

The *National Post*'s Campaign Against Anti-poverty Advocates: A War in Words with Real Casualties

Robert Harding
University of the Fraser Valley

Abstract

Using methods of critical discourse analysis, I studied all opinion pieces and editorials about poverty published in the *National Post* during the first three months of 2014. The dominant discourse that emerged was one of war on anti-poverty advocates. In support of this discourse, discursive rhetorical strategies were mobilized, including oppositions such as deserving vs. undeserving poor, differential treatment of sources and credentials, over-lexicalization, and derogation. As the flagship publication of Postmedia Network Canada, the country's largest English-language newspaper chain, the *National Post* not only sets the tone for its sister publications, it is also strongly positioned to influence public discourse about poverty and how to alleviate it. The prescription to poverty promoted in the op-ed pages of this national newspaper—that governments slash services and programs for the poor and allow market forces to run their course—is targeted at politicians, policy makers, and the general public. During the first quarter of 2014, *National Post* op-ed pieces consistently vilified anti-poverty advocates and discredited the initiatives they promoted, such as implementing guaranteed annual income programs, raising tax rates for wealthy individuals and corporations, and increasing minimum wages and welfare rates.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, poverty, *National Post*, opinion-editorial pieces, anti-poverty advocates

We've been at war for decades now—not just in Afghanistan or Iraq, but right here at home. Domestically, it's been a war against the poor, but if you hadn't noticed, that's not surprising. You wouldn't often have found the casualty figures from this particular conflict in your local newspaper or on the nightly TV news.

—Frances Fox Piven (2011)

This paper examines poverty discourse in opinion pieces and editorials published in the first three months of 2014 by the *National Post*, the flagship publication of Postmedia Network Canada Corporation. While Postmedia's holdings include the largest English-language newspaper chain in Canada, two U.S. hedge funds are its primary owners. The dominant discourse that emerged in this national newspaper is one of war on anti-poverty advocates. This discourse was supported through the discursive use of rhetorical strategies, including oppositions such as deserving vs. undeserving poor, differential treatment of sources and credentials, over-lexicalization, and derogation. *National Post* commentators and editors offered

a simple neo-liberal prescription to the problem of poverty: leave it to “market forces” and individual initiative. The efforts of those who work with the poor—such as social service agency managers, social workers, community planners, and poor people themselves—were constructed as inimical to the economic health of the country as a whole and to poor people in particular.

The war of words being waged in 2014 against those trying to ameliorate poverty in the pages of the *National Post* war is more than symbolic, and it is poor people themselves who suffer collateral damage. It represents a concerted campaign to influence government approaches to policy, by promoting highly ideological framing of causes and solutions to poverty. The prescription promoted in the newspaper—that governments cut programs and services for the poor and allow market forces to run their course—was targeted at politicians, policy makers, and the general public. If poverty activists and the progressive policies they promote are vilified and discredited in the popular imagination, governments may feel empowered to slash vital services and programs. They may also choose to ignore calls to increase minimum wage, index benefits, and implement guaranteed annual income (GAI) programs, initiatives that have the potential to make a material difference in the lives of women, racialized populations, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups. Clearly, the *National Post's* 2014 campaign against anti-poverty advocates was a war with human casualties.

Methodology

Techniques of critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2008) were applied to all opinion pieces and editorials on poverty issues¹ published during the months of January, February, and March, 2014 in the *National Post*, including *The Financial Post*, the paper's business section. Van Dijk's approach focusses on the ways in which news discourse buttresses argumentation strategies through the deployment of news structures, lexical choices, and rhetorical devices such as “contrasts, metaphors, hyperboles and euphemisms” (van Dijk, 1997, p. 33). Given the highly ideological construction of discourse about poverty activism and poor people themselves, the fine-grained textual examination used in critical discourse analysis is well-suited to the study of op-ed pieces about it. Indeed, recent textual analyses of the representation of poverty have employed van Dijk's methodology (Harding, 2016; Jeppesen, 2009; Lorenzo-Dus & Marsh, 2012; Paterson, Coffey-Glover, & Peplow, 2015; Soroko, 2015).

I searched for “poverty,” “poor,” and related key words in the *National Post* using the full-text online news database, Proquest. Every news text that mentioned one or more of these key words in the first three months of 2014 was reviewed. Those texts unrelated to poverty or those referencing other connotations of key words were discarded (e.g., use of the word *poor* in “things are going poorly”).

¹ There is no official poverty line in Canada. In their data, Statistics Canada steadfastly avoids the use of the word *poverty*. Instead, they use the term “after-tax low income cut-offs” or (LICO) to refer to the level below which a Canadian's income is considered low. Many social scientists and advocacy organizations consider this measure to be the poverty line.

Broad themes in the 31 opinion pieces and editorials that discussed poverty-related issues in a substantive way were identified. The twelve op-ed pieces whose primary focus was on poverty were subjected to a detailed textual analysis.

Opinion pieces and editorials about poverty represent an especially rich source of data because they are explicitly ideological. Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs (1997) have pointed out that this news genre represents the practice of argumentation that “uses language to justify or refute a standpoint with the aim of securing agreement in views” (p. 208). While “hard” news stories select certain facts in support of ostensibly objective representations of events and topics, opinion writing invokes “argumentative strategies in order to influence reader’s attitudes and opinions about what editors and opinion writers believe to be important issues” (Harding, 2016). As the national broadsheet of the largest newspaper publisher in the country, the *National Post* has a significant voice in the public conversation about poverty in Canada.

The *National Post* and Poverty Policy Discourse in 2014

At the time of this research, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party were in the fourth year of their first majority government. The neo-liberal agenda of slashing taxes and cutting social services begun during Harper’s two earlier minority governments escalated once the Conservative Party won 166 of 308 seats in the May 2011 federal election. The Harper government eliminated or stripped down numerous programs and services relied on by low-income Canadians, including women and children (Stinson, 2015), Indigenous peoples (FitzGerald, 2015), homeless people (Doberstein & Smith, 2015), and other vulnerable populations. Harper’s neo-liberal agenda was supported by the *National Post*, which had endorsed him and his Conservative Party in the three previous federal elections.

During this time, social workers and others working with the poor campaigned to raise public awareness about the harsh consequences of program cuts on the poor, and advocated for progressive policy change, including minimum wage increases and a guaranteed annual income: Both issues were the subject of *National Post* opinion pieces published during the research period. Activists associated with the Occupy movement, an international socio-political movement protesting the dominance of a global financial system that benefits the wealthy and hurts the poor, also came under the scrutiny of the newspaper. Other *National Post* opinion pieces targeted the City of Vancouver’s social planners and their plan for tackling poverty and improving living conditions in the city’s Downtown Eastside (DTES), known as Canada’s “poorest postal code” (Kane, 2013, May 25). The largest social service agency in that neighbourhood, the Portland Hotel Society (PHS), was also the subject of two opinion columns and an editorial. Another *National Post* opinion piece took issue with Canadians for Tax Fairness, a non-profit organization advocating “fair and progressive tax policies” that reduce inequalities and fund “quality public services” (Canadians for Tax Fairness, n.d.).

Poverty Policy Discourse

In recent years, neo-liberal discourses have dominated the conversation about poverty policy in industrialized countries. British sociologist Levitas (2005) has written extensively about poverty and the role discourse plays in social exclusion. In mid-1990s Britain, she found that the dominant discourses on poverty and “social exclusion” comprised a blend of the social integrationist discourse (SID) and moral underclass discourse (MUD). The latter discourse views poverty as legitimate and warranted since the underclass is “culturally” inferior to mainstream society, while SID reduces the problem of poverty to participation in paid employment, while ignoring other forms of inequality and structural economic factors. Raphael (2011) observed that Levitas’ research, though based in 1990s Britain, has direct “implications” for understanding Canada’s current poverty debate. He argued that MUD is the “dominant explanatory discourse” for making sense of the full range of Canadian public policy on poverty-related issues, including income security, minimum wage, and measures related to employment insurance.

