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The Framing of Adoption: A Content Analysis of Print News Coverage 2014-2016

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Abstract

A qualitative content analysis method was applied to explore the frames associated with child adoption news coverage over a three-year period. The research questions examined the frame themes represented in print news stories about adoption and their prominence. An analysis of national print news publications found that child adoption coverage leaned toward regulatory and policy frames and frames about the child welfare industry. Absent from print news frames were themes that focused on the humanity of adoption, whether from the perspective of individuals and couples considering adoption or of children either waiting to be adopted or who were adopted successfully. The skew toward a small subset of themes on such a complex issue has implications for adopters and adoptees and the stigmas perpetuated across society.

Introduction

The practice of child adoption in the United States can be traced back to 1851 when Massachusetts became the first state to pass a law that recognized adoption "as a social and legal operation based on the interests of child welfare rather than adult interests" (Herman, 2012a, para. 1). Prior to that, children were considered the property of their parents to be used as adult guardians when deemed appropriate, which often meant working as farm labor, being hired out as labor to private citizens or factories for family income, or being orphaned and left on their own to make a way of life. The concept "placing out" (Herman, 2012b, para. 2) began in 1868

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and promoted the idea that home life was superior to the ideal standard for children's well-being relative to institutionalized living. Placing out eventually evolved into what we recognize today as the foster care system.

Agendas that characterized adoption policy in the earliest years focused on child-caring institutions (e.g., orphanages and infant asylums), the processes applied to vet caretakers and the suitability of their homes for child placement, and the regulations associated with the transference of children from biological parents to either foster or adoptive parents. Within this context, adoption frames were dedicated to child welfare reform and family values as defined based on early periods of religious reform (Hart, 2012). Over time, the topic of child adoption became more defined according to the range of social, legal, and policy issues debated to protect the interests of children, as well as on refinement efforts to oversee adoption practices. Among the most prominent efforts to safeguard parties engaged in international child adoption are captured in guidelines specified in the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption¹ (Hague Conference on Private International Law [HCCH], 1993) and in the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (IAA), which provided for the implementation of the Hague Conference guidelines by the United States (Mabry-King, 2016; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2000). Otherwise, domestic adoption laws in the United States vary by state although there are general commonalities on processes for vesting of parental rights with the adoptive parents, the requirements for consent, the standards for assessing the best interests of the child, the confidential nature of adoption proceedings, and the permanent nature of adoption (Acosta, 2013).

U.S. adoption records before 1975 are imprecise since it was not until 2000 that the U.S. Census included "adopted son/daughter" as part of its report categories (Herman, 2012). U.S. Census records from 2010 report that just over two million U.S. citizens are adopted, and up to four percent of families have adopted; in addition, less than three percent of all children under 18 are adopted (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). The Pew Research Center reports a 77% decline in the number of children adopted from non-U.S. countries compared to 2004, the peak year for international adoptions (Budiman & Lopez, 2017). Despite the downward trend, the United States makes up 46% of international adoptions among adoptee receiving countries worldwide and is also a growing source for international outgoing adoptions (Budiman & Lopez, 2017), a practice where U.S.- born children are adopted to individuals from another country (Marbry-King, 2016). Domestic trends also show that adoption rates have declined since 2007 due to a significant drop in kinship or related adoptions. A total of 110,373 adoptions were reported in 2014 (Jones & Placek, 2017).

Faulkner (2010) noted "a great deal of cultural energy has been invested in the ideal of childhood innocence, to the extent that innocence is frequently cited as society's most valuable

¹ The Hague Convention represents an agreement among 83 countries that agree to three key objectives, namely, 1) to establish safeguards for intercountry adoptions in the interest of the child and with respect for his/her rights; 2) to establish a system of cooperation between contracting states in such a way the reduces the incidence of child trafficking, sale, or abduction, and 3) to secure the recognition of contracting states of adoptions made in accordance with the convention (HCCH, 1993).

asset” (p. 106). Entertainment media’s portrayals of adoption reinforces the constructs of childhood and family, with heartwarming portrayals of families and individuals after adoption, as with the CBS network’s annual holiday special, *A Home for the Holidays*, and through the use of storylines that either humorize or dramatize the challenges to adopted children and their families, as with the ABC network’s *Modern Family* and FreeForum’s *The Fosters*. Feel-good presentations of adoption represent a negotiated agreement among program producers, broadcast sponsors, and viewers to limit adoption topics to manageable bites that can be resolved in less than one hour. By default, more challenging topics associated with child adoption become the purview of news media.

