

**The Poverty of News Discourse:
The news coverage of poverty in New Zealand**

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Abstract

This thesis uses methods of discourse analysis to examine the news coverage of poverty in New Zealand. It seeks to find the extent to which dominant discourses, those that reinforce the dominant order, are reproduced and become hegemonic in the coverage of poverty. The use of news sources and their effect on poverty coverage, as well as the news' assumption of shared values are also examined. This thesis argues that through such processes news coverage reproduces dominant discourses that elide the extent to which poverty can be seen as an important and problematic social issue in New Zealand. This thesis analyses a range of New Zealand news texts about poverty. It looks at the press coverage of a Unicef announcement about child poverty in 2005. It also includes an analysis of news stories that refer to poverty, the poor and issues of welfare over a month in 2005. The final chapter of research analyses two television documentaries, *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Streets*, that are about aspects of homelessness in New Zealand. This study finds the reporting of poverty in New Zealand to be inadequate, containing debate over poverty and reproducing the hegemony of dominant discourses.

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Introduction

News media is a major source of information about issues confronting society. This study will use methods of discourse analysis to draw conclusions about how this information is shaped in the reporting of poverty. Remarkably, media researchers in New Zealand have paid little attention to the news coverage of poverty. This study is a step towards addressing this oversight. Poverty is too important an issue to be neglected. For some New Zealanders, poverty means a life of struggle and social exclusion. It goes beyond the basic problem of a lack of resources and creates marginalisation. For others, the media may be their only contact with this important issue. As well as the immediate problems faced by those coping with deprivation, there are its visible side effects in the areas of education and crime. Confronting the problem of poverty is to confront injustice and inequality. Yet there can be a reluctance to acknowledge the poverty of the developed world in the face of the widespread suffering in developing countries. All sites of inequality must be challenged if nations are to consider themselves truly developed. Poverty in New Zealand may not mean starvation but it is synonymous with malnutrition and a shorter life expectancy. These are problems that should not be tolerated in a wealthy nation. Like any social issue, recognition and understanding are crucial to solving these problems. It is important, then, that news allows such recognition through providing ways of seeing the issue. News must encourage debate and discussion over what poverty means in New Zealand today, providing the public with the means to confront the injustice of poverty.

The way that poverty is depicted can inform an understanding of its severity, of the people who suffer from it and the measures being taken to counter the problem. In some studies it is suggested that the news coverage of welfare can influence peoples' support of these systems (Sotiriovic 2001). While news is an obvious source of information about a subject, it is also a site of meaning and ways of understanding poverty. Rather than simply provide the facts, poverty news also reproduces beliefs and shared meanings. Looking at this function of media can reveal dominant values in society. A major research question in this thesis will be to determine the extent to which dominant values, those that favour the powerful, are reproduced to the exclusion of other ways of understanding poverty. As a site of meaning and values, the media is also a resource in the formation of identity. Negative depictions of the poor are obviously detrimental to the way those living with poverty may feel about themselves, but coverage that downplays the problem of poverty may also be problematic for those looking to the media for an understanding of their identity. Such reporting may cause people to feel their problems are not recognised or are not worthy of concern thereby increasing the process of marginalisation. There is a long relationship between issues of inequality and journalism and poverty has been the subject of many key journalism moments, from Mayhew's descriptions of Victorian London to Orwell's observations as a "down and out" (Mayhew 1967, Orwell 1986a). Yet despite the importance of both poverty as a social issue and its relationship with news as a source of information and meaning, there has been little research done on the news coverage of poverty in New Zealand. This study will provide some analysis across a range of news sources. It seeks to find the ways in which poverty is covered by the news, an interest which encompasses the themes and topics of poverty news as well as the actors that appear.

This thesis will show that news can go beyond points of information and facts, to creating ways of knowing poverty, including how it is defined and discussed. This dimension of poverty news will be explored using theories of discourse and analysing the language of news. This will be done both on the level of words and sentences that may be nuanced towards certain readings, as well as on the level above the sentence that is recognisable through discourse analysis. In looking beyond the language of the text and incorporating ideas of the power of discourse, this method aims to consider the relation of the social structure to the discourse that appears. A major theme will be the way that poverty is contained on both levels: in words and grammar where certain ways of talking are privileged, and on the larger level of the discursive where a limited range of understandings will be found to be drawn on across many types of poverty news. In this way the access to ways of understanding poverty are limited, by the features of news discourse itself, and by the effects of societal structures and practices.

This study will look at the news coverage of poverty in New Zealand, using texts from 2005 with the exception of *The Streetkids* documentary from 2004. The bulk of this corpus is newspaper stories, although the scarcity of poverty coverage in television news will be considered and television documentaries will be looked at as a potential site of alternative representations to those found in other texts. Due to considerations of time, only poverty news is analysed in this study but this is not to deny that other media texts, such as those in entertainment genres and non-news sites such as editorials and letters, are also important sites of poverty discourse. However, news does have a popular status as a place that depicts reality and it remains a major source for information about social issues. It must also be stated, that although

particular readings are made of news texts, it is not assumed that all readers will interpret meanings in the same way. Audiences do have the power to reject or reinterpret dominant messages in a text, but it can also be argued that there is a greater power in creating the messages that are available for interpretation. For this reason is important to analyse these meanings because, although negotiable, they remain some of the most readily available resources to understanding poverty in New Zealand.

With a low frequency of poverty coverage, the content of news stories is important beyond concerns of facts and accuracy. A theoretical framework will be outlined in the first chapter that makes a case for viewing news as a site of discursive production. It will be argued that, rather than represent reality in a way that can be evaluated by checking facts, the media construct a view of poverty. It will also be described how this view of poverty is largely informed by dominant discourses. One way that this occurs will be analysed in case studies, where news relies on sources that are privileged as authoritative. There are varying discourses that define poverty, obscuring access to an objective definition. This thesis will not work from a set definition of poverty, instead it will provide some necessary resources to question the definitions of poverty that news privileges. Relative definitions of poverty, which are explained further in chapter one, will be offered as an alternative, highlighting the presumed consensus of the absolute definition. While discussing definitions it must also be noted that this study will occasionally use the phrase “the poor.” This is not intended to assume a group that is homogenous, but for want of a better term, it is used to refer to those deemed by news or poverty discourse to lack resources. The assumed consensual beliefs that news must draw on in covering society are another key factor in news discourse of poverty. It is argued that there are popular beliefs

distinctive to New Zealand that may inform the coverage of poverty. This occurs as newswriters assume values, which may construct poverty as unproblematic, to be consensual in society. One concept that will be defined in the first chapter and drawn on frequently will be Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which offers a description of the relation of representations to social structures. As noted, the process by which the problematic aspects of poverty are contained so that they do not pose a credible threat to dominant beliefs about society will be discussed in relation to news coverage. This containment is a hegemonic process: an appearance of pluralism still only provides a limited set of discourses that appear consensual in understanding poverty in New Zealand today. This thesis will attempt to show how this hegemonic process may occur in reporting, and the extent to which it characterises New Zealand's poverty news.

Chapter 1. This section provides a theoretical approach to the thesis and reviews the literature on the news coverage of poverty. This literature illustrates some of the common themes that have been found in studies of the media and poverty, and is also used to provide examples of the framework of news and society that is drawn on throughout the thesis. It discusses the reliance on those with institutional authority as news sources. This chapter also describes the way that dominant discourses come into news as assumed shared beliefs. The chapter draws on existing literature and theory to argue that news neither reflects nor represents reality; instead it reproduces dominant discourses of social realities, often portraying these as consensual.

Chapter 2. This section is a case study of a particular event that brought poverty to the news: a Unicef report on the incidence of child poverty in developed nations. The frame of events and incidents that is needed to bring issues like poverty to the news

will be discussed critically as a factor in narrowing the extent to which poverty is discussed. Also analysed is the use of sources from positions of authority who reproduce particular discourses of poverty and use strategies of argument that contain poverty as a problem. Critical analysis of language and theories of intertextuality will also be drawn on to account for this.

Chapter 3. A wider focus is offered in this chapter. It moves beyond the case study by examining the way poverty is reported over a period of time, without a trigger event such as the Unicef report. Television news is also considered within a sample of news stories but is found to cover poverty too infrequently for study. This section suggests the common themes that bring poverty into the news and ways in which poverty is articulated alongside other issues, rather than being a topic in its own right. A theory of discourse based in social cognition, will be used to show the way that readings that elide the importance of poverty as an issue are the most explanatory in understanding news stories which refer to problems of deprivation.

Chapter 4. This chapter examines types of news which may offer alternatives to the coverage described so far. It looks at television documentaries which are not reliant on the discourse of authorities, nor constrained by the events focus that shapes other news. Two documentaries are considered, one which tends to reproduce dominant discourse about a group of the poor, whilst the other uses a member of the homeless to offer an alternative view to what is commonly found in news. However, these are still limited in the extent to which they conform to popular requirements for the journalism of homelessness. As well as language, this chapter will include images and music in its focus of analysis.

Chapter One

Approach

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature in the field of news and poverty. However, there is little research, from which to draw from, on the news coverage of poverty in New Zealand and it is a neglected area of study generally. In the studies that have been done, comparison to reality has been a common criterion. The research that will be reviewed questions the accuracy of representations of the poor and highlights stereotypes. While this literature offers some description of the way poverty is frequently covered, its theoretical basis will be shown to be inadequate for this study. Whilst questioning these methods, this chapter will discuss the usefulness of an alternative theory of the relationship between news and society. An argument for the relevance of discourse analysis as a method of examining poverty news will be made. It will be shown to be a method that can explain the news's representation of poverty through its relationship to ways of understanding poverty that are beyond the text. While there is research on the news coverage of poverty which shares this approach, it is of limited use as its analysis refers to other countries. Such research offers examples of the way that discourses of poverty may be drawn on in news but a place remains for an analysis of how this occurs in New Zealand. From this research, and other literature that is reviewed, this chapter will provide a direction for the analysis of the coverage of poverty. It seeks to identify the areas and aspects of poverty news which require specific scrutiny. The chapter will argue that those privileged as news

sources, and the use of beliefs that news assumes to consensual mean that dominant discourses are often reproduced in the news. This necessitates an approach that identifies the extent to which this process occurs in relation to poverty; an approach that does not rely on the comparison of representations to social reality.

News and the “Real.”

As a starting point, this study will assume that news is not reality. While popular discourse about news often draws on this ideology, a wealth of critical media studies refutes it. Similarly, all metaphors about windows on the real and reflections of reality are inaccurate, eliding the mediating or construction process that journalists carry out. The issue of poverty is an example of the faults in these concepts. Poverty is an ongoing, daily phenomenon. A country like New Zealand has a percentage of its population living in poverty everyday; but a daily news outlet will not mention this regularly unless an event brings it to their attention. This fact is revealed in the content analysis of poverty coverage (Golding and Middleton 1982: 67). Events like a dramatic change in the percentage of those living in poverty, a spectacular crime committed by one of the poor or a government announcement on welfare may bring poverty to the news. However, time and space constraints mean all events cannot be summarised in a newspaper, nor covered in a TV news bulletin. Events have to be selected from the myriad of daily occurrences. To decide what does constitute news requires more processes than the analogy of a simple reflection of reality allows. Considering these factors makes it clear that reporting involves subjective choices like the selection of subject, word and quote. Photographs too, seeming slices of the real, involve such processes. Barthes writes, “the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional,

aesthetic norms which are so many factors of connotation” (1977: 19). As noted, further reading of media critics will offer more on the futility of viewing news as a reflection of the real (Fowler 2001: 10-24). But this conclusion poses more questions than it resolves. For this study, it is important to ask, what relationship does news have to the real if not a straight reflection?

Representations

One alternative concept is that the media represent rather than reflect reality. This is the answer implied by Barthes’ description of photographs. It suggests that media filter reality and through that process reality results in representations. While helpful, there has been a move beyond representations, as an approach based on this theme may be too narrow in its assumptions about the relationship between news and social reality. Assuming representation as the media’s role means news can be evaluated by how close it comes to the real. Accuracy has been the judge in several media studies of poverty and researchers have employed the quantitative methodology of content analysis to pursue this criterion for news. Gilens’ (1996) work is an example of this. Taking a cue from the fact that Americans exaggerate the black percentage of the poor he analyses media coverage to see if it presents this bias. He finds that the American news media represents the poor with images of blacks disproportionate to actual poverty statistics. To explain this, Gilens draws on Gans’ concepts of “availability” and “suitability,” finding a partial explanation in the availability of the African American poor to photographers, through their predominance in areas of concentrated poverty. However, this does not explain the lack of African Americans in representations of the poor that the public are sympathetic to, such as the elderly (Gilens 1996: 534). Gilens speculates that news workers are possibly unconsciously

indulging stereotypes (1996: 537). The search for stereotypes has been a popular direction in the analysis of representations and identifying stereotypes was the focus of an update of Gilens' study (Clawson and Trice 2000). Again, the authors found that images of poverty predominately feature African Americans. Other stereotypes of poverty such as criminality, alcoholism and pregnancy were not found to be drawn on as heavily. While useful to learn broad trends, the methodology employed limits conclusions as the researchers only analysed photographs. The language and subjects used to describe poverty in the text were beyond the scope of the study, so a deeper picture of mediated representations remains unexamined.

The problems revealed in judging representations to a criteria of accuracy is neatly summarised by Shohat and Stam, for whom, “An obsession with ‘realism’ casts the question as simply one of ‘errors’ and ‘distortions,’ as if the ‘truth’ of a community were unproblematic, transparent, and easily accessible, and ‘lies’ about that community easily unmasked” (1994: 178). These problems become apparent in the literature that seeks to evaluate representations. One way this has been approached is to draw attention to stereotypes as distortions of reality. Bullock et al review literature on the coverage of poverty with an emphasis on stereotypes (Bullock et al 2001). This extensive review shows that a lack of representation, as well as the depiction of welfare recipients as immoral and issues being framed as individual problems are all features of the media’s coverage of poverty. These results are then updated with research carried out after welfare reforms, to find that few of these stereotypes persist. Also discerned is an overall neutral tone as well as a quantity of articles sympathetic to welfare policy. However, it could be argued that judging the tone of an article is out of the scope of a content analysis sampling 412 stories. While stereotypes can reveal

discrimination or negative images, this focus may neglect the attitudes that underpin them. Such attitudes can exist without being easily identifiable in stereotypes. The standard answer to harmful, negative stereotypes is the call for positive alternatives. But a positive image or description of a poor person may disguise an implicit anti-poor discourse. Making individuals the contested site of media coverage may also perpetuate the individualisation of poverty discourse that authors have described, where it becomes a debate over the personal equalities of the poor, rather than the possible structural causes of inequality (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Peters 1997).

Meinhof (1994) highlights the problem in this style of analysis in a study of TV documentary *Breadline Britain*, especially in considering criticism the show faced for its depiction of poverty. She finds these criticisms to be theoretically naïve in their requirement for an “unmediated slice of life” (Meinhof 1994: 87). The show uses a definition of poverty based on lacking certain items that most people feel are necessities (Ibid: 71). This construction is also of the deserving poor as music and images combine to present a melancholic, submissive mood to poverty over anything more aggressive or challenging (Ibid: 81). Her work offers another discourse of poverty, that of the deserving poor and shows how that may be constructed. She also looks at a reading of *Breadline Britain* (BB) made by another television programme, *The Media Show*. This show criticized some of BB’s images of poverty, which represented aspects of homelessness through what were later revealed to be re-enactments. In her consideration of *The Media Show*’s criticism, Meinhof draws on established theory to make an argument against calling for literal representations. A comparison to “social reality” cannot be the criterion for evaluating media texts; instead, it is the relationship of the text to other texts that becomes the subject of

analysis (Ibid: 88). Media discourses often claim to represent the real. Spokespeople from both sides put forward their claims to the real, yet it is problematic for the critic to claim the real in order to assess representations. Nevertheless, if the power to claim the real is at stake in news, then it can be asked, who has access to this power? Whose discourses of poverty predominate? It will be argued that the discourses of the dominant political and economic order have easier access to the status of reality, marginalising other voices, including those of the poor themselves. If claims to the real are in question, but the researcher disallows themselves this status, they must then find a space from which to analyse and make comment. Meinhof offers one way to scrutinise discourse, through comparison to other texts. Fraser and Gordon (1994) demonstrate another approach by contrasting past meanings with present ones to challenge tacit assumptions. Both approaches could be summarised in MacDonald's assertion that we may search, not for a "truth," but for a "distilled wisdom" by examining multiple discourses (2003: 18). This does not mean that statements made in a medium that claims to portray the truth cannot be questioned, but it does suggest that true/false is too shallow a basis for analysis.

While still employing a content analysis methodology, Kensicki (2004) takes a more complex approach to representations. She describes a "disconnect between societal problems and possible solutions," including news coverage of poverty in her analysis (Kensicki 2004: 53). She places emphasis on the place of non-profit organisations within social issues, as they offer a chance for the public, often theorised as apathetic, to become involved in the potential solutions for these problems. The majority of articles were neutral as to a cause or responsibility for poverty (Ibid: 60). Only 3% placed an individual at fault, contrary to research that suggests poverty is often

blamed on the individual (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Gans 1995, Peters 1997, Bullock et al 2001). However, it has been shown that a term such as dependency, which alone may not allocate blame on a large scale, is part of a wider discourse that argues that the cause of poverty lies in the faults of individuals (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Peters 1997). Content analysis may not pick up this deeper, embedded meaning. Kensicki also writes that little of the coverage suggested solutions for poverty, and of the 11% that did, these possible answers were deemed unlikely (2004: 61). Similarly, non-profit organisations got little mention and none were named more than once (Ibid.). While it may be true that the work of non-profits is unfairly lacking attention and that this “disconnect” encourages apathy, it could also be problematic to position them at the forefront of solutions to societal problems. This could be seen as depoliticising issues by placing private charity as a solution over government action or structural change. Photographer and critic, Martha Rosler describes the call for charity as an “argument for the preservation of wealth [...] the need to give a little in order to mollify the dangerous classes below” (1993: 305). Yet, it is important to acknowledge the potential for charitable organisations to be advocates for political change. This debate again demonstrates the multiple discourses that surround a social issue such as poverty.

The content analysis that has been described is valuable in describing a broad view of the media coverage of poverty. But recent dissatisfaction with quantitative methodologies has produced some important and applicable criticisms. Much of this is a concern that scientific methods are not adequate to approach and answer many of the questions within research issues. The need for quantifiable results can have the effect of limiting and shaping the questions asked, as seen in the focus on stereotypes.

O'Connor (2001) makes an especially relevant point in her assessment of US poverty research. "Poverty knowledge" is her term for the research on poverty generated by public agencies, think tanks and academics. She is critical of the scientific, politically neutral approach that has dominated this field. Among other consequences, the need for scientific objectivity has meant that the political economy of late capitalism remains free from inquiry and instead knowledge about the poor themselves has been sought (O'Connor 2001: 4). While the media rather than the poor are the focus of the above studies, part of O'Connor's criticism can be acknowledged. She writes, "the claim to scientific objectivity rests on technical skills, methods, information, and professional networks that historically have excluded those groups most vulnerable to poverty" (Ibid: 11). This does not necessarily discredit the quantitative studies discussed, but it brings attention to the need for a variety of methodologies including those which do not require qualified claims of neutrality and allow for critical investigation beyond the representations of a problem. The studies above remain useful; they show the persistent feature in representations of poverty such as stereotypes, racialised images and a low frequency of news about the poor. However, by employing an alternative methodology, we can look beyond these features to find the discourses that they represent. Using qualitative methods and going beyond representations can offer a chance to add greater depth to the breadth of study seen in this research.

Discourse

In discussing race and the media, theorist Stuart Hall offers a description of the shift to a focus deeper than representations. For him, the media "produce" representations of the social world and frames for understanding it, and "construct" a definition of

what race is, what meaning its imagery carries etc (Bridges and Brunt 1981 in MacDonald 2003: 14). Instead of construct, the term “discursively produce” may also be used and the concept of discourse can help to explain the media’s relationship to poverty. Looking at discourse does not exclude recognising stereotypes, but goes beyond it. This method recognizes that stereotypes represent a discourse, and seeks to find what that discourse may be. The operation of other, less immediately visible, poverty discourses can be looked for as well. Definitions of discourse vary, and this study will draw on the concept as theorised by Michel Foucault, and used in conjunction with media by other scholars. Discourse in this context, can be loosely defined as “groups of utterances which seem regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and force to them in common” (Mills 2004: 6). MacDonald offers a similar definition, taking the concept to be “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking” (2003: 1). This is helpful in giving discourse a wider life, in the way that it relates to cultural practices. It describes ways of knowing and talking about a subject, issue or even people. Some of the many discourses that attempt to construct poverty will be discussed here, providing both an example of discourse in action and the common ways of understanding this social issue.

Fraser and Gordon (1994) provide a history of dependency as a keyword in US welfare debate, showing that keywords can carry connotations and assumptions that often go unexamined. In the case of dependency, Fraser and Gordon trace the evolution of its use from a term for a state of subordination as a normal social relation in describing wives, children and slaves as dependents; in its recent use it has come to

carry connotations of negative behavioural traits (1994: 331). While these connotations have come mainly from the welfare discourse of long term recipients as dependent, other discourses have informed its negative characteristics. Psychological discourse has pathologised the notion of dependency as a disorder and further feminised the term by describing it as more frequent in women (Ibid: 325,326). There is also evidence that this keyword carries a racial meaning as the dismantling of state discrimination that prevented minorities from receiving welfare for “dependent children,” also gave rise to racist stereotypes of black solo mothers (Ibid: 327). Another feature of dependency, and often discourse generally, is its contradictory nature. Fraser and Gordon give the example of the discussion of teen mothers: “when the subject under consideration is teenage pregnancy, these mothers are cast as children; when the subject is welfare, they become adults who should be self-supporting” (1994: 329). The connotation of individual faults, implicit in the term, distances the need for welfare from larger economic problems. In this way, part of the power of discourse is revealed. They write, “unreflective use of this keyword serves to enshrine certain interpretations of social life as authoritative and to delegitimize or obscure others, generally to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinate ones”(Ibid: 311). Those wielding the discourse of dependency, shown to be politicians of both major parties, have power over those described by it. This is a feature of Foucault’s description of discourse, where objects of knowledge are constructed and defined in a way that excludes other ways of viewing or possessing knowledge (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 12). The unexamined ideological meanings that Fraser and Gordon excavate from keywords can also be seen as assumed to be consensual in the indiscriminate use of these terms. Journalists’

use of supposed consensual ideas, the influence of this process on news discourse and its relation to hegemony will be discussed in the next section.

Fraser and Gordon's work shows the layers of meaning that a seemingly innocuous and widely used term can carry. Drawing on their genealogy of dependency, Misra et al (2003) track depictions of welfare over time. They evaluate magazine articles historically; identifying the way welfare issues are "framed" through either a "dependency," "helping the needy," "family support" or an "undermines families" discourse (Misra et al 2003: 490). Although a quantitative study rather than a true discourse analysis, they find that variations of dependency discourse are a strong feature of welfare coverage throughout the twentieth century. But it is not the only discourse drawn on, as many articles show support for welfare. A racial and gender subtext to the dependency discourse is also made clear. Unemployed women become subject to the stigma of dependency in decades when middle class women began to enter the workforce (Ibid: 501) and "articles are more likely to invoke the strict dependency subframe when they portray recipients as African Americans, or as minorities more generally" (Ibid: 493). Their content analysis puts Fraser and Gordon's (1994) work on discourse in perspective, showing the relationship of the identification of current discourse as a deep reading of a point within wider, quantifiable change. But more importantly for this current study, Misra et al show that no single monolithic meaning or theme dominates media discourse, instead discourses are fluid, multiple and contradictory. The writers describe some of the factors that shape and change the discourses found in news. Cultural influences are one of these and an example is in the way that the American ideology of individualism has supported a discourse of welfare undermining families (Ibid: 484). Elites also

perpetuate certain discourses and Misra et al note that political action does not necessarily reflect media discourse; instead politicians have powerful roles in shaping media discourse. Social groups may also challenge powerful discourses as media look to outsider groups in the quest for new material. However, in acknowledging opposing discourses the authors neglect the policy makers' role as the "primary definers" of media discourse (Hall et al 1982: 58). This occurs as the primary source sets the terms of debate for subsequent spokespeople. So while dominant discourse may face challenge, it is still on the terms of those in positions of power.

It is not always necessary to go beyond news to find alternative poverty discourses that bring others into relief. Street (1994) demonstrates this through analysing coverage of British poverty in relation to media images of Third World poverty. In looking at the two different, seemingly unrelated discourses of poverty that occur in the press, he finds a link between them, which has the effect of creating a new discourse of poverty. The frequency of these Third World stories, the extremes of poverty depicted and the emotional nature of their reportage creates a context in which British poverty seems minor. This effect is heightened as the coverage within the UK was mostly concerned with defining poverty and the accuracy of the images that appeared in representations. In contrast, representations of Third World poverty are not questioned by such a criterion of accuracy. This discourse of belittling First World poverty also occurs through a "semantic purity" in the reluctance to use the term poverty for Western conditions (Street 1994: 58). Street shows that recognising discursive construction does not require a suspension of criticism. Identifying discourses in media and countering them through alternative and contrasting ways of

talking about poverty works, not to prove inaccuracy, but to show how media may choose to frame an issue within certain themes in preference to others.

Gans (1995) does not use the concept of discourse, instead using the notion of labelling to chart trends in American debate and media coverage of poverty. He likens these to stereotypes (Gans 1995: 12). However, like stereotypes, it is possible to view labels as representative of a wider discourse and Gans does discuss the notions that they imply. While Fraser and Gordon outlined the genealogy of one term, following its shift in meaning through over centuries, Gans gives a history of the changing labels that have been used to stigmatize the poor. For Gans, labels have this effect by designating groups as outside of mainstream values. This is seen to be evident in the lack of labels for those groups in poverty that are viewed sympathetically, such as the elderly. He finds the most current label to be the “Underclass” (Ibid: 28). Although the term originated in academia, the mainstream media has had a role in disseminating it. The press has applied the underclass label to African Americans and so it has come to have racial connotations (Ibid: 31). The use of underclass does not merely describe a behaviour but views it as symptomatic of a wider character flaw. Gans’ study highlights the importance of terms and labels within discourse. Although often taken for granted, these can bring ideology into play through the connotations they impart. A similar inquiry will be made in this study. The first chapter will describe and apply the concept of intertextuality as a method of tracing the meanings of phrases that are used in news about poverty.

Defining Poverty

At one point in time discourses may compete, as well as change or lose significance. This is evident in the debate over defining poverty. It is not necessary to present a single definition for this study, as revealing how news defines poverty is itself an important question for analysis. As previously discussed, rather than evaluate texts through comparison to an objective truth, the dominance of certain discourses in the construction of poverty can be countered by presenting alternatives for comparison. However, it is important to review some of the various ways of defining poverty to show that there is no one authoritative “poverty” and to provide as a resource some of the definitions that news may draw on. Perry summarises the basic level definition of poverty as the lack of minimum needs (2002: 102). However, defining those needs is problematic. One definition of minimum needs is in absolute terms, that is the requirements essential for survival such as food, shelter and clothing. Perry writes that there has been a “longstanding debate” between proponents of this definition and those who advocate one based on relative needs (Ibid.). A relative definition of poverty adds to the minimum physical needs by also considering what is necessary to participate in society on similar terms to others. Those who are deprived of this ability through lack of resources can also be considered to be poor. Beyond these basic categories there is controversy in applying definitions and measuring poverty. Meinhof (1994) describes the way a definition of poverty was sought by the makers of UK documentary, *Breadline Britain*. A survey was constructed which asked people to list items they felt were essential. The most commonly occurring items were collected in one list that included, a damp free house, a telephone and having children’s friends over. Those found to be lacking three or more of the final “essentials” would fit the programme makers’ definition of poverty. Easton (1995) discusses the various New

Zealand approaches to defining a poverty line by which deprivation can be measured on a national level. Relative notions informed the poverty line set by the 1972 Royal Commission, which based it on a minimum income needed to participate in a community as decided through submissions. Alternatives included the suggestion to base the poverty line on a food allowance and a measure based on a proportion of the median income. The former is used in the Unicef report discussed in the next chapter, and as a measure it is said by Easton to have no inherent merit, but is a useful tool in cross-national comparisons (1995: 190). The contested definition of poverty can be understood in terms of discourse, as it is impossible to get through a discourse to find the truth of a subject. Any description of poverty must then be informed by existing definitions and discourses. Perry's (2002) study examines the significant difference in results that occurs between measuring poverty through income, and measures which look at deprivation or living standards. Depending on the definition in use, the numbers of the poor may shrink or expand. These and other discourses may be operating or competing within any discussion of poverty and no objective interpretation of poverty will be available. Instead, we only have access to varying discursive constructions. This thesis will seek to identify the definitions and discourses of poverty given consensual status by New Zealand's news.

