (O’Barr, 1994), particularly around prominent social issues. Hence, McDonalds does not just sell Big Macs but
also promotes family values (Goldman, 1984) and Chevron is not just a gasoline provider but a purported steward of the environment (Porter, 1992).

Social issue ads are a valuable source of claims making for two reasons. First, these ads reflect a trend of explicit corporate interest in social problems. “Corporate social responsibility” is now embedded into the strategy of many companies, which claim to improve society on issues ranging from education to AIDS to the environment (Zadek, 2004). Whether corporate social responsibility indicates a serious commitment to making the world a better place, is just public relations, or both, is addressed elsewhere (e.g., Silver, 2001). For our purposes, what matters is that companies increasingly find it in their interests to advertise ways that they are addressing social problems.

This leads to the second reason why social issue ads are an important source of claims making: their tone. Because these ads, like all forms of advertising, must reflect positively on their sponsors, they do not focus on the troubling aspects of the issues they depict. These ads, therefore, contrast with other forms of claims making, which frame problems by dramatizing the harms, often presenting “atrocity tales” that play up, and sometimes exaggerate, the severity of these harms (Best, 1991). The tone of social issues ads, however, is considerably different than that of other forms of claims making. These ads do little to stir up drama around the harm itself; instead, they frame the harm largely in terms of the particular strategy the company recommends for fixing it. Studying these ads is important because of the extensive and continually growing influence that advertising and corporations more generally assert across the globe.

**DATA AND METHODS**

In seeking to understand how corporations across different industries participate in the framing of social problems, we reviewed every issue of *Time* and *Newsweek* from the years 1983 to 1999 and identified corporate-sponsored advertisements that mentioned a social issue. *Time* and *Newsweek* were chosen because they had the highest circulation of any weekly news magazines during this period, ranking 12th and 16th, respectively, in the 1998 survey done by the Audit Bureau of Circulations, which tracks trends in newspaper and magazine publishing. Although other magazines had wider circulations, we focused on news magazines because they have a demographically much broader readership than do niche publications. Because we wanted to investigate the claims-making power of social issue ads as expressed to a middle-class cross-section of the U.S. public of varying ages and representing both genders, studying the most widely circulated news magazines made sense.

Studying this period enabled us to analyze corporate claims making at a time when social issue ads were becoming a recognized reputation-building
strategy. We chose print ads because companies had not yet begun using the Internet to publicize their activities. In total, we collected 4,339 corporate social issue ads, which we sorted into seven categories: environment, education, arts & entertainment (including sports), health & human services, diversity, consumer protection, and community/neighborhood revitalization (see Table 1).

Although no explicit “poverty” category emerged during our initial sorting, we were curious about whether there might be a story about poverty embedded in the other categories. This curiosity stemmed from the fact that the poor are often invisible (Shipler, 2005). Consequently, we reviewed the entire sample of social issue ads again, in search of less-obvious references to poor people or economic inequality. Although there were occasional direct statements such as “I grew up poor,” more typically the ads alluded to poverty indirectly with phrases such as “rundown neighborhoods,” “inner-city schools,” or “students in need of scholarships.” Each researcher coded the set of ads independently, then we discussed inconsistencies in the coding and made a final determination together.

The poverty ads represented a diverse range of industries and were placed by well-known companies including Toyota, IBM, Dow, Sears, Citicorp, Amway, General Dynamics, CIGNA, and Ford. In total, 3% (140 out of 4,339) of the ads pertained to poverty. Although this number is small, it is still an important segment of the ads (see Table 2). Two other categories are also under 10% (diversity and neighborhood revitalization), so the poverty ads are not an outlier. And the largest category (one fourth of the ads) refers to a social issue (arts and culture) that is inherently upbeat. Sponsorship of symphonies or the Olympics is not a response to a social problem as much as a contribution to society, which is a prime example of the positive media attention that companies seek with regard to social issues. If social issues had been distinguished from social problems in our original coding, we hypothesize that the entire sample would have been smaller and that the proportions would have been more equally distributed among problems such as pollution, discrimination, illness, and poverty.

