Poverty and Racism: How We Think And Talk About Poverty Reduction Matters

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ABSTRACT   There is a close connection between poverty and racism yet insufficient literature integrates anti-racist praxis in poverty reduction work. We draw here on the first stage of a project that brought together the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership (SPRP) and the Saskatchewan Anti-Racism Network (ARN) to explore possibilities for better alignment of the advocacy of both organizations. We conducted a media discourse analysis of 462 newspaper articles systematically extracted from grey literature site *Factiva* on how poverty reduction is framed and how media reportage links poverty and racism in Saskatchewan. We find that very few newspaper articles published on poverty reduction focus on the connections between poverty and racism. Additionally, there are four dominant ways of framing poverty reduction namely: i) the cost framing of poverty reduction ii) the shame and embarrassment framing of poverty reduction iii) the human rights framing of poverty reduction and iv) the root cause analyses of poverty reduction. The cost and shame framings of poverty reduction may further marginalize or de-center those living in poverty compared to the human rights and root cause framings. More explicit connection needs to be made between poverty reduction work and anti-racist praxis for effective advocacy.

KEYWORDS   Poverty reduction; advocacy; anti-racism; discourse

There is little doubt that poverty and racism are closely related. Most people classified as "poor" by governments - in the Canadian context, a family of 4 living in Saskatoon in 2022 on under $51,275 - are also racialized populations. Many racialized populations experience poverty because of socio-economic policies that have historically limited their social mobility and continue to hinder their access to resources. This historical reality is often neglected in discourses that present high income countries with Indigenous populations such as Canada Australia and the United States as purely meritocratic societies (McLean, 2018).

This short report comes from a Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC)-supported Intersectoral Action Fund project (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021) in Saskatoon seeking to further integrate the work of the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership (SPRP) and the Anti-Racism Network (ARN). It explores the relationship between poverty and racism in Saskatchewan and examines media framings of poverty reduction and the poverty-racism nexus. It begins by describing existing statistics on the racialized nature of poverty in Canada.

Based on analysis of 462 newspaper articles, it then describes four main ways the print media frames the relationship between poverty and racism. The analysis reveals first that, although there are several newspaper articles that focus on poverty reduction, very few articles explicitly analyse the racialization of poverty or discuss how racism creates poverty. Second newspaper articles use four dominant frames to describe why poverty should be reduced, namely: i) the cost framing of poverty reduction, ii) the shame and embarrassment framing of poverty reduction, iii) the human rights framing of poverty reduction, and iv) the root cause analyses of poverty reduction. While distinct, all four discourses are not mutually exclusive. After presenting some critiques of extant ways of framing poverty reduction, the report concludes by advocating for the need to discuss the relationship of poverty to racism more explicitly. Poverty is produced by racism and histories of colonial violence and poverty reduction efforts are therefore unlikely to be successful until they explicitly focus on the racist roots of poverty.

Racialized poverty: By the numbers

In Canada, data from the 2016 Census revealed that 20.8% of visible minorities were below the low income cut off (LICO) for poverty compared to 12.2% of non-racialized people (Colour of Poverty, 2019). The LICO is an income threshold below which a household devotes a much larger share of its income on basic necessities like food and shelter than other households. A 2012 report on poverty rates among First Nations communities revealed that 49% of First Nations children under age 6 living off reserve lived in poverty compared to 18% of non-Indigenous children (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012). These rates have not changed significantly over the last decade: a 2019 report showed that child poverty rates (for those aged under 18 years) in Nunavut were 34.4% and this number gets even worse (42.6%) for children under six (Campaign 2000, 2021). Rates of child poverty also vary significantly among racialized communities across the country: while poverty rates for children of Filipino (9.5%) and Japanese (13.3%) ancestry are lower than the 17% national average, the rates are much higher for other racialized communities.

Presently, an estimated 53% of Status First Nations children living on reserve are in poverty nationally, and this number rises to 65% in Saskatchewan and Manitoba (Beedie et al., 2019). These unconscionably high rates are also present among other racialized groups—Arab (43.3%), West Asian (42.7%), Korean (35.2%) and Black (30.2%) children—compared to non-racialized, non-recent immigrant, non-Indigenous children (12%) (Beedie et al., 2019; Campaign 2000, 2021).