These discourses have a place in the wider field of social practices. Politicians may organise welfare around one of these definitions of poverty to the exclusion of others. News may or may not refer to groups as poor, or identify a poverty problem depending on which particular discourse they are drawing on at the time. Scholars have looked at the discourses used to report social issues and have found a reliance on "official" practices and meanings, in the formation of news discourse (Ericson et al:

1987). This research will expand on that work by looking to see whether this practice occurs in the discourses of poverty that New Zealand media draw on. The power to define can go further through another effect of discourse. In Gans' work, he suggests that labels force people to behave in the ways defined by the label, describing how one labelled a delinquent can lose "nondelinquent" choices such as job opportunities (1995: 13). Writers on discourse discuss a similar model. Just as societal norms set out what is acceptable, people find that they may speak and act within the bounds of particular discourses (Mills 2004: 63). An unemployed person constituted as lazy by Neoliberal dependency discourse may speak with shame about their lifestyle, while someone speaking in terms of Marxist discourse may show anger towards a system that has put them in that situation. Comber (1998) provides examples in her study of the discourses of education that surround low socioeconomic classrooms. In her case study, media discourse construed a group of these children as unruly and in need of literacy. Although careful to avoid a straight cause and effect correlation, she then focuses on the impact of these macro discourses on the micro discourse of teachers' classroom talk. She found disciplinary practices were prominent, which focused on the students as self-disciplined and hardworking during literacy lessons. Comber takes a Foucauldian stance in showing that this does not go uncontested. While children misbehave in expected ways they also challenge the teachers' actual discourse of literacy and discipline, questioning the tasks they are asked to perform (Comber 1998: 18). In line with this Foucauldian approach, she describes the pleasures that result when teachers and students humorously disrupt discipline discourses through jokes (Ibid: 20). Comber's study provides another example of the far-reaching qualities of discourse as well as the potential for its resistance. Media discourses do not exist in a vacuum, but like all discourses, they have effects on social practices. However, in

acknowledging this, it is important not to overestimate these effects. While a study of audience is beyond the scope of this research, it does not mean they are considered passively subject to discourses of poverty. These discourses can provide ways of discussing poverty, but this is a result of media's role in a wider process in which audience also play a part. The audience have a power to resist and negotiate as well as be subject to discourse. However, it could also be suggested that there remains a greater power in labelling certain ways of seeing as true and broadcasting these to the public. The result is the need to identify the discourses that appear and the authority they are given, so that their effects may be surmised but not assumed.

Consensus and Hegemony

Concepts important to a framework of media and society have been roughly sketched. In summary, it has been shown that news is not a reflection of reality; such a view elides the choices journalists make as well as the impossibility of possessing a single truth or reality of an event or situation. For similar reasons, the news as representations of reality is also imprecise. This claim allows reality to be possessed in the hands of researchers, who may wield it as a tool for the analysis of media. Reality, it is argued, is obscured by discourse; ways of knowing a subject which can create power through the status they give to the bearer and the subordinate place assigned to the subject. A small number of the many discourses surrounding poverty have been described, and the examples reveal among other features, both the power relations of discourse and its effect of obscuring an objective reality. The case for discourse established, the next part of this equation must then be the link between discourse and news.

If a “real” poverty is smothered by discourses that seek to construct it, then it must be constituted by another discourse, “news discourse,” before we may read about it in the newspaper or watch a report about it on TV. Ericson et al write, “the reporter sees it when he believes it in the terms of news discourse” (1987: 19). That is, only when a subject is presentable through the processes and structures of the newsroom does it become newsworthy. In visualising events in terms of news discourse, journalists draw on the techniques of their craft such as news sources, the requirement of balance and the shared knowledge of the society they write for. This last point is one of the less obvious features of news discourse, with its invisibility forming an important part of its function. Constructing a story through news discourse involves presenting an event in a way that is comprehensible for its intended audience. Hall et al write,

This bringing of events within the realm of meanings means, in essence, referring unusual and unexpected events to the ‘maps of meaning’ which already form the basis of our cultural knowledge, into which the social world is already ‘mapped.’ The social identification, classification and contextualisation of news events in terms of these background frames of reference is the fundamental process by which the media make the world they report on intelligible to readers and viewers (1982: 54).

The discourse of news assumes that we share meanings, that society is in consensus on the common language, beliefs and attitudes that a story may draw on to present an event. Every discussion of consensus includes brief explanatory examples, Hall et al provide, among others, “The rule of law protects us equally” (1982: 55), and Fowler also catalogues several including “everyone would like to buy their own house and live in a family life-style” (2001: 50). These beliefs are seen as commonsense, and it

is from a commonsense position that news discourse operates. Possible consensual beliefs that may be assumed in New Zealand will be outlined later. Fowler's (2001) writing explores the concept of consensus in news with particular attention to its linguistic workings. For him the interpersonal language that news uses to digest institutional documents and speech is a factor in assuming consensus. The problematic consequences of the consensus assumption are examined. He argues that the press had a major role in legitimising the public service cuts of Britain's Thatcher government through citing consensual values such as freedom of individual choice and self reliance (Fowler 2001: 51). The discourses of poverty discussed earlier described terms that are used as supposedly neutral and consensually agreed upon but draw on ideology and prejudice. Fraser and Gordon (1994) have shown how the terms "dependency" and the word "dependent" draw on a range of discourse to suppose negative qualities in welfare recipients. Gans (1995) found similar qualities in the term "Underclass." The process by which these meanings, which favour the dominant, become accepted as consensual can be described through Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Forgacs 2000). Hegemony concerns the way that dominant discourses are made natural and the struggle to maintain this status. One way of maintaining power over meaning is through the appearance of multiple ideas. Within news language, this semblance of pluralism can occur while simultaneously dominant discourses are reaffirmed.

In Kress's (1994) study of a newspaper article, he describes the way that multiple views are managed within a wider consensus on the problems and causes of poverty. This is demonstrated in his analysis that includes both language and the story's place among other content on the page. He finds the story's syntax allows four readings, or

“grammars of poverty” (Kress 1994: 35). Each of these grammars aligns the meaning of the story with a political view: poverty being self caused, poverty as the responsibility of the poor while other factors may make it worse, poverty as a situation in which you find yourself with other causes and agents responsible and poverty as a situation that may happen to anyone (Ibid.). However, the article Kress analyses is not specifically about poverty, but a problem within education of which poverty is a factor. Despite the contradictory grammars of poverty that are available, they encourage a politically conservative reading in blaming education bureaucrats for the problems experienced by the subject (Ibid: 37). Bringing his analysis further back to include the entire page, Kress finds the story is balanced by others on the page to provide an overall intended message that is reassuring in depicting the dominant order as a caring one (Ibid: 45). Kress’s study shows that while a problem involving poverty has been identified, it is covered through a managed debate over blame and responsibility. It does not move beyond a consensus that the dominant can help the afflicted. Again this is consistent with the concept of hegemony as the larger political and economic structure escapes scrutiny as a part of supposed consensual or commonsense values.

Hall et al refer to the “public idiom”, to discuss the language of news (1982: 60). The “public idiom” is the news’s use of the perceived language of its reader. The use of which implies a shared subjective reality. A consensual view of society may be operating in the cultural values a journalist ascribes to, through the terms they may use and in the style they adopt. Through these important factors in the construction of news, consensus can be seen as a significant quality of news discourse. While there is assumed to be a level of consensus within society, it still leaves room for debate.

Hallin terms this space, “the sphere of legitimate controversy” (1986: 116). However, not every issue falls within this sphere and even then, debate must take place within certain channels and methods. Petitions or peaceful protest may be seen as avenues in which citizens pursue change on issues, while more aggressive challenges to the established order lie outside of the realm of consensus and be labelled criminal or deviant. Whilst leaving room for debate, there will still be a significant space that remains untouchable. In this hegemonic process the core domain of consensual or commonsense values and beliefs lies free from scrutiny.

Towards a Consensual View of New Zealand

Writers on the media’s assumption of commonsense beliefs and values outline what these consensual ideas may be. Aside from general values, these are specific to a time and place. Hallin, for example, describes the sphere of consensus as “Motherhood and apple pie” (1986: 116). This is obviously an American estimation of consensual values. Nevertheless, the place of those beliefs in America is well known and New Zealand equivalents may be suggested. These assumed consensual beliefs can then be presupposed in order to create a single perspective of events, and Hall et al write of these dominant values as “*the culture*” (1982: 55). It is aspects of the culture that may influence the coverage of poverty in a New Zealand context. One commonly held belief in New Zealand is that poverty is non-existent, or is so minor in comparison to Third World poverty that it is not worthy of consideration. Anecdotally, I have been warned that any study involving New Zealand poverty will be hard as there is no poverty in New Zealand. Obviously, this is not the only discourse on poverty as the Child Poverty Action Group, The Salvation Army and other organizations will testify, but whether or not this discourse finds its way into the culture and is part of a news

perspective is an important research question for this study to pursue. This discourse is persistent enough to be recognised and refuted by a document published by the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services with the intention of breaking popular conceptions about poverty (Joint Methodist/Presbyterian Public Questions Committee 1998).

Such a discourse may be partly fuelled by the notion of New Zealand as an egalitarian society. This discourse has at times enjoyed a place in the culture. It comes from the belief that British colonists founded a state free from Europe's class stratification. Instead, we are a nation of Kiwi battlers and ordinary blokes (the egalitarian myth is essentially male and Pakeha, one reason to refer to it as myth), with the beekeeper that conquered Everest gracing our five dollar note. The egalitarian myth has been identified in literature (Jones 1983) and as part of the stereotype of the New Zealand male (Phillips 1984). For Consedine, the Pakeha male's relationship to the economy has been a significant factor in this part of New Zealand identity,

A large number of myths have grown up around this relationship, which contribute to the belief that New Zealand is an egalitarian society. Some of the more common of these myths are the propositions that everyone in New Zealand has equal opportunity, that there is no real poverty in New Zealand, that anyone can become wealthy if they work hard, that economic growth produces social justice, that the unemployed are lazy and that people are poor because they don't budget properly (1989: 174).

Egalitarianism may have its roots in the 19th century, but it has persisted. Its existence was maintained by welfare state discourse, which dominated New Zealand economics for much of the twentieth century.

The longevity of the welfare state suggests its place as an assumed consensus, largely free of scrutiny or change. Waldegrave et al describe the construction of poverty within the welfare state, where it was seen as a lack of minimum needs and the need for a government provided welfare system to prevent poverty (1997: 214). Although, commentators have noted that within this welfare state discourse, universal social policies were combined with moral and practical requirements for those receiving welfare negating a view of a universal welfare state (O'Brien and Wilkes 1993 in Waldegrave et al 1997: 215). Nevertheless, it has added to a cultural identity with an "ethos of collective responsibility" (Bell 1996:192). The discursive production of poverty as a lack of physical needs, used in official definitions, underwent a change in the 1970s when a Royal Commission adopted a relative definition. The welfare consensus was severely challenged in the 1980s and 90s. Peters (1997) tracks a discursive shift, which came with and enabled welfare change. Welfare argumentation moved from framing the issue in terms of economics to morality (Peters 1997:9). Against this shift, Governments have introduced drastic changes to the welfare system, demonstrating the power of discourse and the need to examine its use. This change in political philosophy has been influenced by overseas discourse. Peters draws on Fraser and Gordon (1994) among others to show a similar construction of poverty as problems of the individual. The arrival of these discourses is also seen in a 1990s edition of New Zealand's social policy journal, entitled *Beyond Dependency* (*Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, vol. 119, no. 8: 97-110). This was the

outcome of a conference on the topic, looking at solutions to benefit dependency. As Fraser and Gordon (1994) have described, the use of this term signals a certain discourse, allied with that of individuals as the cause of poverty. He locates this discourse predominantly in the rhetoric of Neoliberal politicians.

In the light of this discursive shift, many writers believe the egalitarian myth as consensus has eroded. While Bell identifies remnants of the egalitarian myth in popular television shows *Heartland* and *Shortland Street*, she is not sure that the belief persists, “It has now been shoved aside, and new myths are being built by those who have the most to gain from the new edifice” (1996: 192). A recent *Listener* survey supports a lack of faith in the egalitarian myth. It found that 70% of respondents believed there was a class system in New Zealand, although those describing themselves as middle class are less likely to agree (Black 2005: 21). It is possible that the Neoliberal discourse described by Peters is more likely to be part of the assumed cultural map than ideas of egalitarianism. However, multiple discourses can exist at one point in time even if they are contradictory. Notions of egalitarianism and New Zealand as a poverty free nation can be drawn at the same time as ideas of dependency.

Deviance

If newswork involves internalizing a set of commonsense assumptions and values, then it also identifies events that fall outside of these values. For Ericson et al, deviance is the essential news value (1987: 4). Crime is the obvious example of this. Crime represents actions that deviate from consensual beliefs, such as the right to private property and safety. One of the aims of this study is to locate poverty within

these features of news discourse. If there is an assumed consensus that poverty is not a social problem in New Zealand, then the announcement of poverty in news should deviate from this consensus and will require managing. In focusing on deviance, news simultaneously shows what the expected state is. Reporting deviance is, in this way, an act of charting the boundaries of a view of society as consensus. Commentators frequently point to the media's interest in the more deviant aspects of poverty. Golding and Middleton (1982) chart the rise of a moral panic brought on by a case of welfare fraud. Drawing on Cohen (1980), Allon and Martin (1997) find the media are just one among many fields involved in a moral panic over the homeless taking over public space. Official rhetoric and debate found in the media plays a part in fuelling policy responses such as surveillance; the result being a transformation of public space into a site of panic, "a glimpse of the means by which the dominant social and moral order becomes the spatial order" (Allon and Marin 1997: 30). This provides an extreme example of the way dominant discourse can become consensual discourse: a process explained in the next section. Devereux's study of everyday poverty reporting also shows deviance as a news value, with a media focus on the "deviant" poor of Ireland's Traveller community (1998: 96). In this reporting, visual images also work to show the economic and cultural distance between the Travellers and mainstream values (Devereux 1998: 86). This theme seems to operate from a consensus that poverty in itself is not unusual or unexpected. Only when the poor deviate from other norms does the media pay attention, perhaps implying a belief similar to the oft-quoted biblical verse "the poor will always be with us." An acceptance of poverty as a constant in society could also be seen as crucial to capitalism as it removes the need for any structural action.

Campbell and Reeves (1989) explore journalism's negotiation of the boundaries between deviance and commonsense values, discussing news coverage of an issue of homelessness. The coverage concerns a New York City plan to institutionalise homeless people diagnosed as mentally ill. Specifically, news focused on one woman whose resistance to being institutionalised become the subject of a court case. Reporting of the issue equated homelessness with mental illness and alcoholism, and the homeless were depicted as speaking nonsense rather than commonsense (Campbell and Reeves 1989: 33). One way this is achieved is through a "hierarchy of discourse" in which the homeless rarely speak, instead being spoken about (Ibid: 34). Those that do speak, appear drunk or irrational, the nonsense voices described above. This effaces other causes and aligns a commonsense view, embodied by the news, with dominant values. Joyce Brown, the woman who became the centre of the controversy, appeared as the focus of a *60 Minutes* segment. This story was unique in framing the story in terms of class conflict. However, this frame was seen more in terms of individualism versus institutions, bringing it back into dominant values. Another part of this debate, became whether Brown spoke with the voice of commonsense. This effect was furthered by a later story where she had taken on the status of mainstream success. Brown was shown to be a voice of commonsense, but not representative of the homeless (Ibid: 38). "The 60 Minutes story restores safety and normalcy as Joyce Brown, this alien representative from another world, enters and reaffirms our world" (Ibid: 39). Homelessness remains deviant and strange, and in its coverage, the media successfully explains supposed commonsense values. While reporters draw on mental maps of what society is and is not in order to define deviance, they have other tools of representing consensus. News sources, especially

those that appear to represent authority and credibility, aid in defining the deviance that forms much of the news.

News Sources.

In discussing discourses of poverty, several sociological studies have been drawn on. Fraser and Gordon's (1994) study, which traces changing definitions of dependency rarely mentioned the media as playing a part in this. This does not mean the media is unimportant but shows that much of poverty discourse has originated in the rhetoric of politicians and academics. News does not discursively produce poverty by itself. However, it can be suggested that news plays another role, reproducing and disseminating the discourse of these groups. To go further, theory suggests that media will use the discourse of these authoritative figures almost to the exclusion of others. The process by which the words of authority figures becomes the dominant and relatively uncontested discourse of the news occurs through their role as sources. Drawing on sources is essential to news and helps maintain its ideals of authoritativeness and objectivity.

Sources also play an important part in identifying deviance and maintaining boundaries. Sources and source organisations provide a ready supply of issues as well as information in forms like interviews, press releases and official documents. This information is seen as authoritative because of the position of sources. They are the representatives of major institutions; politicians, judges etc; the higher ranking the better. Because of this preference, which itself relies on a consensus that society is organised in such ways, media tend to reproduce the existing power structure (Hall et al 1982: 58). Therefore, those in powerful positions in institutions have that power

further conferred by being called on as authorities in the media. The existing power structure is produced as commonsense. Becker's term the "hierarchy of credibility" has been used to describe the stratification of knowers that occurs (1967: 241). One effect of this hierarchy is that marginalised groups, such as the poor, rarely speak for themselves. For Devereux, a study of television coverage confirms that a major feature of poverty coverage is elite individuals and groups (1998: 96). As well as the obvious authoritative sources: politicians, government officials etc, another source is "the expert" for whom "the disinterested pursuit of knowledge confers objectivity" (Hall et al 1982: 58). As mentioned earlier, academics have been seen as some of the originators of poverty discourse. But even amongst these experts there appears to be a hierarchy of what can be deemed authoritative. Source organisations must maintain their public image of credibility. One way of achieving this is to produce information through methods that are seen as neutral and general (Ericson et al 1987: 21). These methods include the use of numbers, statistics and scientifically obtained information which fulfils the news ideology of objectivity. This research is easily recognisable as fact; qualities of interpretation and bias are less obvious than in descriptive or personal accounts. To ensure their position in the hierarchy of credibility, source organisations may privilege such methods.

An example and the problems implicit in this appeal to credibility through supposed neutrality is described in O'Connor's (2001) study of poverty research. One result of the requirement of objectivity is that knowledge derived from experience is not valued as it does not translate into quantifiable variables. This reveals that the dominant definition of authority as objective and scientific restricts the poor from speaking even by proxy. Although neutrality has been the aim of this "poverty knowledge," and has

limited its ability to investigate capitalism as problematic, it has not stopped its findings and methods from being used for the advancements of certain ideologies, such as the dependency discourse (O'Connor 2001: 7). This has often occurred counter to the intentions of liberal researchers. For these reasons O'Connor argues that what is recognised as knowledge is consequential for the poor (2001: 8). Her work shows that maintaining a place in the hierarchy of credibility can mean adopting methods which maintain a consensus of what is suitable for criticism, as well as further limiting the voices and discourses that are heard.

The combination of convenience and authority means institutional news sources are often overused. A considerable amount of news work is the reproduction of sources' information and accounts. Ericson et al go as far as to suggest an overlapping of source and news organisations (1987: 23). This relationship occurs through reporters' constant interaction with sources, their access to an organisation's culture. This on the subject of contacts, from a local journalism textbook,

Initially, they will be wary of reporters new to a round [...] One way around this early obstacle is to show your first couple of stories to the official before they go to broadcast. If you have got it right, the basis of a mutually trustful relationship will be formed. Later, it won't be necessary to see your copy, although always there will be an implicit need to be accurate and fair.

Later, the official may try you as a sounding board, giving information that can be used as background for a story, although without official sourcing. (Tucker 1992: 74).

The above advice suggests that official and institutional sources are involved in news

discourse beyond quotations and cited statistics. The commonsense authoritative image of institutional sources means an almost uncritical relationship can be encouraged without controversy. While this same textbook later warns that a “mole” within an institution may have hidden motivations, there is no suggestion to be wary of those acting within the interests of their institution. They enjoy a high level of unchallenged access to news audiences.

For Hall et al, these sources become the primary definers of an issue (1982: 58). This is a result of the relationship described, where such sources become the first stop for journalists constructing an issue in news discourse. By providing the initial definition of a topic they set the terms of the debate. The arguments that follow must address the issue in the terms of the initial, institutional debate. Sources frame the problem for subsequent debate and set the criteria of what is considered relevant to the discussion. In considering what this may mean for the coverage of poverty, it is helpful to consider Devereux’s findings: “In the main, poverty news is really news about how those who are in positions of power are responding to aspects of poverty. This news reaffirms their status and rarely questions their activities in any way” (1998: 68). Schlesinger and Tumber (1999) offer some criticisms of Hall et al’s (1982) model of sources as primary definers. They argue that the primary definers model does not take into account the contention between source organisations (Schlesinger and Tumber 1999: 258). Another criticism is that Hall et al describe political figures such as ministers and MPs all as primary definers but media access is not equally open to all of them (Ibid: 259). They find that Hall et al describe the media as more passive than is really the case, as news outlets often challenge the statements of primary definers (Ibid.). The primary definers theory does not acknowledge sources which try to create

counter definitions, nor does it recognise the negotiation that may go on within a source organisation before it presents a primary definition (Ibid: 260). Schlesinger and Tumber do not reject Hall et al's original model as there is no doubt that figures of authority often have their views promoted in news. But the authors do call for a more dynamic understanding of the relation between sources and news, as non political sources can also be drawn on frequently to counter the official line (Ibid: 262). This thesis will pursue the importance of sources, through looking at the effect of those that speak on the news construction of poverty.

Conclusion

Research that evaluates news through comparison to social reality is frequent in literature on poverty journalism. However, this basis of analysis is problematic, in assuming an objective truth about poverty is available to the researcher. The concept of discourse provides an alternative, where news is seen as a site of ways of knowing poverty. Instead of filtering reality, news draws on wider ways of understanding and knowing to create its representations. These exist in places beyond the text and can occur in the language and terms that are used to discuss poverty. The egalitarian myth is offered as one possible discourse that may be drawn on to provide commonsense or consensual ways of understanding poverty. However, it is a "commonsense" view that may be hegemonic in undermining any view of poverty in New Zealand. The extent to which dominant values, which undermine the problem of poverty in New Zealand, are drawn on by news will be pursued in this thesis. One way that dominant discourses can appear in the news is through the identification of deviance. News seeks to show events that disrupt what is expected; those incidents that deviate from what are assumed to consensual values. Identifying the relationship of poverty and

the poor to deviance in news can also offer insight into the influence of dominant discourses. The model of news that is described by Hall et al (1982) offers one explanation of the discourses that appear in the news. This model suggests that news's reliance on those in places of institutional authority not only reinforces this authority, but also results in dominant discourses appearing as those which define the issues. Schlesinger and Tumber (1999), criticise points of this original model, arguing for a framework with more flexibility in its conception of the relationship between sources and news. These authors provide another focus for this study: the need to identify whether those in dominant positions have their discourses privileged in understanding poverty, and the extent to which these discourses define the issue itself. This and the need to identify what is assumed as consensus by news are two of the key questions that arise from this framework. The hegemony of dominant discourses and the absence of other ways of understanding are extremely problematic in news as it is an important site of information about this social issue.

Methodological Statement

The theory discussed will be applied to news texts through discourse analysis. While many researchers in this field have used the quantitative method of content analysis, this thesis avoids this methodology. Those employing quantitative methods frequently evaluate news by analysing the accuracy of representations and identifying the distortions of reality that are found in stereotypes. These approaches run the risk of assuming the researcher has access to neutral truths about the subject of analysis. The requirement of a neutral stance is incompatible with research into poverty. Objective truth about poverty and the poor is not easily accessible as there is a multitude of ways of discussing and knowing poverty. A knowledge of poverty that comes from

experience is also elided through this requirement, as the need for objectivity often privileges certain types of information; particularly statistical and institutional forms. There is no set method of discourse analysis, but as a rule, it takes language as its subject of study. It is an approach which examines language in relation to units of communication that exist beyond individual texts. The concepts of primary definers, hegemony and consensus that have been discussed will be drawn on in conjunction with discourse analysis to explain the process through which particular discourses come into news about poverty. While it does not require precise methods of sampling, this thesis does select several texts in order to give a wide range of the ways poverty is covered. The next chapter looks at reporting where the topic of poverty is at the centre of a news event: the news coverage of a 2005 Unicef report about child poverty in rich nations. Specifically, it analyses articles from New Zealand's major papers which covered the announcement of Unicef's report. All of which appeared on the 1st and 2nd of March 2005. Discourse is analysed through the close analysis of news language, particularly that influenced by news sources, and it also looks at the intertextuality of this language. The third chapter expands this approach, adding van Dijk's (1988) cognitive based theory of media discourse to a critical analysis of news language. It has as its focus of analysis, newspaper and television news from a randomly selected month, the 12th October to the 12th September 2005, with out any major news events that bring poverty into the media. The daily news for most New Zealand centres is searched for articles relating to poverty. Two television documentaries, *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street* are chosen for analysis as they offer the potential for alternative discourses of poverty. Again, a critical approach to language is taken, tracing the intertextuality of the "street kids" label given to young homeless. Theory of documentary is also used to explain the construction of

homelessness that occurs. Further explanation for these particular texts will be discussed in each chapter.

Chapter Two

Reporting Child Poverty: Press Coverage of the Unicef Child Poverty Report.

Introduction.

Child poverty can be an emotive side to the debate over disparity and welfare. Arguments about an undeserving poor are not made as easily when discussing the lives of society's most vulnerable citizens. This subject came to news attention in March 2005, with the release of a Unicef report that included a league table of child poverty in rich countries. New Zealand's place on this report was low, only higher than Italy, the United States and Mexico, for the proportion of children living in relative poverty. Although not covered in much detail, this table was reported; stories appeared in most of New Zealand's major daily newspapers. Analysing these articles is important to a study of poverty coverage as they contain some of the few news references to poverty as an issue of its own in New Zealand. While the subsequent chapter suggests that poverty is usually found on the margins of other issues, here it takes centre stage. For this reason it is important to look at the way the media handles these announcements, which have the potential to break popular conceptions about New Zealand. Conducting this reading with an interest in discourse, is a valuable method for learning, not only about the press coverage of this issue, but about the wider discourses of poverty that prevail in New Zealand. It is crucial not to simply concentrate on the text, but to consider the forces shaping that text. If particular ways of knowing, understanding and discussing poverty are to be found then it is necessary to consider why these discourses appear. Several methods will be used to unpack the construction of child poverty that occurs in this coverage. Applying techniques of

critical analysis to news language, as well as tracing some of the intertextual meanings that occur, shows the dominance of particular discourses of poverty; namely institutional and policy based frames of reference. Similarly, topics that explain news and society such as the incident/event focus of news and the over reliance on those in positions of power as spokespeople, will also be used to understand the way poverty is covered. While the topic of these stories might have threatened images of a well off egalitarian New Zealand or at least, prompted discussion of this important social issue, the actual depiction was far less dramatic. Drawing on the concepts described, this chapter aims to illustrate and explain the way that this event and issue was contained.

The Unicef Report

In March of 2005 poverty was the subject of news headlines in New Zealand. While poverty in New Zealand is referred to in discussions of welfare and appears in the coverage of crime, it is hardly a theme for news itself. The reason for the focus on this unpopular topic was a report made by international organisation Unicef. Entitled the Innocenti Report Card and carried out by Unicef's Florence based Innocenti Research Centre, the report aimed to provide information on the state of child poverty in rich nations (Those belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)). New Zealand was included in the report for the first time. The fact that Unicef found the country to be the fourth worst rich nation in terms of child poverty was a source of news and debate. This ranking showed New Zealand had 16.3 per cent of its children living in "relative" poverty. Relative poverty was defined as households with an income that was below 50 per cent of the national median income. The rate of child poverty refers to data collected in 2001. As will be

discussed, New Zealand's low ranking was the main subject of all local news coverage of the report. Denmark topped Unicef's ranking with a rate of 2.4 per cent, while below New Zealand were Italy 16.6, USA 21.9 and Mexico 27.7.

