



News Coverage of Abortion in Relation to Race and Class in the United States in 2021

Lihan Miao, Hui Zhang, Li Tian & Yuming Wang

To cite this article: Lihan Miao, Hui Zhang, Li Tian & Yuming Wang (2022) News Coverage of Abortion in Relation to Race and Class in the United States in 2021, The American Journal of Bioethics, 22:8, 88-90, DOI: [10.1080/15265161.2022.2089279](https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2022.2089279)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15265161.2022.2089279>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC



Published online: 02 Aug 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2865



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

News Coverage of Abortion in Relation to Race and Class in the United States in 2021



Lihan Miao^{a,b}, Hui Zhang^a , Li Tian^c, and Yuming Wang^a 

^aHenan Provincial People's Hospital, People's Hospital of Zhengzhou University, People's Hospital of Henan University; ^bUniversity of Durham; ^cThe First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University

Mass media play a significant role in shaping public opinion. News coverage of abortion reflects narratives about reproductive health, ethics, and women, and may potentially reinforce negative social stereotypes and stigma surrounding abortion (Feltham-King and Macleod 2015). The target article (Watson 2022) argues that low-income Black and Hispanic women are overrepresented in discussions about abortion, while non-Hispanic white women are underrepresented, which may lead to the racialization of poverty in inappropriate ways. To explore the representation of abortion in news coverage, this commentary employs a qualitative, discourse analysis of news stories published by CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2021. Discourse analysis is an effective method to reveal macrolevel social values through analyzing microlevel texts (Richardson 2007; van Dijk 1987). This commentary adopts van Dijk's critical discourse analysis as a research method for textual analysis and applies intersectionality theory to explain the results. These online news platforms were selected for analysis because they are leading English-language news websites in terms of readership, circulation, and advertising revenues. The aim of this commentary is to explore how news outlets represent Black and Hispanic women who have abortions versus non-Hispanic white women who have abortions in terms of proportion of representation, language strategies, and social ideology.

"Abortion woman" and "abortion women" were the keywords used to search the eight news platforms. Related results were divided into three categories: racial minorities as main characters, white women as main characters, and women whose race was not mentioned. Among 79 news stories collected from the designated websites and determined the percentage of the content discussing abortion related to Black and Hispanic women (31%), non-Hispanic white women (27%), and articles which did not specifically mention race (42%).

After using NVivo 12 to code the content of relevant news stories, we found three themes among the representations of women who were racial minorities and had abortions. (1) A connection between race and poverty: In these news stories, "the poor" and "people of color" often appear together, showing a tendency to relate racial minorities to the poor population. For example, one article in the *New York Times* states, that "Suppress the fertility of the poor and people of color do nothing to bring about structural change" (Bokat-Lindell 2021). According to van Dijk's (Richardson 2007; van Dijk 1987) method of discourse analysis, the language device "presupposition" was employed here, prompting readers to accept the assumption that poverty and racial minorities are intrinsically linked, which may lead to increased racialization of poverty and unconsciously fuel white economic advantage and minority economic disadvantage (Watson 2022). (2) More stigmatized details of abortion: When depicting personal abortion experiences of

CONTACT Yuming Wang  henanyuming@sina.com  Henan Provincial People's Hospital, People's Hospital of Zhengzhou University, People's Hospital of Henan University, Zhengzhou, 450003, China.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Black women, details such as how the woman was treated cruelly were more likely to be represented than in a portrayal of their white counterparts. For example, an article published by CNN detailed the process of a woman being raped and having an abortion, and depicted the woman's range of emotions, citing panic, being discriminated against, and shame (Stracqualursi 2021). Van Dijk (Richardson 2007; van Dijk 1987) refers to this as "overcompleteness," a device defined as "the strategic use of irrelevance." Although portrayals using overcompleteness can easily inspire compassion, they may reinforce a negative perception of these women obtaining abortions. (3) A history of systematic racism toward Black women: When journalists represented Black women's experiences with abortion, the history of racism toward Black women was often supported with data or other facts that emphasized the higher rate of abortion among Black women than white women (Stolberg 2021). The language device employed here is "generalization" (Richardson 2007; van Dijk 1987). While this way of writing expresses a reflective attitude toward history, it can imply that the fate of racial minorities is difficult to change, which may desensitize viewers to racism.