FRAMING POVERTY THROUGH ADVERTISEMENTS

The 140 poverty ads communicate two core messages: they define the problem and they promote solutions to it, accomplishing the twin framing tasks of diagnosis and prognosis (Snow & Benford, 1988). In making such claims, each ad communicates a unique message, yet common themes become evident as well. We focus on five prototypical ads to illustrate our major findings and offer summary percentages to place these five ads in context.
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TABLE 2 Percent of Each Social Issue, Overall

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<td>Environment</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Diversity</td>
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Diagnosis: Who are the Poor, and Why are they Poor?

Corporate social issue ads frame the poor in three general ways, with overlaps among these descriptive categories: (1) the poor hold mainstream values; (2) the poor are constrained by forces beyond their control, and (3) the poor are not the only group needing help.

THE POOR HOLD MAINSTREAM VALUES

Thirty-one of the ads (22%) present the poor as possessing wholesome American values. These include being hard working, religious, disciplined, self-reliant, of strong character, and valuing education. Other ads characterize the poor as trying to better themselves without an expectation that others will solve their problems for them.

Figure 1 depicts the poor as holding mainstream values. This two-page ad is part of a series of more than 20 ads Amway ran during the early 1990s about “self-reliant communities improving the quality of life in their own backyards.” This particular ad chronicles the efforts of two men—James Robinson and Joe Perez—to improve the quality of their Brooklyn neighborhood by organizing volunteers to staff emergency medical services. The ad suggests that the mostly poor cadre of volunteers is dedicated to improving the health of people living in the community. The second page of the ad draws a parallel between these volunteers and Amway workers: they are both hard working.

THE POOR ARE CONSTRAINED BY FORCES BEYOND THEIR CONTROL

Sixty-four of the ads (46%) suggest that the poor cannot simply help themselves, due to factors beyond their control. The most significant factor is age: the children and elderly are ubiquitous. Consider Figure 2, a Toyota ad that ran several times in Time and Newsweek during the early 1990s. This ad portrays a photo of a smiling gray-haired woman named Frances Vaughn. She is happy because she is one of many who have recently been helped.

by the Christmas in April program, a voluntary initiative funded in part by the Toyota USA Foundation that helps to repair dilapidated houses. Children are evident in the Dow and Ford ads described below (Figures 4 and 5, respectively), and are indirectly mentioned in the above Allstate ad (Figure 3). This ad alludes to “a safer playground” and (improvements to) “public schools,” clearly directed at children.

The fact that children and the elderly make up the majority of individuals depicted in our sample of poverty ads is significant given that Americans, by and large, do not hold these constituencies of the poor personally responsible for their economic condition (Gilens, 1996). Other scholars (e.g., Kendall, 2005) have identified the significance of such “sympathetic framing,” which stands in contrast to negative frames that depict the poor as dependent, deviant, or simply as mere statistics. More important is the fact that the children and elderly appear cheerful. They are not suffering

FIGURE 3 Newsweek, November 2, 1998.
terribly as a result of their economic inequality, nor are they blamed for it. Again, the ads tell sentimental stories with positive resolutions.

Another set of ads refer, often euphemistically, to a variety of other conditions that are beyond the poor's control—such as downturns in the labor market, substandard housing, underfunded schools, and crime-ridden neighborhoods. Such phrases as “distressed areas,” “schools left behind,” and “urban ghetto” provide examples. Figure 4, a Dow ad that appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek* during the mid-1980s, offers a visual illustration. Here we see a student at Providence-St. Mel High School “in the heart of Chicago” (a euphemism for a poor Chicago neighborhood) that has old buildings that hinder his educational success. Living in a poor neighborhood is not his fault, nor is it a condition that is within the capacity of the student or the public school system to fix. Rather than blaming the victim, we are offered a

**FIGURE 4** *Time*, February 24, 1986.
sentimental narrative of a downtrodden school and a corporation that comes to the rescue to save it.