Although the ranking was the focus of news, the report also discussed several aspects of child poverty. Other key findings included statistics that showed child poverty has risen in 17 out of 24 OECD countries in the latest ten-year period. Unicef also claimed higher government spending on family and social benefits is associated with lower child poverty rates. Similarly, differences in government policy account for most of the variation in child poverty rate between the countries surveyed. Based on this survey and research, Unicef provided guidelines on dealing with child poverty in rich nations. These included the need to set agreed definitions of poverty; supplementing relative measures with direct measures. Setting deadlines for the reduction of child poverty and gaining public support for these goals was another recommendation. As well as the need to establish a backstop line, from which poverty should not be allowed to increase.

While these were just some of the topics discussed in 2005's Innocenti Report Card, local media looked for responses to New Zealand's ranking. Similarly, letters, editorials and Op Ed articles provided opinions on New Zealand's place with little interest in the other features of the report. A frequent target was the age of the data, which was seen as too old to be relevant. Some opinion pieces also queried Unicef's definition of poverty. One outcome of this was that the term poverty, rarely used in discussions of New Zealand income deficiency, became a feature of news and editorials. However, the focus of the coverage was narrow with all main papers

covering the report in a way that constructed poverty as abstract; distanced from the experience of the poor and downplaying any sense of an ongoing social problem.

News as Events

Popular and dictionary definitions of news regard it as the reporting of events. The title “news” also emphasises immediacy and timeliness as its key features. News shows what crimes, accidents, announcements, wars etc. have occurred since we last looked at a paper or watched a report. This is seen as the commonsense description of what is found in news media. However, scholars have disputed this quality of newness. Ericson et al write, “it makes no sense to say that news is new, because news always implies the existence of a past that is framed in terms of news discourse.” (1987: 19). The concept of news discourse refers to the established way in which news constructs the world; a particular way of knowing society that news draws on and the events focus is just one part of this. Tuchman (1980) describes the way journalists work to typify what could be described as the unexpected through routine methods of coverage. Rather than conflict with routines, events are considered to work into the planned methods of news creation (Shoemaker and Reese 2001: 121). In comparison to an abstract issue like poverty, an event is easier to define as news. Another advantage is that some events, like elections or the announcement of Unicef’s report can be prescheduled (Ibid).

While it may be an established, routine mechanism, news discourse still constructs the world as a series of unexpected events. This relationship is so strong that we have the “media event;” occurrences staged for the media’s attention (Dayan and Katz 1992). Becker (1995) discusses the media’s role in constructing such events as rituals. Although there are criteria for what makes news, in the form of news values, whatever

is covered is cast in the frame of an event. This subverts the view of media as a reflection of society or reality, because these things are interpreted in the terms of news discourse. Such interpretation can involve omitting some events in favour of others. It also sits uneasily with ongoing social issues, which may not fit the news discourse's criteria of events and news values.

This discussion is referring primarily to hard news, which forms the bulk of what makes up the newspaper, TV report and radio bulletin. It is primarily in hard news that issues are constructed through the inverted pyramid design of the news story. Other categories of news include soft, spot, developing and continuing news (Tuchman 1980: 47-49). While soft news and hard news are often thought to overlap, soft news is mainly seen in feature articles, which do not require the same level of immediacy. Features and other soft news are constructed through other variations of news discourse. Within soft news writers can consider context, multiple viewpoints and investigative approaches. However, the dominant discourse of news is hard news, and "Journalists spend much of their energy trying to find an angle which will present what is essentially soft news in hard news terms" (Bell 1991:14). This suggests the requirements of hard news discourse outweigh other ways of seeing an event or issue. The topics of soft news are often brought to attention first through hard news discourse, then followed up in a soft news story. Of course, this is *if* they are followed up; many issues only exist in hard news forms. Other forms such as spot and continuing news are commonly seen as divisions of hard news and are described in similar discourse. Tuchman writes that when asked, newswriters discussed continuing news as a series of stories based on the same subject occurring over a period of time (1980: 49). While this may be seen as the way that ongoing issues are

covered, it still relies on a series of events that refer to the same subject. One example of continuing news is war (Ibid). But war coverage relies on actions occurring as a part of a conflict. Poverty although a continuing problem will not make news coverage without occurrences and actions, which can be constructed as events through news discourse.

Although scarce, news of the poor does make the paper. One way this happens is through the rhetoric of politicians or those in positions of authority. Political rhetoric is not obviously an event yet still receives news coverage. In order to report this through news discourse, rhetoric is constructed as “speech acts,” which generally refers to speech that seems to do something, such as questions, allegations or commands (Fowler 2001: 64). This brings back the concept of primary definers, as not every person’s speech acts make the news. The acceptance of some as authoritative and worthy of being heard relies on a consensual acceptance of the way society is organised. One option to a source wanting to draw to bring attention to an issue is to package and create “events” to bring their concerns to the news. Alternatively, a source can aim for a level of authority to bring their speech acts to attention. The Unicef report may be considered through this requirement. Unicef’s ranking of New Zealand as fourth for child poverty was framed as an action by newspaper reports and the effects of this will be discussed.

News discourse has evolved from the reproduction of raw information to creating the story as a “self-contained language event” (Matheson 2000: 570). Sources are combined and interpreted then put back into a readable, “neutral” discourse. Matheson (2000) shows an alternative to this in his description of the premodern

newspaper story which could contain the unedited rhetoric of sources, sometimes alongside other contradictory accounts. Another feature of modern news discourse is that the reader is not required to go beyond the story to interpret events. Without oversimplifying the actions of audiences, it is fair to suggest that few of us do. Through these mechanisms an issue can be covered through the frame of an event and that event can then be encapsulated in a report. While the content of news is often questioned, it is rare that these larger structures of news discourse receive scrutiny. This is problematic because not all issues can be boiled down to self-contained events. As Gitlin suggests “news concerns the event, not the underlying condition; the person, not the group; conflict, not consensus; the fact that “advances the story,” not the one that explains it.” (1980: 28). So while no previous knowledge is assumed for a news story, it is also concerned only with a moment in time. We may read about events involving poverty which are merely snapshots of a fluid, stretching social problem; the form does not necessarily mirror the content.

A Child Poverty Event.

The Unicef report on child poverty represents one event that brought this continuing social problem to the news for a moment. While child poverty is the issue in question, it is the research that brings it to the news and this is made clear in the coverage. The language of headlines and leads is that of the hard news story. The New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), a news wire service provides the first account in news discourse, heading their story: “NZ gets “terrible” child poverty rating” (New Zealand Press Association 1 March 2005), *The Dominion Post* writes “New Zealand rates fourth in child poverty” (*Dominion Post* 2 March 2005: 4). Like most headlines these are made up of mainly lexical words, summarising what is important. These headlines focus on

the action that has occurred rather than child poverty as a wider issue or an ongoing problem. Creating poverty as events or actions conflicts with the grammar of poverty, which casts it as a state that a person can be in (Kress 1994: 29). Although NZPA write that New Zealand “gets” a bad poverty ranking, no one can get poverty itself, they fall into or find themselves in poverty. It is not an agentive state, although poverty itself can be an agent, causing despair and hardship (Ibid). To overcome this restriction in the grammar while still wishing to create an event out of poverty they emphasise a hard news action in Unicef’s giving the rating. The process through which poverty occurs or the research that determines how the ratings will be given would not fit well in news discourse’s requirements of action or events.

The No Poverty Consensus

There is an angle or frame in New Zealand’s rating being seen as “terrible.” Implicit in this frame to the story are assumed consensual beliefs. Firstly there is the presumption that child poverty is a concern and that a negative ranking is important information. Another value that can be assumed is that a bad rating was unexpected for New Zealand. This is emphasised through language and in both headings New Zealand starts the clause, the place usually assigned to the actor. This is despite Unicef conducting the study and giving the rating. Obviously, national relevance is a factor in this construction. Nevertheless, news being “new” it is only relevant if it tells us something we do not already know. A statement made by Children’s Commissioner Dr Nicky Kiro in NZPA’s report makes this commonplace belief explicit. Kiro describes the report as a “wake up call.” The fact that Unicef found Mexico had the highest rate of child poverty among the OECD is given little or no attention. This relies on seeing Mexico as a less geographically and culturally relevant

nation as well as one where child poverty is not unexpected. News constructs these issues of interest as self-contained events and news values of deviance are one factor of this discourse (Ericson et al 1987). Being ranked high in child poverty is a deviation from consensual beliefs about the country.

Intertextuality and League Table Ranking

A useful tool in analysing these news stories is the concept of intertextuality. This is considering language as having contexts, connotations and fluid meanings that can be derived from its other uses. The work of Russian theorist, Bakhtin has been influential in the evolution of this concept. For Bakhtin, words are not neutral and impersonal but have connotations given to them by those who have already used them (Maybin 2002: 67). An example is “undergo,” commonly used in relation to negative experiences, like undergoing an operation, even though its official definition does not include this connotation (Stubbs 1998 cited in Maybin 2002: 68). For analysis this means that despite the assumed neutrality of news, language can smuggle certain nuances into a report of an event or issue. A richer view of what is being said about poverty can be gained by looking at key words and terms, relating them back to other uses to understand the connotations that they bring with them. However, it is important to qualify this, as Matheson does, noting that “Intertextual analysis is not about identifying sameness and regular patterning [...], but about the cultural work a text is doing in relation to wider structures” (2005: 36). It is also important to consider what contexts may be relevant and are, even if unconsciously, being drawn on. These criteria can be met by considering the other forces within an article in conjunction with terms or phrases that are being analysed for their intertextuality. The other

themes and discourses that are at work need to be considered to determine which of these possible intertextual meanings is more relevant.

This concept can be applied to news descriptions of Unicef's research document. The study is described varyingly as a "report" and a "league table." In news coverage, places on this league table are named using the terms "rankings," "ranked" or "rate," and "rated." Beyond these texts such phrases and the use of league tables, appear most frequently in sports journalism and the business pages of a newspaper. A typical use of "table" and "rankings" can be found in the sports pages of the *Christchurch Press* on the same day the Unicef report was covered. Referring to cricket, it discusses New Zealand's chances of ranking second in a one-day table ("Down the drain at Basin," *The Press*, 2 March 2005: 12). For sports news, tables are another way of discussing competition and are inherently linked with winning and losing. Business uses of the table and ranking terms can often be found in the news. Again, on the same day the report came out a business article in the same paper discusses New Zealand's unexpectedly low ranking in commercial innovation, when compared with other economically developed countries ("Kiwi innovators myth only," *The Press*, 2 March 2005: 9). In the month of February 2005, shortly before the Unicef's report, business news stories also include a report on New Zealand's place in the economic league table of the industrial world ("Up a rung on OECD ladder," *The Press*, 3 February 2005: 5). While business discourse of league tables may not be strictly about winning and losing in the same way as sports coverage, news still foregrounds the competitive meaning of these tables e.g. "NZ nudges past Spain on OECD income list, (*The Dominion Post*, 3 February 2005: 3)" and "Gisborne top of the league for economic growth" (*The Dominion Post*, 18 February 2005: 3)."

Non-sports or business discussions of league tables are less common but do appear. One alternative use was in the reporting of a table that compared the research performance of New Zealand universities with overseas institutions (“League tables for universities shelved,” *New Zealand Herald*, 9 February 2005: A13). The main concern of this coverage was the controversy surrounding this league table. The table was not released following a court decision and those opposed to this ranking system saw it as an unfair comparison. Similarly, league tables describing high school results receive some negative comment in coverage of NCEA, a recently introduced secondary school qualification. In these places, where league tables and rankings are not connected to business and sports, they receive comment. While it is not always major disagreement, there is not a consensual agreement on ranking through tables in these issues. Competitive nuances of league tables are recognised and disputed as inappropriate.

The competitive element of these tables not only exists, it becomes the focus of coverage. The place on a league table is usually seen as more important than the actual score or specific quality (such as a child poverty rate of 16.3%) that place represents and seems it is enough to know it is better or worse than another nation. Olympic Games coverage is renowned for this; tables contrast New Zealand’s medal tally with other countries and these tables can lack mention of the actual sports or athletes that produced the results. In the case of the child poverty report, headlines show this competitive nuance as a key focus. Not one of the headlines from a major daily mentions the actual rate of child poverty, but what is made clear is that New Zealand rates worse than other countries. The fact that we have a certain level of child poverty becomes of interest when it can be seen as better or worse than other nations.

As in sports news *The Dominion Post* invokes Australia for comparison although it is neither the lowest nor highest on the list.

It may seem bold to claim that sports and business metaphors of competition are being brought into articles about vulnerable children. However, it is not the first time that this intertextual reference occurs. The link was made more explicitly than occurs here, in an earlier story about child poverty. Entitled, “A fair deal?” the story opened with “New Zealanders hate losing. We descend into national mourning when our rugby team stumbles and we hang our heads when the mast on our yacht snaps. But few tears have been shed over the country’s latest defeat” (*The Press*, 31 January 2004: 4). The defeat in question was another international study which found New Zealand ranked 15th out of 18 OECD countries for welfare support given to families. However, by making the link overt the article is doing different things with these intertextual connotations. It acknowledges the nuances of competition that have come to be associated with league tables and uses them for effect, questioning New Zealanders’ values for not responding to this competition in the same way as they would for sports. Rather than do this, the Unicef coverage builds on these intertextual meanings without making an overt connection. The connotations come to frame the discussion in terms of competition. This affects the construction of poverty itself within the stories. The league table connotation of winning and losing tends to make child poverty another contest, eliding those affected by poverty in favour of a debate over the accuracy of the ranking itself. As noted, the relevance of possible intertextual references has to be considered. In this case the earlier article enforces the relevance of these connotations. But the general tone of the coverage: rich in bureaucratic discourse and light in the experiences of the poor, also backs a conclusion that the

comparative, competitive nuances of league tables and the associated phrases are at play.

Discourses of Child Poverty

The importance of identifying the key discourses in these stories is emphasised by considering news media ownership in New Zealand. Between them, Australian based corporation Fairfax and Tony O'Reilly's APN media, own the overwhelming majority of New Zealand's newspapers. Without needing to suggest personal influence, this dominance does limit the voices that appear. Only a small number of stories will appear on a national issue such as this, especially as many papers will reproduce or slightly alter the New Zealand Press Association's account. This means then, that the dominant discourses that can be identified in a story are frequently the dominant discourses in almost all of the most read newspaper coverage.

Writers have since revised Hall et al's (1982) model of primary definers shaping the news (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). However, New Zealand's press coverage of the event is largely consistent with Hall et al's original description as they rely on traditional sources of authority. Unicef breaks the story, an ability granted by their status as an authoritative source. They command this level of authority as a large international organisation and they also confirm one of Ericson et al's claims that source organisations will often invoke "systems of rationality" to legitimate their claims (1987: 21). In this case, it is the quantitative research that Unicef has undertaken which legitimates its announcements about poverty. In the *New Zealand Herald* story ("NZ's poverty rate one of the highest," *New Zealand Herald* 2 March 2005: A3), which is typical of articles on the subject, Unicef's announcement and report is described and put in context of an upcoming election. Following this,

Minister of Social Development, Steve Maharey, comments that the government's newly introduced "Working for Families" policy would reduce child poverty. Unicef spokeswoman Beth Wood then says she accepted current Ministry estimates of child poverty and she also acknowledges the Government's steps in the budget, but criticises aspects of the "Working for Families" package. Although she makes this point, Maharey's response remains dominant to extent of defining the terms of Wood's statement. Other voices remain absent from this article as the issue is defined by Unicef and the government. Although some articles did include other spokespeople such as representatives of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Plunkett, they also had their comments structured by a need to respond to Unicef and Maharey's definition of the issue. One response that occurs in several articles, although not in the *Herald* story, is Maharey's comment that the data is five years old and is therefore irrelevant. This is acknowledged by all subsequent spokespeople, including Susan St John of the CPAG, even as they argue that there are still problems to be addressed. This repetition enforces Maharey's point, making it prominent constantly. The extent to which these two, Unicef and Maharey, are able to define the issue is seen in a *Waikato Times* brief about the report ("High child poverty rate," *Waikato Times*, 2 March 2005: 3). The first sentence describes it as a report relying on old data, then quotes Maharey's spokesperson as saying the data is irrelevant because of this fact. This forms the entire story. In this example, Maharey's criticism becomes the most important matter concerning the study.

Looking at other stories confirms this pattern. Unicef and Maharey provide the dominant discourses of poverty. Scanning the lexical structure of the articles reveals the way these discourses are traced throughout the articles. Lexical structure is the

sets of vocabulary that are drawn on, identifying the related terms to show “what segments of the world receive discursive attention” (Fowler 2001: 82). A statistical discourse of child poverty is initiated by Unicef’s survey and can be found throughout articles. For example, this from the *Herald* article: “Report...sixth of New Zealand Children...higher rate...all but three of the world’s 26 rich nations...Innocenti Research Centre...16.3 per cent of New Zealand Children in 2001...less than half the national median income...higher rates...”child poverty league table”...70 per cent...when fully implemented in 2007...estimated...reduce the proportion...homes earning under half the median income...14.7 per cent this year to just 4.3 per cent by 2007...poverty rate...fifth lowest in the world by 2007...estimate...ministry’s estimates...Unicef report...ministry’s figures...proportion of children...rose during the 1990s...5.5 per cent in 1990...14 per cent this month...family support rates...Unicef report...second...proportion...less than half the median income before...taken into account...a measure of inequality in “market” earnings...improved its ranking slightly...down the ranks...proportion of Children...during the 1990s in 17 out of 24 countries...long term figures...estimates...cut child poverty by a quarter this year...halve child poverty by 2010 and to eliminate it by 2020...seven countries that cut its welfare spending during the 1990s as a proportion of the national income, from 21.9 in 1990 to 19.2 per cent in 2000.

In all articles a similar lexical structure occurs. Accompanying it is a similar, overlapping vocabulary that constructs poverty through a bureaucratic, policy focused discourse. This is seen in terms and phrases like Social Development Minister, policies, measures implemented by the government, Working for Families package, “policy mix” and support programmes. Some of these appear in the quotations of

government officials but like the statistical vocabulary it is not restricted to them. Other spokespeople as well as the writer of the news story also adopt this lexicon to discuss child poverty, a feature which enforces Hall et al's term "primary definers" (1982: 57). The effect of the dominance of this lexicon is that Unicef and Maharey's definition or discursive construction of poverty as a statistical, policy issue becomes the primary one.

Both discourses extensively use nominalisation, where verbs and adjectives are realised syntactically as nouns (Fowler et al 1979, Fowler 2001, Fairclough 2003). This is a common feature of bureaucratic and official discourse and while not necessarily ideological, does have potential to be so. Nominalisation can have the effect of mystification, concealing processes and eliding agency (Fowler 1979, Fowler 2001: 80, Fairclough 2003: 143). Reification is another potential, where a process can have the status of objects or things (Fowler 2001:80). This occurs as another feature of the reference to a "child poverty rate," "New Zealand's Ranking" and similar ways of referring to the process. The intertextuality of these phrases has been discussed and obviously, they work as shorthand, reducing a description of a process for conciseness. However, one other effect is that actors and processes are only inferred through these phrases. It makes it possible not to mention the lives of children and the conditions they live in but instead debate the "poverty rate." In the *Herald* article it is reported that Maharey believes new policy will "slash child poverty." This turn of phrase is only possible for discussing child poverty in an abstract sense, viewing it as a statistic. It requires a level of abstraction, picturing the issue as columns on a graph that can be slashed. Causes and solutions to the rate are also discussed using nominals and passive verbs with similar effects of mystification and reification of processes.

Unicef urges the government to “implement recommendations from its report,” while Maharey is confident that poverty has been reduced because of “measures implemented by the government.” These obscure the specific processes and actions that may be taking place.

The dominance of these discourses in defining child poverty is made clear in the assertion, “In New Zealand, poverty is defined as 60 percent of the median income.” This statement appears in several stories and demonstrates a contested definition presented as a shared belief. Unicef’s own definition of poverty is households who earn 50 percent or less of the median income. This is different from the one described as New Zealand’s definition but is still constructing poverty through the same method. Other definitions, including those that measure it in the form of lacking certain physical and social needs, are omitted in favour of the governmental view. This reinforces the way that institutional discourses describe poverty throughout the articles to the exclusion of other ways of knowing like the voices of the poor themselves. The resulting story of child poverty is of an issue constituted through official institutional discourse, defined and described through statistics and both caused and best rectified by policy. In this approach, coverage of child poverty in these news stories is no different to the reporting of a national, policy matter such as inflation. Like this poverty coverage, the average article about inflation may be triggered by a warning of a rise made by an authoritative institutional source. The dominant discourses will be institutional, statistical and policy related. Of course, inflation can be linked to poverty, but one directly concerns deprivation felt by people, the other only indirectly. Yet the coverage hardly reflects this. Both issues are

dominated by similar discourse, of intuitions responding to problems that are best described in statistics and bureaucratic jargon by authorised knowers.

Working for Families?

One of these “measures” is government policy entitled “Working for Families,” which is often referred to as a factor that is reducing poverty. The title, “Working for Families Package,” also elides any specific processes such as those seen in the name of another policy “paid parental leave.” It obviously implies benefits but gives little hint as to how those will be carried out. Such language use raised the ire of novelist Fay Weldon who claimed the “hanging dangling participle,” as seen in this instance in the “Working” of “Working for Families,” is a new form of euphemism: “The hanging, dangling participle has no conclusion. It's like a soap opera, it just goes on and on, with no particular point, no attempt to give dramatic shape or finality” (2005). While the policy name suggests it is ongoing, its intended results as well as the actors are left out. Those who refer to the policy by its title continue to infer that it is an active, working solution and in this, a hegemonic process is realised. In order to discuss it, the argument that it is in fact “working” has to be asserted. This is something that does happen throughout stories on the Unicef report. In one story a Unicef spokesperson claims that it is “important to acknowledge Working for Families” and an ideological statement becomes the definitive description of a group of policies. The Plunket Chief Executive is quoted indirectly as saying “Working for Families was ‘a step in the right direction but clearly more must be done.’” In this last statement, two nominalisations are linked so that the details about what “Working for Families” will actually do and why it is a good step are further obfuscated.

Referring to this policy package by name continues to reinforce its positive image as an ongoing and industrious mechanism. Within coverage of the Unicef report “Working for Families” occurs mainly in quotations. But it also appears in the text of news stories and not always framed with the quotation marks that show the exterior authorship of the claim. The result is another example of the ideological becoming consensual or commonsense through news. However, alternative views of the policy do exist. Opposition parties as well as social groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) have expressed concern over what they see as failings in the policy package. A CPAG study by St John and Graig (2004) claims that the package does not provide much for the poorest of the poor due to an emphasis on helping families who are in work. The study says that “Working for Families” leaves 175,000 of the poorest children with little increase in income, and that many poor families will receive an income increase of less than \$10 more per child per week (St John and Graig 2004: 6). The study commends the policy package for addressing poverty yet expresses scepticism as to whether it lives up to its name. Explicit comment on the policy name is seen in the CPAG’s subtitle “Does the 2004 ‘Working for Families’ Budget work for Children?” (St John and Graig 2004). Whether “Working for Families” lives up to its name or not is beyond the scope of this study, but what can be concluded is that the government’s description of this policy package is not seen as accurate by all. Using the term at a basic level, as occurs in several of these news stories, is to present the ideological and debatable as consensual.

While one may benefit from welfare or assistance in prior welfare state discourse, “Working for Families” suggests that the Ministry of Social Development is working for those who use its services. Those who receive income support from the package

become clients of the Ministry. The construction of government service users as clients is a characteristic of Neoliberal Right discourses. The “Working” of the title also reinforces this discourse of welfare in its emphasis on work. An intertextual link may be drawn between this and “workfare,” a policy advocated in dependency discourse. Several essays on workfare appear in the *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*’s eighth issue entitled “Beyond Dependency” (Rogers 1997, McKenzie 1997). In Neoliberal and dependency discourses, there is a belief that old style welfare causes dependency and programs that reward work are required. The work emphasis of the “Families” policy reveals a double meaning as it is not only supposed to be working for them but also aiming to promote working to them. Government texts enforce both meanings with phrases like “make work pay” (Ministry of Social Development 2005). Again, this is hardly a consensual belief as one of the key criticisms made of “Working for Families” is that it emphasises working families to the detriment of other groups like those on welfare, who may have the greatest need.

The Arguments That Count

Within the coverage of Unicef’s announcement, Steve Maharey is often given the opportunity to dismiss it as irrelevant, put his own case forward with a power that requires the Child Poverty Action Group and other non profit welfare groups to acknowledge his comments in making their own. The strategies he employs can be theorised through the concept of topoi, strategies of argumentation that are used to link an argument to a conclusion (Wodak 2004: 74). Of Wodak’s fifteen topoi, a topos of reality describes Maharey’s overall argumentation most accurately (Ibid). Wodak paraphrases this, as “because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be preformed/made” (Ibid: 76). Maharey says that the reality has changed since Unicef’s

data was recorded and can decide that it is no longer relevant. His political discourse is not just a drifting vocabulary of policy, bureaucracy etc. It is hinged on this topos, which allows him to both reject the study's findings as well as claim credit for the reversal of fortune which he says has occurred.

The use of this topos reveals Maharey's strategy to be similar to those used in opinion pieces, letters and the widely panned argument put forward by opposition leader Don Brash. All three apparently different arguments rely on the claim that "reality is as it is" without anything more to support their claims (Ibid.). Columnist Simon Cunliffe begins his "commonsense" approach by quoting Mark Twain as saying "There are three kinds of lies, lies, damned lies and statistics" ("Milking poverty stats," *Manawatu Standard*, 5 March 2005:14). While the quote is also attributed to Disraeli, it may be suggested that Twain is more representative of the homespun, commonsense discourse that Cunliffe is trying to achieve. Cunliffe also questions the age of the study and its definition of poverty: "Shouldn't we have a closer look at what poverty means? Is it not being able to meet payments on the DVD? Is it not having Sky TV?" Etc. Although he acknowledges that "culturally accepted norms change over time," he then presents for contrast, his 1960s childhood. This is described, rich in the imagery of the egalitarian myth e.g. farm life, dental clinics and school milk. He writes that despite the Spartan life led by many children back then, New Zealand was in the top half of child poverty rankings (However, 2005 was the first year NZ was included in Unicef's child poverty reports). While using a commonsense egalitarian discourse, his argument also relies on the same topos of reality, as Maharey. Similarly, opposition leader Don Brash provides an argument that argues against the need to address a child poverty problem. Although he is not quoted

directly, an article describes the response to comments he made (“Every Child Counts spokesperson Murray Edridge said Dr Brash [...],” NZPA, 22 June 2005). Brash does not appear to use data or other opinions in claiming that child poverty fluctuated over time. His comments also rest on a topos of claiming reality.

Maharey’s topos allows him to perform other ideological tasks as well as rejecting the findings as irrelevant. It gives him the ability to make other claims and espouse his own policies. The “Working for Families” policy, as described already, was not yet implemented at the time of Maharey’s comments yet he is able to discuss it with reference to the Unicef report. It cannot be claimed to have already solved the problem presented by the report yet he can use it via a series of “elaborative semantic relations” (Fairclough 2003: 89). For example, in one paragraph Maharey claims the “Working for Families package” will “slash child poverty by 70 per cent when fully implemented in 2007.” The next paragraph elaborates further on the reduction in poverty that is said to occur by 2007. Although, the Unicef results are relegated to the past in many articles via his reality topos, Maharey is able to claim results for the future. The use of this particular topos is only possible for these three because of news discourse. Maharey and Brash are news sources, seen as the source of authoritative information within news discourse. Sources who are not viewed as authoritative may not be able to have their voices heard through news if they rely on the same topos. As in Austin’s theorising of “performative” speech acts, only those who are authorised can marry a couple or name a ship (Austin 1999: 65). The topos described operates like one of these performatives. Maharey is not simply describing reality, he is by virtue of his position performing a particular reality of child poverty in 2005. We may all be able to suggest the reality of a situation, but only particular voices will have

their view distributed. In the terminology of Hall et al's (1982) primary definers model, it is dominant voices that are authorised to make performative announcements and use such topoi. Within news especially, the poor are denied these uses of language.

