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## **REPRESENTATIONS OF POVERTY IN BRITISH NEWSPAPERS: A CASE OF ‘OTHERING’ THE THREAT?**

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# Representations of Poverty in British Newspapers: A Case of 'Othering' the Threat?

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## ABSTRACT

*The meanings of social problems like poverty develop within the public sphere. This paper uses the theory of social representations to examine how poverty is represented in British newspapers. Poverty has been discussed and interpreted in numerous ways, and newspapers not only provide a platform for these elaborations but also contribute to shaping public understanding on the issue. The study sampled news coverage on poverty in four British newspapers during two randomly chosen one-month periods in the years 2001 and 2011. The data set of news reports ( $n = 274$ ) was thematically analysed to examine representations of poverty. The study found that in the domestic context, media represents poverty as a problem limited to vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. With a lack of discussion on the wider socio-economic causes and contributing factors, poverty within the UK appears as an 'orphan phenomenon' with an unknown genesis. In contrast, the representations of poverty outside the UK are vivid and elaborate, and the news reports hold the socio-political inefficiency of countries responsible for poverty. The study also found that the media uses poverty to make sense of catastrophic events in society: the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the London riots of 2011 were both anchored using poverty. This paper discusses the representational dynamics of these findings and argues that the media representations distance general society from poverty, representing it as a problem of the other.*

**Key words:** Poverty; Social Representations; Othering; Objectification; Media Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Conceptualizing poverty is an elusive task. It has been conceived as the lack of monetary resources (for e.g. the international poverty line in Ravallion, Chen, & Sangraula, 2009), as capability deprivation (Sen, 1985, 1993) and as social exclusion (Jones, 2002). These paradigms are remarkably different from one another, yet they provide equally valid notions of poverty. In the context of such plurality, Herbert Blumer provides a cogent way to conceptualise social problems. He argues, 'a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in the society' (1971, p. 300). Early attempts to map out the social understanding of poverty adopted the framework of attribution theory. Seminal work by Feagin (1972) led to a large number of studies that examined public attributions of poverty in several countries (Lebanon and Portugal, Abouchedid & Nasser, 2002; Croatia, Ljubotina & Ljubotina, 2007; India, Nasser, Singhal, & Abouchedid, 2005) including the United Kingdom (Furnham, 2011). Although attributional research provides the most well-developed corpus of poverty research in psychology, in recent times, psychology and related disciplines have witnessed a resurgent focus on understanding poverty in the context of the wider social processes. The relevance of issues such as community (Sanchez, Cronick, & Wiesenfeld, 2003), place (Spink, 2003) and justice (Carr, 2003) has been brought to the fore. This paper seeks to make a contribution to this growing body of literature and discusses the results of a study that draws on social representations theory (SRT) to examine the understandings of poverty that are presented and discussed in British newspapers.

The theory of social representations is a powerful tool to explore 'how and why people share knowledge and thereby constitute their common reality' (Moscovici, 1990, p. 164). The theory rejects the notion of knowledge being a facsimile of some objective event or a mere description of events in the social world. Instead, it considers knowledge to be produced through acts of communication that are guided by the interests of the people involved. Many social representations studies have aimed to examine such shared understandings through examining newspaper articles: indeed, Farr (1993) expressly recommends this as a useful source of data for social representations studies. Newspaper analysis has been seen as one way of examining representations and ideas that circulate at the sociogenetic level (Duveen and Lloyd, 1990), and a way of examining consensus and conflict in understandings at a broader societal level (Flick and Foster, 2008). The balance between the activity of the individual and the 'irresistible force' (Moscovici,

1984, p.7) of social understandings is at the heart of SRT (Volklein & Howarth, 2005). It is therefore important to remember that newspapers are only part of the story of the way that understanding changes and develops, and the reciprocity between representations within society and the presentation of these in newspapers must be stressed, as must the activity of the reader in accepting and resisting what he or she reads (Foster, 2006). However, journalists have an important role to play in imparting information on complex, abstract topics of which the reader might have little or no direct experience, and are somewhat akin to the amateur scholar described by Moscovici (1988).