Regarding the news representation of non-Hispanic white women who have abortions, three themes were observed. (1) Less emphasis on race: Being young age, unmarried, and unable to afford the cost of raising children were the most frequently mentioned factors leading white women to obtain an abortion, just as with their Black and Hispanic counterparts. However, the representation of non-Hispanic white women differs because their race was not emphasized. Their race is naturally accepted as part of "us." On the contrary, Black and Hispanic women, whose race was particularly mentioned, are regarded as "other." (2) Less emphasis on class: Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation strategies were observed in the representation of class. As noted, youth, accidental pregnancy, and lack of material security led white women to obtain an abortion. Although their situation implied signs of poverty, their lower social class and life in poverty were not magnified. Conversely, "the poor" are racially labeled if Black and Hispanic women who have abortions are represented. (3) More powerful opposition: In the news coverage opposing the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the social celebrities acting as leading voices were often white women, and the cover images of these stories usually depicted protest groups comprised of white women (Weber and Stengle 2021). When news platforms provide space for

the voices of minority women, those women often give more emphasis to women of their own marginalization rather than offering a statements about women as a whole (Shabad 2021). Moreover, images of Black and Hispanic women were more likely to be depicted as victims of social discrimination and illegal abortions, rather than as strong, independent women (Jones 2021).

Gender, race, and class are inextricably intertwined in these news stories, reflecting relevant social norms, abortion-related ideologies, and negative stereotypes (Price 2011). In 2014, 62% of women who had abortions were women of color, while 75% were poor or low-income (Jones and Jerman 2017; Watson 2022). Therefore, we cannot neglect the fact that low-income women of color need increased access to abortion care. However, abortion is assumed to be associated with poverty, racial minorities, and irresponsible lifestyles (McClelland, Dutcher, and Crawford 2020; Stone and Shannon 2022). We agree with Watson's (2022) thesis that the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic women in discussions about abortion and equating poverty with women of color have the potential to foster false racist narratives that align women of color with sexual promiscuity and "irresponsible" procreation; further, this may lead to stigma and negative social stereotypes (Cockrill and Nack 2013).

Although we can observe social stereotypes represented in news coverage, examining the implicit racial discrimination against Black and Hispanic women in news reports has long been a topic of concern for researchers; further, racism embedded in reports is a serious issue increasingly gaining the media's attention (Pantti et al. 2019). While women of color have an increased representation in abortion news coverage compared to white women, we also see news coverage working to correct the history of racism and white privilege. For example, there are more Black women in media coverage portrayed as positive protesters than ever before. Such self-reflection and positive representation are of significant importance for more objective and impartial media reporting.

Women of color have complex identities related to the social reality of abortion. Their identity is situated somewhere between "woman" and "race," and their struggle for individual rights is integrated into their struggle against sexism and negative stereotypes. Thus, they have a strong need to be seen and empowered. In media representation, racial minorities can be observed expressing their experiences of abortion, their attempts to raise awareness, their demand that society legislate their justice, and their struggle to

balance their social identity and racial identity in a society dominated by white and male economic advantages. The media are empowering them by giving them more strategic support, which is beneficial in expanding viewers' awareness of their multiple identities and complex subjectivity.