The use of this strategy especially within Maharey's argument, brings into relief another feature of news discourse; the frame of events. In many ways, Maharey is responding not to the issue of child poverty but to the event that is Unicef's announcement. As Shoemaker and Reese write, "[i]ssues don't always lend themselves to the event model. A president's visit to a national park, for example, may obscure the fact that no substantial action has been taken to protect the environment" (2001: 122). Or in this case, the announcement of poverty by a respected international organisation has obscured the fact that similar announcements have been declared every year Maharey has been in government. His argument addresses Unicef's survey without needing to reference other findings or an ongoing dialogue over child poverty. This is a result of the focus on an event and the generic structure used to contain it. As an announcement story, the articles use a particular way of managing the event. The lead paragraph introduces the report and its findings. From there, satellite paragraphs revolve around this lead, each describing a spokesperson's response to what was described initially. The requirement that each satellite relate back to the lead announcement limits the rhetorical moves that can be made by spokespeople. Their immediate requirement is to talk about Unicef's most recently announced report rather than other events or concerns that surround the issue of child poverty. As well as being restrictive for those who could potentially bring other facets of the issue to light, this structure also enables the topos used by

Maharey. His dismissal of the data due to age is not only enabled but is also encouraged by this generic structure, as his comment is only required to relate to the event, not necessarily the issue. He does this in referring to a methodological problem in order to dismiss one of the few accounts of poverty that make it into the news. Looking at a timeline of recent news involving child poverty makes it clear that it is an event every time, and each can potentially be dismissed with such a “tautological topos” if an ongoing context is not brought to the discussion (Wodak 2004:76).

Child Poverty Timeline

2001- January CPAG releases a report on government policy.

It claims that New Zealand is one of the worst nations in the OECD for child poverty.

Also says that half of all Pacific Island children, a third of Maori and one in 10 Pakeha children “often or sometimes” run out of food for lack of money.

The report suggests improvements in Government policy.

2002- June Government announces action plan to reduce child poverty.

July Welfare groups call for the next government to get serious about eliminating child poverty.

October Welfare groups issue a report on how to improve child poverty issues after a perceived lack of action on behalf of the government.

It is reported that the Social Development Ministry estimates 24 per cent of children and young people in New Zealand are poor.

2003- March The CPAG launches a report critical of lack of action by government in combating child poverty. It suggests future consequences of high poverty rates.

News stories say, “Government reports accept nearly one third of children live in poverty.”

Susan St John of the CPAG, says that foodbanks have reported an increased demand, housing has become more expensive and hospitals had reported increases in diseases caused by poverty.

September A CPAG report shows that 29% of children live in poverty.

It also shows that one in five families face housing-related problems including unaffordable rents, overcrowding and poor quality housing.

2004- January A Christchurch Press article describes an International study released in 2003 which found New Zealand to have low levels of welfare in comparison to other OECD countries.

The same article reports that one in three children live in homes where a benefit is the main income.

February The Wellington People's Centre calls for action on Poverty describing a beneficiary who borrowed money from a loan shark to pay for children's schoolbooks.

August The Children's Commissioner says high housing costs are contributing to poverty for households with children.

October The Public Health Association says government funding is endangering the health of New Zealand's poorest children.

A Public Health Advisory Committee report finds that one in three New Zealand Children live in poverty. It also finds that those from poor families have higher rates of illness, injuries and death.

Government representatives including Steve Maharey promise to seriously consider the reports recommendations.

November The CPAG issue a report claiming that "Working for Families" discriminates against 175,000 children whose parents are beneficiaries.

The report is dismissed by several political figures including Steve Maharey and opposition MPs.

This timeline has no pretence of being the objective way of representing the issue. Neither does it aim to be comprehensive; all of these points are gathered from reports

in the same newspapers that the Unicef coverage was found in. Instead it brings into perspective both the events focus as it happens, as well as the potential for an alternative discourse of poverty, one that draws together several incidents to offer a wider picture of the issue. Poverty as these many instances rather than the one event would require it to be addressed as a fluid social issue, not reducible to a single point in the past; a point from which New Zealand has apparently moved to a situation of extremely low child poverty. Maharey's rejection of old data and all other arguments that negate Unicef's study as irrelevant, refer only to that most recently published study of New Zealand's child poverty. If faced with an alternative construction of child poverty which included other recent reports that make the same claims as Unicef, Maharey would have to modify or change his topos. The topos of reality, with its lack of authoritative evidence, would become a less effective strategy of argumentation.

Maharey has had a previous career as an academic in sociology and he represents a party seen as centre left. As will be observed in the next chapter, there is popular discourse about New Zealand's left wing parties showing more concern for poverty as a social issue. So to some, Maharey's denial of Unicef's report with its seeming lack to acknowledge any current social problem may seem incongruous. This lack of dialogue between the Minister and the issue of poverty may simply be a reflection of his current views, but to be fair, there is also the possibility he is constrained by his role. As a Minister in the current government with an election looming, Maharey must perform as a politician is expected in such a position. He must downplay and deny arguments that New Zealand has social problems under the government of which he is a part. Maharey is situated within institutional discourse and must act appropriately.

However, the authority he claims to make statements about poverty in New Zealand also rest on his position as an expert within the discourse. News is a factor in the construction of this discourse and the lack of challenge presented to Maharey's statements can be interpreted as due to his authority granted by the discourse. The result then, of his discursive position is that he must reject claims that may conflict with his role, to the detriment of discussion, and he may do so by referring to the poor only in terms of numbers due to the legitimacy granted to him.

Conclusion

The Unicef report represents a significant moment in New Zealand news, when the word poverty was used explicitly to discuss local conditions. It is also significant for the way that the issue was encapsulated in an event, defined and dismissed within two discourses. The report formed an incident that acted as a vehicle to bring poverty into the news. However, by constructing New Zealand's low ranking as an event, news reveals an assumed consensus that high child poverty is unexpected in New Zealand. Part of this requirement for the issue to be cast as an event is that the competitive connotations of league table terms and phrases are drawn on. Like a sports story, poverty becomes a matter of winning and losing rather than hardship and deprivation. An earlier report makes this link explicit and it is consistent throughout these articles. Steve Maharey is able to "slash" child poverty only because it has been reduced to this nominal state. This metaphor is also evidence of an assumption that New Zealand poverty is not a concern for many, as it is presented in a way that does not hint at the impact a high or low rate of poverty may have on a life.

This level of abstraction is prominent in the two main discourses that come to define poverty in this coverage: statistics and policy. These two are the fields of action for poverty as a reading of the lexical structure of the articles quickly reveals. In their nominalisation of process, these two discourses obscure actors and processes that may cause and prevent poverty. But perhaps more importantly, the poor themselves hardly appear in this construction of events. One such nominalisation of process is Maharey's "Working for Families" policy package. This also works to pass off an ideological belief as a commonsense description. Among the ideologies present in the description is the belief that the policy does work for families or is working. This is despite the fact it had yet to be introduced at the time of the discussion. The policy's effectiveness has come under debate, so its description is by no means consensual. The intertextual reference to working that forms the policy name is also controversial. Like "Workfare" programs, most criticism of this policy is that it rewards working families to the detriment of others. It is news practices and their relationship with power structures that allow the issue to be defined by these dominant discourses. Similarly, news discourse enables Steve Maharey to refute Unicef's report. His criticism that Unicef's study is out of date relies on a topos of reality. That is a claim that reality is a particular way so a decision can be made. The reality of child poverty is different from the way it was when Unicef collected its data, so he can dismiss this and make alternative claims about child poverty. There is nothing inherently wrong about this line of argument, but a timeline of child poverty news reveals that Maharey is able to make this claim because he is only addressing one event. This topos is less effective when encountering poverty as an ongoing issue rather than as a single moment in time. Another feature of this topos is that while it can be made by almost anyone only some will have their use of it reported. Again, this is a feature of news

discourse with its reliance on dominant and institutional sources. A similar argument made by the CPAG, expressing scepticism about whether the situation had changed does not receive the same attention. Needless to say, the perspective of someone living in poverty who might also use the same topos to reconfirm Unicef's reports does not appear in any of these articles. Poverty, although discussed, is shielded from the reader partly because of news discourse. It is constructed as a matter of competition through largely abstract discourses, remote from any discussion of how deprivation may affect a child. Within these, assumptions that a problem has been solved are also at play. Added to this is the assertion that the problem is in the past, with no context nor opposition to the argument. This may be one of the rare times when the label poverty appears in New Zealand, but in one way or another very little poverty appears in these articles.

Chapter Three

The Day-to-Day Coverage of Poverty in New Zealand

Introduction

Events like the Unicef report on child poverty, which bring the issue directly to the headlines, are uncommon in New Zealand news media. As this chapter will demonstrate, in both newspapers and television rarely is poverty reported on directly. To find poverty and the poor in most news means looking to the margins as the issue tends to be reported as a part of other events rather than as a topic of its own. Politics, price rises and crime will be shown to be some of the themes that bring the poor to the pages of the newspaper. Because poverty is not the subject of much coverage, it is essential to look at the way it may appear in the news on a day-to-day basis without an event that brings it to attention. This type of coverage plays a part in the production of discourses of poverty in New Zealand, and is just as important as the focus of the Unicef article as it is the more frequent references or lack of reference that builds up an overall picture of this issue. In order to provide an analysis of this coverage, this chapter will examine news items which include poverty either directly or indirectly over a period of time. Television coverage will also be included in the sample to acknowledge its place as a major source of news for many New Zealanders. However, it is shown that television features poverty far less than print media, possibly due to different news values. While the approach taken in this chapter cannot provide the same depth of analysis, other aspects of poverty discourse will be revealed by this method. This chapter will show the various themes that bring poverty to the

news, the key actors that discuss the subject and an overview of the way that the mention of this issue is handled by the news. Drawing on the work of van Dijk (1988) as a model for larger scale thematic analysis will show that poverty comes into news through a limited number of events. Through the readings that are encouraged, the place of poverty in these events is elided in favour of other issues or narratives. As in the coverage of Unicef's report, it is again contained as unthreatening to dominant beliefs that poverty is not problematic in New Zealand. This chapter will add to a perspective of poverty news by analysing this process over a month in 2005.

Approach

This chapter's approach parallels Meinhof and Richardson's method by sharing their interest "[...] in the everyday, mundane coverage of poverty, even in the absence of any trigger event" (1994: 5). Similarly, an arbitrary period of time was chosen. This study will be of news from the 12th October to the 12th September 2005. While this was selected in advance without any "poverty event" (like the Unicef report) in mind, it does include the 2005 election and the effect that the proliferation of political discourse has on discourses of poverty must be taken into account. This does not aim to be a content analysis, but an analysis of discourse over a period in a variety of sources. Nevertheless, a rigorous search of the press was carried out; looking for articles with mention of poverty, the poor and related topics such as welfare, unemployment and needs. Television was added to the sample for this chapter and TVNZ's One news, the highest rating television news in New Zealand, was examined for stories that related to poverty. Newspapers yielded the most stories relevant to poverty in this time. However, there was little news of poverty in New Zealand in either medium. Electronic databases allow term specific searching for any mention of

the key terms described above, across a range of New Zealand's newspapers. This chapter will draw on articles from the papers of major centres such as *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion Post*, *The Press*, *Otago Daily Times* as well as, *The Manawatu Standard*, *The Taranaki Daily News*, *The Nelson Mail*, *The Southland Times*, *The Timaru Herald* and *The Waikato Times*. Approximate numbers provide another way of describing the lack of coverage of poverty. While the word poverty appears in roughly 317 articles in these newspapers, once references to Poverty Bay, stories about other countries; reviews and letters are discounted, the final sample is closer to 20 news stories with some mention of "poverty." Searching for "poor" had similar results, with 29 stories using the word in reference to poverty in New Zealand. In this instance the findings were again akin to Meinhof and Richardson's from the UK, who explained a similar lack as "[...] due to the absence of any such "trigger" event which would have put poverty on the national agenda. Without such an event, poverty is not news. It only appeared on the margins of reports about other items" (1994: 6). The absence of poverty from television also mirrors their study. Other explanations for this can be provided beyond the trigger event. As Iyengar (1990) suggests, television tends to privilege episodic news over thematised stories about issues such as poverty. This is true of news in all genres but especially so in television. A factor in this is the nature of the medium itself as the contextual information required for thematised reporting is less visually salient. As McGregor (2002a) notes, visual salience has become an important news value for selecting stories for television. While the dramatic, extreme poverty suffered in the developing world may fulfil this criterion, it is not often applicable to New Zealand. Relative poverty, which is more common in this country, is not as easily represented through

images. The proliferation of cheap imported goods means that traditional visual symbols of poverty like worn and ragged clothing are no longer available to news.

As a key word search the method used has its limitations. The sample is of stories that feature those keywords that relate to poverty. Articles that may be relevant to poverty without using these terms, such as the coverage of social issues like health and education, are missed by this method. However, it can be argued that while such coverage may represent a place where the news does cover poverty, it still signals unease in acknowledging problems of deprivation as “poverty” in New Zealand. The reluctance to use such terms in reference to New Zealand will be discussed in this chapter. The resulting sample featured many newspaper stories with some mention of poverty, the poor or the unemployed as well as a very small number of television stories relevant to poverty in New Zealand. As the final sample was overwhelmingly in print, the methods of analysis used are similar to those practised by van Dijk (1988) in his large scale analysis of the press panic surrounding refugee immigration. As he suggests, the first step here is to organise the articles thematically to show the ways in which poverty gets into the news (van Dijk 1988: 172). Therefore, the following sections are organised around the themes and topics of news stories which feature poverty, in order to provide a snapshot of where the poor can be found in New Zealand’s news.

Where to Find Poverty

The use of the words poverty and the poor in the news occur most frequently in reference to other countries and to the past. In the sample that this analysis draws from, news stories refer to poverty in India, China, Africa and the USA among others.

The USA's place in this list is mainly due to the reporting of the hurricane that destroyed New Orleans and brought to light the difference between rich and poor in that country. The unchecked use of the term poverty to refer to conditions in these countries shows that absolute poverty, the lack of basic needs such as shelter and food which is shown to occur in these mainly developing nations, is part of the consensus. News stories do not have to justify their use of the label to describe poverty in Africa because it is thought that the public agree that the conditions of some people there is best described as poverty. Similarly, stories which refer to poverty in New Zealand's past are also using an absolute definition to qualify their use of the word to describe conditions in this country. A story on businessperson Allan Hubbard describes how childhood poverty is important to his success ("Beetle driving tycoon has no fear of failure," *New Zealand Herald*, 8 October 2005). The examples given makes it clear that the poverty of Hubbard's youth is absolute; "[Hubbard] grew up in a house with no electricity, sacks for bedding and packing-case furniture." This use of poverty in these articles and its scarcity in stories about New Zealand's present conditions show something of the "semantic purity" that Street found in the coverage of poverty in England (1994: 58). He uses this term to discuss the reluctance to apply "poverty" to the domestic situation coupled with its frequent use to describe the Third World, and explains it thus: "the boundaries of the term are being preserved and there is a fear that to give legitimacy to referents of a less extreme kind will be to render the term less 'meaningful' and effective" (Ibid.). The Unicef report, discussed in the previous chapter, clashed with the hegemony of absolute poverty discourse and this was evident in numerous letters and opinion pieces which showed an objection to using the term poverty to refer to New Zealand.

As well as protecting an absolute definition of poverty, the profile of Allan Hubbard also provides several other discourses about poverty. The article with its contrast of Hubbard's childhood poverty and his later wealth constructs a version of the familiar rags to riches story. This type of success story can be read as ideological, supportive of capitalism with its message that anyone can move out of poverty. In this case, the poor are best suited to become multimillionaires according to Hubbard: "He says it is an advantage to come from a disadvantaged home." The story also invokes the egalitarian myth with its image of the humble millionaire who still drives the same car and lives in a modest house. Overlapping these discourses is the longstanding image of the philanthropic industrialist. Within Hubbard's profile we learn that he would rather put his money towards charity than buy a new car. Several statements reinforce this image, "His businesses are now mainly owned by charitable trusts, he says"; "Associates say he and wife Jean give away enormous amounts of money to charities and worthy causes but only a quarter of what they actually do is known," and "He's helped dozens of young farmers into farms by offering them equity partnerships." This is a discourse which can be traced back to Victorian narratives: "Hence that recurrent Dickens's figure, the Good Rich Man [...] He is usually a merchant (we are not necessarily told what merchandise he deals in), and he is always a superhumanly kind-hearted old gentleman who trots to and fro, raising his employees wages, getting debtors out of jail and in general, acting the fairy godmother" (Orwell 1998: 54). Orwell elaborates on the ideology surrounding this character: that society would be better if individuals were better, is one that ignores structural causes and solutions to society's ills. Similarly, the mythic narratives which concern poverty and wealth within the Hubbard story are also concerned with the individual. Drawing on these discourses of poverty results in a construction of poverty as important in Hubbard's

biography, but unthreatening and in the past. A similar use occurs in a sports story where a Rugby League player is shown saying he wants to do well for his family as they did not have much money (TVNZ One News 26 September 2005). Again, this is the discourse of rags to riches used to add interest to the man's story and it does not suggest any sort of wider problem in New Zealand society.

A similar treatment of poverty occurs in a *Dominion Post* story about the 40th anniversary of Porirua as a city ("Porirua," *Dominion Post*, 8 October 2005: 1). The story sketches a brief history of the area and then includes the statements of residents who are also turning 40. With the description of the city's history, the article tells of the development of state houses as well as describing the growth of the local population through urbanised Maori and Pacific Island's migrants. One paragraph describing their life says,

The immigrants brought their culture, their churches, their drive for a better life for their children. There was poverty and struggle along with success. With the multicultural mix came clashes and the rise and fall of various gangs.

Within this paragraph, Pacific immigration is linked to poverty, conflict and gangs. Multiculturalism is used to explain the rise of gangs. The connections made within the media between ethnicity, poverty and crime will be considered later within this chapter. As well as constructing the poverty in Porirua as racial, this article provides a nostalgic, safe view of poverty where it is again relegated to the past. The caption to a photograph provides an example, "The grimmer side of state housing in Porirua in the 1970s. But kids liked the fact there were no fences." State housing is intended to provide affordable accommodation for those on low incomes and it is still in use

today. It is unlikely that a news story would refer to current state housing as grim. Having constructed it as a past phenomenon, state housing can then be described using an adjective that would normally be avoided in objective journalese. At the same time there is nostalgia in children liking the unfenced properties. Poverty is relegated to the past from where it no longer threatens and can be commented on.

Poverty Rhetoric

While poverty in New Zealand is not a common issue in hard news stories it does occur in other places in the news; opinion pieces, readers' letters and the statements of politicians. These places of rhetoric frequently feature references to poverty in New Zealand. The period of news examined included the 2005 election and in the run up to this, politicians were given more space in the media to promote their policies. Poverty, although not a major theme (that title must go to taxation) was frequently mentioned during their electioneering. Reader's letters and opinion pieces also discussed poverty, usually in relation to the words or campaigns of politicians. The use of poverty in these places of rhetoric, and the apparent absence of a "semantic purity" surrounding the term in these places suggests that it may fall within the sphere of "legitimate controversy" (Hallin 1986: 117). Hallin's term refers to social issues which news presents as appropriate for debate. The issues argued by politicians fall within this space and it can be defined in relation to the sphere of consensus; issues that are framed as beyond dispute, and the sphere of deviance; issues that are seen as unacceptable and unworthy of discussion (Ibid: 116-18). While poverty in the Third World can be discussed safely without controversy as it falls within the sphere of consensus, poverty in reference to New Zealand is still a subject of contention and is confirmed as being so through appearing in places of debate and rhetoric. The use of

poverty in these places can reveal aspects of poverty discourse in New Zealand. Politicians of all places on the political spectrum refer to poverty in the news, although it occurs most frequently in the rhetoric of those on the left. Within this period, a Green party candidate calls for an end to child poverty (“Wairarapa set to battle it out,” *Manawatu Standard*, 13 September: 4), a Maori Party representative says that tax cuts for the poor are one of their bottom line policies (“Everything’s up for negotiation except...” *New Zealand Herald*, 15 September), and Prime Minister Helen Clark frames the voters choice between her and National Party candidate Don Brash saying “Do you want to live in a country where we actually care about people who are poor and marginalised?” (“The choice is yours; election special,” *The Press*, 16 September: 1). These parties all fall to left of centre and the obvious conclusion here is that poverty is a concern for leftwing politicians and voters. This assumption is made clear in an op ed piece from the same time in which Martin Van Beynen discusses a psychologist’s explanations for voting patterns saying, “At a deep level, he says, lefties tend to empathise with the powerless and the poor because this may have been how they were made to feel by their parents” (“Oh for a tidy vote,” *The Press*, 24 September 2005: 9).

However, another reference to poverty occurs in an interview with Rodney Hide of the right wing Act party (“Forum: Rodney Hide,” *The Press*, 12 September 2005: 9). Hide discusses welfare abuse and within the article draws on a popular discourse of beneficiaries citing the media for evidence, “[...] you pick up the paper and you read again of a young man that’s beaten up some poor old lady and run off with her purse. And he’s a sickness beneficiary, too sick to work but not sick enough to commit a crime” The connection between beneficiaries and crime, which occurs in the media

and provides Hide with his example, will be considered later within this chapter. Hide's statement is typical of his party's views of welfare; later in the same paragraph he gives his support to a workfare style policy. However, he makes another statement that is less typical of his rhetoric and uses the term poverty overtly. He, in fact, refers to poverty twice in the 'election special' interview where he is given extended space to promote his campaign. The first is his statement that New Zealand has "very very rich government and a poor people," using the term rhetorically as relative to taxation and government assets. But when asked if his party has a narrow vision he invokes poverty again (although it was not a part of the question) saying, "I do not accept for a minute that a vote for ACT is a narrow vote at all and I guess that the debate that we have isn't about whether we want to have poverty or not; the debate that we have is the best way of getting rid of poverty. And in my view the best way of getting rid of poverty is to grow an economy and to have the conditions that allow for prosperity to occur." Within Hide's statement, there is the assumption that there is some sort of poverty in New Zealand, poverty beyond his earlier rich government/poor people remark, but there is also the presumption that people think the ACT vision of low taxation and user pays services does not consider poverty. Relevant here is Bourdieu's observation that political discourse is doubly determined (1991: 183). On one level, the internal, political professionals must pursue their own interests determined by their position in the political field while their discourse is also determined externally by those who they represent (Bourdieu 1991, Fairclough 1997: 181-82). In Hide's case, his Neoliberal agenda is very much internally driven as his party has a particular Free Market ideology which he is expected to follow. However, his invocation of poverty to defend himself against the narrow vision charge reveals something of the external determination of political discourse. As it is not part of the question, Hide's

response shows an awareness or presupposition that people referring to ACT's "narrow vision" believe it does not consider poverty. He works to rectify this perceived view by demonstrating the way that ACT's economics account for the poor. Again, it must be noted that this is at a time preceding an election in a forum where his aim is to widen his pool of voters, a time when this external determination is especially apparent. Hide's desire to show that his ACT party can deal with poverty effectively is, if read as determined externally, evidence of a need for all New Zealand politicians of both the left and right, to recognise poverty as social issue which they must deal with in some form.

If poverty appears in the political rhetoric of many politicians then it is important to look at what the news media do with the discourses of poverty that politicians provide. That is, in what ways do they frame the topic within political discourse. In these stories poverty is notable for its absence beyond the words of politicians. While several politicians of different parties brought the subject into the debate as an issue, and some like The Greens declared it one of their key issues, it received little coverage beyond these statements. Politicians may have announced poverty as an issue but the news media rarely followed it up and did not cover poverty as an issue of concern in its own right. There are some stories that appear to provide the exception to this. A *Timaru Herald* story is entitled, "Nats' policies prompting concern on child poverty" but the entire text of this is based on the statements of a Green candidate (*Timaru Herald*, 15 September 2005: 2). While she discusses child poverty as an issue of concern that would potentially be exacerbated by National policies, the article remains about the Green Party and their views while poverty as an issue generally, although introduced, is not explored beyond the Green's rhetoric. Other stories about

policies that may affect the poor are spaces for considering poverty in New Zealand and open up the issue as newsworthy. Politicians are privileged as primary definers and their words are always potentially news. However, in the few stories that feature politicians' statements on poverty, the interest in this subject does not go above the level of policy. Poverty within the reporting of political rhetoric remains just another aspect of an electioneering politician rather than an issue of news itself. A statement like Helen Clark's emotive appeal, quoted above, asking whether we care about poverty or not, encourages news of poverty to stay within rhetoric. Clark asks New Zealanders to show they care through voting for her and that is all that is necessary. An in-depth investigation or discussion of context is not necessary to care. Caring is an easy request to grant as it does not require any social action from the audience. While this limits poverty as an issue it does make Clark's statement an effective piece of political rhetoric. This focus on the process of politics, the statements and rhetoric associated with electioneering, over the substance, was noted by critics of the coverage of the 2002 election (Morrison 2003, Bale 2003, Hayward and Rudd 2003). An explanation may be found in Street's statement: "the political motives of politicians are commonly understood in terms of their desire to win elections, and their actions are interpreted in relation to this dominant concern" (2001: 47). While this statement lends itself more readily to explaining the cynicism found in much reporting of politics, it also offers an insight into this coverage and the lack of follow up on issues. There is no need to investigate poverty in much depth if it is viewed as just another subject being invoked to gain support to win an election. The obvious response is to turn to another politician and see what he or she might say differently.

The Poor as Victims

The other identifiable category where the poor are referred to in New Zealand, is found in a small number of news stories that frame the poor as victims, usually of price rises. This theme can be identified through examining headlines in the manner of van Dijk (1985, 1988) taking headlines as the highest level of a thematic macrostructure, providing the theme and defining what is most important about the topic. Through this method, a few stories can be identified which mention the poor in some sense and have similar headlines, warning of a price increase or event that will affect citizens. However, poverty in these stories is less of a social concern than the rise in price, new regulation etc. This theme overlaps with the election in articles that mention fears that the poor will be the victims of opposition policies. In the time period looked at, *The Timaru Herald* writes “New wetback regulations seen as illogical imposition” in which one man who is identified as being on “decent wages” claims that the poor will be disadvantaged further by new regulations for home fires (14 September 2005: 3). The *New Zealand Herald* reports “Petrol prices puts heat on families” (17 September 2005). Another story that month brings together several of the apparent problems under the headline “Large bills keep foodbanks busy” (*Manawatu Standard*, 26 September 2005: 3). Home fires are again the concern in “No help over log burners” which briefly mentions the poor as suffering from air pollution (*The Press*, 26 September 2005: 5). A Nelson story describes concern that those on low incomes are getting into debt, “Growing levels of debt alarming” (*The Nelson Mail*, 26 September 2005). A bus fare rise is behind the headline, “Poor will suffer most, say social workers” (*The Press*, 28 September 2005: 1), and *The Press* also uses the poor as victims in “Power prices to rise again” (30 September 2005: 3). In television coverage, deprived children were also shown as victims of a greater

problem. A report of politician Donna Awatere Huata defrauding a charity with which she was involved included a segment reporting that the organisation “faces extinction” (TVNZ One News, 1 September 2005). The story repeats the previous day’s footage of her supporters making vocal criticism of her sentence and it is mainly concerned with the controversy of the organisation’s funding. However there is a brief mention of the charity’s aim, to teach reading to needy children and this is accompanied by a shot of mostly Maori and Pacific Island children in a classroom. As in the print articles, these children as “needy” provide a victim of a greater event than just poverty alone.

Aside from the rhetoric of politicians, these stories represent the only place in my sample where poverty in New Zealand is described in a place of “fact” rather than one of opinion, such as an Op Ed column. In using poverty in sites that are deemed news rather than opinion, these stories show it as occurring within the sphere of consensus; not debating the issue of poverty in New Zealand but referring to it as part of another issue. This is seen in the headlines, as only *The Press* article about bus fares uses the term “the poor” in the heading. Even then, statements such as “Poor will suffer the most, say social workers” makes clear this theme of the poor as the victims; the hardest hit by events. While they occupy the theme space of the headline, they have the role of “patient,” the affected party in the sentence (Fowler 2001: 75). The statement is also qualified as being the indirect quotation of what social workers are saying so the truth claim of the statement is slightly modified in the heading.

These stories are significant in covering an event with an interest in people who are frequently marginalised. It represents an effort to bring poverty to the news, but in

referring to the poor terms of another issue these stories reveal a discourse of poverty as not usually problematic in New Zealand. The process through which this reading is favoured is best explained through van Dijk's methods. He draws on studies of cognition to describe the process by which readers can summarise large units of information from texts like news stories to a basic topic or "macrostructure" (van Dijk 1985: 74). Three principles are used to make these summaries: deletion, generalization and (re-)construction, which are applied at several levels to produce greater and greater summaries, resulting in a final thematic macrostructure (Ibid: 76). Similar processes are apparent in a news story with the headline providing the highest level of a macrostructure in the article, a summary of the text. Similarly, the lead as the next level of the macrostructure provides a slightly more detailed summary. Applying van Dijk's process to a story from those that discuss the poor as victims can provide an example of the way that macrostructures work in news while also revealing that a particular reading, where prices affecting the mainstream are the concern more than poverty, is best suited to these stories:

Petrol price puts heat on families.