This study investigates the framing of adoption in national print newspapers between 2014 and 2016. Within the adoption literature, there are very few studies focused on analyzing newspaper media, and even fewer focused on U.S. domestic adoptions. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the framing of adoption in print news media. Specifically, how is child adoption depicted in print news and how is the public’s interest on the topic shaped by the coverage? Findings from agenda-setting research suggest that media presentations of an issue cannot only shape the public’s attitudes about its attributes, but also impose priorities on the issue that may not reflect reality (McCombs, 1977). Scrutiny of the presence (or absence) of media frames assigned to child adoption, as well as the balance in their representation over time, is an essential step to identifying those issues that contribute to public perceptions and broad social policy. This is significant because the media’s effect on the public’s salience for the issue, as well as the characterizations attributed to it, can have real implications on the lives of the more than 400,000 children in the U.S. foster care system awaiting permanent adoption (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 2017) and for adults who view adoption as a path to family.

Literature review

Child adoption portrayals in media research

Researchers have studied the dramatization of child adoption in broadcast media and concluded that depictions of child adoption in media reinforce negative perceptions about the practice and the people associated with it. While some studies have focused on the depictions of the health or unhealthiness of family units including adopted children in broadcast news coverage (Kline, Chatterjee, & Karel, 2009), others shed light on the judgments of viewers or readers, rather than those producing the media, in demonizing adoptees in broadcast and print media (Creedy, 2002). Kline et al. (2009) looked at television news coverage of adoption between 2001 and 2005 and suggested that “when adoption activities become newsworthy, frequently the story that is broadcast is potentially stigmatizing” (p. 67). Reese (1998) focused on the portrayals of adoption over time, analyzing the stigmas associated with adoption particularly regarding the cost of

adoption as well as interracial adoptions. Most notable in the representation of research analyzing adoption portrayals and framing in the media are three main topics: 1) how adoption is portrayed in broadcast news, 2) emergent frames in international adoption, and 3) the negative stories or negative frames surrounding adoption in news media.

The stigmatization of the adoptive parents is also an area that has received some attention in academic research. Miall's (1987) study found evidence that the general public believed that adoptive couples were unproductive if they were unable to reproduce naturally. Moreover, the idea that a complete parenting experience is justified by blood ties further challenged the traditional understanding of family.

Social constructions of a typical birth or adoptive parent are said to be created in the media and ultimately affect the biases existing toward adoption and the negative ways in which adoption is portrayed (Maxwell & Cook, 2014; Wegar, 2000). This bias is reinforced by the normalization of narrow social constructions associated with family shaped by dominant ideology, in addition to ideas about race, biological normativity, and the ideals of nationalism (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011). Wegar (2000) concluded that the negative and biased images of adoption and adoptees that pervade mass media today are likely to continue to permeate mass media if these images continue to capture the attention of, and elicit emotion from, consumers.

Rushton's (2004) review of scholarship on the adoption of children placed from public care found that the bulk of child adoption research has focused on "adoptive parents' views and their accounts of their children's development" (p. 101). He notes topics for investigation have skewed toward the problems associated with child placement, the challenges to new parents, interventions with difficult adoptions, and the process for matching and preparation. Less attention has been invested in the experience of child adoptees, birth parent experiences pre- and post-adoption, the effectiveness in placement types, and the effectiveness of policies and services that facilitate adoption processes. He concludes that research could do more to improve the public's depth of understanding about child adoption. In doing so, the improved public interest may lend more oversight to the issues that challenge the obstacles to the ideals of childhood and family.

[Framing theory applied to child adoption news coverage](#)

Scholarship suggests that the effect of the news media's attention to adoption, child adoptees, adoptive families, adoption agencies, and adoption policy shapes public attitudes in directions that could become difficult to reverse. The news media's surveillance and reporting might not only cast a negative shadow on the public's perceptions about adoption but could also marginalize adoptees and adoptive families through characterizations that add fuel to its social stigmas. Although stigmas may be changed through social action and societal change (Goffman, 1963), the media could also provide a platform upon which the negative portrayals or stigmatizations of adoption may be changed for the better.

