Born with a plastic spoon in the mouth: Content analysis of poverty in *South Park*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The animated series, *South Park*, is the third longest running cartoon on air with 19 seasons, as well as one of the most watched (Eastman 2013). Set in a fictional Colorado town, the show follows the adventures of four fourth grade boys: Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, and Kenny McCormick. The characters are infamous for using dark humor and crude language to satirize a wide range of subjects. The series has the unique ability to intelligently engage in current events because each episode is created within the week of its airing date. This medium was optimal for further analysis because the show actively challenges ideas and thought processes by utilizing identifiable characters.

The focus of my study is specifically how poverty is portrayed in *South Park.* While there are several studies conducted on other aspects of the satirical cartoon, data is lacking in regards to the poor. My research will focus primarily on the McCormick family, as they are consistently described as one of the poorest families in *South Park*. Stuart McCormick and his wife are frequently involved in domestic disputes elicited from alcohol consumption and drug use. Their son, Kenny, is regularly involved in deviant behaviors that often end in his death. His parent's lack of acknowledgement may be a contributing factor to his frequent demise.

The following research will address how *South Park* portrays poverty, with an emphasis on the McCormick family. The subsequent sections include a literature review, which will examine current literary works related to poverty, methodologies, analysis, and a conclusion of findings.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

As the use of the media and television grow in popularity, so do issues surrounding how certain populations are portrayed. Media presentations can greatly influence the public's perception of a population. Hannah and Cafferty's research revealed that poverty is often depicted in the media as predominantly African American and in urban settings (Hannah and Cafferty 2006). There are several studies on how poverty is portrayed in news coverage, but little on how satirical animation portrays poverty. Television shows can reflect and impact cultural attitudes and beliefs, but also reinforce negative stereotypes (Stewart and Clark 2011). The series, *South Park*, is one of the most popular animated shows in America and one of the longest running series on air with 19 seasons (Eastman 2013). The following section covers the current studies on how television influences popular misconceptions about poverty. The review of this literature will support my question of research of how poverty is portrayed in *South Park.*

Recent research on how television influences people's attitudes focuses mainly on how the topic is framed (Hannah and Cafferty 2006). Framing is a way in which a context or idea is presented in a manner that seeks to influence how that context or issue is evaluated or seen. Hannah and Cafferty's research looks at how television news may influence inaction toward the poor through attribute and responsibility framing (2006). Media images of the poor are predominantly working-age, African Americans living in the city (Hannah and Cafferty 2006). Presenting the poor in this manner is called *attribute* framing—where the focus is on the characteristics that make up one person among the population. Unfortunately, these images often invoke less sympathy from the public, while failing to consider the prevalence of children, disabled, elderly, and Caucasians (Hannah and Cafferty 2006). A second type of framing

referenced often in these studies is *responsibility* framing. This is concerned with how the description of the events influences who is deemed responsible.

Hannah and Cafferty's research duplicated that of Iyengar's study of how poverty is framed in the media. Mass media broadcasts are powerful vehicles for political framing, according to Iyengar (1990). Iyengar notes that the majority of Americans form their political beliefs through news reports, which is explicitly presented in selected frames to influence public opinion (1990). Iyengar describes two frames that the news media uses to portray images of poverty to viewers: thematic frame and episodic frame. Components of thematic framing include information concerning general trends about a population that are abstract and impersonal (Iyengar 1990). The episodic framing describes poverty in a more individualistic way with details about a person's unique experience. Iyengar's studies found that people's beliefs on whom is responsible for the poor is ingrained in the way people think about responsibility (Iyengar 1990). In Iyengar's initial experimental study, he found that responsibility for poverty was greatly affected by media framing (1990). This experiment was repeated by Hannah and Cafferty with sound results. When poverty was portrayed in thematic terms, people considered societal factors as causation (i.e., government programs, the economy, etc.).