Other research has found that poverty discourse encompasses binaries that have the effect of separating “the poor” from “the rest of us” (Jeppesen, 2009). For example, in British Columbia, one venerable opposition is explicitly incorporated in income security policy through the designation of two groups, those on “‘Temporary Assistance’ (the undeserving poor) and people on ‘Continuous Assistance’ (the deserving poor),” which includes people with disabilities and “Persons with Multiple Barriers to Employment as well as Children in the Home of a Relative” (p. 493). The neo-liberal notion that social programs are “expendable,” based on the concept of the undeserving poor, has led to a “pathologization of poverty” in government policy as reflected in services and programs such as the Ontario Works program, which attempts to treat “symptoms such as ‘lack of motivation and poor hygiene’” (Fernando & Earle, 2011, p. 33). The idea that programs such as income security are disposable serves to perpetuate the gendered nature of poverty since, due to structural barriers and systemic sexism, more women rely on these programs than do men.

News Discourse About Poverty in Canada

In looking at poverty discourse in three online Montreal newspapers, Nielsen (2008) found that while poor people may be the subjects of poverty journalism, reporters rarely address the poor as the audience in news stories about poverty. News coverage of poverty reflects a discussion between news commentators about “have-not citizens” with their “have” audiences. Richter et al. (2011) concluded that news media define issues such as homelessness in the public imagination, since most members of the public have minimal contact with poor people. Indeed, homeless people have strong views about how to address poverty and homelessness, but their voices are neither valued nor incorporated into news discourse (Schneider, 2011).

The exclusion of poor people from the conversation about poverty has consequences for the tone and shape of discourse. Schneider, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts (2010) observed that coverage of homeless people in four Canadian major daily newspapers included “almost nothing of the ways in which homeless people

organize themselves socially and make lives for themselves on the streets and in shelters” (p. 169). Not engaging the poor in the conversation leads to their being othered and limits the public’s ability to understand their lived experiences with poverty. News coverage about the poor is an intragroup discourse about a marginal group in that news texts are directed toward middle- and upper-class audiences but have poor people as their subject.

Furthermore, leaving out the perspectives of poor people leads to coverage that stereotypes them (Lindgren, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010); emphasizes individual, rather than structural or systemic, causes (Redden, 2011); and focusses disproportionately on negative subject matter—such as crime—in low income neighbourhoods (Lindgren, 2009). Such blaming discourses typically impose rigid, dualistic categories on the poor, such as worthy versus unworthy (Jeppesen, 2009, Redden, 2011), and legitimate versus illegitimate (Nielsen, 2008).

The exclusion of poor peoples’ perspectives from the news obscures the fact that they are involved in efforts to ameliorate poverty and make concerted efforts to have their voices heard. Jeppesen (2009) argued that, because they “refuse to be silent,” poor people working to alleviate poverty are depicted as “militants” and categorized as undeserving poor. A study of the *National Post* and 10 other newspapers found that not only were voices of poor people absent from news coverage; so, too, were those of social workers and others who work directly with them (Harding, 2016). Kozolanka (2010) found that, when mentioned at all, anti-poverty advocates were constructed as “violent,” “radical,” and “activist,” or associated with terrorism. So who is given a speaking part in the conversation about poverty? Harding (2016) found that reporters and opinion writers framed the question of how to deal with poverty as the exclusive domain of “politicians, government bureaucrats and right-wing think tanks” (p. 44).

Discourse Analysis of *National Post* Opinion Pieces and Editorials

Techniques of critical discourse analysis were applied to all twelve *National Post* op-ed pieces published during January, February, and March 2014 that had a primary focus on poverty (Table 1).

War on the Poor

In news coverage of poverty reduction initiatives, the press frequently utilize a war metaphor to characterize attempts to ameliorate it. Jeppesen (2009) argued that, in fact, “war on the poor” may be a more accurate descriptor of the dominant policy discourse since the latter “suggests that governments are opposing people living in poverty” (p. 491). Certainly, in *National Post* op-ed pieces I analyzed, poor people, especially those not engaged in the labour market, were frequently othered and portrayed, at best, as worthy of our pity, and at worst, as a drain on the economy or morally deficient. Moreover, this study has found that the most severe derogation is reserved for those attempting to ameliorate poverty through increasing and/or improving government-funded benefits and programs.

Table 1
*2014 National Post Opinion Pieces and Editorials*²

Date	Page	Headline	Author	Genre
January 10	A14	Occupy Yourselves	Jesse Kline	Columnist
January 24	FP11	Guaranteed Income Guarantees Poverty	William Watson	Columnist
January 28	FP13	Maximum Wage Damage	Charles Lammam	Guest Columnist
January 29	FP17	Minimum Thinking	Peter Foster	Columnist
January 31	A1	A Curious Way to Back Business	Scott Stinson	Columnist
January 31	FP11	Evidence-Free Minimum Wage Policy	William Watson	Columnist
February 11	A10	Budgets Should Help Citizens, Not Just 'Taxpayers'	Peter Clutterbuck	Guest Columnist
March 5	A2	Vancouver's Dangerous Platitudes	Brian Hutchinson	Columnist
March 15	A6	Eastside Money Pit	Brian Hutchinson	Columnist
March 21	A1	BC Charity Spent Lavishly Helping Poor	Brian Hutchinson	Columnist
March 21	FP11	Sunday School Tax Course	Terence Corcoran	Columnist
March 22	A6	The Emirs of Vancouver	National Post	Editorial

In the *National Post*, the overarching discourse was war on anti-poverty advocates. Discursive rhetorical gambits were employed to derogate and discredit people working to alleviate it. Anti-poverty advocates were constructed as being outside the normative base of Canadian politics. Descriptors such as “leftish critics” (Foster, 2014, January 29, FP17), “left-leaning former mayor” (Hutchinson, 2014, March 5), “leftwing ideologues” (Kline, 2014, January 10), and “old leftist coot” (Corcoran, 2014, March 21, FP11) were routinely deployed to delegitimize them. They were portrayed as being on the extreme end of a binary opposition: supporters of government intervention versus free market proponents. Business people and pro-free-market economists were constructed as the sole experts on poverty reduction policy.

Moreover, the utterances of anti-poverty advocates were framed as allegations. By contrast, the credentials of proponents of free-market approaches were given great emphasis and credibility, and writers directly quoted their words or referred to them as “stating” or “explaining.” Commentators frequently questioned the motivations of those helping the poor, suggesting they were gaining financially or in other ways benefiting at the poor’s expense. As well, doubt was cast on their competence, and their credentials were ignored.

Anti-poverty advocates’ efforts were characterized as costly, ineffective, and even counterproductive in that their actions contributed to increasing poverty and making things worse for the poor. The actual work that they did with the poor and

² Proquest does not provide the page number range of news texts; rather they include only the number of the first page.

the rationale for it was never discussed. Other communications researchers have reached similar conclusions about the invisibility of the work done by people working to reduce poverty. For example, in Ontario newspapers, the considerable work and success of an anti-poverty organization was not mentioned once in 16 years of coverage (Kozolanka, 2010).

Organizations that work with economically disadvantaged populations and promote policy change on their behalf, such as Canada Without Poverty, Raise the Rates, and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty are staffed predominantly by low-paid employees and volunteers, often women. Many of the policy issues these organizations take up—such as the lack of universal free child care, sub-poverty-line income security rates and minimum wages, and gender-based income inequities—have profound socio-economic implications for women. By not reporting on the work done by these organizations and the solutions they promote, news media exclude critiques of the gendered, intersectional nature of poverty, and any discussion of women-friendly policy solutions.

Derogation of Anti-Poverty Advocates

Anti-poverty advocates were routinely dismissed due to their mere association with activism, trade unions, and the left of the political spectrum, such as the New Democratic Party.³ In the first sentence of “Occupy Yourself,” columnist Jesse Kline (2014, January 10) describes the Occupy movement as “the disparate group of leftwing ideologues.” Thereafter, he refers to members of the movement as “protesters,” “plaintiffs,” or “occupiers.” He questions the seriousness of their cause using sarcasm, and by suggesting that their motivation is self-serving:

[They] took over city parks in 2011 to protest everything from corporate greed to the environment and income inequality? Well, they’re back. But this time they’re not trying to empower the downtrodden, they’re trying to line their pockets with the 99%’s hard-earned money.