The concept of framing involves “[selecting] some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman 1993, p. 52). A contextual frame provides a schema both for presenting and for comprehending an issue (Scheufele, 1999). The way an issue is framed in media based on tone (positively or negatively), voice (us or them), or lens (individual, community, or societal) can change individuals’ opinions about the importance of that issue and the prioritization of merits associated with it (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Kinder 1983). The visibility given to an issue in media, the time and space dedicated to promoting it, as well as the number and prominence of references that give voice to the issue are cues external to the message itself that add to the salience of issue frames.

In the context of any issue-based communication campaign, there is an ongoing negotiation that ensues between the frame applied to the message and how the individual makes sense of the information in context with the existing schema on the topic (McLeod, Kosicki, Pan, & Allen, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Individual frames as defined by Entman (1993) are “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” (p. 53) that activate when an audience attempts to make sense of a message proposition. The interaction between the message frame and pre-existing attributions not only influence how individuals process a message but also has an enduring influence on galvanizing their perception of that issue.

Kline, Karel, and Chatterjee (2006) studied the framing of adoption in broadcast media by analyzing these representations through Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. Goffman’s theory is based on the idea that stigma is an outcome of tension between "virtual social identity and actual social identity" (p. 2). In the context of news coverage, Kline et al. (2006) note that the stigmatization of a group occurs when that group is linked with negative attributes in news stories. The media, particularly broadcast news media, often construct news stories surrounding adoption using human interest, economic, and morality frames that ultimately stigmatize adoption in the eyes of readers, promoting individual rather than societal responsibility or blame for social problems (Kline et al., 2006). News media additionally are often accused of, and found to, misrepresent adoption in insensitive ways including discussing adoption through insulting remarks or commenting on adoption with general ignorance regarding the topic (Waggenpack, 1998).

Kline et al. (2009) also studied the portrayals of adoption in broadcast news by exploring the media frames surrounding the depiction of adoption. The researchers attempted to discover whether televised news depicted adoptee families in unhealthy ways and if journalists played any role in counterbalancing these depictions through adoption participant perspectives or positive depictions of adoptees. They found that many stories depicted adoptees as unhealthy (e.g., starved, abused, troubled) or as having deficiencies (physical or psychological). Their study also highlighted the absence of positive news coverage that included birth parents or of negative news stories that incorporated the perspectives of adoption participants (e.g., adoptees, birth parent, or adoptive parent) as a news source (p. 67). Since “the public uses the media to learn about

adoption as a family form” (Kline et al., 2009, p. 56), the study’s implications on issues related to adoption are substantial and suggest a need for greater scrutiny among professionals and civic journalists who report the news.

Research has also given attention to the sociological perspective of international adoption and its implications for families. Tyebjee (2003) focused on advancing proposals for how adoption could be compellingly framed to affect attitudes and interest in child adoption and foster care among immigrant populations. Because the United States has the largest number of international adoptions (Engel, Phillips & Dellacava, 2007), a good portion of the literature on adoption framing in the media focuses on the international aspect of adoption, or U.S. citizens' adoption of children abroad. Engel et al.'s (2007) research concluded that media were particularly effective in influencing national policies, citing a media exposé about black market Romanian orphanages that resulted in a decrease in adoptions from Romania. Jacobson (2014) focused on international adoption activity in two of the most popular countries for adoption, Russia and China, as well as the media frame storylines that characterized adoption coverage from country to country. Jacobson's research also shed light on the disparity in social frames between each country's media. In an analysis of 21 years of U.S. newspaper coverage, Jacobson found that Russia adoption coverage frames were "notoriously problem focused" (p. 672) relative to China adoption coverage, which was overwhelmingly positive. The findings had implications on prospective U.S. adoptive parents' decisions about routes to family and the risks attributed to child adoptees based on country of origin.

Hellerstedt et al. (2008) examined media framing and adoption decision making in print reporting through the lens of international adoptions by analyzing the positive or negative framing associated with international adoptions from various countries. Their investigation attributed the focus on international adoptions to concern for children adopted into societies much different than their own, where racial and ethnic discrimination persists, and children are often made to feel like outsiders or are portrayed as outsiders, even sometimes within their respective adoptive homes.