Although the present work is among the first to examine the portrayal of poverty in newspapers from a social representations perspective, several other studies have examined the portrayal of poverty in the media. The majority of these studies note the deficiency in the coverage of poverty within the news: in a recent report, the Rowntree Foundation examined media coverage of poverty within the UK during a week-long period (McKendrick, Sinclair, Irwin, Scott, & Dobbie, 2008). Their extensive analysis of over 150 newspapers, television programmes and radio broadcasts revealed that poverty receives little attention from the media in terms of number of stories and only a quarter of those stories that do mention poverty take it as the focal theme. Highlighting the impoverishment of the media, the report notes that most of the media references 'use poverty to lend emphasis or to sensationalise and do little to further an understanding of poverty in the UK' (ibid, p. 22).

A particularly pervasive trend in the literature suggests stereotyping of the poor in the news media. A number of studies have reported stereotypical media descriptions of the poor as criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts (Gans, 1979), sexually irresponsible, avoiding work, and being lazy (Parisi, 1998) and lacking in socially desirable qualities (Golding & Middleton, 1982; Martindale, 1996). The media has demonised poor single mothers in particular, who are depicted as immoral, neglectful and responsible for their own plight (de Goede, 1996; Thomas, 1998). In an extreme example, the media has popularized the image of 'welfare queens' who take advantage of the welfare system and live extravagantly (Coughlin, 1989). Similarly, the portrayal of any larger-than-average family sizes in images that accompany newspaper stories has been linked to the popular belief that poor mothers have additional children to maximize their welfare support (Clawson & Trice, 2000). It is perhaps through such stereotypical news coverage that the poor and welfare recipients have become one of the most unpopular groups in modern society (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999).

A sociogenetic analysis of news coverage on poverty becomes extremely cogent as there is

an increasing consensus that the news coverage of a highly politicized issue like poverty tends to reflect the interests of the dominant and powerful groups in that society (Bullock et al., 2001) and very few stories that discuss the problem of poverty in detail find their way into the news (Mantsios, 1995). Guided by such a backdrop, the present work examines the news coverage of poverty in four British newspapers over two one month periods in 2001 and 2011.

## METHODS

In conducting media studies on poverty, the political orientation (Schudson, 2002; Sorenson, 1991) and the tabloid-broadsheet spectrum of the newspapers (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007) have been noted as relevant in influencing the nature of reports. Hence, we chose four newspapers along these two categories: The Daily Telegraph (right leaning broadsheet); The Guardian (left leaning broadsheet); The Daily Mail (right leaning tabloid) and The Daily Express (left leaning tabloid). The Lexis-Nexis database was employed, using the keyword 'poverty' for two randomly chosen 30-day periods (11 November to 11 December 2001 and 11 November to 11 December 2011). The resulting data set of articles was scrutinized to eliminate duplication of reports and metaphorical uses of the keyword 'poverty'. The final data set comprised 274 articles (see Table 1).

The data were analysed by the first author using the Atlas-ti software, following the principles of thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding scheme was developed both deductively and inductively to include patterns suggested by the literature as well as those evident in the data. Relationships between codes were considered in depth. A process of data audit was employed with the second author in an attempt to maintain consistency and clarity in the process of analysis. Table 2 lists the themes and categories with their respective occurrence data. The findings are described and discussed in the next section.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

## RESULTS

Past research examining news coverage suggests that tabloids marginalise socio-political content (Connell, 1998). The findings of the current study support this trend: tabloids ran only 95 stories on poverty compared to 179 reports in the broadsheets. Left-leaning papers published 152 reports compared to 122 reports in the right leaning newspapers. A

chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between the political orientation of the newspapers and their coverage on poverty. The relation between these variables was non-significant,  $X^2(1, N = 274) = 0.07, p > .05, ns$ . However, the left leaning newspapers had 58 reports with 'poverty' in their headline as compared to 26 reports in the right leaning newspapers. Chi-square test on the data confirms that left leaning newspapers are more likely to emphasize poverty in their headlines [ $X^2(1, N = 84) = 12.09, p < .001$ .] News reports in 2001 invoked poverty while making sense of the terrorist attacks of 11 September in the United States and in 2011, poverty was again represented in connection with the London riots that had taken place earlier in the summer. Apart from these, the study did not observe any unique trends in representations of poverty either along the temporal spread (2001 vs. 2011), political spread (left leaning vs. right leaning) or high-brow–lowbrow categories (broadsheet vs. tabloids). The representations of poverty in the news fall along three categories: domestic poverty, foreign poverty and the anchoring of threatening social events.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