By using the exclusive proposition “they,” Kline (2014, January 10) positions Occupy movement members as opposed to the interests of in-group members—those of “us” who work and earn money, described as “ordinary taxpayers” later in the article. By minimizing their numbers and representativeness, he further marginalizes members of this social movement and creates the impression that not only are they out for themselves, their numbers are so small they constitute nothing more than a radical fringe movement. He appeals to readers’ “common sense” by conversationalizing (Fairclough, 1994) the text through the use of discourse markers such as “well,” and by employing conversational language (“Well, they’re back”); posing rhetorical questions; framing their statements as claims (“what the protesters claim”) or simply telling readers what their intentions are (“they’re trying to line their pockets.” Kline whimsically suggests they could have made

³ The New Democratic Party (NDP) is Canada’s social democratic political party. On the federal party’s website, they describe themselves as a party of “progressive Canadians who believe we can build an even better one—a country that’s more prosperous, sustainable, and where no one is left behind” (n.d.).

better use of their time by “occupying vegan restaurants and yoga studios,” and comments that they “seem to have plenty of time to spend in a park, rather than going to work.” The former phrase constructs the occupants as privileged hipster activists, while the latter situates them at the opposite end of the binary from workers. He concludes that the Occupy movement does not genuinely desire to help the poor, since their actions are “detrimental to the people the protesters claimed to be standing up for.”

Anti-poverty advocates are similarly derogated in “Maximum Wage Damage,” a guest opinion piece by Charles Lammam (2014, January 28) of the Fraser Institute.⁴ He characterizes those advocating for an increase in Ontario’s minimum wage as “labour activists” or “activists” who make “demands” that have “adverse effects” on “those who are the most vulnerable with the least skills.” The writer raises doubts about their sincerity, arguing, “the most impoverished and least skilled workers are presumably the very people they want to help.”

By employing the rhetorical ploy of apparent concern about “the most vulnerable,” Lammam sets himself up as an ally of the poor, lending credence to his assessment of the problem—a lack of skills. By narrowly focusing on this particular “deficit” as the cause of poverty, he eludes any consideration of structural barriers and systemic issues faced by oppressed groups, such as women, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and people living with disabilities. Other opinion pieces studied in this project also conflated those living in poverty into “the poor” or “impoverished,” and eschewed any analysis of differential treatment and barriers based on social location.

Lammam’s representation of the cause of poverty exemplifies “poverty porn,” a pattern of news coverage that focuses on “individual failures and deficiencies as opposed to looking at wider societal/economic constraints” (Paterson, Coffey-Glover, & Peplow, 2015, p. 197). Poverty porn represents the poor for the purposes of entertainment, often eliciting angry and indignant reactions from audiences (p. 197).

Lammam (2014, January 28) argues that the “real world” has demonstrated that raising the minimum wage is detrimental to the interests of people living in poverty. This sets up a basic opposition between two distinct perspectives: a realistic view (leave the minimum wage as it is) and an unrealistic view (raise it). The writer further entrenches this binary. Pitted against anti-poverty activists who make “claims,” “trot out demands,” and are disconnected from reality are “independent academic researchers,” “more than a dozen studies,” a University of California professor who is the “foremost expert in the area,” “research from the United States,” “leading scholars in the field,” and “a study of seven major US cities.”

⁴ The Fraser Institute (FI) promotes economic freedom, individual self-sufficiency, and responsibility rather than “economic dependence” on government programs. Their mission is to help create a “free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets, and personal responsibility” (Fraser Institute, n.d.).

Differential Treatment of Sources and Credentials

Research into how sources inform the social construction of the news has demonstrated that “not all news sources enjoy the same degree of access to the media” (Cross, 2010, p. 414). Indeed, the current study found that *National Post* commentators treated sources very differently depending on the type of anti-poverty measures they were promoting. Jullian (2011) observed that a journalist’s choice of sources is in itself an ideological act, since the inclusion or exclusion of a particular source signifies “subjectivity.” As well, sources can be introduced and contextualized in ways that make them sound naive or expert, and can be “used to praise, condemn, discredit, etc., the events or people involved in such events” (p. 769).

In the *National Post* op-ed pieces in this study, the credentials and expertise of “professionals” who support free market approaches were foregrounded and presented as evidence of the veracity of their arguments, while the qualifications and competence of those promoting government intervention were either ignored, dismissed, or derogated. For example, in “Maximum Wage Damage,” Lammam (2014, January 28) does not mention the credentials or expertise of anyone advocating minimum wage increases. Instead, the only information he supplies about them is that they are “activists” or “labour activists,” and he includes no details about their background or experience. This differential treatment of sources is most revealing. It is as if by the mere act of nomination, he has already debunked the arguments of anyone holding a position contrary to his own.

In “Minimum Thinking,” Peter Foster (2014, January 29) uses the present simple tense to establish the facticity of the paradoxical nature of minimum wage: “Given that economics tells us, a priori, that they hurt those they are intended to help—lowest paid workers.” By subtracting the human subject from his statement, the writer removes any notion of bias—on his, or anyone else’s part; he is simply stating a basic law of economics. In setting up an “us” versus them binary, the writer defines “us” as reasonable people who heed those laws, and positions anyone who opposes his views as unreasonable. Having established the wrong-headedness of minimum wage policy, Foster then derogates its supporters. Their arguments and credentials are ignored, and they are dismissed as “the left”—those who have framed the matter as “a culture war issue”; “leftish critics—ever searching for a chink in reality”; and “those who consider themselves advocates for the poor.”

These “minimum wage proponents” are juxtaposed with “economists” who “tell us” that minimum wages hurt the poor, “the great Cambridge economist Alfred Marshall,” the “dominant economist of his time, John Stuart Mill,” Adam Smith, and two Nobel laureates, James Buchanan and Merton H. Miller (Foster, 2014, January 29). The sole reference made to proponents of an increased minimum wage is to “a study by David Card and Alan B. Krueger” who “claimed” that minimum wages had minimal adverse effects on the economy. However, unlike the “experts” opposed to increasing minimum wage, the writer does not situate them in relation to a particular field (“economics”), educational institution (“Cambridge”), award (“Nobel Prize”), or evaluative statement (“great,” “dominant”). No mention is made of the fact that both men are eminent economists. Dr. Card has a Ph.D. in Economics from

Princeton University, and is Professor of Economics at the University of California. Dr. Krueger is Bendheim Professor of Economics and Public Affairs at Princeton University, former chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, and ranked as one of the world's top economists.⁵ Yet Foster dismisses their arguments, describing them as “equivalent to a physicist believing that water could flow uphill.”

Not only are the credentials and qualifications of poverty reduction advocates not cited, individual poverty reduction advocates are often not even identified by name, but rather as part of some unspecified collective, such as labour activists. At the conclusion of the article, Foster even removes them as subjects from sentences, while attributing to them positions and claims, which he immediately discredits: “One oft repeated claim is that if you don’t support minimum wages, you don’t care about the poor. This is the very reverse of the truth” (2014, January 29).

Using similar rhetorical strategies, two other columnists deride the Ontario government’s decision to raise the minimum wage. In “A Curious Way to Back Business,” Scott Stinson (2014, January 31) accuses the government of laying out its plan to “jack up” and “hike wages” “in a gooey layer of sentiment.” He argues that any attempt to make minimum wages keep pace with inflation will hurt those it is “supposedly” trying to help, especially young workers. In “Evidence-Free Minimum Wage Policy,” William Watson (2014, January 31) takes a different tack. Instead of rendering invisible the credentials of those advocating a minimum wage increase, he foregrounds them. Anil Verma, a Professor of Human Resources at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, chaired Ontario’s Minimum Wage Advisory Panel. The writer undercuts Professor Verma’s credibility by pointing out the privilege and high salary earned by academics, and hints that the professor may be acting opportunistically, since the panel recommended that a review be conducted every five years, and “as you’d expect from a panel headed by a professor, establish an ongoing research program for data and information gathering, not necessary at the Rotman School, I suppose, but doubtless paying much more than minimum wage.”