Research questions

Within the adoption literature, there were very few studies focused on analyzing newspaper media, and even fewer focused on U.S. domestic adoptions. This suggests that a more holistic view of issues pertaining to strictly domestic adoptions is both needed, and appropriate, in efforts to track the news media's ongoing portrayal of an issue with the range of implications on the cultural, social, and regulatory landscape of adoption. Since the media agenda is believed to set the public agenda (Guo, 2012), it is feasible to believe that the way in which domestic adoptions are bundled in combination with various social issues in print news media could stigmatize adoption through association, making these bundled issues appear interconnected in the minds of consumers (Vu, Guo, & McCombs, 2014).

This study extends prior media research on adoption by exploring the topic through the lens of print news framing. Because an object's framing in the media can have measurable behavioral consequences (McCombs & Shaw, 1993), the contribution of this research is to lend further evidence to the categories and themes apparent in media's portrayal of adoption. This research analyzes a subset of national print news media for evidence of what adoption frames exist and with what consistency. In doing so, the research attempts to identify trends that allow for observations about the state of child adoption coverage in news media over the most recent three years from the study's launch. Three research questions are explored:

RQ1: What general frames are represented in print news stories (headlines and leads) about adoption?

RQ2: What frames, if any, are most prevalent in their representation?

RQ3: What implications can be made about the effect of the combination of the news frames and their frequency on the public's interest in child adoption?

Method

A qualitative content analysis method was applied to explore the research questions. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Qualitative content analysis seeks to identify trends and patterns in the themes that emerge over the period analyzed, while also predicting the expectancy of broad organizing categories (Krippendorff, 2013). This method improves the opportunity for researchers to make a more judicious appraisal of the observations and trends observed in research, as well as allows for expanded discussion of the intricate characteristics observable in the units of analysis that comprise the sample pool (Kracauer, 1952). Relative to quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to describe the elements of the content observed, while also acknowledging propositions that could explain linkages between the content and audience outcomes (Neuendorf, 2002).

The representation and framing of adoption and activities surrounding adoption were examined in print news media. Although newspaper readership has experienced a decline in the last decade, its selection for research is justified because daily newspaper circulation is still 31 million for print and digital editions combined (Pew Research, 2018). Studies sponsored by the Pew Research Center reported that about half of newspaper readers read only the print edition (Barthel, 2016), and news organization digital platforms were the most common pathway to online news (Mitchell, Gottfried, Shearer, & Lu, 2017). Mitchell et al. (2017) also identified news topics related to community, politics, crime, and health as most likely to prompt readers to

talk to others about the news, search for more information, or post on social media. These data are particularly relevant to adoption news, which could feasibly fall into any one or more categories of news. All newspapers in this study were circulated both in print and online, with the latter replicating the stories reported in the print version.

Unit of analysis and sample pool

The newspapers selected for analysis came from five major metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) which were identified as high-index adoption states. This included articles from the top two news publications in the respective states including: California, New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Illinois (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The unit of analysis applied to the exploration was a single print news story from the leading two major metropolitan newspapers in high-index adoption markets with a daily print circulation of 100,000 or more. The researchers expected that because these areas were larger, contained more diverse populations, and had higher rates of adoptions, news stories from these markets would be more varied and balanced in the coverage of adoption-related news. The targeted news markets above-average adoption index is also suggested to indicate heightened levels of awareness and involvement around adoption news events. The major metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) selected for analysis were in the states of California, New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Illinois (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The final list of newspapers selected within the designated MSAs was identified using Cision's Top Newspapers in 2016 (Cision, 2016). The list of publications included in the study by circulation is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Major metropolitan statistical area newspapers, circulation, and metropolitan statistical populations (Cision, 2016)

Newspaper	Circulation
California	
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	467,309
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	223,549
New York	
<i>The New York Times</i>	2,101,611
<i>Daily News</i>	299,538
Texas	
<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	271,900
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	360,251

Pennsylvania	
<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	173,160
<i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	158,546
Illinois	
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	384,962
<i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	470,548

