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Applying Care to Political Public Relations: Crisis Communication Following the Terrorist Attack in New Zealand

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Abstract

Care is not a word generally associated with political crises. However, following the mosques massacre in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was found to have used care and a feminist approach to political communication that served to unite rather than divide her country following this racially motivated terrorist attack. There is much literature on corporate crises, but this paper adds to the dearth of literature on political crises in a public interest context. Grounded in a consideration of care and agenda building theories, it reveals that a caring approach to political communication (both verbal and nonverbal) following an act of terrorism can influence the media agenda and by extension public opinion.

Introduction

How should a head of state respond to an act of terror on the country's citizens? This is a question that every government should be prepared to answer, as sporadic acts of terror are real phenomena facing countries. From high profile acts of terror such as the New York City World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001, in the United States to domestic terrorism such as the Charleston Church massacre on June 15, 2015, to the more recent Christchurch mosques shootings on March 15, 2019, in New Zealand, political and administrative leaders are under

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pressure to calm fears, identify culprits, act, and restore normalcy. Such crises require effective communication by government and public authorities, not only because citizens and victims in times of crises typically look to the government for leadership, but because the crises may quickly turn into a symbolic contest over the meaning of the crisis, in which diverse publics—citizens, journalists, members of parliament, and other groups on the political stage that monitor and influence the behavior of leaders—make use of (social) media venues, offering competing interpretations (Boin et al., 2016; Canel & Sanders, 2010; Christensen et al., 2013). Some scholars, therefore, have argued that effective crisis response cannot be brought about by simply "doing the right thing"; leaders must strategically manage the meaning-making process, that is, making efforts "to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence in crisis leaders by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative" (Boin et al., 2016, p. 79).

Although many scholars have pointed to the strategic dimension of governmental response to terrorist attacks (Boin et al., 2016; Canel, 2012; Canel & Sanders, 2010; Sparks et al., 2005), few have studied this type of crisis communication from a public relations or public interest perspective. Moreover, the fact that the inquiry of crisis communication within the public relations field has primarily taken a corporate and practitioners' perspective (Coombs, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2010) further underlines the need for exposing how government officials and political leaders use strategic communication to shape views and sentiments of the public and political environment.

The purpose of this study, accordingly, was to fill the lacuna in research and generate an understanding of political crisis communication in response to terrorist attacks from a public relations perspective through an investigation of the crisis response of New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern following the Christchurch mosques shootings. In particular, the study evaluated the substance of the government's crisis communication through the lens of agenda building theory, which is an ideal framework to develop a better understanding of the intersection of political public relations and crisis communication.

Further, drawing on the Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018), this study explores how a feminist approach to strategic crisis communication by a woman politician influences the media agenda and hence public opinion. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) suggest that the AMCC feminist orientation is a more ethical approach to crisis communication when acting in the public's interest than what they term the traditional masculine approach.

Literature review

Political public relations

Political public relations practice dates back centuries (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). However, scholarship lags in bridging theoretical gaps between political public relations and related social

science areas such as public relations and political communication (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). Political public relations is defined as "the management process by which an actor for political purposes, through communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with key publics and stakeholders to help support its mission and achieve its goals" (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011, p. 8). Such actors can include governments (Albishri et al., 2019), state-owned media (Zhang et al., 2017), political candidates (Kim et al., 2011), political parties (Aras, 2018), interest groups (Neil et al., 2016), corporate CEOs (Lan et al., 2020), and even citizens (Krishna et al., 2020). Those actors are crucial in recognizing the key stakeholders and issues and how they are framed in media coverage and public discourse (Lan et al., 2020).

Scholars have emphasized the strategic and management role of political public relations in affecting political issues, processes, and public opinion related to political matters. However, political public relations is largely identified in practice by its media relations function (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). Furthermore, a key feature of political public relations is that it is purposeful, and its main goal is to influence the media agenda and framing of issues (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). However, the authors cautioned that despite politicians' role in shaping news, political public relations does not equate to news management as its remit is much broader.

Like many other fields of mass communication, political public relations theory and practice have evolved with the adoption of digital communication and social media as strategic tools by political actors. Facebook, Twitter, and many other platforms have become important domains for sharing and receiving political information, providing a new arena for competition among political actors (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). Previous meta-analysis studies have provided conflicting evidence on the influence of using digital channels to increase political engagement and participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016). Thus, such tools should not be seen as replacing, but rather complementing, traditional channels of political communication (Albishri et al., 2019).

Political public relations and crises

The current study focuses on how political communication was used within the context of a terrorist crisis. Section 2656f(d) of Title 22 of the United States Code defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (22 U.S.C. § 2656f(d)). This definition has three elements that distinguish terrorism from other acts of violence—the act is politically motivated, it is directed toward noncombatants, and finally, it is done by a subnational group or clandestine agent meaning that countries do not commit terrorist acts even when their actions hurt civilians (Ruby, 2002). This study adopted this definition since it fits the character of the act of terrorism committed in Christchurch.

The public relations literature on crises focuses mainly on corporate crises defining these phenomena as being disruptive of operations and having financial and reputational implications

(Coombs, 2002; Howell & Miller, 2006). Coombs (2002) contributes the concept of a threat grid in which two types of threats were identified—the operational threat and the reputational threat. Other typologies of crises explicated in management literature are man-made and natural causation (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1993), man-made, natural, and social (Rike, 2003), and, conventional, unexpected, intractable, and fundamental (Gundel, 2005). Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1993) pointed out that there is no strict difference between corporate and public crises and that corporate crises may become public-private crises based on their scope such as the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill. Fundamental, however, is what are crises— "events and processes featuring threat, uncertainty, and urgency" (p. 1) and how they should be managed— "prevention and mitigation, preparation and planning, response and decision making and recovery, consolidation and change" (p. 6).