THE POOR ARE NOT THE ONLY GROUP NEEDING HELP

A third way the poor are characterized is as part of a number of groups experiencing a range of social problems. Forty-seven ads (34%) present the poor in this universalizing manner. Examples include “Help the poor, the elderly, the handicapped” and “Everything from help and counsel for battered wives to summer jobs for underprivileged kids.” Consider Figure 5. Here Ford heralds its “scholarships funds and Adopt-A School programs” and proclaims that it is “building a better life for everyone.” The ad suggests Ford is fostering opportunities not just for poor youth but for all youth, and for the rest of us. The story line here is of universal need and benefit, rather than a heroic individual, but the arc of the story is still uplifting. Furthermore, by not marginalizing or isolating people in poverty, companies garner broad support and neither favor nor alienate any particular group.

Prognosis: What Companies can Do?

The ads in our data set were clear in offering particular solutions to the problem of poverty. In this way, these ads distinguish themselves from
other sources of social problems claims making, which emphasize—often quite dramatically—the severity of the problem over how it could be, should be, or is being fixed. We identified four strategies for helping the poor: (1) philanthropy, (2) volunteerism, (3) information, and (4) product sales.

**Philanthropy**

Philanthropy is represented in 76 (54.3%) of the ads. Given the tradition of corporate giving (Himmelstein 1997), it is not surprising that this strategy is the most common of the four. The Toyota, Dow, and Ford ads discussed previously (Figures 2, 4, and 5, respectively) each highlight philanthropy as an antipoverty strategy. Toyota mentions that its foundation has, from its inception, been a generous supporter of the Christmas in April program. Dow touts its scholarships as the reason virtually all graduates of Providence-St. Mel High School go to college. Ford proclaims “we do not just build cars. We build futures.” The ad goes on to assert Ford’s strong commitment to education by funding scholarship programs that teach entrepreneurial skills and foster adult literacy.

**Voluntarism**

An antipoverty strategy closely related to philanthropy that is presented in 12 (8.6%) of the ads is voluntarism, wherein a company encourages its employees to give their time to a local charity. The difference between philanthropy and voluntarism is that companies incur the costs of the former whereas the latter comes at the expense of workers’ time. Like philanthropy, voluntarism has deep roots in U.S. civic culture (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985). For example, Allstate (Figure 3) boldly encourages voluntary action on the part of its employees and, by virtue of the ad placement, *Newsweek* readers. The ad states, “You can turn the page. Or you can turn your neighborhood around . . . . So join us. Call your local volunteer bureau and lend a hand.”

**Information**

In this category, ads present stories and supposed facts, to inform consumers. These made up 17 (12.1%) of the poverty ads in our sample. They look like news stories and appear to have no sales pitch, which augments their message that companies are acting on behalf of the poor. An example is the Amway ad (Figure 1). The fine print at the top of the first page indicating that this is a special advertising feature (not a *Time* news story) is easily overlooked. What appears salient is the journalistic presentation of the
detailed, eye-catching story behind the presumed “article” titled “Brooklyn Volunteers Save Neighbors’ Lives.” Of note is that Amway is not actually doing anything charitable to initiate this work, which coheres with the point the company is highlighting in these ads: that the poor, on their own, can help themselves.

**PRODUCT SALES**

Product sales is the second most common prescription, comprising 35 (25%) of the poverty ads in our data set. Such ads straddle the line between traditional advertising and social issue ads. For example, the CUNA Mutual Insurance Group ad depicted in Figure 6 quotes the poor migrant field worker Paula Gonzalez as saying, “Because we had a credit union our children had a future;” and an ad by a bank (not shown here but in *Newsweek* November 6, 1989) that provides “targeted financing, mortgages and development loans; counseling, education and employment programs!” Companies suggest that people can move out of poverty by purchasing the products of financial services firms, again, by helping themselves.

**ALIGNING WITH CORE VALUES**

A longstanding tenet of advertising is that ads derive influence largely from how they reinforce widely shared values rather than from the specific messages they present about any particular product (Jackall & Hirota, 2000). The poverty ads aligned with four values: (1) rewarding the deserving, (2) privatization, (3) efficiency, and (4) education.

**Rewarding the Deserving**

Each of the ads in our sample implicitly framed the people being helped as deserving of assistance. This is not to say that these ads construct all poor people as deserving of help, but that the poor people portrayed in the ads being helped by corporate largesse are, by definition, deserving. To reiterate, the poor are framed as deserving because (1) they subscribe to the same core American values as do most people, (2) there are a variety of factors beyond their control that limit their ability to fully help themselves, and (3) the poor are part of a broader worthy constituency in need of help.