In “Guaranteed Income Guarantees Poverty,” the same writer dismisses a GAI policy proposal by invoking the lyrics of a decades-old folksong by Québécois singer, Felix Leclerc:

“The best way to kill a man is to pay him to do nothing.” Even so, people keep proposing that we introduce a guaranteed annual income, which would make it possible for recipients, if they chose, to do nothing and still receive a basic income. (Watson, 2014, January 24)

Watson’s use of the adverbial expression, “even so,” elevates the lyric to the level of a truism, leaving readers to wonder why anyone (or rather, any “man,” as his gendered evidence implies that work is an exclusively male domain) would suggest a program so contrary to simple logic. Common-sense arguments are highly persuasive

⁵ According to Ideas/RePEc (n.d.), a website devoted to enhancing the “free dissemination of research in Economics,” Krueger is the 40th-ranked economist in the world.

with news audiences, as they give a “particular and partial reading of the world, while appearing to be universal and uncontroversial” (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001, p. 87).

Shifting from the gambit of appealing to common sense, Watson (2014, January 24) invokes his privileged expertise to buttress his condemnation of the GAI. Citing economist Milton Freedman’s reservations about GAI proposals, he discloses that he, too, is an economist and offers his professional opinion on the negative impact such programs would have on low-income people’s incentive to work: “It’s also possible they’d at least think about cutting back on the drudgery of work and ‘consuming more leisure,’ as *we* economists say [emphasis added]” (2014, January 24). Having privileged his knowledge of low-income workers’ motivation, he turns to the work of “fellow” economists to buttress his critique of the proposal, citing a study by “three economists from Laval University,” thereafter referred to as “the economists” or the “Laval economists.” Watson concludes that the people advocating this policy will not alleviate poverty, but rather “guarantee” it.

That anti-poverty advocates hurt people living in poverty more than they help them was a recurring theme in the *National Post*’s coverage of poverty-related issues. In “Sunday School Tax Course,” Terence Corcoran (2014, March 21) concludes that “social activists” advocating fairness in corporate tax policy are “simply wrong” and that higher corporate taxes are “regressive” and hurt “lower income Canadians.” According to Corcoran, in a recent CBC radio interview Dennis Howlett, “executive director of an organization called Canadians for Tax Fairness” was “spoonfed leftist cotton candy” by host Michael Enright, described as an “avuncular old leftist coot.” Having discredited the interviewer, Corcoran ridicules Howlett’s thesis: “[Howlett] explained how the international tax system worked and how come so many corporations seem to pay little or no income tax and the rest of Canadians are getting screwed.” By using colloquial language (“how come”) and slang (“getting screwed”) to oversimplify Howlett’s argument, Corcoran sidesteps any substantive arguments Howlett may have made.

Corcoran (2014, January 24) contends that since “Howlett is not a tax specialist, let alone a corporate tax expert,” he is disqualified from commenting on the topic of corporate tax fairness. Further discrediting him is that fact that

he’s a long time social activist, who has held a variety of posts, including executive director of the National Anti-Poverty Organization. He’s been a relentless campaigner over decades for social justice, wealth distribution, soak the rich government intervention.

While Howlett’s longevity and doggedness could be construed as positive qualities for any conscientious worker, in this situation, these attributes are given a negative connotation, since they are devoted to corrupt or vindictive ends such as “wealth distribution” and “soaking” the “rich.” Instead of referencing Howlett’s actual words, the writer paraphrases them, stating that he is making “claims,” “allegations,” and “batting around big numbers.”

The organization he works for “has no staff to speak of” and “is a union-backed front for the same old crowd of intellectuals and activists—from Jim Stanford to the Council of Canadians to Armine Yalnizyan” (Corcoran, March 21). As with other op-

ed pieces analyzed for this study, Corcoran discredits organizations and individuals by the mere mention of their names, while not disclosing their achievements, credentials, or actual work experience. For example, Stanford is a Cambridge-educated economist, and the Board of Directors and Advisory Council of Canadians for Tax Fairness include other economists as well as an Osgoode Hall tax law professor. In refuting Mr. Howlett's contentions, the columnist cites two "experts." Unlike the "social activists" he derogates, the writer quickly establishes their authority on the topic: "two of Canada's leading corporate tax experts," and provides specifics about their job titles and credentials: "Nat Boidman of the Montreal Law Office of Davis Ward Phillips & Vineberg, and Jack Mintz, chair of the School of Public Policy at the University of Calgary." After quoting "our two fill-in commentators," Corcoran concludes that Howlett's "argument is simply wrong."

Derogating the Poor and Impugning Those Trying to Help

While *National Post* opinion pieces and editorials in 2014 typically argued that the efforts of anti-poverty advocates are counterproductive, some writers went further, derogating poor people themselves and impugning the motives of those trying to help them. In three columns and one editorial about Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), the newspaper cast aspersions on the efforts of social planners and a major social services agency to improve the area. The theme of the cost of this neighbourhood to "us," in terms of spending of taxpayers' money, recurs throughout all three columns.

In "Vancouver's Dangerous Platitudes," Hutchinson (2014, March 5) begins by denigrating the DTES, referring to it as Canada's "largest urban slum." The columnist uses stereotypical and dramatic adjectives and nouns to emphasize what he sees as the dysfunctional nature of the locality. It is "a perennially distressed, highly subsidized neighbourhood" with "mean streets." Hutchinson constructs the area as synonymous with crime and drug abuse, invoking a dehumanizing and demeaning metaphor, "but the fact remains, and it's as plain as day, the place is also a quasi-sanctioned shooting gallery filled with cutthroat drug dealers, and addictions, despair and disease." Using the metaphor of shooting gallery to characterize the neighbourhood foregrounds the meaning of the sentence in a completely different way. The purpose of the community is not what readers might expect, but rather it is a place where addicts inject illicit drugs. Placing the neighbourhood beyond the normative experience of the *National Post's* audience disinclines readers to be empathetic. Since this metaphor suggests a specific solution—a police response—it assumes the dimension of a generative metaphor, which "derives its normative force from certain purposes and values, certain normative images, which have long been powerful in our culture" (Schon, 1998, p. 147).

The author warns readers that the area is dangerous, especially for the most vulnerable: "predators ... lurk everywhere and sell everything, including the flesh of young girls" (Hutchinson, 2014, March 5). The reference to gender, rare in the op-ed pieces studied, does not lead to any discussion of the gendered nature of poverty or the violence it engenders; rather, it appears to be invoked for the sole purpose of intensifying the sense of moral panic. All-inclusive words such as "everywhere" and

“everything” heighten the direness of Hutchinson’s warning: No matter where you are in the DTES, you are not safe. Using factive language and the present simple tense, he presents this as the incontrovertible truth. This puts readers in the position of having to place themselves beyond the pale of reason in order to come to any conclusion other than that the writer’s.

In singling out specific demographics of the neighbourhood and associating them with the hazards posed to insiders and outsiders alike, the writer naturalizes and normalizes pejorative and negative stereotypes already existing in the public idiom:

And who are these vulnerable persons and groups? “Aboriginal communities, children, women, youth, drug users, homeless, people affected by mental illness, disabled, seniors and sex workers.” Many would argue that any resident or visitor in the DTES can feel vulnerable, it’s that bad. (Hutchinson, 2014, March 5)

After singling out these resident categories, the columnist provides no explanation of why he deems them to be vulnerable, or how it is that they came to be living in this “dangerous area.” By not questioning why these groups are disproportionately represented in the DTES, Hutchinson naturalizes their presence and renders the structural barriers they experience invisible.⁶

After defining who comprises the undeserving poor, Hutchinson (2014, March 5) promptly issues a disclaimer, pointing out that the neighbourhood “has its share of law-abiding, productive residents, to be sure. It’s home to many of the city’s hard-working poor and their children.” Using adjectives, the writer establishes that the only people in the DTES worthy of empathy are “productive” people who obey the law and have paid employment.

The writer reserves his harshest criticism for anti-poverty advocates and city social planners. Paraphrasing Michael Geller, a Vancouver architect and developer, whom he constructs as an expert on social problems, Hutchinson (2014, March 5) argues that the city’s Local Area Plan for DTES (City of Vancouver, 2014, March 15) for improving the neighbourhood was “highjacked” by “special interest groups, especially those he [Geller] refers to as DTES ‘poverty activists’” who for “reasons of their own, want a neighbourhood exclusive to the poor and the marginalized. A ghetto, one might say.”