The difference between corporate and political crises has been explained as dimensions in which crises may be operational-focus or symbolic-focus (Coombs, 2019). Operational crises are those that can have a direct impact on the organization's survival, while symbolic crises are those played out in public. Terrorist attacks then fit the latter. For this type of crisis, the response may be as important as the crisis itself, as the responder's performance is being evaluated by stakeholders (Coombs, 2019). According to Edelman (1964), symbolic forms of communication can influence political perception and public opinion. Extending this thesis to the crisis management context, Hart (1993) argued that crises are not only perceptual but an affective category. In a crisis the popular expectation is for leaders to be compassionate toward victims, which should be demonstrated both verbally and tangibly. However, political leaders have been found to be guilty of unrealistic promises in trying to comfort victims (Boin et al., 2016).

Although heads of corporations seek to avoid crises, politicians appear to thrive on them (Coombs, 2019). For example, in 2001 President George W. Bush was said to have had a rocky start after his slim political victory, and the mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, was "poised to go down in history as a political failure," but they both emerged from the 9/11 crisis as leaders (Boin et al., 2013). Politicians are thought to use crises for two main purposes—to pass policy and/or for political leverage (Coombs, 2019).

An ethic of care

Simola (2005) credits Gilligan's (1982) work on moral reasoning in women as the catalyst for much of the scholarly work into an ethic of care following a few other works in the 1980s and 1990s across disciplines on aspects of care. In this landmark research Gilligan identified care as a moral alternative to justice, which was found in an earlier study by Kohlberg for which the subjects were all male. Gillian's study included both sexes, and she found that the moral decision making process for women and girls was often different from that of boys and men (Gilligan, 1982; Simola, 2003, 2005). Care was characterized not by traditional moral values such as individual rights, impartiality, and fairness, such as the approach taken by Kohlberg, but instead "it was characterized by concern with maintaining and enhancing relationships, as well as an

emphasis on understanding and responding to the feelings and needs of others in their particular contexts" (Simola, 2005, p. 343). In terms of the moral reasoning of men and women, Noddings (2013) also noted, "Women, in particular, seem to approach moral problems by placing themselves as nearly as possible in concrete situations and assuming personal responsibility for the choices to be made" (p. 8). In fact, the author noted that "an ethic built on caring is, […] characteristically and essentially feminine" (p. 8).

Applied Model of Care Consideration

Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) suggested the Applied Model of Care Consideration (AMCC) as an alternative approach to crisis communication, which is applicable before, during, and after a crisis. Care is not usually at the forefront of communication. However, the focus of an ethic of care includes "interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity," which are embodied in public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013, p. 40). For Fraustino and Kennedy, the humanity of persons needs to be taken into consideration, and therefore an ethic of care should not be limited to the private sphere but also should permeate the public sphere. They suggest that "organizations should approach an ethic of care centered on the vulnerability of the potentially affected populations, treating them as though an intimate relationship exists" (p. 25).

Using feminist theory, the model suggests that organizational communication should evolve from genuine care considerations such as respecting relationships, assessing interdependence among relationships, determining vulnerability and treating people with care, and understanding capabilities for reciprocity across four landscapes relevant to public relations practitioners—the physical (the material realities that publics face—access to resources), cultural (respect for cultural differences can inform more effective and ethical communication), political/economic (how political and economic factors contribute to recipients' access to, responses to, and processing of messages) and human (situational and contextual sensitivities in tailored communication efforts). Care within the feminist context is not the masculine normative and rationalistic ethics but is care-based ethics that demonstrates moral maturity, which could be manifested as verbal and nonverbal (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Gilligan, 1982). In the political public relations context, care might be associated with women politicians because studies have shown that men receive more issue related coverage, while coverage of women politicians pays more attention to their personality traits (Htun & Piscopo, 2014). The foregoing therefore gives rise to the following research question:

*RQ1***:** How were the four AMCC landscapes associated with Ardern in government communication, the media, and public discourse?

Agenda building

Many studies have been devoted to examining political public relations and its effectiveness through the lens of agenda setting and agenda building with a consensus that one of the major goals of political public relations efforts is to communicate and shape the salience of certain objects or certain aspects of an object in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking (Kiousis et al., 2016; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014; McCombs et al., 2014). Agenda setting influences public opinion as an unintended outcome of news production, while agenda building is a deliberate attempt by public relations actors to transmit issue salience using information subsidies to audiences (Kiousis et al., 2015; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). It is widely accepted that people get information and salience of issues and objects from the news media. The ability to tap into media's influence is important to political actors, and therefore agenda building as a practice is viewed as a critical activity to political success.

The strategic and purposeful nature of agenda building highlights the role of public relations in the social process of salience formation around issues in the media and public agendas while providing an empirically viable structure with which the effectiveness of political public relations is best understood (Lan et al., 2020; Schweickart et al., 2016; Sweetser & Brown, 2008; Tedesco, 2011). Information subsidies as important manifestations of public relations' agenda-building efforts are an ideal medium for measuring how messages are strategically constructed and how priorities are communicated to influence media content and, in turn, public opinion (Grimmer, 2010; Kiousis et al., 2016). To the extent that the agenda of source information subsidies aligns with that of the news media and/or public opinion, the agenda-building effects of public relations efforts occur.

There are three levels of agenda building identified in the literature. The first level deals with the transfer of salience from issues, objects, and stakeholders to media content (Kim et al., 2011; Kiousis et al., 2016), the second level addresses the attributes assigned to issues and objects (Golan & Wanta, 2001), and the third level is concerned with the network relationships of issues and attributes and how they intersect to influence public opinion (Guo, 2012; Guo et al., 2012).

Agenda-building scholars have predominantly been occupied with examining agenda building in an election context (Kiousis, 2004; Kiousis et al., 2015; Kiousis et al., 2009) or in the context of a government's ability to influence the attributes of foreign news coverage (Albishri et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). To apply agenda-building theory to political crisis communication, more research is needed. In 2008, Sweetser and Brown (2008) researched a crisis from an agenda-building perspective. However, that study's focus was the U.S. military's success in influencing the media agenda during the Israel-Lebanon crisis, which was not directly related to a domestic crisis for which the media were direct stakeholders. Although agenda-building scholars have shown interest in agenda building's influence in different political contexts, this study seeks to add to the literature by examining its role during a domestic terrorist-driven crisis, which leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: The salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the news articles published about the terrorist attack.