Those with no discretionary spending have been hit the hardest.

The average family's finances are over a barrel right now. With petrol prices hitting all-time highs since Hurricane Katrina damaged oil refineries in the Gulf of Mexico quenching the family car's petrol thirst has become a mainstream topic of conversation.

Most people struggle to save even \$20 a week, New Zealand Institute chief executive David Skilling says.

But with petrol prices rising more than 25 per cent over the past year, even this option has gone.

And it's not just the poor who are feeling the pinch. Gas guzzling SUVs and 4x4s favoured by the middle class now cost up to \$100 to fill up.

The people hit most by the petrol price rises are those with no discretionary spending, says David Russell, chief executive of the Consumers' Institute.

Whether oil companies needed to pass on all of the increases to consumers was a question posed by Russell, noting the multinational oil companies had healthy profits.

Not so healthy are the wallets of many families. Budgeting services around the country have been hit with a spate of clients cancelling appointments because they simply couldn't afford the petrol.

[The rest of the article draws on a variety of sources to discuss ways of saving money on petrol].

The various propositions in the text are boiled down in the form of the lead and headline. To reconstruct these summaries, the reader must draw on a larger shared knowledge. The various propositions about petrol prices such as "couldn't afford the petrol," "Multinational oil companies had healthy profits," "petrol price rises," "petrol prices rising more than 25 per cent" and that petrol prices are at an all time high because of Hurricane Katrina, are part of a macrostructure with the "Petrol Prices" of the headline at the top. That is to say, on reading the heading's mention of petrol prices, a "script" or "model" of what this means (petrol is becoming increasingly expensive) is set in order, even though this is not stated in the headline (van Dijk 1991: 74). The various propositions can be read in terms of this script. However, the

model that offers the most explanatory value and explains the various propositions in the story is not always neutral. Just as people summarise information in a way that makes sense for them, the process by which news topics are reduced to a lead and headline is also subjective and models drawing on ideology or prejudice can hold the most explanatory power in tracing the structure of ideas. Heeding this, the use of “Families” in the headline can be examined critically. The term summarises all the other descriptions of those affected within the article, including “those with no discretionary income,” “the middle class,” “the poor,” and “the average family.” While the subheading may invoke those with no discretionary incomes as well, the main headline opts for the general term of families, with only “average family” referring exclusively to this topic. “Most people” and “mainstream conversation” also supports a reading which casts the affected party arousing concern as middle class, average New Zealand families. This script of middle class New Zealand hit hard by forces beyond their control is the most relevant in terms of this statement: “And it’s not just the poor who are feeling the pinch.” The process of abstraction and deletion that occurs in choosing the suitable basic topic of families for the headline subsumes the poor because if it was “just” them then it would not be much of a story. The presumption is that the poor are often “feeling the pinch” and it is not an incident that deviates from the expected. The real issue is that average families are feeling the heat. Those with no discretionary income may be hit hardest, but at the top of the thematic structure are families and a reading that sympathises with them as middle class New Zealanders is the most explanatory. So where does that leave the poor? They become further evidence of this price problem and add drama as those most affected, yet it is not their plight that is taken up but the plight of middle class New Zealand to which they can be invoked.

While the *Herald's* petrol price story is a more obvious use of the poor in the service of another issue, a story that seems more directly focused on poverty encourages a similar reading that views something other than poverty as the deviance from the norm.

Large bills keep foodbanks busy.

Anna Wallis

Power and possibly petrol price rises continue to keep foodbanks busy despite the unemployment rate dropping, says the director of Methodist Social Services, Michelle Lee.

Ms Lee says the number of people using foodbanks has dropped but the Methodist Social Services foodbank still delivered 1400 food parcels last year to more than 4000 people. Half of these were children.

The rise in power prices and rents in the last few years are two reasons people still require donated food, she said. The effect of increases at the petrol pump has yet to be determined.

"Many of the people using foodbanks are working, but are on such low incomes they need a top up."

The foodbank is running perilously short of food at the moment, with a call on its resources as people have to pay large power bills, despite the winter being mild.

"The big foodbank drive usually lasts until May. Then we have to sometimes buy in food to help people, which is a drain," Ms Lee said.

A fundraiser organised by Kevin Reilly held at the Celtic Inn

yesterday was one of several local projects to help both the Methodist Social Services foodbank and that run by the Salvation Army. The Celtic bash raised food and money for the cause.

Classic Hits, Vision Manawatu and Mayor Heather Tanguay have also joined forces for a recent Foodbank Friday drive, while schools are holding mufti days and libraries amnesty days to attract donations.

Anyone who would like to donate to either foodbank can make a drop off at Methodist Social Services in Main Street or the Salvation Army in Church Street.

[The text was accompanied by a photograph of a man from a band playing in a foodbank fundraiser]

Again, tracing the propositions through to their highest level in the headline supports a reading that the real concern is price rises. The headline and lead refer to food banks being busy due to prices. This requires a script or shared knowledge of foodbanks to be drawn on, as it is people not prices that literally keep them busy. This abstracts the process through which people find bills too large to pay and must visit foodbanks. This abstraction can only occur because this process can be assumed to be shared knowledge and is omitted from the headline. “Large bills” is at the top of a macrostructure that includes the rising power price and the yet to be determined effect of a rise in petrol prices. However the issue of low incomes, mentioned in the fourth paragraph, is abstracted in this. While it relies on the presupposition that low incomes are involved it does not signal them as important. The schemata that lends itself to the story is one of the problem of prices, and while there is a call for charity to solve this short term solution, the obvious long term strategy would be to lower power and

petrol prices. The existence of foodbanks is also presupposed as a shared understanding and not a part of the controversy, although a focus on them could show that low incomes and bills are already a problem for some. Within this story there is little room for a reading that would view low incomes as the actual problem. A similar process occurs in *The Press* story about a proposed bus fare increase. The headline is unique in referring to the poor directly but it is an extremely abstracted summary of events: “Poor will suffer the most say social workers.” While abstract, it incorporates a great deal, including the presumption that something is going to cause the poor to suffer more than others and the future tense signals that it is something beyond just their poverty. This proposition is expanded slightly in the lead to show that it is a bus fare increase causing this concern. The controversy over raising the standard Christchurch bus fare makes up most of the story. However, again buried in the text is the issue of the disparity of income and its resultant problems. As in the previous stories, low incomes are presupposed by the use of the “poor” but are not highlighted as the concern. A charity spokesperson says, “Any additional cost impacts more severely on those on minimum incomes than on those earning more.” A representative from another organization adds, “The increases don’t sound much, but they mean something to people for whom paying even a \$2 donation for a food parcel is too much.” Also in the article another charity spokesperson says that social isolation is a problem among those on low incomes. The problems that these people describe such as low incomes even to the extent that paying \$2 for food is a problem, as well as social deprivation and poverty generally, may occur within the text but again they are subsumed in headlines which are at the top of a thematic structure that lends itself to other issues as important. These titles programme a reading towards price rises as an

issue of concern, while those struggling are presupposed as a constant who are then invoked as victims of this development.

The Press article on a bus fare rise is unique among this coverage for reporting the words of a beneficiary to represent the poor themselves. The majority of coverage relies on the words of representatives of the poor, especially spokespeople and leaders of charity groups; people higher on “the hierarchy of credibility” than the poor themselves (Becker 1967). However, this hierarchy is enacted in *The Press*’ bus fare story where the beneficiary’s statement is the last in the article; appearing after the words of the council bus company manager and statements from representatives of three charitable organizations. As Devereux writes “[...] poverty as an issue often only becomes newsworthy as a result of the activities or statements by the agents of the poor. These reports focus on the doings of those who are in positions of relative power over those they are deemed to represent or support” (1998: 88). In this sense the poor are doubly disempowered within these articles. In the first instance, they are identified as being disadvantaged by an event and in the second, they do not speak for themselves. They are spoken about by others who have power over them. This is not to say that people in power should not share views on this issue. People in positions of authority are often the best way to bring the structural side of a problem to light. Yet, there is need for balance, so that those on low incomes do get to speak for themselves and say what issues concern them.

The labels given to those at the low end of the socio economic scale vary. As noted, *The Press* is alone in featuring the term “poor” within the headlines of these price rise stories during the sample period. While this term occurs in several stories it is usually

within direct or indirect quotations of spokespeople. Within the authoritative text that forms the rest of the story, other terms are preferred. “[T]hose with no discretionary spending” appear in the *New Zealand Herald* story about petrol, “low-income Nelson homeowners,” *The Press*’ bus fare article refers to “people already struggling to make ends meet” and the food bank article reproduced above avoids labels and describes “people using foodbanks.” *The Press* article about a power price rise is the only one to feature the term poverty of all of these articles but then only in a City Missioners’ indirectly quoted statement about those “living near the poverty line.” The absence of “poverty” is consistent with these stories’ lack of interest in that social problem and the uncertainty around using the term to refer to domestic situations, while the use of “the poor” in these articles appears to be a way of personalising the price issue. Reference to persons is one of the key news values identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965). While these stories rarely feature any individual members of the poor, using this group does allow greater personification of an otherwise dry event, especially as the poor are those most dramatically affected. Poverty is used to add a touch of drama to an event as news is, after all, a form of story telling (Bell 1997).

The appearance of poverty within these stories is similar to the common reports of the poor and charities around Christmas. A local journalism textbook advocates this type of story as a way to fill the holiday news drought (Tucker 1992: 158). Although they are beyond the sample being analysed here, these stories provide a parallel in a similar apolitical reference to poverty. While such stories show that at that time of the year some face hardship, they do not get involved in the issue of the deprivation people may face for the rest of the year. These stories tend to be framed as encouraging the well off to reflect on their luck and feel sympathy for the less fortunate. It is a

sentimental approach to concerns over poverty and like the stories discussed here, it allows the subject to be brought up without the intrusion of politics or ideology.

Before moving on to the indirect reporting of the poor through frames such as welfare and the unemployed, another story with an overt mention of poverty must be considered. Entitled, “Patsy Henderson Watt; ‘Poverty of hope’ in far north described; Nobel nominee talks” it profiles a family therapist who was jointly nominated as one of 1000 woman to represent grass roots workers at the Nobel Peace Prize (*Otago Daily Times*, 23 September 2005). This is one of the few stories that refer to poverty directly and as an issue in New Zealand today. However, the coverage of Henderson Watt’s views downplays this in a similar way to the coverage of politicians’ words and the reporting of poor as victims. It has a thematic structure that includes overt mention of poverty, but only in terms of the views of this person. While the lead opens with a quote from Henderson Watt saying, “Many families in Northland are battling against ‘a poverty of spirit and a poverty of hope.’” It then goes on to discuss her credentials as a Nobel Prize nominee. It is only by the seventh paragraph that the article resumes the topic of poverty: “Many children and their families in Northland faced serious problems with violence and abuse, arising often from a background of unemployment, poverty and loss of hope, Mrs Henderson Watt said [...]” However this discussion ends positively, saying “ She now saw growing signs of hope.” She then describes how cheaper doctor costs have improved medical conditions, as well as saying an improving economy has helped and that support from government and community groups was improving housing. The final mention of poverty comes after this, saying “Previously, some families had been surviving in shacks and ‘cow sheds.’” The story then talks about Henderson Watt, her nomination,

her biography and the prize generally. While this story is a notable exception in talking about poverty directly, it does remain on the level of Henderson Watt's views. Like the description of politician's views on poverty, it does not go beyond her words to consider it as an issue needing greater discussion or evidence. It remains as proof of Henderson Watt's service to the community and her eligibility for the Nobel Prize. The article ends more positively with the reference to improvements and "hope." This evidence of an improvement alleviates any distress at the poverty she describes and there is no reference to extra work being needed. There is also a geographic element in that the poverty here is defined as being in the Far North, some distance from Otago where the story appears. This story is important in bringing to light an incidence of poverty and linking to other issues such as violence and abuse, but again it does not suggest that there is anything more to be done; solutions are contained in the article and in Henderson Watt's example. We may read with interest yet be content in the knowledge that this distant problem is disappearing. Unfortunately, this story's acknowledgement of poverty is also rare and many stories do not use the terms poverty or the poor directly. In much news the relevance of this issue can only be inferred.

Poverty on the Margins and Between the Lines: The Homeless.

Most of the stories considered so far have been selected because they use the terms poverty and the poor. However, there are many places in the news where these terms are not used, or the mention of poverty is an extremely slight one. In this section, the focus is on stories that are relevant to poverty but contain even less overt mention of it than already seen. Within this category is news where tags are given to participants. It is only through tags such as beneficiary, unemployed and homeless that many of the

poor come into the news, even if stories do not investigate their status beyond the label. In using these labels but making no other reference to socioeconomic status or the issue of poverty, tags can have an explanatory power. Labeling a person as unemployed within the report of a crime invites the reader to recall what they know about the unemployed in understanding the story. This process is described by van Dijk as drawing on models: “Models are mental structures of information which, besides the new information offered in a news report, feature information about such a situation as inferred from general knowledge scripts” (1991: 74). In looking at these references to a person’s socioeconomic status, it is important to ask what models offer explanations to the report. In discussing models, discourse will be used here as an overlapping term to maintain consistency and to offer more by linking these mental models, where possible, to more widespread ways of talking about the poor. It has been shown that some explanatory models can include certain discourses about the unemployed and beneficiaries. Referring to employment or income status also has effects of association, and this section will review the constant association of the unemployed with crime. This association can aid the creation of such models, as much of our information about both crime and the unemployed comes from news. Although slight, these stories are crucial to constructing discourses about particular groups.

Homelessness appeared in several places in the news within the time frame examined. However, in these examples it tended to appear on the margins of stories. A homeless man rummaging in a rubbish bin discovered a fake bomb in Christchurch (“‘Bomber’ may be charged,” *The Press*, 10 October 2005: 2). Another *Press* story is a historical interest piece about Linwood cemetery (“Life tales amid dead,” *The Press*, 24

September 2005: 6). It opens with a description of a homeless man living among the headstones, “Peer between the closely packed branches of a yew tree and you will see the sheets of cardboard and newspaper that are homeless man’s shelter. The yew tree is a symbol of eternal life. The 121-year-old Linwood Cemetery gives repose to more than the dead.” The purpose of the homeless here is to add texture, an interesting visual image to begin a reflection on a part of Christchurch history. It is a non-confrontational image of poverty. Although beginning with this present day view, the rest of the article talks about the past. It is intentionally apolitical, but to use homelessness in such a way does imply a certain acceptance of it. The homeless also appeared as victims due to two other events. An elderly homeless man died while in the custody of Christchurch police (“Man’s death in police cell ‘not suspicious,’ *The Press*, 13 September 2005: 2) and MP Jim Anderton and his wife helped an injured homeless man (“Andertons save man bleeding to death,” *The Press*, 23 September 2005: 1). Like the stories on poverty discussed above, the homeless are passive victims in these two stories. Within the Anderton story, homelessness only appears as a tag to identify the man helped by the MP. It reports that the man jumped out a window to avoid attack and cut an artery. Most of the story concerns the heroism of Anderton, his wife and other passers by. The dominant macrostructure as set up by the headline also works towards the importance of the helpers who are named and occupy the actor space of the sentence: “Andertons save man bleeding to death.” There is little detail of the man or the attack he was fleeing. Like the historical piece, the homeless man is only incidental in this story. However, the need to tag the man as homeless is interesting. Like the above article, it shows that there is an acceptance that there is homelessness in Christchurch. It also adds to the drama of the situation, enhancing the Good Samaritan structure of the story. Anderton is helping someone

who is less fortunate not just because they are bleeding to death but because they are also in a lower social class. A third element in using the tag is that it may have some explanatory value as the use of a label invites the reader to use a script or model of homelessness to understand the events. Little detail is given as to how the man came to have the wound and other details such as whether the feared attack was investigated do not appear. These are, of course, less newsworthy than the dramatic prominent person as Good Samaritan narrative. But these details are explained away if it is “homeless” is read with a particular model of the homeless as people that “live rough” and the attack can be discounted through this. There is the assumption that their activities are deviant so a violent altercation is not unusual and does not need further explanation. This assumption of deviance can also explain their homelessness in terms of substance addiction. These discourses of the homeless are dominant and will be explored in the next chapter.

A similar model is necessary to make sense of the reporting of other incidents that brought homelessness in to the news. The Good Samaritan narrative is a major part of a story entitled “Top chef ladles soup to discerning poor” (*New Zealand Herald*, 30 September 2005). The lead expands on this proposition, “The work of one of Auckland’s top chefs has been put under inspection by a demanding client base.” The article reports a scheme created to find skilled volunteers for nonprofit organisations and uses the example of an Auckland chef who cooks lunch for a group of homeless at a Methodist Mission. The text, in describing the scheme and the chef working for it, is consistent with the Anderton story and with Devereux’s (1998) observation that “angel” figures who aid the poor are a main theme in poverty coverage. The title is the first indication of this with the chef occupying the theme or actor space while the

poor remain passive. The title is also inviting a reader to find irony in the situation described. “Top Chef” is at the top of a macrostructure that describes the man as “one of Auckland’s top chefs” and “new owner of Vinnie’s Restaurant.” The meal he makes for the homeless is “a pungent curry soup.” This thematic thread is invoking a model of high profile chefs, gourmet food and expensive restaurants. The irony occurs in the contrast of this theme and one similar to the model of homelessness drawn in the other stories, in particular the food which is more commonly associated with them: “The dish came complete with plain white bread and weak, milky tea.” The “discerning” of the title is also a part of the humour, as it is a play on deserving, the adjective expected to describe the homeless receiving charity. However, “discerning” is also at the top of a thematic chain, which is carried in the lead through “demanding client base” and summarises a question raised by one of the homeless, “It’s great if he really means it, but if it’s just a publicity stunt it’s not.” The man who introduces this point is described as “street-wise homeless man Dale Peihopa” and he is quoted as saying, “If we never see him again without the cameras around, we’ll know whether he really means it.” However, Peihopa’s query is left to hang; it is not investigated or posed to the chef. The rest of the article discusses the scheme and its aims as well as noting that it is good business practice as “corporates could point to their involvement as proof of their social responsibility.” Peihopa’s question is summarised in the “discerning poor” of the title, inviting the reader to see irony in the concerns raised by the homeless and creating a reading that is again about the “angels” that help them. This reading, and the facts provided in the article are also devoid of any reference to the problem of homelessness in New Zealand, or to any evidence that could be used to call for strategies other than charity to provide for these people. Like the Christmas

stories referred to above, it allows an apolitical, emotional and even humorous reading of poverty and the importance of charity.

The other news story from *the Press* did not involve any charity figures, but like the Anderton story uses homelessness for its explanatory value in an incident. It reports that a man died in a Christchurch police cell and his status as homeless is given through the tag, “A elderly homeless man” and in a later description it is stated that he had no fixed abode (*The Press*, 13 September 2005: 2). Homelessness is again presumed to mean a harsh lifestyle and alcoholism; it is reported that the man was in the cell after being found drunk. It is also said that the man died of natural causes. These represent the only reporting of homelessness in New Zealand in the sample of news considered. Within these, the homeless are passive, anonymous victims of circumstance. Stories draw on the low societal status of these people in explaining their actions and figuring them in narratives and by doing so, enforce their marginalization.

Reporting Welfare

Beneficiaries and benefits are often invoked in a negative sense in political rhetoric, editorials and letters. The words benefit and beneficiary alone can have a negative value much like “dole.” A story shows the views of Maori Party co-leader Pita Sharples (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 September 2005).

NZ benefit-mad, says Sharples.

Simon Collins

The Maori Party co-leader says responsibility has to be on families.

Maori Party co-leader Pita Sharples says New Zealand has gone “benefit-mad” and needs to bring the extended family back into caring for people in need.

He wants grandparents to help care for the children of sole parents, parents to help their adult children through mental health problems, and adult children to care for their parents in old age.

“We believe we have gone benefit- mad,” he said. “We have to put the responsibility back to families.”

Dr Sharples, who has run community services for many years at Hoani Waititi Marae in West Auckland, said New Zealand was shutting its eyes to the welfare problem, just as it was to the impending world oil shortage.

In June, 26 per cent of all Maori people aged 18 to 64 were on benefits, compared with just under 9 per cent of non-Maori. About half of these (12.7 per cent of Maori, against 3 per cent of non-Maori) were on the domestic purposes benefit.

Dr Sharples said benefits kept people alive, but did not give them any quality of life.

“Part of the answer is about strengthening families so that we keep people under our wing and not just cast them off to survive on their own,” he said.

“If you have an adult daughter who is schizophrenic and under medication, because she is schizophrenic there are certain things she can’t be trusted to do, but that doesn’t mean she can’t have a life. I

don't see that that person has to have a whole lot of benefits and go and live by themselves.”

He said older people wanted to feel needed and respected by their families in old age.

“In my home my mother was a nuisance when she got old. We were frightened she was going to burn the house down, she teased my kids, but she still ruled the roost,” he said.

“My Pakeha colleague said my mum wouldn't want to live with us. I said that is the problem, that's got to change. There is an expectation that you have to move out when you get to a certain age. That can change- if one of the parties wants it badly enough it can happen.

“If New Zealand could just extend the family beyond mum, dad and the kids, that would be a great achievement. With a lot of solo mothers, their children's nannas would love to share the time and cost of those babies, but they are missing out because the girl is in some scungy flat in town eating crap food.”

He acknowledged that many extended families were now scattered around the world, but he knew Maori families where people still paid \$30 a week into the account of a sibling in another town.

He said state benefits would always be needed too, but they should be reviewed.

National Party welfare spokeswoman Judith Collins said she was heartened by Dr Sharples' comments and looked forward to talking to Maori Party MPs about welfare reforms if National won the election.

Labour's Social Development Minister Steve Maharey said he also shared Dr Sharples' aspirations for the family but he could not see any specific proposals in the comments that would change what Labour was already doing.

Van Dijk refers to "skewed" headings where a minor topic of text is promoted to headlines (1985: 78). In his example, the process in this promotion is to pull out information that fulfils news values of timeliness. This example is not skewed in quite the same sense, the subject of the heading is interspersed throughout the text. However, the choice of headline draws on one of Sharples' propositions while eliding the rest; his discourse about the importance of whanau is not given any prominence in the headline. Following van Dijk's studies, it can be said that this emphasis directs an interpretation, highlighting the newsworthy part of Sharples' comments. While news values do not provide an easy explanation for this "skewed" topic as in van Dijk's description, alternative explanations can be sought. The headline lends itself to arguments about government overspending, the controversy over welfare versus self-help. Several of these arguments manifested themselves within news at this time, as the rest of this chapter will illustrate. But here, between these dominant discourses, which are easily and quickly evoked to give readers a simple headline that draws on a wealth of debate, Sharples' call for the incorporation of whanau is left out. In picking the headline, newswriters have chosen to emphasise aspects which fit into existing and dominant models about benefits. The power of these models is that they overshadow the new material that Sharples has brought to the welfare debate.

Beneficiaries frequently appear in the news in this time; however they are seldom described as poor and their economic status is often only reported as a tag. A

government scheme to help beneficiaries into work provided a minor trigger event that brought beneficiaries and welfare into the news. The term beneficiary is a loaded one and there is much popular discourse of them as “dole bludgers” and as lazy. The remark made by Rodney Hide and quoted as an example of political rhetoric is also an illustration of some of the negative connotations surrounding those on benefits and it will be relevant again in regards to crime. Coverage of this scheme, which involved financial assistance towards becoming self employed, can be found in two articles from the same paper. The issue is reported quite differently in each: one evokes an image of the deserving poor in order to show a positive side to the scheme, the other reflects and enforces popular discourse of beneficiaries. More specifically it draws on ideas of the government as a “nanny state” simultaneously restricting people through tax and regulation, while giving handouts to an undeserving poor. The headline is the first example of these connotations, “Jobless cash in to set up a business” (*Dominion Post* 13 September 2005: 5). “Jobless” is an immediately negative description, of course it can be justified as objective as these people do not have jobs. But in the context of the heading, the term is juxtaposed with “cashing in.” This phrase constructs these people as unable to get jobs but able to obtain money and it is at the top of a contrasting macroproposition to those involving the jobless. A quantity of money is connoted as well as an implication that there is no effort involved in getting this money; ‘cashing in’ a check is not usually seen as the arduous part in earning money. The jobless do not occupy a passive role in the clause this time, they are actively “cashing in” as opposed to the victims of circumstance seen in previous stories. Under the byline is a subheading, “Work and Income says the millions spent is recouped.” This emphasises the quantity of taxpayers’ money going into the scheme, telling us that it is being spent rather than invested. Here is the text:

Jobless cash in to set up a business

Anna Saunders

Work and Income says the millions spent is recouped. About \$32 million has been spent helping unemployed beneficiaries start their own businesses in the past three years, including one person who set themselves up as a careers adviser.

Work and Income says money spent on the Enterprise Allowance scheme is recouped through its successes.

Fashion models, artists, authors and dancers were among those who became self-employed with grants from the scheme.

Allowances are given to people who have been unemployed for more than six months, and recipients are paid up to \$12,000 in lump sum grants and weekly assistance. They can also receive an accommodation supplement and income top-ups to ensure they earn as much as they would get on a benefit.

Latest figures show that 1081 beneficiaries received \$10.3 million under the scheme in the past year.

Within three months, 71 people were back on a benefit and after a year a quarter of recipients were receiving a benefit.

Work and Income does not monitor the success rate of the businesses.

Recipients of the allowance include three taxi drivers, two real estate agents, a dancer, 29 photographers, 33 musicians, 24 clothing designers, two composers, two "fashion and other" models, one beekeeper, 64 artists, three authors and critics and a careers adviser.

To apply, beneficiaries must provide a business plan and have \$1000.

A report described the scheme as having "potentially positive fiscal impact" and shows that after five years, 71 per cent of recipients will be off a benefit, compared with 62 per cent of other beneficiaries.

Researchers noted that "while enterprise allowance may have a substantial positive impact on employment, the cost of the assistance is high". At best, participating in the scheme saved \$5800 a person, and at worst it cost \$2805 a person, the report said.

When The Dominion Post originally asked under the Official Information Act for the success rate of the businesses and a list of business types, Work and Income said the information was not available. However, after the newspaper began writing a story about the scheme's lack of accountability, more information was provided.

Again, this story makes the most sense if read in terms of existing models and discourses of beneficiaries. The selective assembling of facts is best interpreted through a discourse of "crazy schemes" that waste taxpayers' money on the frivolous. Such a discourse was made very prominent in coverage of a government funded "hip hop trip" where people traveled to investigate world hip-hop cultures and industries with an eye to the growth of this scene in New Zealand. Coverage focused on the controversy of the government paying for what was seen by some as an extravagant use of taxpayer funds. Within this story a similar but less overt reading is the most useful in tying together the thematic structure of the story. The careers advisor detail at the start makes the most sense in this context, it is ironic and undermines the scheme. However, the humour is based on the presumption that a beneficiary is chronically unable to find work This point is reiterated in the final paragraph where a

Work and Income spokesperson is reported as not finding it ironic that a beneficiary could be a careers advisor. This man then suggests that a person could have been out of work for only six months and that their unemployed experience could help them relate to others. The spokesperson's comment, with its introduction of "he did not find it ironic," suggests he is responding to a question. *The Dominion Post* finds the matter ironic and Work and Income do not share the joke. This is the second use of humour in a story about poverty in this sample, the first being in the reporting of a chef cooking for the homeless. Humour in this context can be patronizing, whether it is the intention or not, it makes light of the subject. Undermining the seriousness of the issue also works to contain the problem of poverty. It is also significant that the Work and Income spokesperson's response to "irony" in the lead does not occur until the final paragraph. The list of occupations in the above text has been chosen selectively and is a summary of a later list that has the discourse of a waste of taxpayer funds behind it. While fashion models begins the third paragraph, the later figures show that only two models have benefited from the scheme, yet they are emphasized ahead of the 29 photographers that have received money. Similarly, this early list does not include taxi drivers or real estate agents although as recipients they outnumber the one dancer that is mentioned earlier. The emphasis seems to be on the more glamorous professions in creative industries. Combined with the undermining of a person's choice to become a careers advisor, the emphasis on these careers is best explained by a macrostructure that belittles the scheme and the importance of these jobs is in their frivolousness. For some, the brief collection of occupations that the paper assembles at the start would seem trivial. Of course, the article goes on to expand this with a more inclusive and specific list, but in terms of the stories semantic macrostructure this earlier list summarises the later by selecting the most important

points. However, these points are important in terms of a particular discourse. Later, the article also provides this example of a success: “The scheme has helped launch many successful businesses, including the D. VICE sex toy chain.” While the story provides an example of the scheme’s success it is one that may compound this discourse of the taxpayer funding the frivolous. The last paragraph notes that the ministry had only been forthcoming with information when the paper planned to write a story on the scheme’s lack of accountability, this proposition also offers a greater understanding of the article if a reading is informed by discourses of frivolous government expenditure. It colours the information as needing to be hidden and as somehow embarrassing to the government. Understanding this embarrassment is enabled by a reading in terms of the described model or discourse.