By not naming exactly who he or Geller is referring to, and by telling readers what the “poverty activists” intentions are, Hutchinson sets up a straw target—unnamed individuals who are simultaneously maligned and defined, while being denied a voice of their own. The fallacy serves to pre-empt the arguments of anyone who might be inclined to take a different position than his on the issue.

⁶Jiwani & Young (2006) have also remarked on the invisibility of social location of certain residents in representations of the DTES, arguing that portrayals of Indigenous women “oscillate between visibility and hypervisibility: invisible as victims of violence and hypervisibility as deviant bodies” (p. 899). This binary serves to close off any attention to a basic question: How did these women get here? By not considering the role played by “systemic issues such as intergenerational trauma and residential schools,” opportunities for “re-framing” Indigenous women living in DTES “in more positive ways” are missed (p. 910).

The City of Vancouver is also derogated for two reasons. First, for creating an atmosphere of “political correctness” about DTES issues, and second for its recently released Local Area Plan. Hutchinson (2014, March 5) states that the “official view peddled” by Vancouver precludes any other views, and quotes Geller as saying, “We are supposed to say that the Downtown Eastside is a wonderful community.” The use of the verb, “peddle,” implies that the city may be trying to deceive the public for financial gain. Adopting a conversational style, he begins by emphasizing the cost of the plan: “[it] calls for \$1-billion—yes, \$1-billion—in new spending ... over 30 years.” Paraphrasing Geller, he states that the “plan falls off the mark in other ways.” In fact, it is “bafflegab,” and will “exacerbate the neighbourhood’s troubles.” He argues that the city’s approach to the DTES, which “is the same year after year,” is to spend “more public funds attracting the afflicted and those teetering on the precipice.” Once the problem has been defined as the reckless expenditure of public funds, a neo-liberal solution is clear: “What the area needs is more investment from all corners of society, and from people living there.” In the “real world, a neighbourhood’s success depends on its residents, not on community plans and social engineers.” By this logic, anyone engaged in social planning is unrealistic, on the other end of the binary from those *realists* promoting *investment*, individualism and laissez-faire capitalism.

Two columns by the same columnist focus on the spending practices of a DTES social services agency. In the first, the co-executive directors of the Portland Hotel Society (PHS) are accused of profiting from the poor’s suffering. The headline and sub-heading, “Eastside Money Pit: Millions of Dollars of Tax Money Go to Benefit Agency Managers, Not Vancouver’s Worst Ghetto” (Hutchinson, 2014, March 15) establish the extreme nature of the area and invoke an emotive, visual metaphor that positions readers as “taxpayers” whose money is disappearing into a hole in the ground. Furthermore, these “millions of dollars of tax money” are not used to help “ghetto” dwellers, but rather to “benefit agency managers.” The word “ghetto” has strong race and class connotations, and conjures up an image of a dangerous and dysfunctional neighbourhood inhabited by poor, racialized individuals living on the margins of “civilized” society. The headline’s metaphor is reinforced throughout the column by references to the magnitude of funding required to provide services in the area, “tens of millions of dollars are funnelled each month,” and “pour another \$1-billion.”

Hutchinson (2014, March 15) uses multiple references to exact numbers, particularly in regard to the agency’s management, to establish the facticity of his claims (all emphasis added): “*as a couple*, according to PHS documents, they earn between \$240,000 and \$320,000 per year”; the “agency has *more than 300* full-time employees”; four *other* managers earn between “\$120,000 and \$160,000”; “*more than half* its annual budget of \$28-million is spent on salaries”; “spent *another* \$750,000 dollars on travel expenses and consulting fees”; “pays tens of thousands *more* dollars for ‘administrative support,’ ‘residents needs,’ and ‘program needs’”; and “massive retainers.” Van Dijk (1988) has argued that the reliance on numbers “forcefully suggests truthfulness by the implied exactness of precise numbers (p. 87–88).

Though he furnishes no context for this spending, such as the number of high-risk clients served, Hutchinson (2014, March 15) concludes that the agency “has created a vast social services empire” that is unable to operate “effectively, coherently, with an aim to reduce the need.” Apparently, expanding the scope and scale of operations in response to increased demand is something to be celebrated when carried out by the entrepreneurial class, but condemned when practised by non-profit organizations. The implication is that social service organizations must be kept in their place—modest in scale, inexpensive, and residual in their service provision. In short, the only acceptable approach to social welfare is a neo-liberal one—a charity model that delivers stripped-down services to only those seen as “deserving” at no cost to the state.

Once he has established that PHS is corrupt, Hutchinson (2014, March 15) invokes the agency as a metonym for the “dysfunctional” neighbourhood in which it is located. Descriptive, emotive, and dramatic language is deployed to inscribe and evoke negative and stereotypical evaluations of the DTES. He describes it as “Canada’s most notorious neighbourhood,” “the blighted area,” and “the nation’s poorest postal code,” which consists of “slum tenements.” The neighbourhood’s social conditions and problems result in massive financial costs to the public:

While every story about the Downtown Eastside touches on human misery—walk the streets, it’s impossible to avoid—the main focus is on money: How tens of millions of public dollars are funnelled each month into the nation’s poorest postal code. How they might be better spent, or not at all.

The last phrase, “or not at all,” suggests that whether or not the government should be providing any social services in the area is an open question.

Hutchinson’s (2014, March 21) second column on the PHS, “BC Charity Spent Lavishly Helping Poor,” displays many of the same lexical and rhetorical strategies of the first one, including an emphasis on the numerous large costs and sums of money involved in the agency’s alleged overspending. Due to the alleged spending practices of a few individuals, the writer maligns the entire 300-employee organization, charging that “staff members” were given various “perks of the poverty solving trade,” including “cruise holidays and other vacations.” Those receiving these “gifts” were “hitherto heroes in the Downtown Eastside, at least to some.” Thus, not everyone regarded PHS workers as heroes even before these allegations became known. The phrase “at least to some” undercuts the legitimacy of anyone who supported the agency’s work, conflating the “corrupt” agency with those who regarded their work as important and helpful.

This conflation represents the “malevolent” use of a metonymy. In looking at news coverage of Gulf War protests, Hackett and Zhao (1994) described metonymy as malevolent when used to discredit an entire social movement based on the actions of a few individuals. In his conclusion, Hutchinson (2014, March 21) substitutes PHS for DTES itself: “People always say the Downtown Eastside is rotten.” The use of the all-inclusive adverb “always” creates a one-dimensional and negative

evaluation of the whole area, one that must be taken as an inconvertible fact, since “people” are always saying it.

An editorial on the same topic, published the day after the last of Hutchinson’s three columns was published, echoes similar themes. The headline, “The Emirs of Vancouver” (2014, March 22) refers to PHS staff. The use of “emir,” an Arabic word signifying noble Islamic leader, as a metaphor for social services staff represents an interdiscursivity that connects the issue of PHS spending practices to a seemingly unrelated trope—Orientalism.⁷ Associating PHS Staff with Islam—which, in the Western press, equates with fundamentalism and “everyone-which-we-must-now-fight-against”⁸ (Said, 1997, p. xix)—further others PHS employees from “ordinary” Canadians. They are vilified for not only being different from “us,” but also because they are hypocrites who “publicly champion society’s poorest,” and “privately live like minor emirs on the public dime” (“Emirs,” 2014, March 22).

The *National Post* (2014, March 22) editorial board tells readers that a criminal investigation into the PHS is imminent: “As of press time, there is no word of a police investigation. We expect that to change soon.” The use of the term “press time” and the first person plural pronoun invokes the authority of the official voice of a national newspaper, and elevates “questionable” expense claims to the level of criminal culpability, implying that the newspaper has insider access to information unavailable to the public. While the editorial definitively attaches a criminal label to the agency, there was no criminal investigation of PHS, and no charges were laid (CKNW, 2015).