Adoption-related news stories that ran between the years 2014 to 2016 were retrieved from the online databases ProQuest and NewsBank. The research timeframe represented the most recent three years from the study's launch. Only news stories considered hard news were included in the research sample. Hard news, defined in this study as up-to-date and factual reporting of national newsworthy events, encompassed stories of adoption of a political, economic, crime, or policy nature ("Hard News," 2016). Therefore, any localized or international news, soft news, defined as feature stories that are not factually reported or newsworthy ("Soft News," 2016), op-ed articles, announcements for localized or nationalized events, and any duplication articles were omitted from analysis. Featured pictures framed with a caption or freestanding visuals that accompanied the news story also were eliminated from coding because the databases tended to cut visual supplements from the digital content feed. Based on the criteria in the platforms provided above, a final sample of 10 articles remained and was used in the final analysis.

Coding categories

An initial codebook was developed using adoption-related topics gleaned from The Adoption History Project's website (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adoption/>) and from keywords that emerged from the library database search. On analysis of the returns in the databases, as well as the grouping of topics from the Adoption History Project, the researchers found four overarching themes that characterized discussions of adoptions, including social frames, regulation and policy frames, economic frames, and technological frames relating to developments in birthing or surrogate alternatives. The researchers reviewed several articles from the sample with the coders to clarify the code definitions as well as to negotiate the recognition of the codebook categories before coder training.

The criteria applied to code were operationalized according to the presentation and combination of news story headline and the lead (qualified as the first three paragraphs of the news story) for adoption-focused news stories. This decision is justified, in part, by the traditional structure for journalistic writing structure that adheres to an inverted pyramid style of news presentations in which the most newsworthy information and most relevant details are presented in the first section of the article (Rabe, 2008). Additionally, since the goal of the research was to hone in on what topics and story angle the journalist or editor chose to make

most important, supplemental topics presented later in the article that could distract from efforts to draw conclusions were not included in this analysis.

The final codebook addressed 1) descriptive characteristics about the news source; 2) descriptive characteristics about the story headline and lead, respectively; and 3) lead content characterized according to its social, regulatory/policy, economic, or technological emphasis. News stories were coded on more than one criterion only if multiple criteria applied; coders were instructed to code for as many criteria as apparent in the lead paragraphs. The final codebook contained 37 coding categories. Table 2 summarizes the categories and their definitions.

Table 2. Coding frames and definitions by category

Code	Code defined
Social category (12)	
African-American Adoptions	African-American adoptions, African-American children in need of adoption, African-American parents adopting.
Child Welfare	Stories about child emotional and behavioral well-being. Includes topics such as abuse, neglect, poverty, domestic violence, and parental substance abuse (Burns et al., 2004).
International Adoptions	Stories about issues associated with international and cross-racial/cross-ethnic transfer of child guardianship or topics related to family building or adaption due to cultural/national differences. (Askeland, 2006).
Celebrity Adoption	Stories about celebrity trends to adopt, celebrities or celebrity couples adopting children.
Child Welfare Work	Stories about individuals and parties associated with the adoption industry, (i.e., social workers, child welfare agents or targets).
Search & Reunion	Stories about individual efforts to locate birth- or adoptive-relatives.
Single Parent	Stories involving discussions of single-parent adopters or child adoptees of single parents.

Same-Sex Couple Adoption	Stories about the social implications (values, attitudes, lifestyle trends) of same-sex couple adoption.
Special Needs	Stories about the adoption of children with special needs or disabilities.
Religion	Stories about the intersection between religious beliefs/doctrine and adoption.
Open Adoption	Stories about birth-parent(s) access to adopted children.
Closed Adoption	Stories about issues related to records confidentiality of birth-parent or adopted child.
Regulation & Policy Category (4)	
Legislation/Legalities	Stories about the legality of same-sex adoption, single-parent adoption, or kinship (interfamily) adoptions; also includes legal actions taken by governmental bodies, organizations, schools.
Court System	Story gives attention to court's interpretation about actions or individuals featured.
Fostering	Stories involving discussions of foster care, foster parents, the foster care system, requirements to foster.
Same-Sex Adoption	Stories dedicated to the legal, political, legislative/policy issues surrounding the debate on same-sex adoption.
Economic Category (2)	
Cost to Adopt	Stories about the cost to adopt or costs associated with adoption.