The Dominion Post provides balance to this story in another article, by the same reporter in the same issue. This time the heading is “In business and thankful” and it provides a profile of one of the scheme’s success stories (*The Dominion Post*, 13 September 2005: 5). With the headline at the top of the story’s thematic structure, its “thankful” summarizes various propositions of a deserving poor discourse. Although the sex toy company makes an appearance, the bulk of the story is about a hairdresser who set up a business with the help of the government funded scheme. The lead paragraph introduces the woman, indirectly quoting her saying that “she would not have been able to own her own business without Work and Income’s Enterprise Allowance scheme.” Within this story, there is no comment from detractors, nor are there the negative and undermining details of the other stories. There is one note, saying that Sue Middleton (the hairdresser) was previously on the domestic purposes benefit and still receives some government assistance. But it follows this with a

description of the success of the D.VICE sex toy business referred to in the previous article. The nature of the company is not gone into and the text mainly refers to the company's success. While the previous story did not discuss beneficiaries in detail, the emphasis being the controversy in the use of taxpayers' money, this story invokes a deserving poor discourse of those on benefits. Middleton is also described as a mother of three. This can affirm her deservingness at a time when political rhetoric brought "family" to the fore as central to society. This story with its detail of Middleton's success invites another script, one that sees beneficiaries positively when they stop receiving benefits. It remedies the imbalance of the previous story by drawing on a narrow script by which beneficiaries can be described positively, when they are seen as motivated and deserving.

A similar attitude and discourse of a grateful poor can be found in "Benefits to be had all around" (*New Zealand Herald*, 16 September 2005). This also profiles a beneficiary within a grateful, deserving poor discourse. The context of the profile is the election and the article describes the positive outcome for the woman no matter which party wins. Below the byline the story is announced as "Single mother's work plans means she is better off no matter who is PM." After a very brief lead sentence that reiterates this statement, the story describes how Vanessa Wilson returned to New Zealand from Australia to escape a violent relationship. This immediately tells us that Wilson is a deserving single mum, rather than one of the frequently derided "teen mums" and she has taken the sensible step of leaving an abusive marriage. This discourse of the deserving poor and "hard working single mums" is the most useful reading in several places in the story. At one point it says, "But she has no intention of staying on the benefit. She is exactly the person that both parties want to help

because she intends to help herself.” It then describes Wilson’s plans to set up a home business. The story ends on a patriotic quote, “I’m living in the best country in the world. There’s nowhere else to bring your children up that’s better than here,” and is reassuring about both benefits and beneficiaries. Despite claims to the contrary, the poor will not be disadvantaged by the proposed changes of National Leader Don Brash while beneficiaries are deserving and striving towards employment. Australia is also depicted as harder on working people than New Zealand, going against an attitude that Australia is a destination for those wanting better pay. Other stories with a deserving theme include a story about an invalid beneficiary’s efforts to lose weight with the help of a health organization for Maori, Pacific Islands and low income people (“Health journey takes weight off mind,” *Waikato Times*, 15 September 2005: 4). However, the deserving poor is a relatively minor theme. Overall, coverage of or that includes beneficiaries and benefits provides a negative picture of welfare and its recipients as abusers of the system, and as criminals.

Crime News and the Unemployed.

People labeled as low in socio economic terms can be found throughout crime news in the sample period. Again there is little discussion of this status beyond the tag of unemployed, beneficiary or the title of a low wage job but news using this slight reference constitutes much of the coverage of those living around or below the poverty line. In a few stories in this time, not only are those on benefits but the welfare system itself is associated with criminality. The *Herald* reports “Thousands wrongly paid benefits totaling \$30m” which details newly released information about the incidence of benefit fraud in New Zealand (*New Zealand Herald*, 30 September 2005). This article says that some may not have known they were getting more than

they were entitled to while others were knowingly committing fraud. Dunedin's *Otago Daily Times* follows this with a story about 55 Otago Health Board workers who have been revealed to be also receiving benefits ("55 health staff on benefits," *Otago Daily Times*, 29 September 2005). Within these stories as in most crime news, beneficiaries do not speak and are constructed as not only receiving a benefit to which they were not entitled but as criminals as well. A process of association can be described; the stories about welfare are few and these stories add to a picture of welfare that is generally negative. This reporting of welfare fraud as well as more general crime news, where the transgressors are described as beneficiaries, provides an overall coverage of those receiving benefits and the welfare system that is negative. The association of those unemployed or on benefits with crime adds to a model or discourse of these people that can have an explanatory value in reporting their deviance.

Crime stories frequently provide the occupation of those accused or convicted of breaking the law. The sample analysed includes beneficiaries as possessing weapons ("Two Geraldine brothers plead guilty," *Timaru Herald*, 21 September 2005: 15), as pedophiles ("Outed paedophile sues for \$80, 000," *New Zealand Herald*, 27 September 2005) and there is also the story of an alcoholic sickness beneficiary who stabbed his sister's partner after being accused of not doing enough housework ("Victim stabbed in row over housework," in *The Press*, 28 September 2005: 2). The label unemployed occurs frequently in crime news. Among the many occurrences there are charges of recidivist drunk driving ("Third trip to jail in three years for drunk driver," *Southland Times*, 29 September 2005: 12), supplying magic mushrooms ("Dunedin High Court," *Otago Daily Times*, 12 October 2005), and an

alleged scalping (“Scalping accused seek bail together at marae,” *Dominion Post*, 12 October 2005: 5). Aside from these, there is a multitude of references to unemployed people being charged or convicted of petty theft, assaults and drug crime. This is partly due to the practice of several papers from smaller centres to report all court proceedings. Another practice in news is to publish lists of drink driving convictions, with the offender’s name, occupation as well as details about the offence and their sentence. Again, the unemployed, beneficiaries and those in low income jobs make up a large segment of these lists. The reporting of the unemployed within this crime news is superficial and usually consists of only a tag e.g., “A 45-year-old unemployed man will appear in the Christchurch District Court today” (“Weapons charge,” *The Press*, 26 September 2005: 3). Coupled with this overrepresentation of the poor within crime coverage is the popularity of crime as news. McGregor’s (2002b) work demonstrates this. Her study shows that as of 2001 crime made up 19.63% of hard news in New Zealand’s major newspapers, an increase on a 1992 study (McGregor 2002b: 85). Sociologists have long studied the part poverty plays in causing crime and a government study of statistics suggested income inequality was a factor on a rising crime rate (Statistics New Zealand 2003). Another explanation for the overrepresentation of the poor in crime news comes from criminologist Greg Newbold who suggests that the deviance committed by those with little capital is treated more seriously, policed more rigorously and punished more severely than the acts of wealthy business criminals (2000: 252). However, while crimes are reported as being committed by those with low incomes, there is no recognition of the dialogue over crime and poverty. Yet the use of brief references to socioeconomic status adds to another explanatory framework. These tags occur in the higher level macropropositions, and can lend themselves to scripts about the poor and crime.

McGregor writes that crime news is incident based and personalized. Referring to a specific example she finds that among other details, news media publicizes “individual deviance through primary, “factual” definitions” (McGregor 1993: 28). With this approach to reporting crime, any causation can be assumed as being on the level of the individual. The tag of unemployed works in terms of this discourse by lending itself to other negative models about the unemployed that may explain criminal actions. As seen in Rodney Hide’s quote, there is a discourse of the poor as too lazy to work and preferring crime instead. Labels can explain crime in terms of the prejudice that the unemployed suffer from other deficiencies aside from their lack of jobs. The constant association of the unemployed with crime in news coupled with the lack of explanation builds an available model to explain crime news where the poor are unusually deviant and the use of the tag is enough causation. With no other causation, a reader can draw on the association of the poor with crime, to explain the cause through prejudicial belief that the poor are deviant. The occasional reference to causation occurs in a prosecutor or judge’s remark such as the following: “Judge Saunders said MacDonald had little recollection of his offending. ‘You are a self-indulgent young man who is prepared to receive the benefit and use it to buy drugs and alcohol.’” (“Man who joined friend in farm raid ‘led life of self indulgence,’” *The Southland Times*, 24 September 2005: 6). However, this is still about individual deviance with self-indulgence given as a factor in criminal behaviour; a proposition suited to the popular discourse of dole bludgers. In other stories drugs or addiction are sometimes blamed, but socioeconomic explanations are absent while occupations are included. Just as the Judge pronounced, individual reasons are behind these crimes, just as they must also be behind the perpetrators’ poverty. In this way, a hegemonic

discourse of poverty develops as it is in the most basic “objective” reporting that a particular ideology appears as natural in explaining poverty and crime.

Maori and Poverty

This use of prejudicial and negative models to explain news is similar and overlaps with the portrayal of Maori in the media. Walker criticises the coverage of Maori in news describing it as negative and marked by a focus on deviance as well as saying, “from the nineteenth century to the present day, the Fourth Estate has played a consistent role in the way it selects, constructs and publishes news about Maori” (2002: 231). However, the construction of Maori as poor and deviant is an enormous and complex area and can only be touched on in this summary. Research group Kupu Taea, provide an extensive analysis of the coverage of Maori and Treaty of Waitangi issues (Moewaka Barnes et al 2004). Among their findings, especially relevant to poverty is the reference to Maori in articles covering statistical reports of social issues which assume a level playing field. They write, “In these stories, Maori were repeatedly described as lagging behind Pakeha on most social indicators, with little or no context about why that may be so. This had a cumulative stigmatizing effect and reinforced explanations that blame Maori for poverty and poor health (Ibid: 36).” Within this sample, there are instances of similar discourse within the news. *The Waikato Times* reports a study which fits the Kupu Taea description precisely (*Waikato Times*, 11 October 2005: 3).

New report says Maori are deprived

Geoff Taylor

Nearly half of Waikato's Maori population lives in "deprived" situations according to a new study by the Waikato District Health Board.

A study on the region's health needs shows an estimated 43 per cent of Maori live in the most deprived areas, which are worst in Ruapehu, Waikato District, Hauraki and Otorohanga.

This compares with 20.8 per cent of non-Maori.

The study also shows Maori in affluent suburbs are in worse health than non-Maori in poor areas.

Overall, 25.7 per cent of Waikato people lived in the highest areas of deprivation, compared with the national average of 20 per cent.

Because of a strong link between deprivation and poor health and because Maori have the poorest health of any ethnic group in the country anyway, the report will result in the district health board putting more emphasis on Maori health.

Pacific Islanders, people in low-socio economic situations, and the elderly are also being targeted.

[The rest of the article goes on to describe the measure of deprivation used, the effect of deprivation and poor health on life expectancy and proposed measures to remedy the problem].

As in Moewaka Barnes et al's study, there is no mention of context or explanation for the deprivation suffered by Maori. The fact that well off Maori suffer worse health

than deprived non-Maori also is repeated several times with no explanation of context. The third to last paragraph includes a quotation from the senior project manager at The District Health Boards' Maori Health Unit, who says "one of the key messages is that we don't want to blame the Maori population for their health." The article favours a reading that does just that. With no alternative explanation for Maori deprivation or poor health it invites prejudiced readers to draw on racist notions of Maori to explain the situation. Not only is an explanation for any deprivation lacking, but the headline programmes a reading that sees Maori as poor to be the main finding of a report that is mainly about health. This macrostructure occurs in the lead and opening paragraphs. Other findings, such as the low life expectancy of Maori or Health Board plans to target Maori Health, are omitted from the macrostructures that form the headline and there is nothing in the propositions of the lead that points to these findings anyway. But as the Kupu Taea group note, this is not unusual in coverage of Maori and it is frequently noted in the media that Maori are rated lower than Pakeha on social indicators. The story then, only serves to build and reinforce this negative picture of Maori as the theme selected as the most important is not new. It will be shown that it also occurs in political discourse to attack Maori in a way that holds them solely responsible for their socio economic status. Selecting Maori deprivation as the focus of lead and headline cannot be justified in terms of news values of immediacy, but it reaffirms popular and prejudiced beliefs about Maori as commonsense. Notably, this story is one of the very few that reports on the incidence of poverty as news in itself. The only other story that could be described as doing so is the article covering the Nobel Prize nominee which describes poverty in Northland. This article also adds to the racialisation of poverty as Northland is considered a predominately Maori area. In representing the only discussion of poverty itself while

constructing it as Maori these articles reproduce discourse of all poor as Maori and vice versa. This discourse contains poverty as a racial problem and is similar to Gilens' (1996) observations about the United States. He argues that due to the over representation of the poor as black, Americans overestimate the percentage of poor that are black and have negative attitudes to welfare. He believes that people draw on the prejudice that African Americans are responsible for their own poverty to justify this attitude. If replicated in New Zealand, this is a discourse of poverty and race that is harmful to Maori, and to Pakeha and other New Zealanders living on low incomes, who may be ignored as poverty becomes a Maori issue, occurring only in Maori areas.

Prejudiced beliefs about Maori as poor due to personal failings are drawn on in political discourse in a way that views them as commonsense. In the coverage of a candidates' election forum, the debate between an ACT candidate and a Maori man is described ("Get the point," *Waikato Times*, 14 September 2005: 1). In response to the man's criticism of ACT's attitude to Maori, the candidate is quoted as saying "All we want is for you to get off your bum and work." The "you" can only be Maori generally; the man questioning the candidate is an academic. The candidate here is participating in racist discourse, assuming that Maori do not work and the reason is laziness. Again this relies on a discourse of Maori as deprived being commonsense knowledge that does not need further explanation. Another Maori audience member disputed the candidate's statement. The response reported was, "get that chip off your shoulder. You are not special. Maori are not special. We are all New Zealanders." An alternative to the racism and the assumptions in this statement is not provided in the article, instead it goes on to report on another candidate's speech. Later the story

repeats the ACT candidate's "get off your bum" remark as one of the best quotes of the evening, with the description, "Mr Mallett trades insults with a Maori member of the audience." Although the remark contains prejudice and racism in equating Maori with laziness and unemployment it is not treated in the manner reserved for argument that is far off the consensus in the sphere of deviance. It remains without comment as legitimate debate.

The questions posed to Maori party co-leader, Pita Sharples, in another story require a shared familiarity with these discourses of Maori, unemployment and laziness from both the interviewee and the reader ("Q & A," *New Zealand Herald*, 13 September 2005). Pita Sharples is asked, "There's a view which says that Maori need to take greater responsibility for some of the social ills they endure. What do you say to that?" Sharples has enough familiarity with this discourse to debate it specifically: "They're quite prepared to point out that our NCEA results are lower than others, and so on. What they have to point out with it, as well, is to see where those people sit on the socio-economic ladder of New Zealand society. So coupled with things like offending is some of the worst poverty in this country but also a real working-class attitude to life." He is familiar with this script of Maori as underachieving and argues for the consideration of structural causes. However, news offers more support to the discourse posed to Sharples. Content analysis of New Zealand's news found that negative themes are emphasized in the coverage of Maori (Moewaka Barnes et al 2004). Although racial tags have been dropped from crime news (see Kernot 1990 about this practice) Maori names combined with occupational tags are still evident in this area of reporting. The next chapter, in analysing a television documentary will further discuss the way that particular groups of the poor are racialised.

Conclusion

In surveying the coverage of poverty over a month, the initial observation is that it barely appears in news. A search for articles directly about poverty would yield little. Poverty is more commonly articulated as a part of other issues. It occurs in articles about the developing world, which reveals a level of consensus assumed about absolute definitions that is not granted to the incidence of relative poverty that occurs in New Zealand. Furthermore it invites comparisons which undermine recognition of a social problem in New Zealand. The term is used freely in reference to New Zealand's past, but again, this often relies on an absolute definition and does nothing to suggest any debate over the present situation. Debate does occur though, and in places that are signaled as being sites of controversy and rhetoric, poverty is allowed space. However, while politicians may freely mention poverty, it stays in this space of debate and rhetoric which again constructs a reluctance to recognise poverty in New Zealand. This also produces a discourse of poverty as an issue for politicians to debate but not one of news relevance on its own. This discourse further downplays the issue as it disappears without the catalyst of the election. The poor do occur as the passive victims of price rises, but again this coverage does little with poverty as an issue in its own right. As a feature of these stories it adds an angle to another issue and a reading based on van Dijk's (1985, 1988, 1995) methods shows that other aspects aside from the poor's victim status is elided from the stories' thematic structure. As in election coverage, the opportunity to consider the issue of poverty, the effects of it and the lives of the poor themselves are not covered and preference is given to incidents with a wider appeal. While poverty occurs it is downplayed in these articles. However, mention of it can suggest a lot in stories about deviance and crime. These are places where those on low incomes appear, often in very brief mentions but in ways that

offer an explanatory value. In coverage of welfare issues, readers are invited to recall the negative associations of the benefit system to make sense of articles which bring together points consistent with popular discourse about frivolous government spending. Similarly, crime news, which is plentiful but bare and apparently straightforward in style, refers to socio economic status by way of occupation tags. As this is virtually the only place in news where the “unemployed” are referred to, it works to both construct and invoke the associations of this label. The most explanatory model in this context is one that sees the unemployed as being so for individual faults, which must also explain their crimes for lack of any alternative discourse. Maori also appear negatively through association. They are cast as poor without any discussion of causation or context and again prejudice is easily applied to understand this coverage. Explaining the poor in terms of their own individual faults avoids any greater responsibility for their situation - just as putting them to the margins of other issues downplays the incidence and the problems of poverty. The issue of poverty is contained through these strategies. This may not be intentional but it can effect any attempt to see poverty as a social issue facing New Zealand by looking to news.

Chapter Four

Televising Homelessness: TV Documentary and Homelessness in New Zealand

I went down into the underworld of London with an attitude of mind which I may best liken to that of the explorer.

(Jack London, Preface to *People of the Abyss* 1903)

Introduction

The poor have long been considered a group needing to be charted for the rest of society. The two television documentaries, *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street*, which form the basis of this chapter, can be seen as having a place in the same tradition as London in observing the experience of the poor. Both documentaries are also significant in providing a point of difference to the coverage described so far. The previous chapters have been concerned with journalism in hard news formats and the limiting effect of this on the coverage of poverty. While this type of news is the most prevalent, in looking for the discourses of poverty circulating in New Zealand today it is necessary to consider where alternatives may lie. *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street* both investigate forms of homelessness, the first through the subject of the so called “street kids,” homeless, inner city youth, while the latter has a more general focus. Homelessness is an anomaly in the issue of poverty in New Zealand. It is less publicised and not often recognised as an issue in New Zealand. For this reason alone, the documentaries present a compelling variation from the coverage of poverty. In covering this issue, they break with several of the conventions observed so far.

Neither relies on a trigger event to bring poverty to attention. Both depart from the reliance on figures of mainstream authority, instead preferring to rely on the words of their subjects. Another divergence is their interest in the experience and living conditions of those in poverty. Again this breaks with the more statistical, abstract accounts of poverty discussed so far, and it can be considered to be enabled in part by the documentary form. Although, it will be shown that these documentaries rely on many existing and dominant ideas about poverty. Contained in London's words are the implications of a firsthand approach to the homeless, the need to make sense of them as different. The interest rests on the perceived otherness of the group, the gulf that must lie between them and the intended audience for these observations. It is this difference that becomes a key focus for the observation of the poor and it is a focus that also works to construct a difference. This chapter will look at the two television current affairs documentaries, showing what alternatives are on offer but also revealing the dominant beliefs that are reproduced.

From Mayhew to Ehrenreich: A Brief Historiography of Observing The Poor.

There is nothing new about the interest in the lives of the poor seen in *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street*. Both report on homelessness by observing the poor and documenting their words. While the causes of poverty are explored, the main focus is in showing how the homeless live. This type of reportage, which may be described as a journalistic ethnography of the poor, has a history which can be traced back to at least the 19th century. One predecessor is Henry Mayhew who ventured into the slums of Victorian London to describe the beggars, prostitutes and sweatshop workers he found. Originally published in the *Morning Chronicle* his reports were collected as *London Labour and the London Poor* (Mayhew 1967). Dickens' (1995, 1997)

sketches and journalism also include similar issues. At the turn of the century on the other side of the Atlantic, Jacob Riis used the new technology of flash photography to record the conditions of New York tenement dwellers. A frequent theme in this reporting is an interest in living with or observing the poor for the sake of documenting how they live. What is implicit is that these lives are then served up for consumption by a middle class audience. This is most obvious in 19th century journalism when reporters were not shy of moralising over the lives lead by the poor. Here is Mayhew on prostitution, from his volume subtitled “Those that will not work”: “There is a great abandonment of everything that one may strictly speaking denominate womanly. Modesty is utterly annihilated and shame ceases to exist in their composition. They all more or less are given to habits of drinking” (1967: 219). The moral and biblical overtones are no longer a major feature in observations of the poor, but the interest in their lives has remained.

This journalistic ethnography of the poor is by no means a purely 19th century phenomenon. As noted, American author and socialist Jack London (1903) turned explorer/journalist to write *The People of the Abyss*, describing the slums of London. London’s account influenced what may be the most well known example of this journalistic trend, Orwell’s (1986a) *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Like London, Orwell famously lived the life of a “down and out” as a dishwasher in Paris and as a tramp in England. From this perspective he documented the way of life, attitude and conversation of his fellow tramps. A less covert method of bearing witness informed a similar journalistic exercise, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Orwell 1986b). Orwell’s books are often referred to as documentaries, reflecting the links between his descriptive journalism and the in-depth reporting of films. At the same

time film was added to the methods of witnessing the poor first hand with documentary pioneer John Grierson's *Housing Problems* 1935, which is, as the name suggests, an investigation into the inadequacy of British slums. While it may be synonymous with the depression, the need to describe the way the poor live has continued. Tony Wilkinson (1981), a reporter for the BBC's *Nationwide* current affairs series, was worked over by the make up department before being filmed living among the homeless in the early 1980s. Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001), *Nickel and Dimed* provides a recent account of the poor from a journalist's perspective. For her study she worked at a series of low wage jobs, describing in detail what this work required, the substandard living conditions available while on this wage as well as impressions of her fellow working poor. British versions of Ehrenreich's study appeared shortly afterwards. Fran Abrams (2002) described the experience of working for the minimum wage in a book entitled *Below the Breadline* and Polly Toyenbee (2003) wrote a similar account. These recent accounts, following a lead set by Orwell, have often worked to show the normality of the poor against their perceived failings. The books by Ehrenreich, Toyenbee and Abrams sold well, suggesting that the appeal of knowing how the lower half lives is still strong.

While this list is by no means exhaustive (such a survey would make an interesting study), it does reveal this continuing journalistic theme of observing the poor first hand. The intertextuality of the exercise is clear in blurb descriptions of the modern examples as being in the tradition of Orwell, London etc (Wilkinson 1981, Ehrenreich 2001, Abrams 2002). If this ethnography of the poor is a trend in journalism then its purpose must be, like all ethnography, to document the behaviours of an "other." The fact that the trend has not abated shows that the poor remain significantly "othered"

enough from a middle class perspective to make compelling reading. Simultaneously, these exercises construct them as an other through a focus on difference. Alternatively, an approach may be to address this status by revealing the normality and commonsense of the poor. As a review of the most recent literature on the life of the poor says, “the people described by Abrams, Toynbee and Ehrenreich are not the lazy good-for-nothing stereotypes that are typically represented in the media and by politicians, but hardworking people putting in long hours for wages that barely enable them to survive” (Bambra 2003: 549). While before this, the status of the poor allowed journalists to make moral judgements of the group they were bearing witness to. Whichever theme is favoured, the discourse of the other viewed from a middle class perspective remains inseparable from this mode of reporting. Although most of these examples come from the genre of literary journalism, the two documentaries here are performing similar work within the culture. The need to observe the poor is a persistent one and each era has brought their own themes and discourse to the project. From revealing their moral deficiencies to their common sense, the poor remain a territory to expose and interpret.

Television Documentary in New Zealand

Documentary is a strong tradition in New Zealand television. Two major channels have relatively successful documentary strands. This can be seen as complementing the short bulletin convention of television news in the same way feature articles supplement the lack of context or depth in hard news. However, writers have cast aspersions on such a view, noting that while New Zealand’s documentary strands are held up as a rare instance of the success of local programming, they are used cynically by networks to ensure funding through New Zealand’s public service agencies, while

providing something more akin to “infotainment” (Roscoe 2000, Debrett 2004). For Roscoe (2000), their content is often characterised by a focus on “mainstreaming the margins”, a claim that can be evaluated in terms of these documentaries on homelessness. As she writes, “‘mainstreaming of the margins’ ultimately means that the communities are not represented for and by themselves, but are offered up as ‘exotic others’ to be consumed by the mainstream audience” (Roscoe 2000: 257). While these documentaries may focus on groups often neglected by the media, it is in a way that maintains dominant discourses.

The Streetkids

The Streetkids was broadcast as part of TV3’s documentary series, *Inside New Zealand*, at 8:30pm, Thursday 5th August 2004. As with all episodes in this documentary slot, credits for the overall series are then followed by an introduction by a presenter, in this case, newsreader and journalist Carol Hirshfield. An hour long, the documentary followed a group of “street kids,” recording their lifestyle. No journalist is shown in the documentary, but it derives a narrative from a voice over. Much of the footage of the group has been filmed at night. Among other things, they are shown drinking, sniffing glue, bedding down for a night and working as prostitutes. One of the group goes to court and although the trial is not shown, her description and response do feature. Interspersed with this observational footage are scenes where members of the group comment on the themes of the documentary. These are monologues rather than interviews, as again there is no evidence of a journalist eliciting their responses. *The Streetkids* concludes with some of the group discussing their futures beyond the street.

Disco Kids, Street Kids and Homies: The Evolution of a Label.

The title “street kids” is not a neutral term. A New Zealand audience may have certain expectations of a group labelled “street kids”, which comes from its history in news and popular discourse. “Street kids” are generally associated with the 1980s and 1990s, which appears to have as much to do with the emergence of the term as the phenomenon itself. In this way the “street kids” label has a history remarkably similar to Hall et al’s (1982) study of mugging in the UK. Hall and his colleagues found that the discovery of mugging as a new type of crime in Britain coincided with the introduction of the American term to the country. They argue that the crime it describes has a much longer history (Ibid). This parallels the “street kids” label in the association that is made between the use of the label and the origin of the phenomenon. “Street kids” as well as its connotations of glue sniffing and gangs were identified as the subject of a moral panic in the 1980s (Shuker et al 1990: 9). However, a 1982 literature review traces the phenomenon back to the Disco Kids of the 1970s and relates it to similar issues in other western countries as well as to the “child vagrants” of the 19th century (Bevan 1982: 3).

Bevan’s review also includes newspaper reports and the transcript of a television report on “street kids.” By looking at the themes and focus of these it is possible to find some of the associations of the “street kids” label. The earliest reporting using the label “street kids,” that Bevan records, appears in 1981. An Auckland Star story reports on the comments of a Boystown director who says, “a new wave of bored young, unemployed people are living in Auckland’s inner-city streets” and that many survive through theft (*Auckland Star*, 17 July 1981 in Bevan 1982: 52). The director also suggests a solution to the problem in the form of financial support for youth

workers and the cause, he believes, is the excitement of inner city street life (Ibid). Similar connotations of choice and lifestyle will be shown to be drawn on in *The Streetkids* programme. Bevan also provides another Star story from that year which refers to “street kids,” in reporting on the work of a public health nurse (*Auckland Star*, 18 November 1981 in Bevan 1982: 53). The story draws attention to the psychological problems suffered by the “street kids,” and the nurse comments on their poor health caused by lifestyle (Ibid). A *New Zealand Herald* story from the following year uses the term “street kids” to describe a group responsible for inner city attacks (*New Zealand Herald*, 20 January 1982 in Bevan 1982). The article gives “street kids” gang connotations, saying they are “traditional enemies of punk rockers and ‘Boot boys’” (Ibid.). A source describes signs of racial tension within this conflict (Ibid.), adding another connotation and racialising the “street kids.”

Another article involves a comparison of “street kids” to images of the destitute children of 19th century London (*Evening Post*, 3 February 1982 in Bevan 1982: 55). By this year the term seems to be the main label for homeless youth and appears without quotation marks in news stories. This change can be seen as shift in the media’s acceptance of the term (Fowler et al 1979: 211). It can also be seen in terms of dialogicality as the label loses its ‘dialogization’ through the removal of parenthesis (Fairclough 2003:42). A dialogue over how to describe the youths is effaced for the now accepted, authoritative term. It also signals an assumption that the audience understands and shares the “street kids” label. A significant step, it signals the closing down of the debate as that label’s connotations of race, criminality, homelessness as a choice and lifestyle are favoured over alternative labels and concepts.