Conversely, individuals were more likely to hold those in poverty responsible if the media coverage used personal accounts (episodic frame). When poverty is described as a collective outcome, it is received much differently than when explained in the context of a specific poor person. When the causes of poverty are viewed as individually brought about, individuals are less likely to be proactive in helping the poor. These studies conclude that attribute framing of poverty negatively influences public perceptions of the poor, but also reinforces racial biases.

Liz Jackson argues in her article that media which invokes emotional stimuli "can produce a moral demand for action" (2014). Emotions and compassion cannot be simply created in a person, rather they are ever adjusting within their cultural and social spaces. The common misconception of poverty has been elicited by attribute framing (Hannah and Cafferty 2016), creating a "blame the victim" situation. The way in which poverty is framed is further marginalizing minority groups when it places responsibility solely on the victims. Hannah and Cafferty's research results maintain that there's less positive emotional responses when individual causal attributes were associated with those in poverty (2006). When they manipulated the casual attributions in their experiment, they found that measures of helping were significantly reduced (Hannah and Cafferty 2006). In other words, when they portrayed victims of poverty from a larger perspective, rather than stereotypical depictions, emotional responses were exhibited and helping behavior demonstrated (Hannah and Cafferty 2006).

While studies on *South Park's* depiction of poverty are limited, a series of articles discusses *South Park's* portrayal of body image and gender roles. Victoria Nagy conducted a content analysis of how motherhood, specifically, was depicted in *South Park (*2010). The study suggests that while the mothers in the comedy may have some stereotypical attributes, they are far from the typical middle-class homemaker that is commonly used (Nagy 2010). Nagy maintains that the female characters challenge heteronormative roles and myths. Research by Joe Thorogood illustrates how body image is portrayed in the series (2016). This study analyzed vulgar descriptions of bodily humor throughout *South Park (*Thorogood 2016). Thorogood found that *South Park* utilizes degradation techniques and vulgarity in order to keep an ambiguous perspective (2016). This technique "dissolves the distinctions between high and low culture," according to the findings (Thorogood 2016).

A reoccurring theme found across the studies is the desire for ambiguity while eliciting critical thinking about social issues. While these studies focus on how common gender roles or body image are portrayed, the focus of my research is how poverty is depicted in *South Park*. The previous studies, while equal in importance, lack recognition of other marginalized groups. The following research will further explore how poverty is portrayed in *South Park* and what are the reoccurring themes.

**DATA AND METHODS**

This study utilizes unobtrusive method to analyze how poverty is depicted in *South Park*. *South Park* has been conveying critiques of social reality through satire and irony since August of 1997 (Eastman, 2013). The television show has the ability to create story lines that are up to date on current events because of their simple animation model. This enables them to address a scope of political and social events while they are fresh on viewer's minds. For these reasons, my study focuses on how poverty is depicted in *South Park*.

I conducted a content analysis on eight *South Park* episodes that were accessible to me via Hulu. The method of content analysis was used because the data is non-interactive and readily available. For this study, the episodes chosen primarily focus on the family of Kenny McCormick, as he is regarded as "the poor kid." Because the focus of my research is depictions of poverty, my samples were obtained by first deciphering which episodes include Kenny and his family. Of the 247 episodes, I chose fifteen to begin my analysis. Upon watching the episodes, I narrowed my sample to eight. My interest in depictions of poverty in *South Park* made content analysis the most suitable methodology for my research project. The episodes in my sample

include: "Cartman joins NAMBLA," "Fat Camp," "W.T.F.," "City Part of Town," "Poor and Stupid," "The Poor Kid," "Kenny Dies," and "Major Boobage."