At the core of the poor’s deservedness is the ethos of individualism. Across our sample of ads, stories are told about people who either succeed on their own or make a difference for others through their individual efforts. The Amway ad highlights individual accomplishments in setting up
"Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant Volunteer Ambulance Corps." At the very bottom of the Toyota ad is the phrase "Toyota: Investing in the Individual."

The implication of depicting this individualistic ideology is twofold: first, for poor people themselves, who can overcome obstacles through hard work and will be rewarded for it, and second, for those who aren't poor, who can and should help solve the problem through their volunteer activities. This emphasis on individualism is significant because of what it does not acknowledge: namely the difficulty of being a hero and the paucity of volunteer time and money compared to the need. Nor does it acknowledge the fundamental inequalities in our educational system that can thwart the most
ambitious of individuals from getting ahead (Kozol, 2005). Pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps is much easier said than done, as sociological research has consistently shown (e.g., MacLeod, 2008).

Yet, by claiming to help deserving individuals, these ads reinforce a U.S. ideology of equal opportunity where individuals succeed or fail based on their own merits; the notion here is that drive and determination play a stronger role in explaining one’s lot in life than do structural factors such as access to housing, education, and employment (Hunt, 1996, 2004). This individualistic ethos doesn’t preclude the fact that structural disadvantages are real. The second frame described above, “The Poor are Constrained by Factors Beyond Their Control,” clearly acknowledges such disadvantages. But even if the cause of poverty in these ads is structural, the solutions are still individual.

Privatization

In addition to reinforcing an individualistic ethos, the poverty ads also echo the sentiment that the best solutions to social problems are those undertaken privately, without government. Three of the four reform strategies mentioned in the ads—philanthropy, voluntarism, and product sales—support this idea. With corporate philanthropy, the company’s private funds supplement or replace government money for housing programs and scholarships. This is further encouraged by the U.S. tax code, which allows write-offs for philanthropic donations. A second strategy, voluntarism, similarly promotes tackling a problem privately through the giving of one’s time by helping neighborhood-based organizations. And product sales ads rely upon the consumer and the market, rather than the public sector, to address income inequalities.

Efficiency

A third sentiment reinforced by the ads is that poverty can be handled efficiently, like other business matters. Eighty eight of the 140 ads (63%) present quantifiable ways that the company is managing poverty. For example, an IBM ad (Time, February 17, 1986) begins by indicating that the company has been a customer of Cherokee Nation Industries since 1973. It goes on to say that Cherokee Nation Industries “started with 20 employees in 1970 and now they employ 360 people. And in that time the number of families on welfare in the area has decreased 16.6%.” Sports Illustrated similarly quantified the impacts of its actions when it advertised (Time, May 23, 1994) that it was making a “cash contribution to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America to support the establishment of new Clubs in disadvantaged neighborhoods. More than 1500 Clubs and the two million young people they serve will benefit from
this unique partnership.” By quantifying their contributions, these ads legit-
imize the perspective that social problems can—and should—be handled in
a business-like manner.

Even when numbers are not mentioned, emphasis is on objective solu-
tions. Housing can be rehabilitated, playgrounds lit, and streets cleaned
up, with immediate and obvious results. It is difficult to help people to
change their economic circumstances, so the ads focus on aspects of the
issue that are relatively easy to fix and for which evidence of change can be
documented.

Given how central quantification is within corporate culture (Jackall,
1988), it is not surprising that corporate-sponsored ads use business lan-
guage and endorse measurable solutions. However, by extending this
rhetoric to social problems, business expands its influence and takes on a
new role. Companies claim to be concerned about social problems, yet their
language and approach keep these problems at a distance. By appearing to
manage social problems with ease and detachment—and thereby minimiz-
ing the human suffering—companies legitimate their particular approach to
the issue of poverty.