H2: The salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the public discourse on Twitter regarding the terrorist attack.

Second-level agenda building

The second level of agenda-building looks at the salience of attributes assigned to objects (Kiousis et al., 2006). Kiousis et al. (2016) identified two main types of attributes: substantive and affective. Substantive attributes refer to "the cognitive dimension of attribute salience based on reasoning," while affective attributes are concerned with "the valence dimension of salience that is based on emotion" (pp. 4-5). Issue frames are typical examples of the substantive attribute dimension used in prior agenda-building studies, as framing involves the process of promoting certain aspects of issues more than other aspects in messages (Entman, 1993; McCombs, 1997). According to Weaver et al. (2004), "Journalists can present only a few aspects of any object in the news," which they termed "agendas of attributes," which can be considerably salient (p. 259). Affective attributes, on the other hand, are often operationalized as the tone of messages—the positive, negative, or neutral portrayal of the objects (Kiousis et al., 2016). This study will measure the influence of the attributes ascribed to objects and issues by the New Zealand government, which gives rise to the following hypotheses:

H3: The framing of the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of those frames in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre.

H4: The tone toward the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of similar tone toward those issues in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre.

Network agenda building

The first and second levels of agenda building focus on salience transfer of individual objects and attributes, while the third level, or the network agenda, focuses on the bundling of issues and/or attributes and their subsequent packaged transfer to the media agenda that contribute to the perception of linkages among different objects or attributes (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo & Guo, 2017). Research into network agenda building is relatively limited with little qualitative data (e.g., Albishri et al., 2019; Kiousis et al., 2015; Neil et al., 2016; Yang & Saffer, 2018;

Zhang et al., 2017). Several of these studies found supporting evidence for the cooccurrence of attributes in information subsidies and the news coverage. This study adds to this new body of research by examining the third level of agenda building in a crisis context and therefore proffers the following hypothesis:

H5: The salience of stakeholders' network cooccurrences in the public relations messages of Ardern and the New Zealand government's messages will be positively related to their salience in a) media coverage and b) public discourse regarding the Christchurch massacre.

The research site

On Friday, March 15, 2019, white supremacist hatred shattered Christchurch's generally peaceful existence and focused the world's spotlight on that country. Fifty-one lives were lost, and another 50 persons were wounded when a 28-year-old Australian man using military-style weapons opened gunfire on two mosques where persons from the Muslim community were worshiping. Reacting to the tragedy, Ardern labeled it a terrorist act resulting in the national security threat level being raised from low to high for the first time in that country's history (Ardern, 2019). Ardern was portrayed as a self-identified feminist, and media reports commended her for showing calmness, compassion, and empathy (Newsome, 2019; Rizvi, 2019). President George W. Bush, for example, in the wake of 9/11 "wanted to find out who did this and kick their ass," while Ardern on the other hand "focused her energies on the victims, their loved ones, and a nation that needs to heal" (Rizvi, 2019, paras. 3-4).

Method

As in previous agenda-building studies (e.g., Albishri et al., 2019; Kiousis et al., 2016), this study used content analysis to test the hypotheses regarding the transfer of salience of objects and attributes from Ardern's information subsidies to news media content and public discourse in the context of the Christchurch mosques shootings. Communications (media releases, speeches, and transcripts) of Ardern and the New Zealand government were collected and served as units of analysis, along with news stories and public tweets mentioning the massacre, from the day it occurred on March 15, 2019, until April 30, 2019, when communications about the incident petered out.

Sample

Sample data for this study covered the six weeks following the incident. Howell and Miller (2006) suggested that crises have a life cycle in the same vein as the product lifestyle in marketing. At all five stages in the crisis life cycle (prodromal or signal detection, preparation or probing, acute or containment, chronic or learning, and resolution or recovery), a mass media solution is suggested to mitigate fallout. The period covered addresses these stages and encompasses the bulk of the news coverage about the incident.

The media content about the incident was obtained from six national media outlets in Australia and New Zealand and the Associated Press using the search terms: Christchurch massacre, Jacinda Ardern, Muslims, Mosque, New Zealand, Gun Man, and terrorism. A total of 1,674 articles were retrieved from the News Bank database. However, because of redundancy in the articles, only some of the Australian and New Zealand newspapers (N = 181) and the Associated Press (*N* = 44) were coded. The Associated Press stories were used because of its intermediary agenda-setting function for international news selection (Golan, 2006). Communications from Ardern taken from the official government website Beehive.gov.nz were statements made in news releases (*N* = 19) and speeches (*N* = 1). To analyze public opinion, online tweets were retrieved using hashtags. The unit of analysis for public opinion was a single tweet posted by users. Data were retrieved from the hashtags using a crawling and open source program that was written in Python by several developers (Henrique, 2017). The scraping of Twitter data resulted in a large number of tweets (*N* = 39,798), so a random sample of 1,500 tweets was used from #ChristchurchMosqueAttack.

Measures

Object salience

A total of 16 stakeholders and 10 issues was selected for content analysis. The stakeholders were determined based on an initial reading of 10 percent of the sample containing communications from Ardern and news stories. The stakeholders were (1) Ardern, (2) Prime Minister Scott Morrison, (3) Mosques Victims, (4) the gunman, (5) ethnic and religious groups, (6) immigrants and refugees, (7) terrorists and terrorist groups, (9) parliamentarians and senators, (9) government departments and agencies/police force, (10) courts, judges, and attorneys, (11) news media, (12) New Zealanders/Kiwis, (13) Islamic States/Leaders of Islamic States (14), Australians/Aussies (15), international organizations (16), community organizations (17), and foreign countries and leaders other than of Islamic states. Each stakeholder was coded as present (1) or absent (0) based on the mention of the stakeholder in the individual government message, news article, or tweet.