## Domestic poverty

The representations of poverty within the UK were developed around three major themes—child poverty, inability of households to pay for winter heating and the issue of aid and welfare. Child poverty emerged as the most elaborate aspect of poverty reports on the UK. All four newspapers substantiated their sympathetic coverage on child poverty with statistical data and particularly emphasised on sustained education as key to improving the lives of poor children.

*Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found there were still more than 4million children living below the poverty line in the year to April 2000. This was 300,000 fewer than in 1996/7, during the last year of Conservative rule - but the reduction fell far short of Tony Blair's ambitions. (The Guardian, 10/12/2001).*

*George Osborne said a decent education was the best way to pull the most deprived youngsters out of poverty. [...] "Education ... early years learning ... that is how you change the life chances of our least well off and genuinely lift children out of poverty," he said. (The Daily Telegraph, 30/11/12).*

*Currently six out of ten two-year-olds from the poorest families do not experience any formal early education [while] the participation rate in the wealthiest homes is 72 per cent. (The Daily Mail, 29/11/2011)*

With reference to child poverty, the media made several attributions to lazy parents and held them responsible for the plight of poor children. In the same context, it was argued that the provisions of welfare sustain this laziness and tendency to avoid regular employment.

*The government's child poverty strategy, published earlier this year, emphasises the importance of work as the key solution to being poor, but beyond that devotes a lot of space to the importance of personal responsibility and good parenting. Along with income, the strategy cites "the context in which a child is raised" as a root cause of poverty, adding: "That is why we are committed to supporting strong families. We also know that effective parenting is critical to enabling children to flourish". (The Guardian, 23/11/2011)*

*More voters believe benefits are too generous and discourage people from going to work; while an increasing number blame child poverty on lazy parents than a failure in society. (The Daily Mail, 07/12/2011)*

The second theme on domestic poverty was the increasing cost of winter heating, and 'fuel-poverty'. The media presented fuel poverty as a unique problem faced by the elderly and pensioner households.

*Dr Brenda Boardman, fellow at Oxford University's environmental change institute, said that the pressure was building on politicians to act against the energy sector, as MPs encounter fuel poverty in their constituencies every week. Each 1% price rise pushes at least another 40,000 households into fuel poverty [...] (The Guardian, 02/12/2011).*

*It is estimated in last year's bitter winter around 30,000 older people died from cold-related illnesses. All this reinforces the urgent need for the Government to appoint a dedicated Minister for Older People who would become their champion and end the damaging indifference to their needs. (The Daily Express, 27/11/2011)*

In line with previous research, the issue of aid and welfare received considerable media attention. It was argued that welfare benefits are very high in the UK leading to dependency and misuse by the poor.

*'Take a family headed by a drug addict or someone with a gambling addiction - increase the parent's income and the chances are they will spend the money on furthering their habit, not on their children.' (The Daily Mail, 02/12/2011)*

Interestingly, of the four newspapers sampled for the study, only The Guardian lent support to the welfare system in the UK. The prevalence of anti welfare attitudes among the general public has consistently been reported in several developed countries including the UK (Gilens, 1995; Gilens, 1999; Golding & Middleton, 1982; Sefton, 2009) and the media can be



argued to play a significant role in the process.

Beyond these three themes, coverage on other groups in the UK was sparse (see Table 2). Jeppesen (2009) argues that in developed nations child poverty forms the bulk of media discussions on poverty whereas themes of adult poverty tend to be sparse. For instance, in the prevailing economic climate in the UK, homelessness and unemployment are some of the issues that one might imagine to be relevant but they were absent from the sample. The emerging representation restricts poverty in the UK to the limited context of two very specific groups (children and the elderly) even as strong anti welfare ideas find their way through the news.