These statistics can be summarized simply: poverty in Canada is racialized. Unfortunately, these statistics on their own do not reveal the ways that colonialism and histories of systemic racism and injustice have produced the currently disproportionately high rates of poverty among racialized communities in Canada; nor do they explain why poverty is so racialized.

Discourse and framing of social problems

Discourse refers to "any sound, word, image or object… organised with other signs into a system capable of carrying meaning" (Hall, 2009, p. 9). Discourse analysis treats language not "as a

neutral means of transmitting information" (Alhassan et al.,, 2021, p. 4) but as actively involved in producing realities: enabling "certain ways of thinking about reality while excluding others" (Cheek, 2004, p. 1142). In Canadian contexts in particular, for example, the construction of discourse that portrays Indigenous peoples as "lazy" has provided a powerful linguistic excuse to willfully ignoring historical patterns of colonial violence and dispossession, while also justifying government inaction on alleviating poverty among Indigenous communities (Lutz, 2009; Manuel & Derrickson, 2015). Through discourse analysis, one can critique and problematize commonly accepted ideas. It helps in diagnosing the root causes of social problems that result in scapegoating particular members of society. For example the classic representation of working-class women as "welfare queens," a representation that invokes a picture of "a greedy conniving dole cheat raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars" to fund her lazy lifestyle at the public's expense, elides how neoliberal capitalist social policy produces poverty in the first place (Cronin, 2012, p.31).

Drawing on critical race theory, we began by rejecting historical notions of a biological basis of race (that viewed racialized groups as poor because of laziness built into their genes), viewing poverty instead as based on histories of racism that "inhibit and disadvantage some more than others" as a means to entrenching white supremacy (Treviño et al., 2008, p. 8). We sought to explore how often poverty and racism co-occur in media publications in Saskatchewan and some of the dominant frames that are used to understand and describe this nexus.

The Public Health Agency of Canada project

The project emerged from a recognition that while anti-poverty work and anti-racism advocacy have occurred over the years in Saskatchewan, these efforts have occurred in silos and could be better integrated. The project brought together the Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership (SPRP) and the Anti-Racism Network (ARN) to promote further engagement on how poverty and racism are correlated and together produce health inequalities. The project involved engaging community partners, people with living and lived experience of poverty and racism, and academics. The SPRP was established in 2010 and is based on a mutual commitment to multi-sectoral and sustainable poverty reduction in Saskatoon. It operates to move people out of poverty and developed the 12 Bold Ideas to Eliminate Poverty in Saskatoon (Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, 2019). The ARN is an alliance of over 30 community-based organizations across Saskatchewan, meeting monthly to support member organizations in learning and practicing anti-racism. The ARN recently created the Prairie Center for Racial Justice (www.prairiecentreforracialjustice.ca), a cooperative social enterprise focused on grassroots mobilizing and education. This report partly builds on the efforts of these two organizations to work together and enable greater public understanding of the intersections of poverty and racism.