The eight issues chosen for the analysis were based on the reading of the sample previously described. The issues examined in this study were: (1) threat to national security, (2) legislation,

(3) gun control, (4) immigration, (5) race relations, (6) human interest, (7) terrorism, (8) values and morals, and (9) internet open access. Each issue was coded as present (1) or absent (0) with the help of a list of keywords developed for each issue. For example, the issue immigration was recorded as present when "migrants," "immigration," or "refugees" were mentioned. For the issue race relations, the keywords used were "race," "racism," "Islamophobia," and "white supremacist."

Object salience was then determined by an aggregate measure of presence of each of the stakeholders and the issues in the same agenda (the agenda of Ardern, the news media, or public discussion).

Attribute salience

Five issue frames were chosen as substantive attributes for the analysis based both on the initial reading of the small portion of the sample and on a short list of the so-called generic frames identified in previous studies (Baran & Davis, 2015; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). They were (1) unity, (2) responsibility, (3) conflict, (4) resolution, and (5) tragedy. These frames assess whether a message is framing an issue in terms of solidarity, responsibility attribution, conflict, solution or treatment recommendation, or human tragedy. For example, a unity issue frame is reflected in the following messages: "when groups come together," "political agreement," or "we must act." The tragedy frame is present if any victims or expressions such as "innocent worshipers" were mentioned. Each frame was coded as present (1) or absent (0).

Following Kiousis et al. (2016), the affective attributes were measured with regard to the overall tone displayed specifically toward each issue mentioned in the analyzed messages. The tone was coded as (1) positive, (2) neutral, or (3) negative.

Attribute salience was determined by an aggregate measure of presence of each of the issue frames or tone category in the same agenda (the agenda of Ardern, the news media, or public discussion).

AMCC landscapes

We also measured how the four AMCC landscapes were associated with Ardern by assessing each of the landscapes' presence (where 1 = present, and 0 = absent) in the messages, articles, or tweets that mention Ardern. The presence of the four landscapes was judged with the help of predetermined keywords and expressions. For example, cultural landscape was present if the message, article, or tweet mentioned Ardern wearing the hijab, meeting with the Muslim community, attributing the attack as targeted to one particularly community or group, or reaching out to the Muslim community. Political landscape was present when the message, article, or tweet mentioned Ardern pushing changes to gun laws, addressing parliament in pushing the passage of gun reforms, seeking to end use of social media for acts of terrorism, or moving the national terrorism threat level up.

Message type

The communications from Ardern and media stories as well as the public tweets were further categorized as follows: (1) media releases, (2) transcripts, (3) speeches, (4) news stories, (5) editorials, and (6) opinions.

Intercoder reliability

Coding was equally distributed among the three coders. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha. In all, 10% of the sample was used in coder training, and 20% was used in calculating Krippendorff's alpha. After four rounds of coding, coders were able to reach a satisfactory agreement for all variables: stakeholders (0.83), issues (0.76), frames (0.71), tone (0.73), and AMCC (0.79).

Data analysis

To analyze how the AMCC was applied in the crisis communication, the coders were asked to identify which of the four landscapes was linked with Ardern each time she was mentioned. Then, the frequencies of landscapes were calculated for each type of communication to identify how frequently each landscape was associated with the Prime Minister. Due to the violation of Chi-Square assumptions of cells count as shown in Figure 1, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was used to scrutinize whether there were differences between sources of messages regarding the relative proportion of associating the Prime Minister with the four landscapes. The Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test has been used as an extension to the Fisher's exact test to deal with contingency tables that are larger than 2 X 2 (de Waal, 2015).

To analyze the first and second levels of agenda building, the frequencies of mentions regarding issues, stakeholders, frames, and tone were calculated for the New Zealand government messages, media, and public tweets. The lists of frequencies then were correlated using Spearman's rank-order correlation to test each hypothesis. The analysis for the third level of agenda building (*H5*) was conducted using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) to correlate the networks of stakeholders in the New Zealand government messages with their networks in media and public tweets. All the analyses were conducted using different R packages.