## **Foreign poverty**

The second category of representation was of poverty in countries other than the UK. Our data reveal that newspapers engaged in a much more elaborate discussion of poverty outside the UK, citing several Asian (India, Bangladesh etc.), African (Swaziland, Democratic Republic of Congo etc.) and European countries (Italy and Spain). These reports were rich, multifaceted and, unlike the domestic context, were not limited to specific groups. Instead, the descriptions of poverty were thick, graphic and begged attention. For instance, hunger is perhaps the most gruesome reality of poverty and while it did not feature in the domestic context at all, it was widely reported in foreign contexts. Similarly, topical problems like unemployment were also prominently discussed.

*Swaziland has the world's highest HIV rates and lowest life expectancy. The economy is collapsing so fast even pensions have been stopped while poverty is so extreme people have resorted to eating cow dung. (The Daily Mail, 11/11/2011).*

*Antonio, a 44-year-old unemployed decorator forced to queue for a meal, said: "Nobody is spending any money on their houses. Everybody is postponing what can be postponed. There is no work, and if you get any they don't pay for months." (The Guardian, 14/11/2011; reporting on Italy).*

Reports on foreign poverty also stood out for their elaborate discourse on why poverty was rampant in the developing world. While no causal commentary was available for poverty in the UK, several reasons for foreign poverty were considered. Most prominent among these was the charge of socio-political inefficiency, corruption, and the failed governmental efforts in the developing world to address the prevailing crisis of poverty. To support these charges, frequent references were made to several political figureheads from

the developing world, notorious for their deviant behaviours. For instance, a report in The Daily Mail elaborated on poverty, child mortality and the AIDS epidemic in Swaziland before describing the 13 wives and luxury cars of King Mswati III and held him personally responsible for all these problems.

*But Swaziland is effectively bankrupt. Already, two-thirds of its people live beneath the poverty line and 40 per cent are unemployed. [...] Such shocking statistics make the King's polygamy, promiscuity and profligacy seem lethally irresponsible. Little wonder one of the world's oldest monarchies is fighting for survival. (The Daily Mail, 11/11/2011).*

Similarly, the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Joseph Kabila, was held responsible for widespread poverty in Congo:

*Victory for Kabila is widely predicted to trigger a violent backlash in one of Africa's biggest and most unstable countries. International observers have cried foul, with allegations of "ghost voters", fake polling stations and brutal persecution of the opposition [...] His stock has nosedived among Congo's 71 million population over a failure to tackle poverty and corruption [...] Observers detect creeping signs of tyranny. Under Kabila there have been numerous reports of activists and journalists being arrested, beaten or killed."(The Guardian, 26/11/2011).*

Linked to this theme of inefficiency and instability was media's scepticism towards humanitarian and developmental aid that the developing world receives. News reports linked the slow progress made by these countries in eradicating poverty to an alleged mismanagement of developmental aid, with a particular emphasis on financial aid coming out of the UK.

*In March, International Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell announced a strategy which will involve pouring billions of pounds of new aid money into some of the world's most corrupt regimes in a bid to tackle poverty. (The Daily Mail, 22/11/2011).*

*Delhi University's former dean of education, Professor Anil Sadgopal told me: "I don't know what the British mean when they say their free school project is 'proving very effective and making remarkable progress'. I think the British people should be asking their Government why it is funding such bad-value projects out of your public exchequer." His question is equally pertinent when it comes to Indian maternity services, which have received £60 million in British aid. At the first maternity clinic I visited, an operating theatre with thousands of pounds of equipment was gathering dust because a surgeon, anaesthetist and theatre nurse cannot be hired as there is no money to pay them. (The Daily Mail, 02/12/2011).*

While a limited number of reports considered the consequences of trade exploitation on

the developing world, the historic legacy of the colonial past of these Asian and African countries did not appear in any of the news reports. To conclude, the news coverage on poverty outside the UK not only provides a thick description of the horrors of poverty; it is also replete with themes of corruption, chaos and mismanagement.

## **Poverty as an anchor**

Although the time frame chosen for sampling news reports was random, it happened to fall in temporal proximity to tragic events. The sampling period from the year 2011 coincided with the aftermath of a major riot in London and while discussing these riots newspapers drew heavily on the topic of poverty. Similarly, the sampling period from the year 2001 followed the American declaration of war in Afghanistan where the UK was an ally. The war itself was the result of the terrorist attacks in America on September 11 and media used poverty to make sense of these acts of terrorism.