In sum, news platforms provide a space for discourse in the postcolonial era. Abortion, a topic that reflects the intersection of gender, race, and class, holds significance to examine the representation of Black, Hispanic, and white women in public opinion in postmodern society. Negative stereotypes and discrimination surrounding abortion and race have long existed. Media representation can reflect social inequality, and concurrently, the representation of inequality in the media can be emphasized through dissemination, thus impacting the awareness of their viewers. We analyzed several mainstream media platforms for the span of 1 year. Further research requires a diversity of platforms and a longer time period to include more news coverage. In this commentary, through discourse analysis of the media's representation of abortion, we hope to inspire and promote further discussion and dialogue concerning social justice in abortion ethics.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

FUNDING

This work was supported by the National Key R&D Program of China [Grant No. 2018YFC0114500]; and Medical Science and Technology Program of Henan Province [Grant No. LHGJ20200025].

ORCID

Hui Zhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8875-5392>

Yuming Wang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0497-055X>

REFERENCES

- Bokat-Lindell, S. 2021. What Would a Post-Roe America Look Like? Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/opinion/supreme-court-abortion-ro.html?searchResultPosition=1>
- Cockrill, K., and A. Nack. 2013. "I'm not that type of person": Managing the stigma of having an abortion. *Deviant Behavior* 34 (12):973–90. doi:10.1080/01639625.2013.800423.
- Feltham-King, T., and C. Macleod. 2015. Gender, abortion and substantive representation in the South African newsprint media. *Women's Studies International Forum* 51:10–8. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2015.04.001.
- Jones, E. 2021. DC police officers say they were told to have abortions to keep job. Accessed May 5, 2022. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/dc-police-officers-abortion-ultimatum>
- Jones, R. K., and J. Jerman. 2017. Population group abortion rates and lifetime incidence of abortion: United States, 2008–2014. *American Journal of Public Health* 107 (12):1904–9. doi:10.2105/ajph.2017.304042.
- McClelland, S. I., H. Dutcher, and B. Crawford. 2020. In the fabric of research: Racial and gender stereotypes in survey items assessing attitudes about abortion. *Journal of Social Issues* 76 (2):239–69. doi:10.1111/josi.12367.
- Pantti, M., M. Nelimarkka, K. Nikunen, and G. Titley. 2019. The meanings of racism: Public discourses about racism in Finnish news media and online discussion forums. *European Journal of Communication* 34 (5):503–19. doi:10.1177/0267323119874253.
- Price, K. 2011. It's not just about abortion: incorporating intersectionality in research about women of color and reproduction. *Women's Health Issues* 21 (3 Suppl): S55–S7. doi:10.1016/j.whi.2011.02.003.
- Richardson, J. E. 2007. *Analysing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shabad, R. 2021. House lawmakers recount traumatic personal stories at hearing on anti-abortion laws. Accessed May 6, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/house-lawmakers-recount-traumatic-stories-rape-back-alley-abortion-hearing-n1280475>
- Stolberg, S. G. 2021. A congresswomen's story: Raped at 17, 'I chose to have an abortion'. Accessed May 6, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/us/politics/cori-bush-abortion.html?searchResultPosition=1>
- Stone, A., and T. W. Shannon. 2022. Race-obsessed leftists don't want to talk about the abortion rate of Black babies. Accessed May 5, 2022. <https://thefederalist.com/2022/02/25/race-obsessed-leftists-dont-want-to-talk-about-the-abortion-rate-of-black-babies/>
- Stracqualursi, V. 2021. Cori Bush shares personal story of sexual assault as a teenager and decision to have an abortion. Accessed May 4, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/30/politics/cori-bush-sexual-assault-abortion/index.html>
- van Dijk, T. A. 1987. *News analysis: Case studies of international and national news in the press*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.
- Watson, K. 2022. The Ethics of Access: Reframing the Need for Abortion Care as a Health Disparity. *The American Journal of Bioethics* 22 (8):22–30. doi:10.1080/15265161.2022.2075976.
- Weber, P., and J. Stengle. 2021. Abortions resume in some Texas clinics after federal judge's ruling. Accessed May 10, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abortions-resume-texas-clinics-judge-halts-law/?intcid=CNM-00-10abd1h>