Education

Seventy six of the 140 poverty ads in our sample (54.3%) pertained to edu-
cation. References to education were found in all categories of solutions
but most often took the form of encouraging a donation to a scholarship
fund, either company-specific or a well-known program, such as the United
Negro College Fund. Companies also supported education by providing
funding for teacher training and supplies, donating equipment and mate-
rials to schools, and rewarding exemplary teachers. A prototypical example
is the ad by the CUNA Mutual Insurance Group. Here, Paula Gonzalez iden-
tifies herself as a “poor migrant field worker. And I knew the only thing that
could take my children out of poverty was education.” A series of credit
union loans that were protected by CUNA enabled Paula’s five children to
go to college and now two are lawyers, one is a nurse, one is a social
services director, and one is an import specialist for U.S. Customs. This
ad enthusiastically affirms the American Dream and shows the role that
can be played by business—in this case, insuring an educational loan. In
the United States, beliefs in the “education solution” are deep, widespread,
and largely unquestioned (Boyle, 2001); hence companies have little to lose
by such an association. Educational opportunity is believed to form the
backdrop for personal success, affirming the individualistic ethos discussed
above.

These four values coalesce to place the underlying messages commu-
nicated by the poverty ads right in the center of American culture. As a
nation, the United States has longstanding commitments to individualism,
private reform, efficiency, and education. Social issue ads during the 1980s and 1990s reflected and reinforced these values.

COMPARING MEDIA FRAMES ABOUT POVERTY

Even as corporate social issue ads affirm mainstream values and suggest a set of diagnoses and prescriptions with respect to poverty, they differ markedly from news accounts in their relative emphases and tone. Whereas the news focuses on atrocity tales that highlight the problem’s severity, social issue ads promote solutions; consequently, the news is negative whereas the ads are positive. In comparing the two media frames, we assert the importance of recognizing corporate social issue ads as a distinct claims-making channel. These ads elaborate a unique morality tale, or what Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) called a “rhetorical idiom”—one that is solution oriented.

Highlighting the Contrast

The rhetorical idiom conveyed through social issue ads becomes apparent when these ads are analyzed side by side with mainstream news media reporting on poverty during the period we studied: the 1980s and 1990s. The news media generally depicted the poor as “undeserving,” characterizing poverty as a condition disproportionately experienced by racial minorities too lazy to better themselves. This framing identified these people’s deviant behavior—their drug use, sexual promiscuity, and abuse of the welfare system—as core explanations for why they were poor (Gilens, 1996; Lens, 2002; Luker, 1996). Such imagery differed significantly from that of the “deserving” people portrayed in corporate social issue ads. These people were frequently depicted as succeeding in their efforts to rise out of poverty. Moreover, the ads were racially diverse, relentlessly positive, and seldom mentioned welfare. Furthermore, the ads in our sample framed the poor as people afflicted by factors beyond their control. Deviant behavior was not mentioned; the people featured were consequently not blamed for being poor.

News media frames about poverty typically invoked a quite common rhetorical idiom around calamity. This idiom constructs a moral imperative based on the magnitude and cause of the problem, rather than around the solution. Indeed, references in news stories to poverty solutions were often ill defined; though, of course, given the concurrent Congressional interest in welfare reform, news media discourse implicitly piggybacked on the imperative that the government must “end welfare as we know it” by creating term limits on cash assistance (Blank-Libra, 2004). In contrast, the corporate ad frame was dominated by solutions: companies promoted philanthropy, voluntarism, information, and products. Unlike news stories,
corporate ads presented very little drama about the devastating effects of economic inequality on families and neighborhoods. These ads were not, after all, explicitly intended to engender public awareness or fuel activism, nor designed to galvanize politicians to push for poverty reform. Instead, ads emphasized individual mobility and business-like approaches, giving the impression that the private sector can easily and effectively manage the problem without needing to allocate substantial resources. At the same time, the fact that solutions were emphasized, suggests that poverty is not intractable. Moreover, these ads imply that economic inequities can be redressed in a straightforward, managerial, and apolitical manner.

The rhetorical idioms about poverty respectively invoked by the news and by advertising each call upon their own distinct cluster of images. So though the news media may use images that signify the rhetoric of calamity, corporate social issue ads offer images of managerial knowhow. The latter is a rhetorical idiom that is not traditionally associated with social problem discourse. In this idiom, social problems are solved the same way any business problem is handled: by applying logic, quantifying, delegating, and holding people accountable. The detached language of business pervades the discussion of poverty, likely contributing to the emphasis on privatization, at the same time as it suggests solutions that are efficient. Nor is there any contest of ideas or policy debate presented in the ads; rather, the business approach to the problem of poverty is presented as a fait accompli—as unproblematic, depoliticized, and quantifiable.