Results

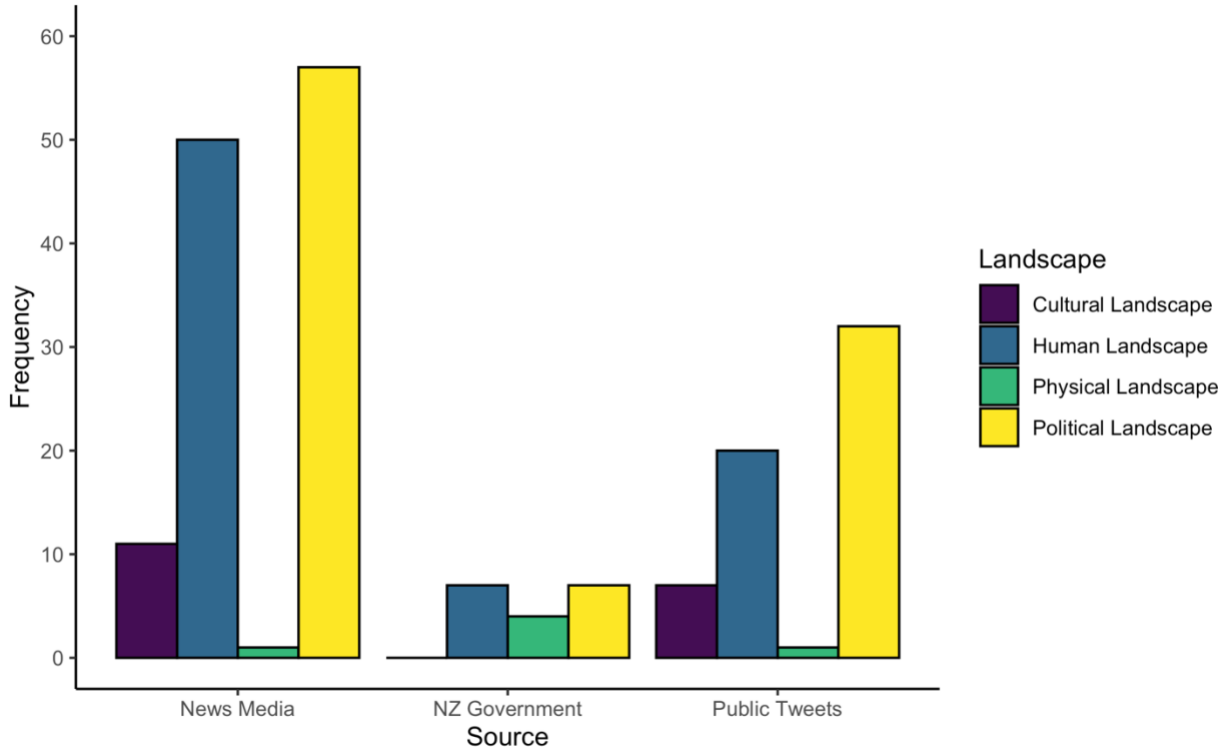
AMCC

RQ1 asked how the four AMCC landscapes were associated with Ardern in government communication, media, and public discourse. As shown in Figure 1, the New Zealand government messages had equally linked Ardern with the political (38.9%) and human (38.9%) landscapes. The same type of messages associated Ardern with the physical landscape in 22% of the total messages, and she was never associated with the cultural landscape in the New Zealand government messages. A similar pattern is also notable in the case of media coverage and public tweets as the political landscape was predominantly associated with Ardern compared to the other landscapes (47.9% in media coverage and 53.3% in public tweets). The human landscape was associated with Ardern in 42% and 33% of her total mentions in media coverage and public tweets, respectively. Out of her total mentions, Ardern was linked to the cultural landscape 9.2% of the time in media coverage, and 11.7% of the time in public tweets. She has seldomly been associated with the physical landscape in both media (0.8%) and public discourse on Twitter (1.7%).

Due to the size of the contingency table, and having less than 5 counts in some cells, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was used to determine whether there was significant difference between the New Zealand government's messages and news media coverage regarding associating the four AMCC landscapes with Ardern. The result shows that there was significant difference between the two types of messages regarding the relative proportion of AMCC landscapes (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test = 13.203, $p < .05$). The same test also was used to determine the difference between the New Zealand government messages and the public tweets about the crisis in terms of how both sources associate the four AMCC landscapes with Ardern. The analysis revealed a similar result to the first comparison: There was a significant association between the source of messages (New Zealand government vs. public tweets) and the relative proportion of which AMCC landscape was associated with Ardern (Fisher- Freeman-Halton exact test = 9.601, $p < .05$). Although the associations were significant in both cases, they provide evidence against the agenda-building power of the New Zealand government when it comes to influencing news media and the public regarding the proportional association of Ardern with the four AMCC landscapes. This logic of interpreting tests of association (e.g., Chi-Square, Fisher's exact test) has been applied in previous agenda-setting and agenda-building studies (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kiousis et al., 2013; Lan et al., 2020).

Figure 1

The Distribution of AMCC Landscapes Across the Sources



Object salience

H1 predicted that the salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the news articles published about the terrorist attack. The data offered support for *H1* for both stakeholders ($r = .573$, $p < .05$) and issues ($r = .632$, $p < .05$).

Relative to the total mentions of issues and stakeholders in the New Zealand government communication and the Prime Minister messages, New Zealand (15%), Ardern (14%), and Racial/Religious Groups (12%) were the most salient stakeholders, whereas Terrorism (28%), Human Interest (24%), and Security (12%) were on the top list of issues in government agendas. The news coverage of the Christchurch attack, however, put more emphasis on New Zealand (14%), Christchurch Mosque Victims (12%), and Racial/Religious Groups (10%). In terms of issues, the media coverage prioritized the same list of issues as the New Zealand government with slightly different emphasis and order (Security: 24%; Terrorism: 20%; Human Interest: 19%).

H2 stated that the salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively

related to their salience in the public discourse on Twitter regarding the terrorist attack. The correlations between the strategic messages by New Zealand's government and the public discourse on Twitter regarding the Christchurch attack were also significant for both stakeholders ($r = .659$, $p < .01$) and issues ($r = .717$, $p < .05$). *H2* thus was supported.

The public discussion of the Christchurch attack emphasized New Zealand (35%), Racial/Religious Groups (18%), and Christchurch Mosque Victims (9%) among the other stakeholders. In the same vein, Terrorism (32%), Human Interest (24%), and Politics (10%) were on the top list of issues mentioned in public tweets regarding the Christchurch attack.

Attribute salience

This part of the results focuses on the transfer of issues attributes from the New Zealand government's agendas to news media and public discourse on Twitter about the Christchurch attack. *H3* argued that the framing of the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of those frames in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre. Across all the types of messages, the issue of terrorism was mostly framed as "Responsibility Attribution" to either the perpetrator or far-right groups. Although the issue of human interest was predominantly framed as a tragedy in the government communication and the news coverage of the attack, it was mostly discussed by the public as an opportunity for unity and tolerance among different social and religious groups. The issue of politics was discussed from a conflict perspective in both media and public discourse; however, the same issue was mostly mentioned from a resolution perspective in the New Zealand government messages. Overall, the correlation between government messages on one hand and the news coverage and public discourse on the other hand concerning the transfer of issues attribute saliency was significant (news coverage: $r = .418$, $p < .001$; public discourse: $r = .353$, $p < .01$) (See Figure 1). Thus, *H3* was supported.

H4 suggested that the tone toward the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of similar tone toward those issues in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre. This hypothesis was only supported in the case of the correlation regarding tone saliency between government messages and the public discourse on Twitter (*H4b*; $r = .467$, $p < .01$). *H4a* was not supported. Out of the 11 issues discussed in the government messages, 5 were predominantly neutral, while 3 were mostly had a positive tone, and 3 were mostly discussed in a negative tone. Media, on the other hand, had 7 issues that were predominantly discussed in a negative tone, compared to 2 mostly neutral issues and 2 that were positive. Finally, a negative tone in public tweets was salient in 7 out of 11 issues, while a neutral tone was salient in 3 issues, and a positive tone was salient in 1 issue out of the 11 issues.