Methodology

Informed by key principles of engaged scholarship (Hoffman, 2021), including the commitment to connect our intellectual curiosity of the relationships between poverty and
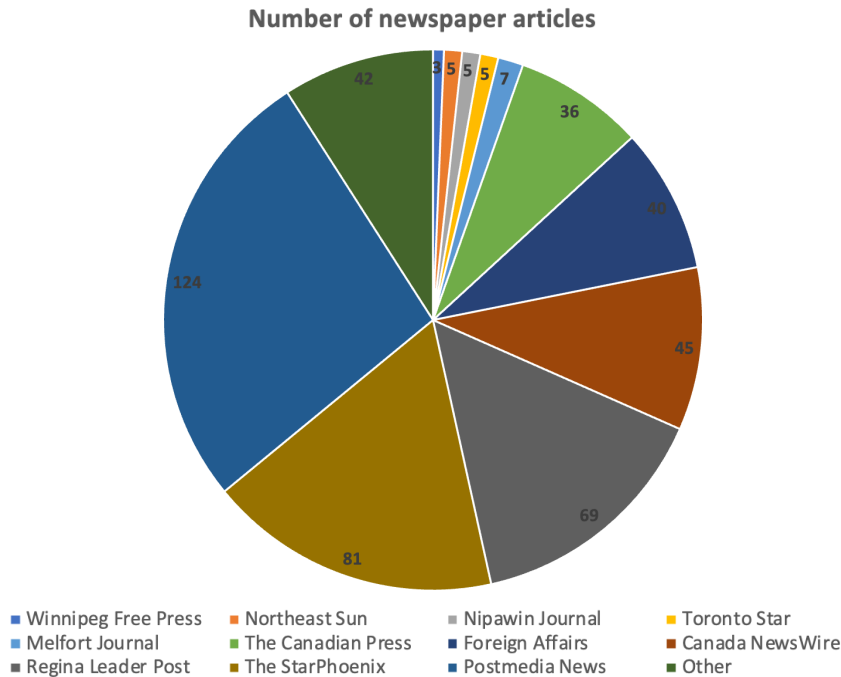
racism to advocacy and multidisciplinary approaches, the first step of the project was to conduct a discourse analysis (Willig, 2013) of media reportage in Saskatchewan between 2000 and 2022 on poverty reduction and racism. Our motivation was to reveal the intersection of anti-racism and poverty reduction work, both of which have received considerable attention from engaged scholars, although sometimes with less integration. In total, 462 newspaper articles were systematically extracted from newspaper search site *Factiva*, imported into NVivo 12 software, and inductively coded to describe public discourses on poverty reduction and racism. Each article was read in its entirety and coded for: 1) who it described as 'poor'; 2) explanations offered for why poverty exists and potential approaches to reducing poverty; 3) descriptions of the intersection of poverty and racism; and 4) how each article framed the solution to the problem of poverty and the extent to which anti-racist praxis was presented as part of the solution. All codes were combined to explore patterns and to describe the dominant frames used in writing about the poverty-racism nexus (Hall, 2009). After we identified the dominant discourses, we met with partners from the SPRP and the ARN. These meetings provided space for self-reflection and provided an avenue for partners from both organizations to reflect on their advocacy over the years to begin to explore what reframing how we think and talk about poverty and racism might look like.

Figure 1. Word Cloud based on media articles.

Number of newspaper articles

Figure 2. Newspaper sources

Framing poverty reduction

The media analysis revealed four main ways poverty reduction is conceptualized, justified and framed including: 1) cost framing 2) shame and embarrassment framing 3) root cause analyses and 4) human rights framing. In the cost framing, poverty reduction is seen as important because it would save the government money in the long run. The shame and embarrassment framing views poverty reduction as important because it is considered a national shame that so much poverty would exist in Canada. The root cause framing argues that poverty should be reduced because individuals cannot reduce it themselves since it is a systemic problem requiring systemic solutions. The human rights framing argues that poverty should be reduced because it violates people's human rights. These framings are not mutually exclusive but offer a language for making sense of why poverty exists and what can be done about it.

1. *The cost framing of poverty reduction*:

Several media publications relied on a cost framing to justify the urgent need for poverty reduction in Saskatchewan/Canada. In a few cases cost was also used to justify inaction regarding, or slow progress towards, poverty reduction. An article published in *The Star Phoenix*, highlighted that "when all the societal costs are tallied poverty [costs Canada] $8.2 billion meanwhile a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy has been assessed at less than $4 billion a year" (Cooper, 2012, para. 7). A similar article noted that "a growing body of evidence shows that allowing poverty to continue is far more expensive than investing to help