The criminality associated with “street kids,” is evidently part of an official discourse. A story documenting a Social Welfare Minister’s planned discussion with “street kids” includes his emphasis on the pressure they face to engage in crime (*Dominion Post*, 12 February 1982 in Bevan 1982: 56). A television current affairs show also adds criminality to the discourse of “street kids” through a dichotomy between “street kids” and police (TVOne *Midweek*, 9pm 27 January 1982 in Bevan 1982: 68-71). The programme also features a youth worker saying that the impact of racism is a reason that most are Maori and Pacific Islanders, adding ethnicity as a feature of the “street kids” discourse. Other aspects of the “street kids” issue include their unsupportive home life, the attraction of street life and their unemployment which is attributed to both lack of jobs and their inability to keep them (Ibid.). Although this programme screened in 1982, most of these themes are still prominent in *The Streetkids* more than twenty years later.

By the 1990s and 2000s, the label “street kids” still appears in news to refer to homeless youth. However, other connotations such as criminality and vandalism are so powerful that the term “street kids” can apply to them, irrespective of homeless status. A telling example is the *Evening Post*’s comment on a golf team named “The Street Kids”, where the first use of this name is accompanied by the disclaimer, “Not in the sense of graffiti and skateboards” (“Street kids scrub up in cup,” *Evening Post*, 14 September 1998: 22). Similarly, the Taranaki town of Hawera was reported as having a “street kid problem” and the term is used interchangeably with “Homies” (“Hawera puts street kids in their place,” *Daily News*, 11 January 1997: 1). “Homie”, was a common label in the 1990s to refer to youth who are visible followers of hip-hop culture. The “street kids” or “homies” described in the story are accused of

intimidation, assault, shoplifting, burglary and wandering the streets at night. However, they do not appear to be homeless in the sense of the term's early 1980s meaning. There is no explanation that they may be living on the streets due to joblessness and an abusive home life. Instead, the offenders are sent home and the problem is solved through cooperation with their families (Ibid.). The use of the "street kids" label refers to their attitude, appearance and youth not to particular living circumstances. The graffiti and skateboards connotation seen in the golf club story is smuggled in through the term homie. This usage is illustrative of the way "street kids" has come to mean a subculture. As a term describing life style it refers to values and implies choice, rather than cause at the level of social structure.

In 2003, a year before *The Streetkids* is screened on television, the term still appears in news to apply to violent inner city youth with no mention of living conditions ("Violent street kids causing havoc in city, says cabbie," *Waikato Times*, 8 March 2003: 3). The apparent explanation that an offender is a "street kid" is their clothing: "Last Sunday a 25-year-old Hamilton man was taken to hospital after being stabbed in the inner city by a girl in "homie" clothing" (Ibid.). After more than twenty years of use in news the "street kid" label has become shorthand for a particular lifestyle. As Hall et al write, "Labels are important, especially when applied to dramatic public events. They not only place and identify those events; they assign events to a context. Thereafter the use of the label is likely to mobilise *this whole referential context.*" (1982: 19). It is possibly for these reasons that the subjects of *The Streetkids* do not use the term themselves, instead choosing to describe themselves as streeties, a label that appears in *Life on the Street* and in a statement by a homeless man in a recent Christchurch *Press* article ("Streeties' deny blame for fire," *The Press*, 26 January

2005: 3). It may be an adaptation of the original term but it is the label that this group prefers for themselves and it is one that does not instantly bring the associations implicit in the term “street kids.” Yet the documentary still uses the older term and the title sequence spells it out in graffiti typography. It is “street kids” rather than streeties that carries more resonance with the audience, possibly saving the producers the work of creating an entirely new discourse of this aspect of homelessness. The use of this existing discourse, with its connotations of life style, crime and choice can be demonstrated from the very beginning of *The Streetkids*.

Opening *The Streetkids*

The opening titles of *The Streetkids* are a significant indicator of its aims as well as the cultural work it performs. For Fiske and Hartley the credits at the beginning and end of a television show are “boundary rituals,” separating one category from another to distinguish a show from what has preceded or what follows (1984: 166). But beyond this function, the opening sequence of a television show also serves as an “anamnesic,” a device to remind viewers of what they know about the programme and its genre (Fiske and Hartley 1984: 168). This function is most obvious in continuing series but the opening of *The Streetkids* can also be theorised this way. While the programmes opening does not necessarily remind viewers of other documentaries, although it does to some degree follow a format, it works to encapsulate ideas and associations of “street kids” and urban poverty. This concept is especially relevant to *The Streetkids* because the discourse of poverty that its title sequence draws on is a familiar one. With its credits performing an “anamnesic” function *The Streetkids* translates the lives of the poor into a recognisable idiom from its very start.

The programme opens with footage of a cityscape at night and accompanying this is a blues style trumpet. The images include time-lapse footage of the Auckland skyline with the sun going down, as well as night streets and alleyways. Several juxtapose Auckland's Sky Tower, a symbol of wealth as the tower marking a Casino, with dark city streets. Interspersed with these are excerpts from interviews. Removed from context, these appear to present themes chosen by the filmmakers in the words of their subjects. In one, a girl discusses prostitution while in another a young man describes his criminal activities in a confrontational manner saying, "I'm breaking into your cars, I'm snatching peoples' bags and wallets. Anything worth a quick dollar I'm doing it." These interview segments operate like the traditional introduction to an essay, outlining the themes that are to be explored and are seen to be important about the subject. At the end of this opening sequence is the graffiti title, *The Streetkids*. As anamnestic, this opening with themes and images of graffiti, crime and innercity life recalls the discourse of "street kids" that emerged in the 1980s. But there is another theme in this opening, that of the film noir city, a connotation evoked largely by the music.

Music is not a prominent feature of *The Streetkids* It follows standard documentary convention in its restrained use of music to set mood and themes (Corner 2002). Foreboding strings accompany a scene where two girls sniff glue and stagger around describing its effects. The use of the music is not dissimilar to drug scenes in Hollywood films, with its unusual qualities signifying that they are high and a horror movie style theme to let the viewer know that this is a deviant behaviour. But the use of music in the introduction and credit sequences of the documentary is significant in setting an overall theme for *The Streetkids* as part of its anamnesis function (Fiske and

Hartley 1984: 168). Music can be seen as adding a “semiotic layer” to the images on screen (Meinhof 1994: 80). Blues brings obvious connotations as the music of a dispossessed people. Its subject matter is frequently poverty, and for these reasons its use in *The Streetkids* is consistent with the way blues is used in fiction films. But it is a particular genre of fiction film that is evoked by the mournful trumpet of *The Streetkids*: the film noir.

The images accompanying this music, the alleyway and the deserted night streets, are not consistent with the environment that the streeties are shown in during the rest of the day. The alleyway shot includes the back of old buildings with fire escapes and downpipes, while the environment the streeties are depicted in is main streets, urban parks and a city cemetery. Although not consistent with this environment, the image of the circa 1930s alleyway is reminiscent of another image, the Film Noir city connoted by the music. This is the city as a dark and criminal moral vacuum, made famous in films of the 1940s but revered and frequently imitated as a distinctive visual style (MacCannell 1993). Films in the Noir canon frequently have themes of crime and corruption. Opening *The Streetkids* with these visuals and the appropriate music sets the scene as the “naked city” or the “asphalt jungle” an unforgiving, lawless environment not commonly associated with New Zealand. Just as the images used for this opening sequence are not completely consistent with the environment in the text, neither is the music. Blues, while evocative of poverty, is not shown to be the music of the streeties. Their clothing suggests hip-hop culture and there is a glimpse of one rapping and breakdancing in another scene. The use of blues is a way of bringing the group within a frame of reference more familiar to the middle-class, middle-aged, white viewers of the documentary. The ghetto imagery of hip-hop is less

identifiable than the connotations of Film Noir's urban poverty. The lack of attention given to rap in favour of older filmic styles makes clear that the discourse of "street kids" being presented is not completely on the terms of its subjects. The importance of hip-hop culture remains unexplained, as just another matter of difference, while the group is categorised by older styles of music and imagery. Another effect of the use of this music and imagery is to relegate the group to an underclass status. While hip-hop culture may appear confrontational to a documentary audience, the blues relegates them to a familiar dispossessed. Rather than fellow New Zealanders failed by the egalitarian myth they become something akin to the American notion of the underclass (Gans 1995, Silver 1996); a non confrontational poor relegated to old film genres of the US.

Documentary Mode and Narration in *The Streetkids*

Writers on non-fiction film have described particular modes or styles of documentary with their own, often, ideological implications (Nichols 1991, Corner 2000). As noted, *The Streetkids* follows its subjects over a period of time without an onscreen journalist/presenter. This is a technique associated with observational documentary, and encourages the notion that the action shown would be occurring even without a film crew at hand (Corner 2000: 216). However, techniques of expository documentary are also crucial to the documentary. In particular, its use of an off screen commentary, a method described as "voice of god" for the sense of omniscience it provides (Nichols 1991: 34). Within *The Streetkids*, this voice helps to structure the programme, interpreting the action on screen. In this sense, the *vérité*-style footage can be seen as illustrative, providing the examples to back up the presenter's discourse (Corner 2000: 216). This style of filming provides the images and examples

with which the narrator can then apply his meanings and explanations, describing them through the dominant meaning of “street kids.” This is seen as key to expository forms and Nichol’s description of this mode is worth quoting at length:

Knowledge in expository documentary is often epistemic knowledge in Foucault’s sense of those forms of transpersonal certainty that are in compliance with the categories and concepts accepted as given or true in a specific time and place, or with a dominant ideology of common sense such as the one our own discourses of sobriety support. What each new text contributes to this stockpile of knowledge is new content, a new field of attention to which familiar concepts and categories can be applied. This is the great value of the expository mode since a topical issue can be addressed within a frame of reference that need not be questioned or established but simply taken for granted (1991: 35)

Some of the “familiar concepts” being applied to the streeties are a common sense discourse of poverty as absolute; a less controversial and more visually salient discourse than a relative discourse. The other is of the young homeless as “street kids,” an existing discourse of inner city Maori youth who are substance abusers and criminals. It is through these concepts and expository technique that the poverty of *The Streetkids* is defined.

Constructing a Definition: Absolute Poverty and *The Streetkids*

One method through which *The Streetkids* applies existent and dominant discourse to its subjects is through the expository technique of “rhetorical continuity”: editing to maintain the rhetoric of its essay form (Nichols 1991: 35). However, the continuity of

The Streetkids is not exclusively rhetorical. It also draws on a temporal and spatial continuity, moving from night to day to night, following a group in one city for this period of time. But it does break out of this continuity for the sake of its essay form. Themes are drawn out of the temporal narrative and then worked on with examples filmed at other times. Prostitution, which is discussed further below, is covered through observational footage of girls soliciting at night, interspersed with daytime interviews. The apparently natural logic of the programmes “day in the life” structure elides the construction of poverty that occurs. *The Streetkids* examines certain elements in the lives of its subjects and in doing so, it constructs poverty through a predictable set of references. The documentary focuses on particular themes through which it claims to represent *The Streetkids*. These include the places they sleep, their sense of community, the food they eat and their sexuality as well as their recourse to theft and prostitution.

Through these themes the documentary also uses a visual lexis similar to the accounts by London, Orwell and others. The use of these images in constructing this group as “street kids” shows that an absolute rather than a relative definition of poverty is at play. An absolute definition is one based on minimum physical needs (Perry 2002: 102). The needs which generally form an absolute definition are those focused on and found to be lacking or substandard in the lives of the “street kids.” Shelter and nutritious food, both undisputed in absolute poverty definitions, are examined in the lives of the streeties. Clothing, another common minimum need, proves more problematic and has to be explained. Relative poverty is the widely used alternative to absolute definitions. Relative definitions of poverty go beyond basic physical needs and consider poverty as affecting a person’s ability to participate fully in society.

However, *The Streetkids*' focus on shelter, food and clothing is more consistent with a discourse of absolute poverty. The deviant behaviours observed, such as substance abuse and prostitution, add to this with the discourse of "street kids" using the tropes of deviance that are commonly associated with this label.

Like many accounts of the poor, housing conditions are a significant focus. The camera follows one of the group as he makes his way to a place to sleep in an inner city cemetery. Several shots of this dwelling place are shown including some demonstrating how the man's sleeping spot backs on to graves. Other observations of the streeties' shelter includes two of the group entering an abandoned building and a scene depicting a heavily graffitied house where two young women spend the night. The graffiti is significant as one of the tropes of a "street kids" discourse. Food is also dealt with in the documentary. Some of the earliest images in the film include a close up of the fish and chips the group eats. Later there is an explanation and image of them getting a meal and shower from a charitable organisation. While the close up of greasy fish and chips may suggest inadequacy of diet, the charity scene shows that they do not want for food. This interest in diet responds to particular questions and expectations about poverty: that the poor should lack nutritious food.

Sexuality and prostitution are strong features of the documentary. In one scene, the narrator explains how the group forms relationships and that Ukray, one of the "street kids," prefers short term relationships. This is followed by Ukray listing the girls that he has been with and saying that he has possibly fathered a child. One of the girls talks about being pregnant and the narrator explains that many of the girls have had children which were taken off them by Child, Youth and Family. This, combined with

The Streetkids interest in prostitution constructs the sexuality of the “street kids” as deviant. Prostitution is one of the key themes of the documentary. Several members of the group talk about it, discussing its dangers and the number of streeties that are sex workers.

As well as the deviant behaviour of prostitution, crime, especially theft and substance abuse, is a key theme of the documentary. One scene shows two of the group sniffing glue and describing it. Other scenes include shots of streeties sniffing solvents. This theme is consistent with a discourse of “street kids” who are often described and depicted as glue sniffers. Similarly theft, which is explored in some detail, is also consistent with some of the earliest discussions of “street kids.” Again, these themes maintain the important distinction that “street kids” are not just homeless youth but are also deviant and criminal. While *The Streetkids* reinforces this existing discourse, it also contributes to it by focusing on a sense of community among the group. This is made reference to several times by both the narrator and the subjects of the documentary.

Historically, one consistent image of the poor is one of ragged or dirty clothes; the journalists discussed earlier go into detail on the state of dress of their subjects. It is an expectation that if one is poor then clothing and appearance must reflect this (Hewett 1994). However, the subjects of *The Streetkids* do not provide this semiotic resource. Their clothing is not noticeably worn or dirty, instead they often wear designer labels. The inconsistency of the streeties’ clothing with the familiar iconography of poverty that that documentary relies on receives comment. The narrator says, “it’s important too when you’re young to look good, even when you are

living on the street.” This is built on by Ukray who says, “it just feels funny, like, walking around in the same hoary clothes for days and days and days on end.” Whether this comment is elicited by the programme makers or not is irrelevant as it still reveals the persuasiveness of a discourse that expects a certain image of poverty. While it is possible that the programme makers are responding to this discourse it is just as likely that Ukray is aware of this perception and is explaining his clothes in terms of this notion.

As the programme follows the group over a period of time these themes may appear to be simply witnessed by the filmmakers, but implicit questions must direct the cameras gaze and the narrator’s observations. As Hall writes of press photographs, “Of course, the choice of *this* moment of an event as against that, of *this* person rather than that, of *this* angle rather than any other, indeed the selection of *this* photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meanings, is a highly ideological procedure”(1973: 188). Similar ideological choices occur in *The Streetkids*. The dominant themes of the documentary represent an interest in two concepts: the old discourse of “street kids” and witnessing poverty based on an absolute definition. The programme goes further and adds another important component to the “street kids” discourse, the notion of choice and lifestyle as the cause of their homelessness. While this is explored in terms of the participants in the documentary, the group is also constructed as representative so that these explanations may apply on a national scale.

Narration

The role of the narrator is fundamental in constructing the streeties as representative and explaining their situation in terms of choice. An example from the start of the documentary reveals this, “The central Auckland group are much the same as any other group around the country. Aged between 13 and 20 they have left whatever homes and families they’ve had to live rough on the streets.” Several things are occurring in this extract of narrative. Firstly there is the assumption that this group is representative of others throughout New Zealand. Occurring early in the narrator’s comments and the program, it sets up what we see as generic so the documentary can be watched as an example of “streetkids” everywhere. A similar process happens in *The Streetkids*, the synecdoche that forms the programme’s title. It holds out a part as representative of the whole, implying that the show is not just depicting a group of “street kids,” but the “street kids.” These assumptions occur early, establishing our narrator as an authoritative voice.

Nevertheless, the most striking thing about this excerpt is the explanation given as to why the group is homeless. The wording of this can be considered in terms of its transitivity: its use of verb and process (Fowler 2001: 70). The group, and most “street kids” based on the preceding assumption, have “left” their families. “Left’ is an action and as the actors in the clause the “street kids” are in control of this (Ibid: 73). They have chosen to live homeless. There is a repeated agreement in transitivity to show how the subjects came to the state they are in now. Chase describes her problematic home life, talking directly to the camera and in another expository convention, the “give and take between interviewer and subject” is not shown (Nichols 1991: 37). After Chase’s description the narrator summarises, “Chase was shifted around from

place to place finally leaving Te Puke for the streets of Auckland.” While Chase was passive in being “shifted” she has, as actor, made a choice to leave her family. Notably, she has chosen not just to leave a dysfunctional family environment but to leave it for “the streets.” Homelessness becomes an option. At another point in the documentary the same transivity occurs in the narrator’s explanations: “Having left their homes behind they’ve been drawn together on the streets. No matter how temporary the situation may be for the moment this is their families.” While “drawn together” infers an existential process, there is still a consistency of agency in the leaving of families. Rather than evaluate this as a truth claim, a critical stance can be taken with the way it simplifies and generalises causation. In the second to last example, Chase’s own description of leaving her home town is edited out in favour of the narrators simple “leaving Te Puke.” In several of the “street kids” narratives stories of abuse and neglect precipitate their leaving their families. They have little power over this catalyst to their homelessness, yet the narrator’s summary describes their agency. A more complex discussion of cause that incorporated necessity could leave room for an alternative to this discourse of choice.

To go back to an earlier example: “they have left whatever homes and families they’ve had to live rough on the streets” demonstrates more than assumptions and generalisations of agency, it also reveals the narrators role in using a public idiom. The phrase “live rough” is colloquial, as is “on the streets.” The “street kids” do not literally live on streets but opt for abandoned buildings and city cemeteries; the phrase is a popular one to signify homelessness. Hall et al’s description can be applied, “the media ‘take’ the language of the public and, on each occasion return it to them *inflected with dominant and consensual connotation.*” (1982: 62). There is also an

intertextual dimension to both phrases as they are older slang linked to an earlier and more recognisable idea of poverty. It is through Hall et al's process that these young people may be seen as streeties but are eventually cast as *The Streetkids* with the original connotations of the phrase remaining intact. This process can be described through the concept of hegemony (Forgacs 2000). While it is the poor speaking for themselves, mode and narration are just one way of making them understandable through dominant discourse. By avoiding traditional sources and providing experiential accounts in contrast to conventional reporting, the show seems to offer an alternative; providing something closer to the real. But in appearing to be a natural presentation, the show can reinforce dominant meanings all the more. The expository mode with its sense making narrator and rhetorical form is important in achieving this. In replicating earlier discourses and explaining the streeties in terms of a choice to leave behind family for homelessness, *The Streetkids* does not provide much alternative to existing media treatment of poverty in New Zealand. Its drawing on observational modes does present the subject using the poor themselves without recourse to traditional sources and parallels the efforts of Riis, Orwell and others. However it provides a familiar message of glue sniffing, graffiting "street kids" who partially fulfil an absolute poverty definition, yet are there by failure on a personal or family level. This implies that there is no need for social action beyond the documentary, especially when the actions beyond the situation are shown to be on the level of the narrative and individual. It is useful at this point to consider the criticism made by one chronicler of the poor of another:

Of course Dickens is right in saying that a gifted child ought not to work ten hours a day pasting labels on bottles but what he does not say is that no child ought to be condemned to such a fate, and there is no

reason for inferring that he thinks it. David escapes from the warehouse, but Mick Waller and Mealy Potatoes and the others are still there, and there is no sign that this troubles Dickens particularly. As usual, he displays no consciousness that the *structure* of society can be changed (Orwell 1998: 56).

Orwell's comment still raises some relevant points. *The Streetkids* is focused on a few subjects and it is their faces and words that are promoted as representative of an issue and given some sort of sense, while next week the same will happen to another marginalised group in New Zealand society. There is nothing to suggest structural causes as a possibility in the poverty of the streeties. The problem, as in Orwell's description, is in terms of individuals and narrative. The cause of the streeties poverty is their leaving their families and the solution appears to be in their hands as well. This is revealed in the final clips of *The Streetkids* where the chief protagonists of the documentary talk about their lives and plans for the future. All avow to quit living on the streets within the next ten years. Again, leaving the streets is a matter of choice, not social action and by performing these actions within the text, the need for the viewer to do anything but watch is eliminated.

Life on the Street

Like TV3's screening of *The Streetkids*, *Life on the Street* was shown within part of a regular documentary slot, TV One's *Documentary New Zealand* series at 8.35pm on 21 February 2005. It also shares a similar format, combining observational footage with voice over. *Life on the Street* is presented by Johnny, who is introduced as living homeless in Christchurch. This is shown through shots of police investigating his

railway side shack. Johnny talks directly to the camera describing his life and his views on homelessness. He then interviews other homeless people in Christchurch and Wellington. As well as conducting these interviews, Johnny also provides a voiceover commenting on the footage of these people, introducing them to the viewer and adding to the information given in the interview. While the show is primarily made up of interviews with other homeless, there are also clips of representatives and workers from charities, as well as one scene where Johnny performs Karaoke in a Christchurch bar. Aside from these brief scenes, Johnny's interviews dominate. The homeless Johnny speaks to are not easily fitted into existing stereotypes like the subjects of *The Streetkids*, instead they are young and old and while several have addictions not all do.

Narration

As noted above, *Life on the Street* follows the same format as *The Streetkids*, blending observational features with the expository technique of a voice over. Similarly, as part of the documentary strand described by Roscoe (2000), *Life on the Street* could also be read as performing a function of "mainstreaming the margins." It considers a marginalised group, excluded from the society generally but especially rare on the television screen and aims to provide information about them in a 40-minute current affairs show. It is also consistent with journalism's long running interest in bearing witness to the lives of the poor, a practise that requires them to be presented as marginalised while simultaneously making sense of them for a more comfortable audience. However, Johnny provides the most striking point of difference between *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street*. As a presenter interviewing fellow homeless, he offers as a departure from journalistic encounters with the poor as well as a reversal of

the primary definers model that structures much poverty news as well. He does not perform the usual role of journalist as well informed everyman/woman (Campbell and Reeves 1989). Johnny's authority derives from his experience as homeless. As in Devereux's (1998) study of Irish current affairs documentary *Are you Sitting Comfortably, Life in the Streets* is relatively unique in that the programme's subject actually guides the show. But *Life on the Street* goes one step further than Devereux's example in that Johnny is not a representative of the poor. He lacks credentials as a campaigner and has not been used as a spokesperson by news. Instead, he is shown to be currently homeless and although he says he spends time helping his fellow homeless he is not depicted as being affiliated with a charitable organisation. Unlike London, Orwell and Ehrenreich who went "undercover" to experience poverty, Johnny's circumstances are not a means to his journalism and he must return to them with the completion of the documentary. While this is an important distinction, it must not be overstated as Johnny's power is limited. He may narrate, but he does not direct the camera's gaze, nor edit the final programme. Narration is significant yet it is still just one component of the documentary's construction of homelessness in New Zealand.

Life on the Street, like *The Streetkids*, uses its subjects in an expository sense by generalising about New Zealand's homeless. While this was done by the narrator of *The Streetkids*, it is Johnny that makes claims about people beyond the text. Similarly, these are about the causes of homelessness in New Zealand, "Most of the street people I know have an addiction of some sort." Rather than rely on an expectation of the journalist's authority, Johnny's claim relates to his own experience. The most recurring of these claims is Johnny's view on addiction, which he repeats as

authoritative observation in the way allowed to a traditional expository narrator (Nichols 1991: 35). His explanation of addiction involves one of the recurring themes of poverty in New Zealand, the discourse of choice. While Johnny and other participants in *Life on the Street* frame their situation in opposition to a discourse of choice, he does use it in describing addiction. When interviewing Denise, Johnny asks her if she has an addiction. She tells him she is an alcoholic. He then rephrases his question as “you choose to be an alcoholic,” although later in this interview Denise explains that she has a breathing problem and agrees when Johnny asks if it is this ill health that has caused her drinking problem. He also implies that psychological problems and abuse can lead to addiction, something inferred in his own personal history. Nevertheless, Johnny uses choice in discussing addiction throughout the documentary. In regard to a Wellington alcoholic and street person he says,

You can take an alcoholic to water but you can't make him drink. So he's, so he's going to want to stop himself. Until such time as he does stop he'll live that way that they're living now. Cause they're actually safe, cause they've got the other people around them all the time and they all look after each other which is good.

He makes a similar comment about a friend with whom he is reunited in the film. Finding the man still drinking although off the streets, Johnny again says, “he's gotta want to stop himself.” While Johnny's discussing alcoholism through choice may go against a view of it as an illness and beyond control, it remains a powerful discourse in his words. This is because, in his terms, it is invested with his experience and the commonsense knowledge that he brings as presenter. Johnny can be seen as a representative of homelessness in a similar way to Campbell and Reeves' description

of the woman at the centre of an incident of news coverage of homelessness: “But what has made Joyce Brown the icon of homelessness for news and especially 60 Minutes is her ability to articulate a common sense position which makes her plight less threatening and which ultimately extols heartland individualism” (1989: 39). It is true of *Life in the Street* that poverty is contained this way and the documentary is consistent with *The Streetkids* in that it remains on the level of the individual. However, it still has much to offer on the discourse of poverty in New Zealand. Although limited in the way described by Campbell and Reeves, it cannot be dismissed, as uncommon themes are introduced to the discourse. As will be discussed within Johnny’s narration, choice and individualism are sometimes implied as oppositional to explanations of homelessness.

Defining and Constructing Poverty in *Life on the Street*

While it provides a break from the convention of the primary definers model of news, *Life on the Street* does make use of existing discourses of poverty in New Zealand. Again, its opening sequence can be read as anamnesis, bringing together the expectations of its topic for the viewer (Fiske and Hartley 1984: 168). Through this technique, *Life on the Street* is remarkably consistent with the title sequence of *The Streetkids*. It shows several images of the homeless. The first is of Johnny walking towards the camera along railway tracks. The images that follow include one of a young woman crossing a street while inhaling from a bag of solvents, a man with matted hair holding a beer in a shaking hand and the final image is of a man bedded down for the night under a tree. These shots are all set to blues music. This music is used throughout the documentary, linking scenes and providing a soundtrack when the subjects are not speaking. While Meinhof found that the music in the

documentary, *Breadline Britain* created a theme of the melancholia of poverty, *Life on the Street*'s blues has other connotations (1994:80). The blues of *Life on the Street* is guitar rather than brass giving it a rougher edge without the film noir connotations of *The Streetkids*' opening. Instead, it is consistent with the opening images of railroads and street people as a discourse of hobos and vagrants; the poverty of an earlier era. Street comments on the use of Depression era imagery in British news as a touchstone for true poverty against which modern examples can be judged (1994:47). Other writers show that this is a strong discourse (Richardson 1994, Hewett 1994). The opening of *Life on the Street* appears to be seeking this comparison, showing a New Zealand audience that there is indeed poverty in this country. While relative definitions may be the current measure, this imagery and its links to the past attempt to evaluate the poverty of the documentary as absolute.

One way that this absolute sense of poverty is pursued within the show is through a focus on the shelters that the homeless create. The camera investigates Johnny's shack and he explains that it used to be a livestock pen. In an interview with Denise, a homeless person from Christchurch, she tells him that she carries cardboard and blankets to stay warm when sleeping outside. Thomas, another member of Christchurch's homeless is shown putting down bedding under a tree. Shannon has constructed a tent like shelter and is filmed lying in it as it creaks with the breeze. The audience is invited to acknowledge the inadequacy of these methods of shelter in order to judge these people as truly poor. Also consistent with a discourse of absolute poverty as the dominant definition, is the repetition of survival as a factor in the lives of the documentary's subjects. After Johnny tells how his accommodation used to be a pen for pigs he adds, "but it's a matter of survival that's what it's all about aye, yeah

necessary survival.” Thomas explains his living homeless in these terms as well saying, “I’m just doing it to survive.” Unlike the documentary that provides the focus of Meinhof’s (1994) study but similar to *The Streetkids*, *Life on the Street* constructs its poverty through an absolute definition. While Meinhof’s subject used, appropriately, melancholic music as part of its theme of relative poverty and the depression that this invokes, *Life on the Street* uses blues for its connotations of the extreme poverty of a previous era, which informs its interest in absolute needs.