A Dissenting Voice

The only *National Post* opinion piece clearly positioned outside the dominant discourse is Peter Clutterbuck’s (2014, February 11) guest column, “Budgets Should Help Citizens, Not Just ‘Taxpayers’.” The author works with the Poverty Free Ontario cross-community network. He provides an overview of the development of Canada’s “social safety net,” noting that various social programs implemented in the 1960s and 1970s reduced the poverty rate for elderly Canadians from 30% to under 5%. He contends that those programs began to erode in the 1990s, leading to a situation where benefit levels have “failed to keep the rate of seniors’ poverty down.”

In contrast to the other news texts examined in this study, Clutterbuck (2014, February 11) does not derogate those he believes responsible for the cutbacks such as “the Harper government,” and “Finance Minister Flaherty.” He does include two implicit criticisms of their actions, describing the finance minister as poised to “deliver his latest gift [income splitting] to the traditional notion of the middle class

⁷ Edward Said (2003) described Orientalism as a study based on the re-thinking of what had for centuries been seen as an unbridgeable chasm separating East from West (p. 352).

⁸In the context of an international discourse of “Islamic” terror that conflates “Islam” with “terrorism,” Canadians have become increasingly unsympathetic towards Islam. In 2013, 54% of Canadians outside Quebec had an “unfavourable view of Islam” compared to 46% in 2009 (Geddes, 2013).

family in Canada,” and referring to the government’s decision to “abandon” the previous Liberal government’s plan to establish a National Childcare Program.

Although this guest column stands out for its opposition to neo-liberal discourse, its inclusion serves to reinforce the dominant narrative that casts certain actors in very specific roles—Clutterbuck represents the very anti-poverty advocates vilified in the *National Post*. In this way, news media exert a powerful ideological influence by “highlighting the political salience of contending groups” in ways that construct an “ultimate moral conclusion” that favours elite interests (Gunster & Saurette, 2014, p. 352). Clutterbuck’s lone voice of progressivity serves as the exception that proves the rule.

Making the Case for a War on Poverty Activism

The overarching discourse about poverty in these opinion pieces and editorials is one of war on anti-poverty advocates. In this case, the war waged in the pages of the national broadsheet is not one based on any rules of war, such as Rule 25 of the 1864 Geneva Convention, which prohibits the targeting of those trying to help victims (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2016). Instead, these op-ed pieces target the very people trying to improve the lives of the poor, and employ any and all methods, regardless of fairness, balance, or objectivity, to destroy the “enemy.” This war discourse is supported through a variety of lexical and rhetorical strategies, which are reiterated throughout the corpus of the data.

The voices of the poor are generally not included and the arguments advanced by those working to alleviate poverty are either ignored or summarily dismissed. Instead, writers both inscribe and evoke negative evaluations of anti-poverty workers and their motivations. Typically, unfavourable evaluations in news representations exclude “information that does not quite fit such an evaluative process,” information that “will be duly deemphasized if not fully concealed” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 16). In opinion pieces and editorials about poverty, negative evaluations of anti-poverty advocates include a great deal of derogation and over-lexicalization.⁹ Previous research has found that news representations of homeless people contained an excessive quantity of derogatory descriptors of them and that over-lexicalization is “an important strategy in the linguistic production of deviance among groups” (Toft, 2014, p. 785). Using over-lexicalization, the *National Post* has positioned those attempting to ameliorate poverty as outside Canadians’ normative experiences, and as pursuing actions that harm the interests of “hard-working, tax-paying” Canadians.

Not only are the poor’s voices absent from poverty discourse, their faces are also rendered invisible. Based on the texts studied here, readers would have no idea that some groups are far more at risk of poverty than others. Instead of referencing the role played by structural factors or discrimination based on gender, Indigeneity, racism, or ableism, *National Post* opinion writers mobilize common-sense

⁹ British linguist Roger Fowler (1991) describes over-lexicalization as the “existence of an excess of quasi-synonymous terms for entities and ideas that are a particular preoccupation or problem in the culture’s discourse” (p. 85). He cites the “proliferation of (often pejorative) words for designating women” (p. 85) as a common example of this linguistic strategy.

explanations of what causes poverty, such as immorality, lack of talent, or lack of a strong work ethic. This selective framing of poverty and its causality obscures its differential impacts based on multiple intersectionalities, including gender, race, and ability. Poor people themselves may be convinced that if they work hard enough they can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” (Soroko, 2015, p. 33). Blaming discourses, such as those found in the *National Post* opinion pieces in this study, not only have the potential to influence policy makers and the general public; poor people themselves may come to internalize these images and learn to expect, and accept, stripped-down policies and programs.

Woven through much of the *National Post*'s coverage is an appeal to a selected canon of common sense. Once news media have defined issues in common-sense terms, audiences have difficulty resisting those interpretations, since they represent a “closed form of thought, resistant to curiosity, challenge or change” and “give a particular and partial reading of the world, while appearing to be universal and uncontroversial” (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001, p. 87). Refusing to go along with the common-sense positions promulgated by the *National Post* requires readers to place themselves beyond the bounds of common sense.

The main rhetorical argument supporting the dominant discourse is that anti-poverty activists promote solutions that hurt those they are trying to help. In fact, this is one of the more benevolent characterizations of anti-poverty advocates found in this research, since the implication is that, while they are harming the poor, their intentions are good. Still, their actions cause “unintended consequences” (Lamman, 2014, January 28), make the poor's “lives more expensive” (“NDP's Perverse ATM Populism,” 2014, February 5), act as “Robin Hood in reverse” and take from the “poor to give to the rich” (Mintz, 2014, February 4).¹⁰

A related argument furnishes an explanation for why the actions of anti-poverty advocates hurt the poor: They do not understand economics and live in a dream world. This line of thinking builds on a binary opposition, namely, Government measures to help the poor versus business or the economy. *National Post* commentators portrayed supporters of any level of government intervention as being opposed to business and a “healthy” economy. Anti-poverty advocates were constructed as dreaming, being unrealistic, or not understanding the “laws” of economics.

The “blindness” of anti-poverty advocates is attributed to their dogmatic attachment to “leftist” ideology or their affiliation to unions or activist positions, the implication being that since anti-poverty activists are on the left of the political spectrum, “naturally,” they promote radical, unreasonable and unworkable solutions. This argument is supported by lexical choices that construct them as embracing radical, left-wing positions, such as “labour activists” (Lammam, 2014, January 28), “union-backed front for the same old crowd of intellectuals and activists” (Corcoran,

¹⁰ The *National Post* editorial and the Mintz column were among 19 op-eds identified as encompassing a substantive discussion of, though not a primary focus on, poverty (see Methodology).

2014, March 21), “activist lawyer,” (Hutchinson, 2014, March 15), and “authoritarian collectivist” (Foster, 2014, January 29). Even in op-ed pieces that did not have a primary focus on poverty, *National Post* op-ed writers resorted to this strategy, for example calling anti-poverty activists “Marxist-feminist cadres” (Kheiriddin, 2014, February 20). The notion of a right–left ideological spectrum assumes the possibility of multiple positions situated along a broad continuum. Yet op-ed pieces from this time period do not contain any references to “the right” or “right-wing,” effectively normalizing all positions other than those on the left. The *National Post*’s ideological continuum consists of two positions: “Left-wing,” and the common-sense positions of everyone else. Indeed, the views of anti-poverty advocates are situated as irreconcilable with those of taxpayers. Since they have been constructed as unreasonable radicals, it follows that everything they say is suspect. This underpins a fourth rhetorical argument: Anti-poverty activists promote wasting “our” tax dollars.

Unlike the first rhetorical argument, the final argument does not assume good intentions on the part of anti-poverty advocates, but rather charges that they are impelled by the prospect of personal gain or have questionable motives. Some language casts doubt on their sincerity by referring to what they “claim” to be doing, hinting that they may have other agendas. Other times, op-ed writers simply tell us that they are engaging in “emotional blackmail” (Watson, 2014, January 24), “trying to line their pockets with the 99%’s hard-earned money,” or “not trying to empower the downtrodden” (Kline, 2014, January 10).