In the one-month period sampled from the year 2001, 19 separate news reports across all newspapers sampled linked terrorism to poverty, even claiming poverty as the cause of terrorism.

*'And there must be recognition that the next generation of suicide bombers is growing up in Palestinian refugee camps, in the grinding poverty that so scars the Third World and that we have done insufficient to address.'* (The Daily Telegraph, 24/11/2001)

*'The president of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, warned last night that global poverty was breeding terrorism and called on the west to make good on its promises to bridge the gulf between rich and poor nations.'* (The Guardian, 13/11/2001; emphasis added)

It is noteworthy that in the 2011 sample, media did not associate poverty with terrorism instead, newspapers presented poverty among the youth as the single most important factor leading to the rioting in London.

*'A report commissioned by the Guardian newspaper – based on 270 interviews with those taking part in the disturbances – placed 'policing' behind only poverty as a trigger.'* (The Daily Mail, 06/12/2011)

*'Dr Rowan Williams wrote an article in The Guardian this week, responding to interviews which that newspaper and the London School of Economics had conducted with 270 people who rioted across England back in August. The researchers concluded that a complex mix of grievances (poverty, inequality) brought youths out onto the streets as well as a dismayingly simple greed for what some called "free stuff".'* (The Daily Telegraph,

08/12/2011, p. 33)

What is more, there is an implicit yet pertinent facet to the links the media drew between poverty and these threatening social events. As the quotes above illustrate, stories presenting poverty as the cause of terrorism and rioting cited highly credible sources and institutions like the London School of Economics and the President of the World Bank. On the other hand, the limited number of reports that questioned these links quoted anonymous sources. It can be argued that as a result of the evident discrepancy between the perceived credibilities of sources—those linking poverty to terrorism etc. and those questioning these links—might bias the eventual position of the reader on these issues in a certain direction.

*But one source said: 'there is no evidence to suggest that the September 11 attacks were prompted by poverty and injustice. The attacks were launched to support a radical political agenda.'*(*The Daily Mail*, 21/11/2001; *emphasis added*).

*'And an Abu Dhabi prince declared that militant extremism in the Middle East didn't come from poverty - 'it is the way they are ruled that is the problem.'*(*The Daily Mail*, 10/12/2001; *emphasis added*).

To conclude, linking poverty to social unrest, criminal behaviour and terrorism not only stigmatises the poor but also instils a sense of fear towards them. Past research indicates that poverty is regarded as a burden to society (Reutter et. al., 2009) and shaking off the stigma of poverty may be even more difficult than AIDS stigma (Campbell et. al., 2012). In the discussions that follow, we focus on the implications of these findings and argue that the media coverage captured in our data set leads to creating the poor as the 'problematic other'. Using our theoretical backdrop of social representations, we examine the dynamics through which media has engaged in othering poverty and outline three specific processes of othering that we observe in our data.

## DISCUSSION

Most media studies on poverty point in the direction of a recurring observation that usually the poor are presented in one of two contrasting frames: the 'deserving poor' and the 'undeserving poor'. While the frame of deserving poor employs a sympathetic treatment of the poor, the frame of the undeserving poor is built upon the rhetoric of deficiency in individuals who are portrayed as a burden on the taxpayer due to their dependency on welfare policies (see also, scroungerphobia, Golding & Middleton, 1982). This mutually

exclusive binary based on deservingness has been noted in several studies (Barnett, Hodgetts, Nikora, Chamberlain, & Karapu, 2007; BBC, 2010) and our data, too, supports these trends: in all three categories, the discussions on poverty were shaped by representations of deservingness and deficiency. In the domestic context, the plight of poor children was linked to household poverty caused by parental laziness and drug addiction. The media clearly presented such parents as deficient and undeserving of welfare. Similarly, the discussion on foreign poverty highlighted socio-political deficiencies in the developing world. In this way, the media presents developing nations as undeserving and, as demonstrated earlier, explicitly questions the justification of channeling British taxpayers' money into these nations in the form of foreign aid. Finally, in linking poverty with terrorism and riots, the media presents the most undeserving face of the poor. Within this context, the poor are not only undeserving of public sympathy and help, they become a source of threat and danger to the rest of the society.

