

Tackling stereotypes and prejudice

The common characteristic of all negative stereotypes of people experiencing poverty is that they are accused of being a drain on society – on the ‘hard-working majority’, who they appear satisfied to take advantage of. There is a resonance of that in the over-used phrase in currency among politicians of ‘hard-working families’ – and usually repeated without question in the media. The implication is that those who don’t work, for whatever reason, are less deserving and that those who do have few problems. Neither is true.

The creation of positive and negative stereotypes of poverty stems from the old but subjective categorisation of ‘the deserving and undeserving poor’. If it were true, it would follow that there must be people who choose to be in poverty. While it is true that some people do not take up paid work and live on benefits instead, that is for a whole host of reasons, such as lack of confidence, the nature and pay of the jobs, the reliability of benefits versus paid work, lack of available childcare, travelling difficulties and so on.

When the media is criticised, it is often for creating or reinforcing negative stereotypes and labelling people in poverty as ‘scroungers’, ‘feckless’ or ‘lazy’. Though this may be a view held among a fair proportion of the public, particularly concerning people claiming benefits, that does not make it acceptable. Journalists can play a valuable role in challenging the groundswell of belief that people are in poverty because of their own behaviour and inadequacies and could get out of it if they pulled themselves together.

The media can tackle these prejudices as it has helped to tackle other forms of discrimination, such as racism. Journalists themselves need to be aware of negative stereotypes when dealing with stories that involve ‘unpopular’ groups, such as the children of gypsies or refugee families.

It is easy to be dismissive about some of the problems faced by people experiencing poverty in the UK today, yet the skills needed to balance a budget on an inadequate income – when there are no spare resources to cope with unexpected emergencies, such as household repairs, particularly without the benefits of credit cards or a bank account – are rarely considered. Frequently, reports suggest that families in poverty are bad at budgeting. The evidence suggests the opposite is true – they have to be particularly good at budgeting simply to survive.