Adoption Statistics	Stories about the statistics—number of adoptions in country, state, gay adoptions, transracial adoptions, international adoptions, or any general statistics regarding adoption
Technological Category (4)	
Eugenics	Stories about the improvement of the population through eugenics or improving individual genetic quality.
Matching	Stories about parent-matching technology or technology’s use in connecting adoptive parents with an adoptable child.
Infertility	Stories about women’s infertility and adoption as an alternative to family planning.
IVF/Invitro/Surrogacy	Stories about surrogates or surrogacy, invitro fertilization, artificial insemination, IVF treatments to aid in conception.

Coder training

Two independent coders received three hours of training from the research team on a subsample of news stories in the sample pool. Then, they each coded the total sample of news stories. The purpose of the training was to 1) “provide basic validation of the coding scheme” (Neundorf, 2002, p. 2), 2) increase the opportunity for proper application of the coding categories, and 3) to improve the inter-coder reliability quotient, “a necessary criterion for valid and useful research” (Nuendorf, 2002, p. 2). The training also allowed the researchers an opportunity to clarify the code definitions as well as to negotiate the recognition of the codebook categories between individual coders.

Results

In this section, the frames found in the analysis of the data are reported. The section begins with a description of the sample characteristics and intercoder reliability. The findings are discussed in the context of the research questions that guided the investigation.

Sample characteristics and intercoder reliability

A total of 10 articles made up the content analysis sample. Four articles were published in 2014; three articles were published in 2015 and 2016, respectively. In terms of newspaper outlets, five articles in the sample were sourced from the *Los Angeles Times*, three came from the *New York Times*, and two appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*. Although the sample size was smaller than the researchers anticipated, the quantity did not distract from the goals of research. An overall Krippendorff's alpha statistic for inter-coder reliability was acceptable ($k\text{-alpha} = .76$) with 92% pairwise agreement between the coders, which met the baseline of .68 or higher for an acceptable level of agreement (Neundorf, 2002).

Table 3. Inter-coder reliability

<u>Coding Category</u>	<u>Krippendorff's Alpha Reliability</u>	<u>Percent Pairwise Agreement</u>
Overall agreement	.76	92%
Headline Tone	.86	90%
Social Themes	.76	93%
Legislation & Policy Themes	.75	88%
Economic Themes	.83	95%
Technological Themes	.48	95%

Table 4. Frequency of frames and topics discussed within frames

Frame identified	Topics identified within frame	Frequency of topic in sample
REGULATION & POLICY		
	Legislation	7
	The court system	7
	Fostering	7

	Same-sex couple adoption	4
Total frame identification in sample		25
SOCIAL		
	Child welfare/child welfare work	10
	Same-sex couple adoption	4
	International adoptions	3
	African-American adoptions	2
	Search & reunion	1
	Single parent adoption	0
	Celebrity adoptions	0
	Special needs	0
	Religion	0
	Open adoption	0
	Closed adoption	0
Total frame identification in sample		20
TECHNOLOGICAL		
	IVF/Invitro/Surrogacy	2
	Infertility	1
	Matching	0
	Eugenics	0
Total frame identification in sample		3
ECONOMIC		
	Cost to adopt	1
	Adoption statistics	1
Total frame identification in sample		2

Legislation and judicial themes led among coding categories

RQ1 asked, what general frames are represented in print news stories (i.e., headlines and leads) about adoption? To explore this question the variety of categories present in news stories was analyzed in addition to the tone attributed to the headline and copy. Within the regulation and policy category, news stories with frames related to legislation, the court system, and fostering were equally prevalent to one another ($n = 7$), followed by the frame of same-sex couple adoption ($n = 4$). The frames found in this category also had a tendency to be intertwined in a single news story with frames from other categories, as was evident in the news stories such as “The Child Welfare System; Broken Bond; Court Delays and Keeping Children in Foster Care Longer Set the Stage for Deeper Heartbreak and Wrenching Removals” (Therolf, 2016) and “Adoptee Advocates Decry ‘Re-homing’” (LeVine, 2014), each of which included three frames from the regulation/policy category in addition to themes from the social category (i.e., child welfare/work) as part of the headline and lead. “Adoptee Advocates Decry ‘Re-homing’” specifically focused attention on a domestic practice whereby adoptive parents of foreign-born children solicit people illegally over the Internet to take the child, thereby putting an adopted child's welfare at risk.