In our data, the British press limits domestic discussions on poverty to the case of poor children and elderly whereas the presentation of foreign poverty is more detailed and explicit. On the face of it, little is common between the domestic and foreign poverty contexts of media discussions, as is between them and the third context where poverty is used to make sense of terrorist attacks and riots. However, when conceptualised on the social landscape where the poor form a distinct group, it becomes evident that the representational content in each of the three contexts contributes to the social distancing of the poor (cf. Simmel, 1921). We argue that such a social distancing leads to the creation of the poor as the 'Other' in comparison with the rest of the society as the self. Self-Other distinctions are central to social spaces and identities and past research has shown that specific social groups are often presented as the 'Other' (for e.g., mental illness, Foster, 2006; AIDS patients, Joffe, 2005). Our work suggests that the poor form another social group that is developed as the 'Other' and this is achieved through three distinct representational pathways: othering through representational absence, othering through representations of difference, and othering through representations of threat.

**Othering through representational absence.** Absence and denial are perhaps the most common ways in which the public sphere deals with threatening and anxiety provoking information. Poverty is complex, dynamic and pervasive, yet our study reveals absences of several kinds in media discussions of poverty. Absence is marked by a 'partial construction of the object' (Gervais, Morant, & Penn, 1999, p. 424) as is evident from the lack of any

consideration of the causes and dynamics of poverty in the domestic context. The partial construction is also evident in the absence of discussions on socio-economic factors involved in condemning individuals and families to poverty and a marked failure to extend a sympathetic treatment to groups other than children and the elderly. It has previously been noted that the media often restricts its sympathetic discussions to the case of children while adult poverty is seldom considered (Jeppesen, 2009). What is more, closely related issues like unemployment, homelessness, rising cost of healthcare etc. did not feature at all in news and as a result, poverty is isolated as a very topical problem. These absences are not limited only to reports on the UK but extend even to foreign poverty. Most of the Asian and African countries that were featured in the media reports have a long history of wealth drain during the dark colonial era. While specialised academic works have often linked poverty in the developing world with the history of colonial exploitation (Bagchi, 2010; Sen, 2008), the media sidesteps the issue completely and instead highlights the socio-political deficiency of these nations.

Theoretically, these absences have a tremendous significance. Gervais et al. (1999) underline the significance of representational absence and consider these absences to be indicative of the manner in which power dynamics in the social world influence the construction of reality. Indeed, the 'unsaid' forms a critical part of the representational carousel and these absences hamper the acknowledgement of poverty as a significant social problem and also reduce the imperative for concerted attempts at its amelioration. It is an implicit, yet significant channel of externalising the threat of poverty by creating the Other where it is localised—an other whose existence is never fully acknowledged.

**Othering through representations of difference.** The Other is an embodied recognition of its departure from the constitutive elements of the self. While the distancing of poverty in the domestic context happened through absences, it was through portrayal of stark differences that foreign poverty was constructed as a malady of the Other. Poverty in the developing world was attributed to corrupt institutions, political mismanagement and callous political leadership. The graphic imagery evoked by the description of the 13 wives of King Mswati III in Swaziland, the fake polling stations and ghost voters in Joseph Kabila's Congo and defunct maternity clinics of India can be understood as the objectification of differences between the contexts to which the Self and the Other belong. According to Moscovici (2000), 'to objectify is to discover the iconic quality of an imprecise idea or being, to reproduce a concept in an image' (p. 49). Objectification is also the process of ascribing a tangible figure to the contents of a representation. For instance, in the context