Network salience

As mentioned in the literature, the third level of agenda building examines how the linkages among issues or stakeholders transfer from one source to another. *H5* proposed that the salience of stakeholders' network cooccurrences in the public relations messages of Ardern and the New Zealand government's messages will be positively related to their salience in a) media coverage and b) public discourse regarding the Christchurch massacre. Three network matrices were created in Excel by calculating how frequently one stakeholder is mentioned with another stakeholder in the New Zealand government messages, media coverage, and public discourse on Twitter. The government matrix was correlated with media and public tweets matrices using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) test through an R package. The results showed that the cooccurrences of stakeholders in the government messages were significantly correlated with their cooccurrences in the news coverage (*QAP* = .593, $p < 001$) and the public discourse on Twitter (*QAP* = .507, $p < 001$). Therefore, *H5* was supported.

Discussion

This study empirically investigated the effectiveness of the crisis communication by Ardern and her administration following the Christchurch mosques shootings to influence media and public agendas. The study used content analysis to examine the relationships between the government's communication to the news media coverage of the crisis and public discussions of the incident. The results revealed solid support for all three levels of agenda-building linkages (i.e., object salience, attribute salience, and network associations among objects or attributes) of Ardern's crisis communication to news content and to public discussion. The results of this study underscore the value in further extending the political public relations and agenda-building model (Kiousis et al., 2016; Tedesco, 2011) to a political crisis communication context.

Specifically, the study found that the issues raised in the government's correspondence were those prioritized in the media. One such issue was the Prime Minister's naming the incident a terrorist attack and moving the country's terrorist threat level to high for the first time in that country's history. The perpetrator, an Australian national, did not fit the traditional description of people the West typically portrays as terrorists, but by naming the gunman as such and raising the threat level, the Prime Minister gave salience to these objects and issues and set the stage for the media to follow, demonstrating the power of political communication and its agenda-building influence to give labels and priority to events.

The success of Ardern to attribute responsibility for the loss of lives to the use of automatic weapons was instrumental in helping with the speedy passing of new gun laws, which demonstrates the strategic nature of agenda building and political public relations. All these laws were proposed and passed by April 11, which supports the political crisis communication

literature argument that politicians use crisis events to pass laws that would be difficult during normal times and to support their mission and goals.

The government was not only successful in leading the issues but also in directing the tone of public opinion supporting Hart's (1993) argument of crises having both a perceptual and affective category. This white supremacist terror attack on the Muslim community could have quickly escalated into a race war. Ardern's tone, however, engendered togetherness and brotherly/sisterly love among the different races of people living in New Zealand, which gives credence to Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) call for more investigation into a feminist approach to crises as Ardern's communication did not take the masculine approach of a call for justice, but rather was more in line with care and called for building closer ties within the community (Gilligan, 1982; Simola, 2003, 2005). Ardern appeared to have thrived during the crisis as politicians can do (Coombs, 2019). In terms of crisis types, it was symbolic of how unity could evolve from tragedy through meaning making. In the wake of the Christchurch attack, Ardern made meaning and managed emotions by incorporating care in her symbolic crisis response—manifested by, for example, hugging and speaking at length to and about the people in the Muslim community who had been targeted in the attack (Salomonsen & Hart, 2020). In terms of network agenda building, Ardern's messages were mostly framed as being sympathetic toward the victims, which could lead to the perception that she was a compassionate leader that embraced diversity.

The findings also imply that the incorporation of the ethic of care in crisis communication might have played a role in facilitating the transfer of salience. The government communication emphasized the humane and political aspects of the care in leadership, while both the media and the public via Twitter perceived the two aspects as most prominent. In the analysis, the humane aspect was manifested by the mentioning of Ardern and her administration's empathy and support to victims. The political aspect was recorded when there was a condemnation of extremist and terrorist acts and a call for changes to laws, for example.

Whereas about one-fifth of the communications by Ardern and her administration contained the physical aspect (manifested by providing material support), very few of the media and public messages paid attention to this aspect when discussing the government's leadership. Although both the media and the public placed a moderate amount of attention on the cultural aspect of the care in leadership, the government did not emphasize this aspect in its communications. This may be due to the sensitivity of the cultural aspect, which was manifested by gestures like meeting with the Muslim community and wearing the hijab, and this sensitivity seems to demonstrate that the public is most interested in how politicians make them feel, rather than the actions that they take since the cultural was played out in the nonverbal actions of the Prime Minister. Her approach, therefore, appears to give credence to the application of a caring feminist approach to a political crisis, a domain that has been dominated by male leaders.

Theoretical and practical implications

The question of how a feminist approach to crises influences public opinion remains understudied. However, this study adds five main findings to the literature. Following are the theoretical and practical implications.

First, Ardern acted with a feminist ethic of care, which answers the research question and supports Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) position that care can be exhibited beyond interpersonal relationships and outside the private domain. This finding gives credence to further research on differences between male and female approaches to political leadership especially during a crisis. Care was found to be exhibited in at least three landscapes in the government communication—the human, physical, and political, suggesting the feasibility of engaging with care at the level of wider society and in the public sphere. Although the social and political construction of care as a gendered concept has received much attention across the social sciences (Milligan & Wiles, 2010), it is important to recognize the need and benefits of extending the ethics of care to the political communication domain, particularly given that the number of women leaders around the world, although still a small group, has grown (Geiger & Kent, 2017).

Second, the study provides at least some empirical evidence that an ethical approach to crisis communication could bring about an alignment of media and public agendas to the political leader. The public relations literature suggests the dominance of the two-way symmetrical model as an ethical approach to public relations (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The ethics of care might serve as a useful alternative approach to crisis communication that takes consideration of a more complex social and political-economic context.

Third, the media interprets actions and frames political actors based on these actions, which would account for care in the cultural landscape being found in media coverage and public tweets. The significance of this finding is that the nonverbal actions of politicians become just as important during crises as the verbal. For women leaders, nonverbal actions might be even more critical as their choice of clothing, the events they attend, and the type of help they give become political statements that are interpreted by the media. In this instance, these acts were interpreted as care.