Same-sex couple adoption rights category dominated coverage about adoption actors

Within the period analyzed, same-sex couple adoption rights and adoption cases occurred across four of the 10 articles analyzed. This frame was coded in both the social and regulatory/policy categories. News stories capturing this theme almost unanimously paired with issues regarding court reviews of adoption rights or state legal privileges denied to same-sex couples seeking to adopt. However, one news story in the sample was unique in its emphasis on international/cross-racial/cross-ethnic adoption. An article entitled, “Schechter Couple Adopts Ethiopian Brothers” (Shields, 2015) was the single article in the sample that provided a human-interest perspective on the adoptive parents’ journey in assimilating their adopted children into the U.S.

Characterizations assigned to news leads steered away from negative frames

The coder descriptive words used most frequently to characterize the tone of news leads included informative, happy/hopeful, informative, and in one instance, sad. Informative characterizations tended to educate and inform readers about processes and systems, to report data and numbers, or to share information about organizations, laws, or judgments. The articles titled, “National Briefing: Nationwide; More children in foster care” (Associated Press, 2015), which reported statistical data on foster care trends in a decade, or “Abbott gets high ranking for adoption benefits” (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2016), which featured the adoption benefits provided by a Chicago-based healthcare company, are examples of this category. Happy/hopeful/inspiring frames were

tied to stories about celebrations (i.e., “A Family-Friendly Court; On Adoption Day, Judge Hands Down the News Adults and 200 Kids Have Awaited,” Streeter, 2014) or realizing some victory over adversity as in the article, “The Nation; A New Victory for Gay Rights; High Court Upholds Adoptions by Same-Sex Parents, Reversing an Alabama Ruling” (Savage, 2016).

Regulation and policy frames were most prevalent in representation

RQ2 asked, what frames, if any, are most prevalent in their representation? The research found that news story frames existed across every major coding category (e.g., social, regulation & policy, economic, and technological). Despite the number of frames listed in the social category ($n = 12$ coding frames), it ranked second to regulation & policy in the number of frames coded in total for each subcategory. Frames coded as regulation and policy occurred 25 times, followed by the social category frames ($n = 20$), then technological ($n = 3$), and economic ($n = 2$) frames, respectively. Specifically, the most coded frame occurred in the social category under the combined frames of child welfare/child welfare work ($n = 10$). In the regulation and policy category, a three-way tie among the legislation/legalities frame ($n = 7$), court system ($n = 7$) frame, and fostering ($n = 7$) frame occurred.

Dominance and frequency of frames have implications on potential child adoption actors

RQ3 asked what implications can be made about the effect of the combination of the news frames and their frequency on audience perceptions? The findings lend evidence to the social frames that dominated the landscape on child adoption from 2014 through 2016. Same-sex couple's right to adopt and court review of legal appeals surrounding this issue were a dominant component of adoption frames in the public sphere. However, child welfare frames written from the perspective of the child adoptee or the birth parents were underrepresented, as was coverage on pro-adoption advocacy groups that could represent the interests of children still hoping to be adopted. Frames that captured the economic or technological issues surrounding adoption were entirely absent. The dominant frames during this period could lead an outside interest to conclude that child adoption is a same-sex couple issue. For single adults and couples who do not fall into this demographic, the news coverage could effectively marginalize opportunities to view adoption as an acceptable alternative for family planning.

Research summary

In summary, the key findings that emerged from the investigation are as follows:

1. Frames about legislation, the court system, and problems associated with the foster care system (i.e., child welfare) were coded most frequently.
2. Frames about adoption actors (e.g., children waiting to be or placed with adoption, birth parents, or adoptive parents) occurred less frequently unless tied to news

stories that reported on law, policy, or the court's review of the prospective adopter's rights.

3. The adoption rights of same-sex couples and the legal review of court cases were dominant frames across the three-year period reviewed.

