

Mind your language – avoiding stereotypes

Over the years reporting has become much more sensitive in issues such as race and disability. But with poverty, myths and stereotypes persist. This paper gives guidance on avoiding the pitfalls.

Introduction

In many areas of society and activity – for instance race and disability – there is now much greater understanding and subsequently less knee-jerk and inaccurate reporting of the issues and facts. With poverty there is still a tendency to reach for stereotypes. Objective journalists will always challenge these and report as they find.

When you do find a family or person in poverty who clearly confounds the stereotypes, it is important not to hold them up as exceptions to the rule – they may be the norm, and it is the stereotypes that are wrong.

While there will be a few people who are responsible for their poverty, no one chooses to be poor, and are there though no fault of their own. The list looks at the most common myths and stereotypes and advises on how to avoid them. There is a risk of being over-sensitive, but it is clearly better to avoid offence if possible.

Stereotypes and myths – what to avoid

Poverty-stricken, impoverished

At seminars held during the research for Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research into reporting poverty, the view of organisations representing people in poverty and participants who were experiencing poverty was that these were stigmatising.

'The poor'

People who are poor are not a generic group (just as disabled people are not) and thus this should be avoided. 'Neutral' phrases such as 'people in poverty' or 'poor people' are better.

Lazy

This is often linked to unemployment but being unemployed and being lazy are not the same. All many people want to do is work, even for low wages, sometimes for self-esteem, or perhaps to avoid the stigma attached to unemployment. Some who are long-term unemployed may not make much effort any more but this does not mean they are necessarily lazy.

Scroungers, spongers, dossers and feckless

These are all terms considered stigmatising. They are certainly derogatory and it is difficult to see any examples where they would be justified, except in quotes.

Handouts, Benefits culture

'Handouts' is often used derogatively and often regarded as offensive. Many people in receipt of benefits have contributed through national insurance when they have been working. Insurance is the relevant word here: no-one would regard a payout for a car repair as a handout. 'People receiving benefits' or 'in receipt of benefits' are more neutral choices here.

Blame; deserving and undeserving poor

People in poverty are often blamed for their own situation, yet in the vast majority cases it is not their fault. Unemployment, for instance, is a major factor, yet individuals should clearly not be held responsible when factories close as a result of economic conditions. Similarly distinctions between deserving and undeserving are normally unhelpful or even wrong: 'hoodies' and long-term unemployed people are no less deserving than older people or middle Englanders fallen on hard terms.

Poor people are bad at budgeting

Frequently, reports suggest that families in poverty are bad at budgeting: yet the evidence suggests the opposite is true – they have to be particularly good at budgeting simply to survive.

Sink estates

Place someone in a sink estate and you are likely to be reinforcing a stereotype. Many people find they are discriminated against for employment or loans simply because of where they live. It is not a journalist's job to help perpetuate accepted views.