The fourth finding adds to the complexity of salience transference at the second level of agenda building. Although there was a strong transference of issues, the transference of tone was less prevalent. From a practical standpoint, one might reason that in this type of crisis, the public becomes dependent on the government for information and instruction, and therefore the government frames would be salient. However, what was also evident from a practical standpoint is that, in this type of crisis the public is also important since the terrorist attack was based on racial hate, and public opinion demonstrated that the public did not endorse the action. Therefore, although the predominant human interest frame from the government was that of tragedy and New Zealand's "darkest days" (Wockner, 2019, para. 7), this same frame was discussed by the public as an opportunity for unity and tolerance, which suggests that practitioners should use unity frames for crises like this one.

Finally, like other network agenda-building studies, this research found that the cooccurrences of stakeholders in the government messages were significantly correlated with their cooccurrences in the news coverage (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo & Guo, 2017). Further research in this area is needed to identify the different influences on public opinion that these relationships might have. For the political public relations practitioner, these findings make it more critical to be strategic in selecting the stakeholders and issues with which to associate since the media and public have been found to make meaning from everything that is done during a crisis.

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More Than a "Bad Apple": Applying an Ethics of Care Perspective to a Collective Crisis

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Abstract

The Larry Nassar case is one of many abuse stories within and beyond sports. Although conventional strategies of image repair such as identifying one "bad apple" are considered effective within an ethics of justice perspective, we argue that crisis responses must adopt an ethics of care when physical and emotional harm has occurred. Using a case study approach, we qualitatively analyzed organizational responses from Michigan State University (MSU), U.S.A. Gymnastics (USAG), and the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC), as well as media coverage of Nassar's sentencing hearing, through Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) framework. We theorize how the media landscape creates a space of resistance for survivors that facilitates ethics of care in a collective crisis.

Introduction

In January 2018, former doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison after decades of abusing hundreds of athletes (Cacciola & Mather, 2018; Levenson, 2018). The investigation into the case, which began in the summer of 2016 (Kwiatkowski et al., 2016), ultimately estimated that more than 50 people across three interdependent organizations—Michigan State University (MSU), U.S.A. Gymnastics (USAG), and the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC)—shared responsibility for enabling the continuous abuse (Wagner, 2018). Although the organizations did apologize and promise corrective action, such typical reactive crisis responses

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framed Nassar as a bad apple rather than part of a larger problem in the culture of sport. As such, the organizations failed to acknowledge collective responsibility in their responses and lack of preventative action. In Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney's words during Nassar's sentencing hearing:

> If Michigan State University, U.S.A. Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee had paid attention to any of the red flags in Larry Nassar's behavior I never would have met him, I never would have been "treated" by him, and I never would have been abused by him. (Abrams, 2018, para. 21)

Ultimately, the organizations' responses lacked an ethics of care—relational obligation and concern—toward the victims and those indirectly affected by this trauma and relied instead on an ethics of justice—a focus on legal responsibilities—that is the hallmark of most crisis communication (Tao & Kim, 2017).

Crisis communication, especially within a sports context, has generally focused on crisis management and image repair for organizations (e.g., Frederick et al., 2019; Len-Ríos, 2010). However, we argue that this narrow view of organizationally based crisis communication does not allow for adequate theorizing about the larger cultural problems and collective responsibility related to issues such as abuse. Following the lead of the collective voice of survivors and other feminist communication scholars, we argue for a continued move toward a feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) in crisis communication. Using a case study approach, we analyzed the crisis communication responses of the organizations involved in the Larry Nassar case, as well as media coverage of the scandal during the sentencing hearing. We offer a brief analysis of the organizational responses of MSU, USAG, and USOC as they enact a traditional bad apple response to the scandal. Then, we apply Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) for Ethical Strategic Communication to the collective crisis involving MSU, USAG, and USOC. Ultimately, we propose the media as an additional landscape of care to consider in the model to approach a collective crisis from an ethics of care that advances public interest communications theorizing.

Literature review

Our literature review begins with a brief overview of traditional approaches to crisis communication that result in a bad apple logic. Then we discuss the need to consider collective crises, particularly when focusing on networks of abuse. Finally, we discuss ethics of care in a crisis communication context.

Crisis communications and the bad apple

As Avery et al.'s (2010) analysis of 18 years of crisis communication research revealed, Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory and Coombs' (1995) situational crisis communication theory

(SCCT) dominate the field. At their core, both approaches are about maximizing reputational protection for organizations in post-crisis communication. Organizations can follow specific crisis response strategies such as denial, apology, justification, and excuse based on crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation (Coombs, 2007). Because of this prescriptive approach to crisis response, there is a potential for organizations to shallowly follow these response strategies to avoid responsibility for the crisis and manipulate stakeholders into accepting the response (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Although Coombs (2012) insisted that, in SCCT, "people are the first priority" (p. 159) while reputation is second, this may not always be the case in practice. In a more recent examination of crisis communication literature, Zhao (2020) argued that such an organization-centric research agenda limits understanding of the broad implications of crises for a variety of stakeholders, which we contend includes victims of abuse.