In order to optimize my data analysis, printed transcripts of each episode were used to translate some of Kenny's lines, as his orange parka muffles his voice where it is almost impossible to understand. While gathering my data, I took extensive notes on common phrases used to describe Kenny and his family, his criminal record, school life, and of course, his frequent demise. After my initial analysis I began the coding process. I grouped my data by descriptive codes first, which helped me organize the information into categories. These categories were then analyzed for literal codes with in the texts. Having the printed transcripts on hand made this part of the coding easy. Three analytical themes emerged from the reduction of the descriptive and literal codes. These findings are further analyzed in the following section.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how poverty is depicted in *South Park*. I conducted a content analysis of eight *South Park* episodes that focus on the poorest kid in town, Kenny McCormick. These episodes include: "Cartman joins NAMBLA," "Fat Camp," "W.T.F.," "City Part of Town," "Poor and Stupid," "The Poor Kid," "Kenny Dies," and "Major Boobage." Analyzing these episodes helps gain a better understanding of how poverty is portrayed in the show. Completion of my data collection and analysis lead to three major themes. (1) Those who are considered impoverished are represented as "rednecks" and ignorant; (2) Common characteristics of the poor are drug and alcohol use, domestic violence, and child neglect; (3) children in poverty using drugs and committing crimes. The following sections of this analysis will discuss these reoccurring themes further.

*Rednecks and Ignorance*

The most apparent of the three themes was that those in the lower class are rednecks and ignorant. In the episode "Goobacks," those making up the lower class were losing their jobs to immigrants from the future. Darryl Weathers (town redneck) is featured on *The O'Reilly Factor* to voice the opinions of the "pissed-off, white-trash, redneck conservatives" affected by the immigrants. When asked what he thinks about the arising issues, his only response is "They took 'er jerbs!" What was interesting is that these characters did not consider themselves to be underprivileged. In season 19 when the town decided to gentrify Kenny's house, Stuart defended his home when Randy said "Your house sucks" by stating that he "Work(s) hard and provides for (his) family just fine!"

The episode "Poor and Stupid" depicts NASCAR fans (all of them being white) as poor and stupid. The fans are all dressed in either mismatched button up shirts or ripped clothes and holding a beer. Eric Cartman envies Kenny's "poorness" because he believes it is crucial for being a successful NASCAR driver. He actively engages is dangerous activities to "kill his brain cells" to become a better driver, gaining negative public attention. These actions illicit anger from Kenny, as he and his family have an appreciation for the motor sport.

The poor are also portrayed as being ignorant and gullible in the episode "W.T.F." The boys start a backyard wrestling club that brings a large crowd of redneck spectators. They believe the elaborate stories told by the boys during the show and carry on conversations afterwards at the local bar. When the rednecks learn that the boys wrestling production left the school's wrestling coach jobless, they quickly supported his style of wrestling.

*Crime: Drugs, Alcohol, and Neglect*

Another common theme that emerged was the prevalence of the poor being involved in crimes such as drug and alcohol use, domestic abuse and child neglect. Kenny's parents are often seen yelling and hitting each other violently, as in the opening scenes of "The City Part of Town." While they are known alcoholics, it is revealed in "Lil Crime Stoppers" that Kenny's parents cook meth for a drug cartel as well. This might be the source of their income, as their place of employment is never mentioned or shown. The money the do acquire is not spend on quality food, as they are frequently seen eating pop-tarts or just a slice of bread. When they go to jail in "The Poor Kid" for meth, Kenny and his two siblings are sent off to a foster home.

It is apparent that Mr. and Mrs. McCormick are only *not* fighting when they are reproducing. When they mention to Kenny they are thinking about having a baby, he is not happy. Eric Cartman comments on the baby announcement with:

God-damnit, poor people suck! Your family is already on welfare, and now they're gonna bring another kid into the world. Poor people are turning out babies, adding to the overpopulation, and they're expecting me to pay for it with my tax dollars.

This statement did not upset Kenny or his parents. Kenny realizes that if they bring another child into the world, he is going to have competition for food and have to take care of it. He attempts to terminate the pregnancy by fixing his mother her "favorite drink," a combination of vodka and cocaine, with a secret ingredient, morning after pills. She surprisingly turns down the drink, but his father couldn't resist. Kenny continues to try and abort the baby with extreme measures, such as a plunger and a violent amusement park ride. The end of the episode, Kenny is hit by an ambulance. Shortly after, Mrs. McCormick births an orange-parka-wearing-baby, which they call their "brand new Kenny!" This is the 52 time they have named a new born Kenny.