of the political leaders of the developing world, the media builds upon the ancient themata (see, Markova, 2000) of a powerful evil figure that brings about misery and pain (Avens, 1977; cf. the archetypes of 'the devil' and 'the trickster', Jung, 1990). Describing the deviant behaviours and atrocities of several corrupt leaders of the developing world, the media not only blames them for poverty in their lands but in doing so, also develops them as tangible icons of foreign poverty. Similarly, fake polling stations and defunct maternity clinics are images that graphically encapsulate and objectify the representation of a dysfunctional socio-political order as the cause of poverty. These descriptions are representations of difference between British society and societies where poverty is rampant. Such objectification reinforces these differences between the Self and the Other and makes the inherent representation readily available for meaning making activities in the society. It is thus that the process of Othering develops on a platform of differences: poverty appears as an atrocious affliction scarring societies that are remarkably different from the UK. The Self is a British reader of these newspapers and clearly does not belong to a society where poverty exists because in those lands, political leaders take 13 wives or maternity clinics are defunct. With the distinction between Self and Other thus established, the media once again represents poverty as the problem of the Other.

**Othering through representations of threat.** Poverty has long been associated with a range of socially undesirable activities: petty crimes like theft to mass nuisances in the form of riots have all drawn upon poverty as an explanation (for e.g. see, Olzak, Shanahan, & Mceneaney, 1996). As we noted while presenting the results of our study, poverty was linked to the threat of terrorism and riots and this becomes the strongest channel of othering poverty. While poverty has often been linked to riots by the press, terrorism is a rather novel context for poverty discussions. Hence, before we address othering based on representations of threat, we examine the association of poverty with terrorism in detail.

Moscovici (2000) argues that the origins of all representations can be traced to the need of the society to 'make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar' (p. 37, italics in original). Indeed, the events of 11 September presented unforeseen unfamiliarity. Although suicide bombings were not a new phenomenon (for e.g. see, Reuters, 2004), the unfolding of events on 11 September provided many moments of novelty. Not only was it unique with respect to a series of simultaneous terrorist attacks across the US, it was also the first time in human history that commercial airliners were used as a terrorist weapon. Further, the World Trade Centre towers had been regarded as symbols of the prosperity of the western

world, representing the success of neoliberal capitalism (Reid, 2004). Their destruction left tremendous voids, literally in the physical world and metaphorically in the social knowledge system. It was a shocking moment of unfamiliarity and novelty and thus required an explanation. It is under the shadow of such crises in social knowledge systems that new representations are born (Moscovici, 1988).

The poor have long been considered as a threat by affluent and prosperous sections of the society. Reis (1999) argues that European society has a historical past of construing poverty as a threat due to its potential for violent revolutions. The French Revolution of 1789 exemplifies this, where the proletariat overthrew the bourgeois culminating in the imprisonment and eventual execution of the monarch. Elites in several nations like South Africa (Kalati & Manor, 1999), Brazil (Reis, 1999) and Bangladesh (Hossain & Moore, 1999) have been reported to regard poverty as a threat to their well-being for reasons as diverse as the perceived antisocial activities of the poor to the spread of diseases. In the same line, as our study notes, the representation of poor being dependent on welfare can also be understood as denoting an exploitative and hence threatening presence. However, representing poverty as having close associations with terrorism invokes a threat that is dramatically different from all other threatening constructions of poverty. While the revolutionary threat of poverty has historically been realised through mass mobilisation and therefore been predictable, the threat of terrorism is neither discrete nor overt and relies predominantly on its surprise value to afflict innocent casualties. Similarly, when the threat of poverty comes from its perceived association with criminal behaviour, the threatened community can exercise its agency and reduce the threat by taking measures such as avoiding impoverished neighbourhoods. With terrorism, the possibility of anticipating an attack and subsequently exercising agency in a pre-emptive fashion is minimal. As a result, terrorism presents an unpredictable, clandestine, ever-present and indiscriminate threat to all social groups. This representation adds a new dimension to the perceived threat of poverty in society and precipitates the strongest othering of the poor. General society as the Self must remain fearful of contact with poverty as the Other for the Other has been represented as the harbinger of great misery in the society (cf. distancing self from defective and dangerous strangers, Hodgetts et al., 2011).

