

## Book Reviews

Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). 210 pages. ISBN: 9780814736708. Paperback \$26.00.

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*The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* by Ange-Marie Hancock explores the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, the bipartisan welfare reform legislation more colloquially known as “the end of welfare as we know it.” The book focuses on elite portrayals of welfare recipients and how welfare recipients were characterized in the public discourse surrounding PRWORA. Hancock posits that elites hold misperceptions about welfare recipients—namely, that welfare recipients are lazy (unwilling to work) and hyper-fertile (purposely having more children to receive more benefits)—and that these misperceptions drive a public identity of welfare recipients as the prototypical “welfare queens.”

The book is part historical analysis, tracing the public identity of the “welfare queen” from its roots in slavery to the present. The book is also part content analysis, qualitatively and quantitatively examining the media discourse and congressional debate leading up to PRWORA’s passage. It is here that Hancock shows the reader two revealing phenomena: first, how welfare recipients were consistently portrayed by elites as single African American females who were young and poor, and second, how children were often the focus of welfare reform at the expense of their parents.

Though the title includes the word “disgust” and the book uses the phrase “the politics of disgust” multiple times, there is no measurement of disgust specifically in the book, nor are any observational or experimental data incorporated by which disgust is measured. Rather,

disgust is used as a descriptive word to explain the attitudes of policymakers and the mass public about welfare recipients. The book neither makes nor tests an explicit hypothesis about the use of disgust as an emotion to motivate opinion. In that respect, the book differs from more traditional studies of disgust in the social-psychological framework—disgust is not measured here as a moderator/mediator or even as an independent or dependent variable. The book is much less a study of emotion appraisal and cognition than it is descriptive and historical.

How did the underlying disgust for welfare recipients help make the framing of welfare recipients as “welfare queens” politically effective? Disgust is an important psychological mechanism influencing negative attitudes about the homeless and other groups (Clifford & Piston, 2017). Portraying welfare recipients as exhibiting similar attributes as the homeless—unwilling to help themselves, undeserving of assistance—likely tapped into those salient attitudes. Likening welfare recipients to another prominent disgust object such as the homeless (purposefully or not) made the frame more pervasive, as many people think about both groups in the same vein. Furthermore, Republicans held a legislative majority when PRWORA was passed, which necessitated making the case against the “welfare queen” to their (white) voters in particular. Research suggests that conservatives tend to be more sensitive to disgust than liberals (i.e., their disgust can be cued more easily), meaning that it may not have been all that difficult to make this case (Smith et al., 2011; Terrizzi et al., 2010).

Hancock’s main argument is that perceptions shape the narrative; the narrative shapes the public debate; and the public debate shapes the policy outcomes. If perceptions are incorrect, misguided and harmful policies result. In the case of welfare reform, perceptions of welfare recipients as “welfare queens” became the prevailing narrative, which limited the policy options available to policymakers. PRWORA’s focus was on so-called workfare provisions, which tightened welfare payments in exchange for work, because it was a commonly held belief that welfare recipients eschewed gainful employment. PRWORA’s focus was *not* on expanding access to quality education—crucial to pulling oneself off

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welfare—because the narrative did not allow it breathing room in the national conversation.

The public debate also successfully shut welfare recipients themselves out of the policy process. Almost nowhere in the congressional record, as Hancock demonstrates, is the average welfare recipient portrayed positively. Instead, a pervasive caricature persists of the “welfare queen,” a young black woman who is unworthy and undeserving of public provision. Overall, PRWORA was harmful to the same welfare recipients it was purported to help, who were ignored when PRWORA was being crafted in Congress. Elites did not give agency to welfare recipients, and then these recipients did not have a say in the policies that (negatively) affected them.