Prescription

The primary prescription offered in *National Post* op-ed content from early 2014 is consistent with orthodox neo-liberal doctrine: The problem of poverty must be left to “market forces” and individual initiative. Well intentioned, or not so well intentioned, initiatives on the part of governments or anti-poverty advocates that involve increased government spending or higher taxes on individuals and corporations only serve to exacerbate poverty, while harming business and “ordinary” citizens. Thus, governments ought to lower taxes on individuals and corporations, and reduce government spending on social services and programs, in order to create the necessary conditions that provide a strong incentive for individuals to seek work and take responsibility for themselves and their families.

Conclusions

Why does it matter what the *National Post* says about poverty? It is only one newspaper, and its combined print and digital circulation of 1,097,080 (Newspapers Canada, 2014) is scarcely half that of the *Globe and Mail*, Canada’s other national newspaper.¹¹ While not the largest circulation newspaper in the country, it is the foremost publication of the Canadian media giant, Postmedia Network Canada Corporation, the largest publisher of major daily English language newspapers in the

¹¹ In 2014, the *Globe and Mail*’s total weekly circulation, including print and digital, was 2,149,124 (Newspapers Canada, 2014).

country. In addition to the *National Post*, their holdings include eight broadsheet dailies, six tabloid dailies, *24 Hours* (a free daily distributed in Toronto and Vancouver), and dozens of community newspapers as well as several magazines. By setting the tone for its sister publications, the *National Post* is in a position to influence public discourse about poverty.

Conservative positions on social issues taken by *National Post* commentators are consistent with the chain's overall "rightward slant" (Gutstein, 2014). Ever since Conrad Black owned the newspaper chain, there has been a close connection between the company and the Fraser Institute,¹² so it is not surprising that people employed by the conservative think-tank penned several of the texts studied in this project. Charles Lammam, who wrote "Maximum Wage Damage," is the Institute's Director of Fiscal Studies and is described on the organization's website as an "expert" on eight topics, including government spending, poverty and inequality, and privatization. While Lammam was a guest opinion writer for the newspaper, William Watson who wrote "Evidence-Free Minimum Wage Policy," and "Guaranteed Income Guarantees Poverty," is a regular columnist for the *National Post*. He is also a "senior research fellow" for the Fraser Institute, described as an expert on government spending, poverty, and inequality. Given that part of the think-tank's mandate is encouraging individual self-sufficiency and responsibility rather than "economic dependence" on government programs, it is not surprising that their commentators are unsympathetic to poverty reduction initiatives calling for increased government spending.

The *National Post's* discourse of war on anti-poverty advocates must be understood in the context of its ownership. Postmedia Network Canada is owned by a consortium of investment and asset-management companies. Two U.S. hedge funds, Silver Point Capital and GoldenTree Asset Management—"aptly referred to as vulture funds," since they profit from other companies' "distress"—owned 54% of the company in 2014 (McSheffrey, 2015, October 16). Postmedia has shown a willingness to vigorously represent corporate interests through its media strategies. For example, the corporation gave a presentation to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers offering to collaborate with the oil and gas industry to "'bring energy to the forefront of the national conversation,' and 'engage executives, the business community, and the Canadian public to underscore the ways in which the energy sector powers Canada'" (Gunster & Saurette, 2014, p. 335).

A war-on-anti-poverty-advocates discourse serves the interests of corporate media as well as those of corporations generally. By 2010, Canada's combined federal and provincial corporate tax rate had decreased from about 50% in the early 1980s to 30% (Silver, 2014). Nonetheless, corporate taxes still represent a significant cost to Canadian corporations, and, not surprisingly, corporations have long lobbied

¹² Simon Fraser University communications researcher Donald Gutstein (2014) noted that when Postmedia Network purchased its communication holdings from the Asper family in 2010, it simply continued the chain's conservative direction established by Conrad Black in the mid-1990s, and then maintained by the Asper Family from 2001. Over the years, Fraser Institute staffers were brought in to the editorial rooms of many of the chain's newspapers.

governments to reduce them. Many European countries that have been more successful at reducing poverty than Canada, especially child poverty, have significantly higher levels of corporate taxation.¹³ According to UNICEF's Office of Research (2013), Canada's 2013 child poverty rate was higher than those of 20 other countries, including Poland, Slovenia, and Hungary. Clearly, reducing poverty rates through government intervention is expensive, at least in the short term,¹⁴ and has implications for taxation levels. Therefore, it is predictable that the owner of the country's largest print media corporation would foster commentary that discredits government-funded social services and frames poverty as an individual problem best left to market forces.

Nonetheless, the consistency with which anti-poverty activists were vilified in the *National Post's* op-ed pieces from early 2014 is noteworthy. There is a reason why so much attention is paid to their efforts in the mainstream media—the work of anti-poverty advocates keeps critical social issues in the public spotlight and on governments' agenda. Indeed, their work poses a threat to the status quo, since significantly reducing poverty requires a redistribution of wealth to groups disproportionately impacted by poverty. While dominant discourses about poverty are problematic, if they can be shifted, the government may adopt policies and programs that are more effective at alleviating poverty. Dufour (2011) argued that Quebec's 2012 adoption of Bill 112: An Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, which resulted from the popular mobilization of an anti-poverty collective, changed public discourse. Poverty discourse in that province now includes the “question of access to full citizenship and it is a responsibility of the individual and the collective” (p. 55).

Rodriguez (2012) believed that to transform poverty discourse, the poor need to be engaged, since this could lead to a discourse of liberation for marginalized populations. Citing the example of how the women's movement fundamentally reshaped discourse about women's issues, he asserted that transforming the dominant discourse about poverty is not an impossibility. Bryant (2013) contended that shifting poverty discourse to include “structural issues such as how public policy distributes economic and social resources across the population” (p. 44) can result in improving the situation of people living in poverty. He cited the examples of Finland and Norway, countries that have substantially lower poverty rates than Canada, where dominant discourses are about “redistribution and reducing social inequalities” (p. 44). Shifting long-standing discourses about poverty is a first step towards transforming Canada's policy response to it.

¹³ For example, Belgium (33.9%), France (33.3%), and Germany (29.58%) all had significantly higher rates of corporate tax than did Canada (26.5%) in 2014 (KPMG, n.d.).

¹⁴ Silver (2014) argued that poverty costs Canadians billions of dollars every year, and that reducing poverty can result in considerable savings, but that the “investment needed to make a large reduction in poverty needs to be made now; the benefits in terms of savings will only be made in the future” (p. 149).

References

References marked with an asterisk indicate items included in the critical discourse analysis.

- Bryant, T. (2013). The politics of poverty: Shifting the policy discourse. *Social Alternatives*, 32(1), 44–48.
- Canadians for Tax Fairness. (n.d). About us. Retrieved from <http://www.taxfairness.ca/>
- City of Vancouver. (2014, March 15). Local area plan—Downtown Eastside. Retrieved from <http://vancouver.ca/files/cov/downtown-eastside-plan.pdf>
- CKNW. (2015, March 24). Still no charges against former operators of Portland Hotel Society. Retrieved from <http://www.cknw.com/2015/03/24/still-no-charges-against-former-operators-of-portland-hotel-society/>
- * Clutterbuck, P. (2014, February 11). Budgets should help citizens, not just ‘taxpayers’. *National Post*, p. A10. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- * Corcoran, T. (2014, March 21). Sunday school tax course. *National Post*, p. FP11. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Cross, K. A. (2010). Experts in the news: The differential use of sources in election television news. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 413–429.
- Doberstein, C., & Smith, A. (2015). Housing first, but affordable housing last: The Harper government and homelessness. Retrieved from https://www.policyalternatives.ca/Harper_Record_2008-2015/18-HarperRecord-Doberstein-Smith.pdf
- Dufour, P. (2011). Anti-poverty policies and the adoption of Bill 112 in Quebec: A change of path? *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 65/66, 45–57.
- * The Emirs of Vancouver. (2014, March 22). *National Post*, p. A6. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Fairclough, N. (1994). Conversationalization of public discourse and the authority of the consumer. In R. Keat, N. Whiteley, & N. Abercrombie (Eds.), *The authority of the consumer* (pp. 235–249). London, UK: Routledge.
- Fernando, S., & Earle, B. (2011). Linking poverty reduction and economic recovery: Supporting community responses to austerity in Ontario. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 65/66, 31–44.
- FitzGerald, J. (2015). CCPA. Truth without reconciliation: The Harper Government and Aboriginal Peoples after the apology. Retrieved from https://www.policyalternatives.ca/Harper_Record_2008-2015/16-HarperRecord-FitzGerald.pdf
- * Foster, P. (2014, January 29). Minimum thinking. *National Post*, p. FP17. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. London, UK: Routledge.