improve people's economic wellbeing. Currently 3.8 billion--5 per cent of GDP—is lost from the Saskatchewan economy each year due to increased health and social costs and decreased economic opportunities" (Martin & Meili, 2015, para. 11). While these framings are advocated for by academics, community leaders, and others interested in poverty reduction, the framing places a price on poverty reduction and unintentionally creates a logical loophole: poverty should be reduced because poverty reduction costs less than the cost of allowing poverty to remain. Hypothetically, this implies that if poverty reduction ever becomes more costly than the cost of inaction then it can be justifiable not to try to reduce it. Indeed, a few publications justified inaction on such cost-based grounds. One publication from *The Canadian Press* noted that "many of the ideas introduced in a poverty reduction strategy introduced this year won't be pursued until the province can afford them" (Graham, 2016, para. 9). Another publication describing investments in housing for First Nations concluded that although the province had committed to pursue housing investment as part of its poverty reduction work, this agenda would only continue "when the province's fiscal capacity allows" (Regina Leader Post, 2016, para. 10). In this sense, just as the use of a cost framing might justify advocating for poverty reduction, cost may also be summoned to justify inaction.

2.   ***The shame and embarrassment framing of poverty reduction***:
Many publications focused mainly on shaming those in authority into acting to reduce poverty. These publications revealed shocking statistics about poverty—typically among Indigenous communities in Canada—and concluded by asking policy makers to act on poverty since inaction constitutes a national embarrassment. While well-meaning, these publications often did not necessarily focus on the suffering and pain of those dealing with poverty and rarely amplified the voices of those with lived experience but rather focused on those in power. One of these publications noted that "living conditions for Canada's Native people have been a national embarrassment for many decades and there have been countless pledges to deal with the problem" (Canada & the World Backgrounder, 2006, para. 2). The publication concluded that "in fact, if the statistics for Canadian Aboriginal people were viewed separately from those of the rest of the country, Canada's Aboriginal people would slip to 78th on the UN Human Development Index—the ranking currently held by Kazakhstan" (Canada & the World Backgrounder, 2006, para. 9). Although well meaning, this framing also stigmatizes low-income countries and seems to suggest that poverty levels among Indigenous people are bad because they fall to levels similar to low-income countries, which only further normalizes experiences of poverty for those in low- and middle-income countries. Unfortunately, the shame and embarrassment framing persists. The opening lines of a 2020 article read, "[t]he face of child poverty in Saskatchewan is not the face we see on television of impoverished third world countries. It can be the face of the child who comes to school unkempt and repeatedly without a lunch, but it can also be the face of the children next door" (Baldwin, 2020, para. 1). While the shock value from this framing could engender action, this framing fails to acknowledge or recognize that poverty in low-income countries is not and should not be normal(ized), rendering it a problematic framing.

3.   *The root cause of poverty framing of poverty reduction*:

Several articles also sought to reveal the root causes of poverty and to describe key factors that continue to entrench poverty among vulnerable communities. This discourse connected poverty to social determinants of health, argued that poverty is not a choice, and advocated for recognition of the reality that several social ills, including crime and illness, will not disappear until poverty and its root causes are effectively dealt with. In one article with such framing, an advocate noted that while politicians may think "that really poverty is about either getting a job or pulling up your bootstraps and it's because of people's individual choices," such assumptions are wrong because "there are systemic factors at play" (Deibert, 2018, para. 8). Connecting poverty to food insecurity and its adverse health impacts, another media report quoted a director of a local food bank as arguing that:

> people often think that those people accessing services here at the food bank have made poor choices, but poverty is not a choice. Nobody chooses to live in poverty… As a matter of fact, poverty takes away so many people's choices. You can't choose to eat healthy because even though you know that's what's best for you, you can't afford to do it. (Hengen, 2016, para. 24)

In this framing, poverty is explicitly described in relation to broader social and economic processes, with advocates not necessarily framing poverty reduction as a way of reducing costs but focusing instead on the complexity of poverty reduction and the need to attend to economic inequality, racism, and other root causes of disadvantages as a way to respond to the problem of poverty.