Readers may be quick to think that the public identity of welfare recipients as “welfare queens” is due to racism and racial resentment. If racism and racial resentment alone explained PRWORA’s passage, supporters of welfare reform would have been almost exclusively white and opponents almost exclusively people of color. But they were not. Hancock shows that racism and race alone cannot explain the passage of welfare reform in 1996. To demonstrate this point, she provides evidence in two forms. First, she notes that African American members of Congress from both parties voted in favor of the legislation. Second, she includes block quotes of floor speeches and public testimony made by African American members of Congress cueing the same public identity of the “welfare queen” that white members did. The word “disgust” was not spoken, but it did not need to be—it was apparent. Hancock concludes that the reality is more nuanced than race alone in explaining the public discourse around welfare; race interacts with class and gender.

Perhaps Hancock’s greatest contribution is to direct attention to the idea of intersectionality in studying welfare: that race, class, and gender must be studied in unison, as none acts independently on its own. Doing so seems like a reasonable next step, as scholars are mindful that not all marginalized are marginalized equally. A gay person who also happens to be a black woman, for instance, is likely more marginalized than a gay person who happens to be a white man. Hancock takes this logic and applies it to her theory of how policymakers and the media frame welfare recipients in America.

Hancock effectively conveys how the public identity of the “welfare queen” shaped the debate surrounding welfare reform in 1995–1996, but she leaves open whether (and how much) it influenced the policy

outcome. The book heavily implies that the debate did influence both the provisions within and messaging surrounding PRWORA—this is the logical extrapolation of Hancock’s argument—but this remains essentially an untested hypothesis. The book includes no direct test for whether the now-shifted public discourse shifted the provisions and messaging surrounding PRWORA. Stated differently, Hancock argues that when elites frame a policy in a particular way, that limits the actions to be taken on that policy because the Overton window shifts. The book includes ample evidence to support this claim. The content analyses of major newspapers and the *Congressional Record* should convince most readers that the public identity of the “welfare queen” shaped public discourse. Whether this discourse moved public opinion and directly affected PRWORA remains an open question. The presumption is yes, of course it did, but a black box remains between the primary sources included in the book and the particular policy outcome (in this case, PRWORA). Testing disgust as the mechanism remains in this black box, too.

Throughout the book, a careful reader may be tempted to ask, Are political culture and public identity another name for framing? Hancock appears to answer no, though she does not tackle the question directly. Whereas research around framing effects implies a frame is temporary, political culture and public identity appear to be more pervasive in the public consciousness and essentially more permanent. Consider Nelson et al.’s (1997) study of the framing of a local KKK rally. The framing effects are temporary—a story one night on the local news. They would become part of political culture and public identity, at least in Hancock’s eyes, when they become deeply ingrained in the public narrative, the way portrayals of welfare recipients as lazy African American females are. In the framing context, elites frame the narrative around welfare recipients, conditioned on race, class, and gender.

By the same token, careful readers may notice the repeated use of the term “social construction.” Social construction, as it is used in the book, describes how elites and others characterize welfare recipients; in this sense, social construction appears similar to framing. If the crucial aspect for both social construction and framing is that they create new reference points for people when an item is cued, they must be similar. Perhaps foreshadowing this question, Hancock notes that “the lack of conceptual clarity of key constructs such as ‘social construction of target populations’” (p. 5). The book

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may benefit from the inclusion of relevant research on framing effects and a discussion of how framing differs from political culture, public identity, and social construction, respectively.

In closing, this book is recommended reading for anyone who studies marginalized groups, along with their friends and allies, as well as students of public policy. Further, political theorists should find a home in the book's focus on what the politics of disgust and the public identity of the "welfare queen" means for democratic theory and fair representation. Readers should expect a study of disgust broadly speaking, in a descriptive sense, rather than a cognitive framework (testing disgust as a mechanism; using an experimental approach). Finally, those who study race, gender, or socioeconomic status should take an interest in the book because of the interplay of the three, recognizing that none acts independently of each other within the political realm. Intersectionality is a new and exciting avenue of study in political science, and *The Politics of Disgust*

explores the debate around welfare reform in 1995–1996, contributing substantially to this literature stream.

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