Kenny's death is a very common theme in the series, but I've found those that are induced by negligent parents. In "Best Friends Forever," Kenny walks out of his front door to avoid his parents' violent argument and is mowed over by a passing truck. Kenny dies due to a terminal illness that went untreated in "Kenny Dies." When he is in the hospital, his parents make little effort to comfort him. Their lack of concern for his whereabouts and over all well-being are crucial in understanding Kenny's actions.

*Children in Poverty*

A reoccurring theme throughout the episodes was Kenny committing crimes and doing drugs. He obtained a sniper rifle in "Poor and Stupid" to kill Cartman with at the NASCAR race for ruining the sport's reputation. In "The Wing" and "The Toothfairy Tats 2000," he scams people out of money. Kenny also assisted Stan in breaking into Cartman's house and removing his kidney.

Kenny is the only child on the show that regularly uses drugs. The boys are always giving him things to try, which he usually never opposes. Kenny gets high off cat urine, termed "cheesing", in "Major Boobage," and hallucinates an imaginary world comprised of large breasts. In actuality, he is running around the town naked. Kenny is brought down from his high by Cartman and proceeds to violently attack him for taking him out of his fantasy. When huffing cat urine to get high becomes known in South Park, it is deemed illegal. Kenny skips school to "cheese," but his cats are confiscated by the police. This leads Kenny to breaking into Cartman's attic to get high.

He is also shown as performing odd tasks for money throughout the episodes. In "Fat Camp," Kenny is dared to eat dead manatee spleen for money and is then dared to eat it again after he throws it up. When kids gather in the school yard and begin offering money to see

Kenny eat weird things, Stan and Kyle realize there is a profit to be made off his willingness to do whatever. The events that follow get progressively worse in nature. Jesus even goes as far as to call Kenny a prostitute in the episode. Kenny's stunts gain enough attention to get him a TV show, "The Krazy Kenny Show." While on a radio show, Kenny is challenged to see who is the biggest prostitute. The stunt was to give the radio host, Howard Stern, oral sex for $50,000. Since all the contestants were willing to perform the stunt, the bidding went down. Kenny "won" and said he would do it for $10. Since performing a sexual act for money is considered prostitution, Kenny was arrested on those charges and sent to jail. He went to jail three other times: once for illegally downloading music, another for vigilantism, and for participating in Whale Wars.

**CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to analyze the depictions of poverty in *South Park*. The analysis of the episodes generated three significant themes that can be supported with examples obtained from the data sample.

One theme that was found within the *South Park* episodes was that those who are considered poor are portrayed as naïve rednecks. Instances when this occur are evident in "W.T.F.," "Goobacks," and "Poor and Stupid." Those who are considered poor in *South Park* are oblivious to realities and are easily influenced.

A second reoccurring theme is the prevalence of the lower class being involved in crimes such as selling drugs, domestic violence, and child negligence. These depictions of poverty are in almost every episode which includes Kenny. The McCormick's are known alcoholics and always

seen fighting. Kenny's deaths are so frequent to his parents that they show little remorse. Many of his deaths can be attributed to his parents' lack of supervision and concern.

The third and final theme of poverty depictions in *South Park* is children in poverty and criminal actions. Kenny has a history of breaking into homes, stealing, and prostitution as a means of making money or just for fun. His lack of concern for consequences are obvious in his hastily actions.

There are several theories that can be utilized to try and understand why Kenny's parents live the way in which they choose. If you consider Robert Merton's strain theory, the McCormick's method of income generation (meth) is a reasonable option. They are rejecting the traditional way of making money, but they still value the idea of acquiring wealth. One can also interpret Kenny's actions through collective socialization theory: that children growing up in high poverty communities with few successful adult role models will have low expectations of themselves. This theory might explain why he performed outlandish stunts for the entertainment of others.

Further exploration of these ideas are out of the scope of this study. Future research should investigate how these social theories interplay with the depictions of poverty, race and crime in *South Park*.

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