The contrast between media frames about poverty delivered through the news and through advertising can be explained by the different types of settings where these claims are deployed. The tacit rules and conventional features of news reports and corporate ads differ. News articles tell stories in ways designed to elicit attention and sell copy, contributing to broader public fears of “atrocity.” Corporations, alternatively, attempt to avoid controversy in their activities oriented around corporate social responsibility (Himmelstein, 1997).

Discerning the Similarities

Behind the different rhetorical idioms in these two forms of media lies a core commonality: news and advertising focus on the individual in constructing their images of poverty and its amelioration. As opposed to thorny and often vehemently presented images of welfare abuse uttered by passionate politicians and publicized in the news media, corporate social issue ads present feel-good images that obliquely create the very same effect. By suggesting that only these “deserving” individuals should receive a helping hand, the social issue ads—just like news media—construct poverty as an individual issue. The ads’ allusions to poor people experiencing constraints beyond their control are overpowered by the emphasis on solutions and the
managerialist rhetorical idiom. In the corporate ads, individuals heroically help others and help themselves rise out of poverty.

Whether news stories blame the victim or ads reward the successful, individual-oriented narratives about poverty certainly reflect and quite possibly also contribute to the fact that Americans overwhelmingly see poverty as caused by personal irresponsibility (Hunt, 1996, 2004). Propagating these individualistic images through positive, upbeat ads in popular magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* presents the same core narrative as that evoked by the more disparaging rhetoric of atrocity conveyed through news stories about the poor. Presenting this same image through these differing media serves to obscure the reality that poverty has structural causes that require comprehensive efforts to redress (Wilson, 1996).

**CONCLUSION**

The current study illustrates the unique way that corporate advertisements frame poverty: by defining the problem principally in terms of measures that are readily at hand to ameliorate it. Constructing problems by promoting solutions significantly differs from the practice that is typical among claims makers as diverse as the news media, activists, experts, victims, police, doctors, and lawyers. Each of these groups, in its own way, draws attention to problems through atrocity tales that dramatize the severity and magnitude of the harm. This framing strategy stems from the agenda that is common to these groups: each operates in a competitive field with the aim of focusing scarce public attention and policy resources on particular maladies that afflict our society (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988).

Compared to these groups, corporations occupy a very different claims-making role given that they are in business to accrue profits. Corporations have the money to buy advertisements to promote their goods and services, and their ads consequently also publicize the role of big business as a problem solver. Corporate social issue ads are used indirectly to portray favorable images of the companies themselves. Although this is what advertisements are supposed to accomplish and why companies invest in them, the ads contain messages not just about the company, but also about its moral legitimacy to address problems like poverty, thereby catapulting business into a claims-making role. Additional research is needed to understand how the growth of corporate social responsibility has influenced social problem construction.

It is also important to learn more about the actions, in addition to the advertisements, associated with corporate social responsibility. A definitive feature of the corporate ads we studied is that they construct solutions to social problems that do not require companies to change their business practices. In these ads companies do not offer to increase pay or benefits,
support a tax structure that might provide a decent safety net, or price their products more affordably. Rather, companies present positive images and simple solutions, often to be carried out by actors other than themselves. Therefore corporate constructions of the problem support the status quo even as they challenge news media images of the poor.

Most important, companies make a key claims-making maneuver: they frame poverty in a way that it ceases to be a significant social problem. The ads we studied present poverty as hidden and sanitized. Readers of *Time* or *Newsweek* could have reasonably assumed that the poverty and welfare rhetoric in the media was just sensationalizing. The disparity between how corporate ads construct poverty and the realities of this condition for the approximately 37 million of Americans who experience it is especially important to highlight now, because corporate social responsibility has become an institutionalized aspect of business strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Therefore, corporations will likely continue to use their significant claims-making power to construct social problems or to deproblematize the issues, as found in the current study. We have explored how these constructions benefit the company; we must now also wonder how much they benefit the poor.

REFERENCES