Discussion

This study investigated the framing of adoption in national print newspapers between 2014 and 2016. Newspapers in five metropolitan statistical areas were selected for mining adoption news coverage over the specified period. The findings revealed that print news' coverage of the child adoption issue leaned heavily toward legal/legality frames that give attention to the legal actions taken by organizations and interested parties in court review for the privilege to be (or remain) adoptive parents. The next most prevalent frames were found in the social category, with negative frames applied to child welfare and the work of child welfare agents. Ironically, human-interest frames that focused on the humanity of adoption appeared with the least frequency among the news content sampled. One news story sampled focused on an adoptive family through frames that highlighted international and cross-racial adoption. News frames dedicated to personalizing the birth parents who transfer parental rights to others or the children waiting to be adopted were absent from the sample pool.

Similar to previous studies on media coverage of child adoption, print news storylines were concentrated on elements that lent an impression of child adoption and its actors as litigious and difficult. Systemic difficulties caused by court delays and the child welfare system's policies, as well as news stories about same-sex couples' legal suits to become adoptive parents were written from a third-person perspective so that the reader could absorb the facts of the story without expending emotional empathy toward the individuals affected. News headlines were a cue to reinforce adoption stigmas through the choice of words used to capture readers' attention. Descriptive terms such as "broken," "wrenching," and "deeper heartbreak" provided prominent cues for the problematic circumstances surrounding child adoption.

The surveillance and reporting functions of media (McQuail, 2005) intend to ensure that news stories will be framed in terms that make complex events become more accessible to media audiences. The presence of frames that skew toward a small subset of such a complex issue suggests a need for greater vigilance in oversight among news media gatekeepers and greater control in media representation among adoption advocates to harness the ongoing interest of the public. For better or worse, the reporting of adoption stories and the representations of those involved may heighten, if not skew, the public's interest in the people and processes that characterize child adoption. The stories presented in print news have the potential to leave an impression as permanent as those presented to an audience in broadcast news or entertainment media through the use of journalistic storytelling, verbal imagery, and word choice. Yet story lines related to the challenges of new parents, matching and preparations, birth family contact

arrangements after adoption (Rushton, 2004), or the financial costs of adoption were not part of the print news agenda during the study timeframe.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The study also identifies limitations and highlights opportunities for future research. A limitation of this investigation is in the small sample size of news articles on child adoption in the United States. Future research should broaden the scope of the newspapers included to determine how this subject is discussed in a larger geographic region and context. Future research that expands the number of newspapers included in the sample, or that broadens the stipulations placed on the sampling frame could be applied to increase the sample pool. In this research, coders analyzed the first three paragraphs of the article. While this is typically where the most pertinent information in the article is provided, future research should seek to analyze the entirety of the text to develop a more holistic view of the coverage. Future studies also are suggested to explain how coverage of adoption has changed or changes over time going forward and how this compares with previous periods in time.

The current study analyzed print articles out of context of the vehicle in which the article ran or photojournalism images that may have accompanied the article. Even the column width space or placement of the news story can cue the reader to its prominence in the media content. Future research could also explore coder frames in the context of print-plus-visual supplement contexts to see if the outcomes are different. Last, with the exclusion of soft news coverage, those news outlets and stories seeking to humanize the issue of child adoption may have been overlooked. The hard news section of a print article tends to give focus to issues such as crime, litigation, or abuse of the establishment. Other sections of the newspaper—lifestyle, community, health, or business, for example—could result in adoption frames that were not found in hard news headlines and lead paragraphs. Soft news coverage is recommended in future research to obtain a more holistic view of news representations of the issue. Last, references to news sources quoted in a story are recommended as a coding criterion to provide context to the relationships between news frames and source agents.

Conclusion

The current research outcome challenges media gatekeepers and audiences alike to consider the importance of news framing in the public's understanding about the issue of child adoption. For some, aspirations for a family are only attainable through adoption. However, the void in the media's coverage of individual viewpoints, combined with the stigmas attributed to adoptees and adoptive families, could effectively dissuade prospective parents from pursuing child adoption. This research supports the idea that adoption's coverage in the major print news vehicles

perpetuates the perception that child adoption is an atypical path to family sustained by marginalized actors. This characterization effectively counteracts efforts to build understanding of issues that influence the practice of adoption and degrades the list of reasons to pursue child adoption.

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