4.   *The human rights framing of poverty reduction*:

Finally, a number of media publications framed poverty reduction in human rights terms. These publications argued that poverty ought to be reduced not because the cost of inaction is higher or because it is embarrassing to have high rates of poverty, but because high levels of poverty are an infringement on the human rights of those experiencing it. This framing sometimes drew on a capabilities framework (Nussbaum, 2003, 2013; Sen, 2000) to argue that poverty leads to unrealized potential among the poor or that it prevents the poor from exercising fundamental freedoms. Turning attention to specific groups such as children, one such publication noted that:

> [i]n fact, all children and youth do have rights and respecting these rights is fundamental to ensuring that we live in the kind of just, equitable and free society that Canadians value. While we have made considerable strides, as a society we are violating the rights of children and youth regularly. We see evidence of this in calls that come into our office. It is clear that children living in poverty often lack the resources to develop to their full potential—that is why we are so concerned that two-thirds of status First Nations children in Saskatchewan are living in poverty. (Pringle, 2014, para. 5)

Similarly, other advocates using this framing described resources that people living in vulnerability and poverty may lack, and argued that access to these resources should be considered human rights. In one such article, poverty reduction advocates framed digital poverty in human rights terms, stating that they would like "to see internet access deemed a basic human right, especially now that the pandemic has highlighted just how much other human rights like education and health rely on it" (Giesbrecht, 2021, para. 29). While each of these framings are susceptible to critique, the human rights framing can be quite powerful given its situatedness in international conventions.

The Poverty-Racism Nexus

While poverty among racialized communities is regularly reported on, minimal efforts are made to explain how poverty and racism are related. The word "racism" appeared only nine (9) times throughout the reviewed articles which were extracted using the search term "poverty," while "poverty reduction" appeared 2,946 times. This reveals that poverty and racism are not sufficiently analyzed simultaneously in media articles. Moreover, articles that attempt to highlight poverty among racialized communities were often descriptive and did not pay sufficient attention to explaining how and why poverty might be related to racism. A publication that describes high levels of poverty on a First Nations reserve may recognize that poverty affects Indigenous people disproportionately, but such recognition can lead to different conclusions. For example a reader drawing on extant stereotypes might interpret this to mean that Indigenous people are lazy (Lutz, 2009) and therefore experience more poverty. Other readers with more knowledge of Canada's colonial history might conclude that poverty in that reserve is caused by racism and that specific policies that dispossessed Indigenous people of their land (Anaya & William, 2001; Mumford, 2016), perpetrated genocide (Daschuk, 2013; Jones, 2004; Talbot, 2006) or actively prevented Indigenous people from labour market participation (McLean, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012) are responsible for these levels of poverty.

Nonetheless, some publications (Canada & the World Backgrounder, 2006; Deibert, 2018; Radford, 2014) highlighted that poverty exists at higher rates in Indigenous communities and often concluded by remarking on the need to study structural racism. In one publication, for example, members of a task force against racism "encouraged government to engage in long-term, integrated, multi-year actions grounded in three overarching foundational understandings, which are: dignified mutual relationships; poverty reduction and the prevalence of racism; and recognizing First Nations and Métis cultures and languages" (Lloydminster Meridian Booster, 2014, para. 10). While these publications mentioned racism and explicitly recognized that racism and poverty are related, they did not necessarily analyse colonial violence and how it produces the racialized experience of poverty.

Conclusion

Although available statistics show a strong correlation between poverty and racialization, media reportage on how and why poverty and racism are related is relatively low. This brief report reveals two key realities. Firstly, even though there is a recognition that racialized populations

are often more likely to live in poverty in Saskatchewan and there are several newspaper articles that focus on poverty reduction, very few articles explicitly analyse the racialization of poverty and discuss the mechanisms by which racism creates poverty. Secondly there are four ways most media reports on poverty reduction are framed, namely: i) cost framing; ii) shame and embarrassment framing; iii) human rights framing, and; iv) root cause analyses. These different modes of thinking and talking about poverty reduction, while useful, come with some pitfalls. Poverty reduction advocates ought to reflect on the different framings presented and carefully reframe how poverty reduction is discussed, with special attention to discussing racism as a fundamental cause of poverty in Canada and Saskatchewan. Partnerships such as the collaboration between the SPRP and the ARN are crucial steps in building synergies on poverty reduction and anti-racist praxis.

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