Broadening the Discourse

While *Life on the Street* often focuses on the essentials of life that make up an absolute definition of poverty, it also discusses issues that highlight aspects of a relative poverty discourse. It considers how poverty may affect a person aside from lack of food and shelter, especially in a country where poverty is not often discussed and homelessness is thought to be non-existent. While, this occurs once in *The Streetkids*, which includes a scene where a streetie talks about the way people perceive them, it is much more prevalent in *Life on the Street*. Thomas tells how the homeless incur stares and he describes his efforts to look tidy, “we try to keep ourselves clean so that people that do have places and that see us everyday think OK he’s got a place or he might not but he’s keeping himself clean.” In this instance he is talking about cleanliness, not as a matter of hygiene or health but as a way of avoiding a feeling of judgement. Thomas also adds a relative dimension to the subject of homes and shelter, saying “hey we’re normal people it’s just that we don’t have a house or a flat where we can go home to at night or go to sleep or have our friends come around.” Thomas’s statement includes the recognition that a house is not just the absolute requirement of shelter but also a means to participate in society.

This broadening of the discourse of poverty also occurs through an interest in the activities of the poor and in the appearance of Steve, a friend of Johnny's, who is shown to be off the streets and now living in a council flat. However, his interview shows him as still drinking methylated spirits and carrying heavy psychological baggage. Showing Steve as having a home reflects the programme's broader definition of poverty. Although the immediate need of a home has been solved, Steve still suffers from the same problems as other homeless. Like *The Streetkids*, the documentary also considers drug use in the form of glue sniffing, as well as mentioning prostitution, but unlike that programme, this is shown in terms of addiction rather than lifestyle. But aside from these "deviant" behaviours which fulfil a news interest (Ericson et al 1987), *Life on the Street* also looks at some of cultural activities of its subjects. The most prominent of these is a scene showing Johnny performing Karaoke. Recalling Fiske and Dawson's (1996) study on the homeless' use of media, it depicts Johnny singing the chorus of a country and western song that includes the words "the lonely, lonely streets that I call home." His voiceover explains, "Karaoke to me is a form of release from the stress that I have during the day and it gives me a chance to rest my mind." This scene is in contrast to *The Streetkids*' lack of interest in the cultural activities of its subjects, such as hip-hop, which are observed but not afforded the same focus as the programmes' key themes of community, drugs and crime. Similar moments in *Life on the Street* include Denise saying she likes art and sport, shots of Steve's drawing as well as Shannon's explanation of his Christianity. Shannon tells how he can relate to Jesus as someone who "didn't have an address, he lived out." The programme also concludes with Johnny singing. Like the documentary's depiction of the feelings of exclusion that the

homeless feel, these scenes add another side to the construction of poverty, one that broadens it beyond just deprivation, into other parts of life.

Comments on the relationship between the homeless and other New Zealanders occur frequently in the programme. One unnamed member of Wellington's street people explains, "It's more dangerous like Thursdays and Fridays cause all the business workers and all that, all the executives finish work and get pissed and can't handle it and come and try and beat up all the peasants (laughs). Get all their boss frustrations out aye." It is telling observation, showing both how vulnerable the homeless are, as well as their own awareness of the discourse which places them at the "bottom of the heap." It challenges the usual politics of othering, as it is the non-poor who are being discussed as different and problematic. While these references occur openly, dominant discourses about the poor also occur indirectly. Several of the statements made by Johnny and other people within the documentary can be read as being in reference to existing notions of poverty in New Zealand. At the beginning of *Life on the Street* Johnny introduces his living conditions saying, "this is my home, I don't want to be here I just don't have any where else to go." Johnny's comment may seem redundant as the camera lingers over the squalor of his accommodation. However, there is a presupposition in his statement; Johnny is answering criticisms that his lifestyle is one of choice. He is aware of the discourse that homelessness is not existent in New Zealand (He says this overtly at a later point in the programme) and that those who live homeless do so through choice. This discourse existed within the relationship between poverty and choice perpetuated by *The Streetkids*. Similar presuppositions include Thomas's already described point; the homeless are normal people that just lack houses. As well as recognising houses as more than simply

shelter, Thomas's statement is also working in opposition to a discourse of the homeless as having points of difference beyond living conditions. Thomas's statement and Johnny's need to explain necessity as the only reason for their lifestyle shows how people become subject to discourse, constituting themselves within its terms (Mills 2004: 63). Both Johnny and Thomas are speaking in terms of existing ideas of homelessness that they are aware of and feel they must address in reference to their own lives. However, the hegemony of the explanation of choice and the notion of the homeless as having personal failings is contested in their statements. Both men provide a powerful argument, offering alternative causes for their circumstances and undermining the explanations that seem to occur naturally in *The Streetkids*.

The Ethics of Filming the Poor

The practice of middle class journalists' adopting disguises in order to tell the experience of poverty is an exercise fraught with ethical dilemmas. In comparison, *Life on the Street* and to a lesser extent, *The Streetkids*, seem to provide a model of an alternative way to tell the stories of the poor. Avoiding traditional sources and letting the homeless talk for themselves, both shows seem to offer a new and useful journalistic approach. However, although hackneyed the phrase "no easy answers" bears considering in relation to an incident in the production of *Life on the Street*. Shortly after participating in the show, one of the men, identified only as Shannon, was murdered on a Christchurch street. This fact is acknowledged in the documentary. Johnny appears onscreen and says he has just come from Shannon's memorial and then explains what has happened concluding, "he'll be safe where he is anyway, that's the main thing." Although Shannon does seem to have provided consent, his appearance in the documentary was the subject of complaints from his family. These

complaints were made formal through the procedures of New Zealand's Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA), a regulatory body that rules on issues of ethics in television and radio.¹ The specifics of the complaint made by Shannon's stepfather were that the programme breached his family's privacy, that it did not show respect for their state of bereavement and that there was no public interest in depicting Shannon in that way (BSA 11 July 2005). In response to this TVNZ (2005 in BSA 2005) argued that they had Shannon's consent and defended the public interest of the footage. Among their defences, they claimed Shannon was enthusiastic about taking part, as his own appearance might prevent others from a similar lifestyle. They said that Shannon's part in the show had "[...]accomplish[ed] the objective of putting homeless people into the public consciousness and presenting them as caring people with human feelings like everyone else." The BSA ruled in favour of TVNZ's argument declining to uphold the complaint. This was unsatisfactory for Shannon's family who disagreed with TVNZ's response. Rather than a warning of the risks of life on the streets, they believed it showed "a young man being exploited by the filmmaker who had used another homeless man to win Shannon's confidence" (BSA 11 July 2005). In a later reiteration, they argued that Shannon lacked capacity for informed judgement. Nevertheless, the BSA still declined to uphold the complaint.

Despite the BSA's ultimate decision, the case highlights issues involved in the filming of some of societies most vulnerable. It is an ongoing issue in the ethics of news and documentary specifically. As Winston notes, there is little precedent for the argument that documentary may change a situation like homelessness (2000: 150). He cites the example of documentary pioneer John Grierson's *Housing Problems* (1935),

¹ See Tully and Elsaka for a discussion of the powers as well as weaknesses in the regulatory systems for New Zealand's media (Tully and Elsaka 2000).

“Housing problems and documentaries about housing problems are, like the poor, always with us. We always have the right to know about poor housing-and the right to do nothing with that knowledge. This in turn gives the film-maker the right to disturb and expose the poor” (Ibid.). Although *Life on the Street* may reverse the primary definers model, it does not hand over the camera. The words of its subjects are elicited by the filmmakers and then edited into a final product by them. While eschewing the usual officials and using the poor to speak may seem like an obvious option in providing an alternative discourse, it is not without its own ethical pitfalls. It raises the question of whether the intrusion into peoples’ lives is rewarded by more than just the advancement of the film makers’ career. Although the words are the subjects’ own they do not have complete control over how they are used. *Life on the Street* may add to the discourse of poverty in New Zealand but the expense of this achievement has to be continually evaluated when reporting on the lives of the poor.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis it has been noted that journalism about poverty fails to recognise structural causes of poverty. The same complaint is true of both documentaries analysed here. Yet while both have this failing, there are still some considerable differences in the discourse of the poor that can be found in the two programmes. Their similarities are just as noticeable. They share an interest in the lives of the homeless, a focus that can be traced back to the work of writers like Henry Mayhew and in doing so they look at the visually salient differences between the poor and the well-off. The result is a definition of poverty that is absolute; seeing poverty in terms of the lack of minimum physical needs. This may also point to a reluctance to

believe in relative definitions of poverty. A reluctance that has been detected in other news coverage of poverty throughout this thesis.

There is a difference in approach between the two documentaries. *The Streetkids* works more to tie into the dominant discourse of its subject. The genealogy of the term can be traced and in the process, several distinct tropes can be observed. Most of these are negative; products of the moral panic that surrounded the emergence of the label. Glue sniffing, gangs, graffiti and petty crime are some of the key features of the dominant discourse of “street kids” and not only are they unchallenged by the programme, they form its focus. The result is an example of Roscoe’s (2000) “mainstreaming of the margins.” *The Streetkids* does add to our understanding through a focus on the community that is created by the subjects. Yet it is still the “street kids” themselves who are constructed as choosing this deviant lifestyle and ultimately they can choose to leave it.

Life on the Street also draws on many features of the existing discourse of the homeless in New Zealand. As a helper in Christchurch’s night shelter says, “[people] see the night shelter and think it’s a lot of so called down and outs or druggies or you know.” While she addresses what she perceives to be a popular conception, this trope does feature in the documentary. The use of blues is consistent with a discourse of “down and outs.” The film’s opening credits invite the viewer to recall their prior knowledge of poverty: one of tramps, hobos or down and outs. The “druggies” of the woman’s statement, are also a recurring theme with Johnny describing addiction as the main cause of homelessness. But while these popular conceptions are displayed on screen, the documentary goes beyond them; most significantly in allowing the

homeless to be their own spokespeople. In doing so and moving away from constructing a group through labels like “street kids,” *Life on the Street* performs something similar to the semantic shift from vagrancy to homelessness (Campbell and Reeves 1989: 21). “Streetkids,” like vagrants, invokes the idea of those “who choose to wander and live on the margins of society” (Ibid.). *Life on the Street* simultaneously draws on such imagery, yet through the discourse of Johnny it seeks to provide an alternative. The subjects of *The Streetkids* appear as their own spokespeople, but their words are constructed in terms of the filmmakers’ device of an expository drive. A similar technique is used in *Life on Street* but it is the expository narrative of Johnny which contests much of the hegemonic discourse of poverty in New Zealand. *Life on the Street* uses existing discourse in its construction of the homeless as a group deprived in an absolute sense, comparable to the extremes of the past. However, it widens the discourse, showing a group of New Zealanders trying to make their way in a society, whilst aware of how they are perceived and living in a situation that is not simply a problem of food and shelter.

Conclusion

Overview

This thesis has found severe inadequacies in the news coverage of poverty in New Zealand. It did not seek to evaluate poverty coverage in terms of its accuracy, and does not argue that news reports the issue untruthfully. But, while the information in poverty news may be accurate, what is significant is the material that is excluded. This thesis contends that certain types of information and ways of knowing are privileged over others. These discourses support, much more than they contest, inequalities of resources, power and participation. Information which comes from those in dominant positions in society, such as politicians and large organisations, is sought over other types of knowledge. Experiential accounts of poverty in New Zealand or information provided by those who are considered poor are absent from most of the coverage that has been discussed. Even when such accounts do occur, they are still framed by dominant discourses which elide the extent to which poverty can be seen as a problem. The news looked at was also consistent with Devereux's (1998) findings, as the possibility of structural causes behind poverty was not raised. Instead, poverty was explained through problems of individual faults, policies or price rises. News appears to reproduce a reluctance to accept poverty in New Zealand and solutions rarely come into coverage. The concept of hegemony describes most of this coverage with news offering little to challenge the hegemony of dominant discourses of poverty. Arguments and discourses which might provide dissenting voices are either left out or sublimated in favour of dominant ways of viewing the issue. Discourse analysis was the method which revealed these findings. In each chapter, the language of news and the discourses that appeared were analysed to find the construction of poverty that occurred. This thesis found that through its reproduction

of hegemony, news fails to challenge the inequality of resources at the heart of the issue of poverty. Each chapter of this thesis shows a different aspect of news coverage and the way this process of hegemony occurred across a range of texts. Coverage of a 2005 Unicef report had at its focus the incidence of child poverty in New Zealand, yet this issue was sublimated through hegemonic power. The coverage involved spokespeople debating the validity of the report. Poverty was constructed as an abstract issue of statistics for which the best solution was future policy. Despite Unicef's findings their message, that New Zealand has a child poverty problem was frequently lost in these stories. Looking at news over an arbitrarily selected month in 2005 showed that without announcements like Unicef's, poverty is not news itself. Instead, the issue of poverty could be found alongside other concerns and again, the hegemony of discourses that minimised the problem of poverty was enacted. While international poverty was commented on, in New Zealand during this period it hardly appeared as an issue of importance on its own. While electioneering politicians drew attention to the problem of poverty, news framed this as political rhetoric and did not look into it any further. Again, stories relied on readings informed by assumptions that New Zealand's poverty was not an issue of much concern. Many of these assumptions about poverty that news reinforces were revealed through adopting van Dijk's (1988, 1995) methods of discourse analysis. The fourth chapter looked at two television documentaries, *The Street Kids* and *Life on the Streets*, as potential spaces for alternative discourses about poverty, but disappointingly found that the hegemony of dominant discourses were reproduced. These documentaries both appeared to offer a break from conventional news coverage in avoiding the usual sources of news, instead seeking the words, faces and perspectives of those living homeless in New Zealand. Despite this space for alternatives, in *The Streetkids* particularly, discourses

and stereotypes of the homeless that constructed their situation as one of “choice” were reinforced. Neither programme offered structural causes as explanations for homelessness and poverty. However, *Life on the Street* did attempt to broaden the debate about homelessness through the narration of a member of the homeless. *The Streetkids* also sought the voices of those living on the streets, but through techniques of editing, these words were structured around the “street kids” stereotype of the 1980s. This stereotype reinforces the hegemony of a construction of homelessness as one of choice, criminality and lifestyle. Although these programmes avoided institutional sources, they still relied on dominant discourses to structure their definition of poverty so it remained familiar and unthreatening to the audience. Although three different kinds of text were examined to provide a multifaceted representation of the reporting of poverty, the findings across all are similar. The extent to which poverty could be seen as problematic in New Zealand was severely contained. To offer explanations for this hegemony, concepts introduced through literature on the media will be discussed in relation to the findings in this thesis.

Events

News discourse, the way of understanding and talking about the social world that is used by news media, involves seeing news in terms of events. Chapter Two discussed this requirement of news, drawing on the work of several writers to illustrate this point (Gitlin 1980, Shoemaker and Reese 2001). This need to view the world in terms of events is problematic to poverty, which is more commonly seen as a social issue. The topic of poverty is seldom seen as an event in itself. The effect of this aspect of news discourse is seen in the lack of coverage of poverty. In a one month sample of news there was little mention of poverty in New Zealand on television news. A likely

reason for this was the lack of an event to bring it to attention. In this same period, mention of poverty in New Zealand was found in newspapers, but again, the event focus was evident in shaping this news; while poverty was mentioned it was rarely the subject of coverage itself. Instead issues of deprivation were, articulated alongside other events. Topics such as power price rises, crime and the speech acts of politicians, were some of the incidents that provided a vehicle for poverty to come into news. However, looking at this news using van Dijk's (1988, 1995) cognition based methods of discourse analysis revealed that these other events supplanted poverty in importance. The "news" in these stories was always the other issue, no matter the topic. The place of poverty was as a background to this more important problem; reinforcing the view of poverty as unproblematic in New Zealand. Several factors can be seen to create such a view; one obvious cause is the news value of immediacy which means the most recent incident is given prominence. But these values must rest on assumptions about the world. The background status that is given to poverty can be seen as both relying on and enforcing a dominant discourse of it as not problematic in New Zealand. Crime news, which was found to touch on the low socioeconomic status of many New Zealanders, was also reliant on an incident focus which avoided any discussion of causation or context. This construction of crime through incident lends itself to prejudicial explanation and understandings of the unemployed, in the absence of any discussion of causation. While this news showed the effect of the events focus on coverage where other poverty was an issue on the sidelines, the Unicef report was an example where the incidence of poverty was unavoidably at the centre of the news event. Yet the need to cover issues in events was clear in the way news stuck strictly to the report as topic, rather than the bigger issue of child poverty. While this may have been a rare opportunity to investigate the

problem of child poverty in New Zealand, news simply called for spokespeople to respond to the report. The use of language in the stories was also a part of this event construction. A metaphor of competition was invoked to describe the report's findings, comparing New Zealand's ranking with that of other nations. This notion of competition was problematic, limiting the ways in which poverty was discussed; reinforcing a construction of poverty as an abstract, statistical issue. This is a problem that was found throughout news coverage, where investigation into the issue of poverty and the effect it may have on people's lives is neglected in favour of another theme or frame. Spokespeople were only required to answer to the report as an event rather than the greater context that it represented. In several stories, Government spokesperson Steve Maharey dismissed the data of the report, while the context of it remained free from scrutiny, with the result that the greater issue and of child poverty which the report refers to was lost from view. Unicef's report was a chance for news to discuss such issues and challenge dominant discourse about poverty in New Zealand. Instead these discourses were reproduced and discussion was limited. This was an effect of both the event focus and the reliance on institutional authorities as those best qualified to talk about poverty in New Zealand.

Primary Definers

Hall et al's (1982) primary definers model of news content offers a useful framework to understand the power of dominant discourses to define poverty in New Zealand's news. This thesis acknowledged the criticisms made by Schlesinger and Tumber (1999) who qualify Hall et al's analysis of power. However, much of the coverage of poverty analysed in this study vindicates Hall et al's original model. The news coverage looked at frequently relies on sources of institutional authority for

information about poverty; this is a major part of the continued reproduction of dominant discourse. The traditional concept of the primary definer most successfully described political reporting during the election, where the words of campaigning politicians were the main feature of stories. Politicians of the left and the right referred to poverty in New Zealand, but news reproduced their words with little discussion, context or investigation. The reporting of these views also suggested they were more about winning elections than the issue of poverty. Again this is tied to the need to report only the initial incident, but it also suggests a reliance on these definers which eclipses any requirement to report poverty beyond their statements. The primary definers model also described the reporting of Unicef's statements, where news relied on Unicef and Government ministers for the first response. This had an effect on the discursive production of poverty in this news, as stories constructed poverty through the words and discourse of these organisations. As a result, poverty became an abstract issue, one of ratings and policy with no room for other accounts. While spokespeople for charities were sometimes drawn on, the voices of those with first hand knowledge who may provide experiential accounts were absent. Due to initial sources' ability to define the issue, these spokespeople also discussed the report in terms of policy and statistics. Government Minister, Steve Maharey was a primary definer of this event, able to dismiss the finding in some stories due to the age of the data used by Unicef, but without the need to provide alternative figures. Reporting of his view of poverty reinforces it as authoritative, while those who may claim the reality of child poverty through other types of authority, such as experiencing poverty, are not given this privilege. This had detrimental effects on the opportunity to discuss the issue of child poverty. News reproduced the hegemony of the discourses of the

dominant, due to a reliance on them as sources and spokespeople on the issue of poverty.

Dominant Discourses and Alternatives.

The discourse of poverty as “not a real problem in New Zealand” holds an explanatory power in understanding news coverage. While this thesis has found little to suggest that news invests in myths of New Zealand as egalitarian, it does show a reliance on another part of this same discourse; a reluctance to accept poverty in New Zealand. Considine (1989) showed that the belief that there is no “real poverty” in New Zealand” is a factor in the egalitarian myth. This informs much coverage, where poverty receives a status of lesser importance to other issues, suggesting that it is not a credible problem in New Zealand. In stories about petrol price rises and even a bus fare increase which would affect the poor, these events were given greater prominence over the poverty which made these issues a concern for some. This reluctance to accept New Zealand’s poverty as real is also seen in a reliance on an absolute definition of poverty. Absolute poverty, which is less common in New Zealand, receives a consensual status that is not given to relative definitions. While relative definitions of poverty do occur they are subject to justifications. In Unicef’s report, which discussed relative definitions of child poverty, these were defined through statistics and the debate stayed on an abstract level. This definition required explanation. However, “poverty” is used almost exclusively to refer to the absolute poverty of other countries or to the past without a need for justification. References to relative poverty tend to be accompanied by explanations of this definition, and often it remains in the words of a news source. News is obviously reluctant to fully endorse this definition, perhaps due to a general lack of acceptance of poverty in New

Zealand. However, this reluctance is not evident when the poverty discussed is absolute. In documentaries that looked at homelessness, absolute definitions of poverty were frequently drawn on in the construction of poverty that occurred, enforcing the absolute definition as the commonsense way of understanding poverty. As in Street's (1994) study, the controversy of defining poverty in New Zealand could be due to comparisons to the extremes of the developing world. In the coverage looked at there were no explicit links made between New Zealand's poverty and that of the developing world, but it is possible that such a comparison informed news. *The Streetkids* and *Life on the Street* are two sites where some of these dominant discourses of poverty in New Zealand appear. These programmes were chosen as they had the potential to disrupt dominant discourses of poverty. Both documentaries reported the words of the poor themselves, rather than the views of authorities and were not bound by a focus on events. However, dominant discourses often appeared as central to understanding poverty in these documentaries, limiting the representations available and containing the problem of poverty. One discourse, dominant across much coverage and found in these documentaries, is that of the poor as deviant. This also contains the problem of poverty; people are poor due to their individual faults. This is especially evident in crime news, where almost the only place the unemployed feature in news is crime pages. A belief in the deviancy of the poor often explains these stories, as there is little causation given for why the unemployed appear frequently as criminals in news. Welfare reporting also focuses on the deviant, looking at fraud and what is seen as government schemes "gone wrong." But this focus on deviance was most obvious in *The Streetkids*, which constructed a group of the homeless through their deviance as much as through their homelessness. Again this documentary relied on a dominant discourse of poverty as absolute, but within the

documentary a discourse of “street kids” as a group of deviant youth, who actively choose homelessness was central to an understanding of the programme’s subjects. The show drew on many of the connotations of the “street kids” label that came out of the 1980s and 1990s. Bevan (1982) provides a useful resource of news stories on “street kids” from this time, and the themes of crime, graffiti and glue sniffing are common in this coverage. All of these themes are reproduced in the documentary. This discourse of deviance and lifestyle was constructed through images, music and editing. This discourse limits the problem to the level of the individual, as it views the “street kids” as choosing to live homeless, thus placing the burden of change upon them as individuals. Another key aspect of *The Streetkids* was the way it racialised this group of homeless, depicting almost all of them as Maori. A similar racialisation of the poor was observed in other coverage where Maori and deprivation were linked, yet context and explanation are absent. As in crime news, this absence of causation lends itself to prejudiced explanations. Again this contains the problem of poverty as one of race rather than one that implicates the economic structure. Due to constraints of time this is only touched on this thesis, but there is enough evidence to suggest that this is a concerning aspect of poverty coverage and one that requires further research showing the extent to which poverty is racialised in New Zealand’s news media. *Life on the Streets*, another television documentary about the homeless, is similar to *The Streetkids* in reproducing both discourse about poverty as an absolute state and aspects of the discourse of the poor as deviant. However, it does show some significant differences from the other poverty coverage that has been considered. Its use of a homeless man narrator means that a different type of authority was drawn on and as a result different discourses of poverty appeared. This perspective broadened ways of understanding what poverty meant, and a number of the problems of social exclusion

were discussed. However, remedying existing news coverage of poverty is not as simple as copying *Life on the Streets*. The documentary still fails to challenge the hegemonic discourse of poverty as not requiring action or having any structural factors as a cause. An ethical dilemma rose out of the show which suggests that caution is needed when filming those in a vulnerable situation in society. But, more than any other text analysed in this thesis, it does offer some insight into widening the ways of understanding poverty in New Zealand.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis has found major inadequacies in the coverage of poverty in New Zealand. This is of serious concern; poverty is not an abstract issue, but one that equates to deprivation and injustice. It is essential, then, that news provides the public with the means to challenge and debate this injustice. Yet New Zealand's media fail at this task in their reliance on discourses of poverty that support the dominant social order. A range of news texts have been examined and most do little to challenge the complacency that many New Zealanders have about poverty in this country. The news that has been analysed, even that which directly concerned poverty, does not confront popular myths about there being no real poverty in New Zealand. Across the various methods of covering poverty that were examined, the extent to which it may be viewed as a problem is consistently contained. Incidents concerning poverty are constructed through dominant discourses that undermine a view of these events as evidence for social change. While the existence of poverty in New Zealand is alluded to, what this means in terms of peoples' experience and the extent to which this poverty requires action, is frequently excluded from coverage. I am not arguing for

the replacement of one dominant discourse of poverty with another, but recognition of the views currently marginalised in news.

The problem in poverty coverage is not simply a matter of a lack of attention. Although this is a factor that also needs addressing: television news which devotes 20 minutes to sports in each one hour broadcast failed to deliver on issues of deprivation, hardship and inequality when sampled for a month. However, there is some reporting which brings poverty in the news and journalists must be given credit for this. But when poverty is brought into news, the way it is handled does not do justice to its importance as a major social issue. In the reporting of these moments, the news media has reinforced the hegemonic discourses of poverty in New Zealand as unproblematic. News often relies on a reluctance to accept that this poverty is not “real” poverty. One explanation is that this reluctance to accept poverty in New Zealand has been internalised by newswriters. But it is also possible that they assume it is a belief held by the public, too controversial to confront. Neither are acceptable excuses as news must challenge orthodoxies at the expense of the audience’s comfort, especially when it involves breaking down processes of marginalisation.

The hegemony of dominant discourse can also be linked to other aspects of journalistic practice. The news focus on events is one explanation, for both the lack of coverage and the reporting of poverty as incidents, rather than as an issue. But while this may be journalistic practice and it is unlikely that news will stop reporting events in an event format in the near future, this approach can be modified to give adequate recognition to social issues like poverty. Although events bring poverty to the news, there is no reason why the issue of poverty must not be explored further in

conjunction with these incidents. Rather than call on spokespeople to respond to Unicef's report, journalists can choose to look into report's claims themselves, offering alternatives to the primary definers model. Similarly, politicians' references to poverty must be investigated beyond their words, otherwise their statements remain rhetoric for which they are not truly accountable. These events and statements are opportunities to discuss and investigate poverty. Furthermore, there is room to question the assumptions that go beyond events. If events are defined through their deviance from an assumed order, then journalists have a major power in where they fit poverty into this order; to view deprivation and inequality as unacceptable means that the incidence of poverty can be a subject of news itself without reliance on an external event. Journalists must also look at their own relationship to power structures, as the reliance on the discourses of those in places of institutional authority is a major cause for the hegemonic representation of poverty that occurs. Journalists have to play a bigger role in challenging the complacency that dominant discourses create about New Zealand society. *Life on the Street* provides an example of a different approach. It demonstrates the possibilities for poverty news that eschews the usual sources. Drawing on the discourse of those whose authority comes through experience can offer different and less familiar ways of viewing poverty. As in this documentary, different voices can provide discourses of poverty that are challenging and truly new, bringing to news, aspects of poverty that have traditionally been missing. While many of these factors have limited poverty news, they can, and should be worked through, to create news which facilitates greater awareness and debate. The problems in the coverage of poverty represent failings on the part of newswriters who have not done justice to the importance of the issue. However, this thesis also suggests that New Zealand's media researchers have also neglected poverty. As a

place of criticism, the field of media studies is responsible for challenging complacency in the reporting of social issues. Despite the importance of poverty, there is little research on its news coverage in New Zealand. This thesis suggests some of the problems in this coverage and areas where further work is needed to provide a fuller picture of the representation of poverty that occurs. Like news, scholars offer society a critical conscience and have the responsibility to challenge inequality. Poverty remains too important and too vital a problem to be neglected in either field. This study provides some conclusions, and shows that media representations of the marginalised must be continually challenged.

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