### **Media, poverty and othering: some conclusions**

In examining the patterns of representations of poverty in this sample of articles from



British newspapers, we found an implicit tendency to distance poverty from general society and portray it as a problematic Other. The representations of domestic poverty were restricted either to a particular age group (children/elderly) or to specific problems (fuel poverty). The problems of children were attributed to bad parenting and fuel poverty was blamed on energy companies while the social order in general remains just. The othering achieved through confining attention to only certain groups relied on absences. The distancing is subtle and implicit, yet the notion of poverty belonging to the Other is perceptible. For British readers of these newspapers, poverty beyond the UK inherently belongs to the Other: here, discussions are elaborate and the images are graphic. The differences are further highlighted by vivid descriptions of anarchy, corruption and mismanagement that the newspapers earmark while discussing poverty abroad. What is more, the Other is even given a face: poverty (and especially its causes) is objectified in the tyranny of inept political figureheads. These representations of difference chalk out a well-defined distinction between the Self and the Other: the Other is deficient and has problems while the Self, for all its differences from the Other, is separated from the problem of poverty. Poverty afflicts people in societies that are distinctly different from one to which an average reader of these newspapers belongs. The distancing from poverty comes full circle when poverty is used to anchor the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. The Other that has hitherto been regarded as different from the Self becomes an object to be feared. With this representational turn the differences between the Self and the Other are made absolute—the Other becomes a direct threat to the well being of the Self.

The relationship between the media and its audience in the modern world is bidirectional. The content of the news is often a response to the perceived preferences of its consumers (Foster, 2006; Hough, 1988). Growing competition between news agencies has contributed to the evolution of a new trend that has been designated as market-driven journalism (McManus, 1994), consumer and supplier relationship (Tai & Chang, 2002), and commercial journalism (McChesney, 1999). Despite this bi-directionality, the role of news media in shaping the public perception of social issues remains well documented (Baum & Potter, 2008; Bloch-Elkon, 2007; Bratton & Mattes, 2003; Hodgetts, Bolam, & Stephens, 2005; Nisbet & Myers, 2011). Society draws upon the communicative acts of newspapers and through its subsequent elaboration in the public sphere, representations—for example, those of poverty—are born, maintained, developed and changed. Among other contributing factors, these representations circulating in society interact, compete and inform each other and contribute in the formation of the public

opinion on poverty. The role of public opinion in democratic societies is critical, since it can influence governmental responses to social problems (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). In several societies, research has noted that governmental action on social problems mirrors what the society thinks about them (Burstein, 1998, 2003; Hays, Esler, & Hays, 1996; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Wlezien, 1996). It is in this light that we argue the significance of othering poverty. By no means, we suggest this to be intentional on the part of the media—a commentary of that sort remains beyond the scope and intentions of this work. Instead, we hope that this work highlights some of the channels through which the poor are distanced from the general society and are developed as an Other that is either of no direct relevance or is a threat to the well being and safety of the Self. In doing so, we outline three pathways through which media contributes to the othering of poverty and we hope that subsequent works will build on this and outline other pathways that result in the social distancing of the poor.

The present study has its limitations with respect to the number of newspapers and the duration of coverage sampled but it nevertheless highlights a worrying trend. Jovchelovitch (1996) notes that representational activities depend upon the development of an ‘other’ in the social landscape and in that sense, othering is inevitable in meaning making activities in the society. As we have tried to demonstrate in our discussion, the othering of poverty restores the notion of general prosperity and well-being in society while the significance of the problem, and any attempt to deal with it, dwindle. As we approach the 2015 ‘deadline’ for the Millennium Development Goals, it is time to put poverty back in the public consciousness.

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Table 1. Description of the Dataset

Newspaper	2001 data set	2011 data set	Total
The Daily Telegraph	22	40	62
The Guardian	43	74	117
The Daily Mail	23	37	60
The Daily Express	24	11	35
Total	112	162	274 (N)

Table 2. Description of themes and coding

Themes	Categories	Instances of occurrence
Domestic Poverty	Poverty in Children	67
	Inability to pay for winter heating	64
	Aid and Welfare	46
	Disabled people in poverty	5
	Retired Army Servicemen	4
	Youth	4
Foreign Poverty	The issue of developmental aid	28
	Socio-political deficiency	14
	Graphic description of poverty	10
Poverty as an Anchor	Links between terrorism and poverty	19
	Poverty and the reason for crime and Rioting	19
	Poverty as a health concern	2
	Poverty as the cause of environmental degradation	2

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