- Fraser Institute. (n.d.). About us, who we are, mission. Retrieved from <http://www.fraserinstitute.org/about-us/who-we-are/mission.aspx>
- Geddes, J. (2013, October 3). Canadian anti-Muslim sentiment is rising, disturbing new poll reveals: Angus Reid survey reveals a land of intolerance. *Maclean's*.
- Gunster, S., & Saurette, P. (2014). Storylines in the sands: News, narrative, and ideology in the Calgary Herald. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 39(3), 333–359.
- Gutstein, D. (2014). *Harperism: How Stephen Harper and his think tank colleagues have transformed Canada*. Toronto, ON: James Lorimer & Co.
- Hackett, R. A., & Zhao, Y. (1994). Challenging a master narrative: Peace protest and opinion/editorial discourse in the US press during the Gulf War. *Discourse and Society*, 5(4), 509–541.
- Harding, R. (2016). Limited and limiting conversations about the poor: Elizabethan prescriptions to poverty in the Canadian press. *Canadian Review of Social Policy/Revue Canadienne de Politique Sociale*, 76, 25–51.
- * Hutchinson, B. (2014, March 5). Vancouver's dangerous platitudes. *National Post*, p. A2. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- * Hutchinson, B. (2014, March 15). Eastside money pit: Millions of dollars of tax money go to benefit agency managers, not Vancouver's worst ghetto. *National Post*, p. A6. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- * Hutchinson, B. (2014, March 21). B.C. charity spent lavishly helping poor: Financial review of Insite operator details questionable spending. *National Post*, p. A1. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Ideas/RePEc. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://ideas.repec.org/top/top.person.all.html>
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2016). Customary international humanitarian law: Practice relating to medical personnel. Retrieved from https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule25
- Jiwani, J., & Young, M. L. (2006). Missing and murdered women: Reproducing marginality in discourse. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 31, 895–917.
- Jeppesen, S. (2009). From the 'war on poverty' to the 'war on the poor': Knowledge, power, and subject positions in anti-poverty discourses. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 34(3), 487–598.
- Jullian, P. M. (2011). Appraising through someone else's words: The evaluative power of quotations in news reports. *Discourse and Society*, 22(6), 766–780.
- Kane, L. (2013, May 25). Vancouver's vision for Downtown Eastside stokes anti-gentrification protests. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2013/05/25/vancouver_vision_for_downtown_eastside_stokes_antigentrification_protests.html

- Kheiriddin, T. (2014, February 20). Income splitting doesn't just help taxpayers: it helps kids. *National Post*, p. A10. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- * Kline, J. (2014, January 10). Occupy yourselves. *National Post*, p. A14. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Kozolanka, K. (2010). Unworthy citizens, poverty, and the media: A study in marginalized voices and oppositional communication. *Studies in Political Economy*, 86, 55–82.
- KPMG. (n.d.) Corporate tax rates table. Retrieved from <https://home.kpmg.com/xx/en/home/services/tax/tax-tools-and-resources/tax-rates-online/corporate-tax-rates-table.html>
- * Lamam, C. (2014, January 28). Maximum wage damage. *National Post*, p. FP13. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Levitas, R. (2005). *The inclusive society: Social exclusion and new labour* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Lindgren, A. (2009). News, geography, and disadvantage: Mapping newspaper coverage of high-needs neighbourhoods in Toronto, Canada. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 18(1), 74–97. Retrieved from <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com>
- Lorenzo-Dus, N., & Marsh, S. (2012). Bridging the gap: Interdisciplinary insights into the securitization of poverty. *Discourse and Society*, 23(3), 274–296.
- McSheffrey, E. (2015, October 16). Postmedia's oily Harper endorsement. *National Observer*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2015/10/16/news/postmedias-oily-harper-endorsement>
- Mintz, J. (2014, February 4). Redistribution by regulation. *National Post*, p. FP15. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- The NDP's perverse ATM populism. (2014, February 5). *National Post*, p. A10. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Nesbitt-Larking, P. (2001). *Politics, society and the media: Canadian perspectives*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.
- New Democratic Party. (n.d.). About the NDP. Retrieved from <http://www.ndp.ca/about-ndp>
- Newspapers Canada. (2014). Circulation report: Daily newspapers 2014. Retrieved from http://www.newspaperscanada.ca/sites/default/files/2014_Circulation_Report-Daily_Newspapers_in_Canada_FINAL_20150603_0.pdf
- Nielsen, G. M. (2008). Conditional hospitality: Framing dialogue on poverty in Montréal newspapers. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 33(4), 605–619.
- Paterson, L. L., Coffey-Glover, L., & Peplow, D. (2015). Negotiating stance within discourses of class: Reactions to Benefits Street. *Discourse and Society*, 27(2), 195–214.

- Piven, F. F. (2011, November 6). The war against the poor: Occupy Wall Street and the politics of financial morality. TomDispatch.Com. Retrieved from http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175463/tomgram%3A_frances_fox_piven_the_war_on_the_home_front/
- Raphael, D. (2011). *Poverty in Canada: Implications for health and quality of life* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Redden, J. (2011). Poverty in the news. *Information, Communication and Society*, 14(6), 820–849.
- Richter, S., Burns, K. K., Chaw-Kant, J., Calder, M., Mogale, S., Goin, L., ... Schnell, K. (2011). Homelessness coverage in major Canadian newspapers, 1987–2007. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 36(4), 619–635.
- Rodriguez, A. M. G. (2012). Marginalization and the multiplicity of rationalities: A discourse theory of poverty. *Theory in Action*, 5(2), 104–121.
- Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Vantage Press.
- Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Schneider, B. (2011). Sourcing homelessness: How journalists uses sources to frame homelessness. *Journalism*, 13(1), 72–86.
- Schneider, B., Chamberlain, K., & Hodgetts, D. (2010). Representations of homelessness in four Canadian newspapers: Regulation, control, and social order. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 37(4), 147–172.
- Schon, D. (1998). Generative metaphor: A perspective on problem solving in social policy. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (2nd ed., pp. 137–165). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Silver, J. (2014). *Poverty*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Soroko, A. (2015). *Poverty in U.S. and Canadian financial literacy curriculum frameworks: A critical discourse analysis* (Master's thesis). Library and Archives Canada—Theses Canada. Retrieved from www.collectionscanada.gc.ca
- Stinson, J. (2015). The Harper government's reorienting of Status of Women Canada. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from https://www.policyalternatives.ca/Harper_Record_2008-2015/14-HarperRecord-Stinson.pdf
- * Stinson, S. (2014, January 31). A curious way to back business. *National Post*, p. A1. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- Toft, A. (2014). Contesting the deviant other: Discursive strategies for the production of homeless subjectivities. *Discourse and Society*, 25(6), 783–809.
- UNICEF Office of Research. (2013). *Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview*, Innocenti Report Card 11. Florence, Italy: Author.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as Discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum.

- van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Power and the news media. In D. Paletz (Ed.), *Political communication and action* (pp. 9–36). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1997). Discourse as interaction in society. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction 2: A multidisciplinary introduction* (pp. 1–37). London, UK: Sage.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R., Jackson, S., & Jacobs, S. (1997). Argumentation. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as structure and process 1: A multidisciplinary introduction* (pp. 208–229). London, UK: Sage.
- * Watson, W. (2014, January 24). Guaranteed income guarantees poverty. *National Post*, p. FP11. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>
- * Watson, W. (2014, January 31). Evidence-free minimum wage policy: It's passing strange that the Ontario Liberal government chose to ignore evidence gathered by its own ministries and panel. *National Post*, FP11. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com>

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Robert Harding, School of Social Work & Human Services, University of the Fraser Valley, 33844 King Road, Abbotsford, BC, V23 7M8, Canada. Email: robert.harding@ufv.ca