Scholarship on crisis communication in the context of sports scandals follows this trend closely, focusing heavily on strategies for image repair and restoring organizational reputation and legitimacy (Brown & Billings, 2013; Bruce & Tini, 2008; Len-Ríos, 2010) and/or fan and community perceptions of the organizations and their responses to sports crises (i.e., Brown et al., 2015; Frederick et al., 2019; Harker, 2021). In such crises, a bad apple is usually named—someone who is "deficient or deviant in their individual choices, but not a product of the larger economic, historical, or political systems they inhabit" (Wingard, 2017, p. 137). The bad apple or separation strategy diverts responsibility away from the organization(s) and its culture because another person or entity is "really" responsible for the offensive act (Brinson & Benoit, 1999, p. 505). Smith and Keevan (2019) examined this strategy of separation in the domestic violence case involving football player Ray Rice and the response from the National Football League (NFL) Commissioner Roger Goodell. The scholars explain that the strategy of separation, borrowing from the logic of the bad apple, combines "bolstering, shift the blame, and corrective action to demonstrate that the acts of particular employee do not represent the attitudes, thoughts, or actions of the organization" (Smith & Keevan, 2019, p. 295). Similarly, media outlets oftentimes cover instances of child sexual abuse by employing the episodic frame, which diverts attention from the broader issues (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

Sexual abuse scandals, whether within or beyond the world of elite sports (e.g., Ohio State, Penn State, Baylor, Florida State, the Catholic Church, the military) cannot be viewed as isolated incidents but instead must be understood as arising out of a networked context of abuse. In other words, the crisis is not limited to the heinous acts of cruelty perpetuated by individuals (bad apples). As such, we cannot only look at responses from single organizations. It is from this position that we next introduce scholarship focused on understanding collective crises.

Defining a collective crisis

The Nassar case involves several interdependent and overlapping organizations (MSU, USAG, USOC) and can be considered a collective crisis, or a crisis involving multiple organizations

associated with the same crisis (Comyns & Franklin-Johnson, 2016). Crises that affect multiple organizations "presumably influence each other's crisis resolution responses because the organization's response can be easily compared with the responses of other organizations" (Ham et al., 2012, p. 19). This type of comparison then may permit the bare minimum of ethical responses as each organization tries to respond in ways that are equal to what other organizations have done with little motivation to go beyond that. For a collective crisis, one event may be multiple events that have occurred within different organizations. Collective crises may lead to distrust in not just one organization, but the system that sustains them. However, current theorizing in crisis communication typically only considers one organizational context and not these interconnected systems.

Although scholars and practitioners explore how these strategies are or are not effective at managing the crisis or repairing image, this narrow view of crisis communication does not address the larger cultural problem or collective responsibility among organizations. At the time of writing, research into the Larry Nassar case also has been limited to single organizations with Frederick et al. (2019) analyzing the traditional image repair responses (and fan perceptions) of only MSU. In sum, traditional crisis communication research and practice, especially in cases where harm has been done to human beings, does not do enough to acknowledge collective responsibility and an ethics of care. In the following section, we explain how an ethics of care has been considered in crisis communication research.

Ethics of care in crisis communications

Feminist scholar Carol Gilligan (1982) proposed an ethics of care to challenge discourses in ethical theory focused on rights and legal discourses—typically called an ethics of justice. In an early study of crisis communication and sexual harassment, Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995) found that legal strategy dominates organizational decision making in times of crises. Similarly, Tao and Kim (2017) found that "when organizations respond to their crises, they tend not to emphasize ethical approaches; though when they do it is more often the ethics of justice approach than that of the ethics of care" (p. 690). At the center of these different approaches is the relationship to the individuals involved. Put another way, an ethics of care is about fulfilling responsibilities toward people rather than resolving claims of conflicting rights (Simola, 2003). This type of ethical approach focuses not on issues of fairness but on issues of care given toward vulnerable populations (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018).

Bauman (2011) explored three different ethical approaches to crisis leadership, concluding that an ethics of care offers the best approach for dealing with crises that involve harm because people attribute intentionality to organizations and people who allow harm to occur. Ultimately, an ethics of care approach "requires leaders to manage the complexity and human relationships that are part of the crisis rather than spending time making impartial judgments and resolving conflicting rights" (Bauman, 2011, p. 288).

Crisis prevention is essential to an ethics of care framework. Simola (2005) argued that signal detection—paying attention to early warning signs (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993) and uptake—informing someone in power to act upon warning signs (Mitroff, 2001)—are key crisis prevention areas in which to apply a care perspective. According to Simola (2005), resistance, voice, and silence are concepts of care most salient to crisis prevention. People can engage in resistance to relational violations through voice by speaking "of their own observations, knowledge, and feelings. They also listen to voices of resistance in others" (Simola, 2005, p. 345). But, using voice to resist may lead to negative repercussions for individuals, resulting in silence that "precludes others from receiving information about potential problems" (Simola, 2005, p. 345). To summarize, a care perspective in crisis prevention allows for opportunities for people to voice concerns and for those concerns to be acted upon by those with the ability to prevent crisis situations.

Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) advanced previous theorizing related to ethics of care to formulate the AMCC, which can be used before, during, and after crises across contexts, organizations, and geographies. Drawing on feminist geographies (Dias & Blecha, 2007), the authors ground studies of care "in a specific time, place, and geopolitical landscape" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 23), meaning there is no one size fits all crisis prevention or response. Landscapes feature both material and ideological characteristics. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) identify four landscapes of care: (1) physical—material resources and geography, (2) cultural—gender roles, social norms, shared values, (3) political/economic—government institutions/norms/politics, economic structures, political systems, and (4) human—emotionality, existing networks/relationships, health. Further, there are situational variables based on traditionally feminine values, such as interdependence, relationships, vulnerability, and reciprocity, that crosscut each landscape. The authors argue that considering landscapes of care and these situational variables "could contribute to understanding and implementing effective *ethical* communication that holds public interest (vs. primarily organizational interest) at their core, even when practiced from an organizational or management perspective" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 19, emphasis in original). However, Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) studied only single organizations to develop their model. We believe there is an opportunity to further understand how ethics of care can be applied to a collective crisis by examining the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case. As such, the following research question guided our study:

RQ1: How, if at all, was the bad apple logic used in organizational responses to the Nassar scandal?

RQ2: How, if at all, can the collective crisis of the Nassar abuse case be understood through the AMCC framework?

Method

We used a case study approach to answer our research questions because the Nassar abuse scandal offers what Yin (2009) terms a "critical case" (p. 47), which is appropriate for research designed to confirm, challenge, or extend an existing theory. Patton (1990) explained that critical cases are "those that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things" (p. 174). To triangulate our data through multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009), we collected and analyzed both organizational responses and media coverage of the Nassar abuse scandal from January 19-24, 2018. Although Nassar's abuse can be traced back to the early 1990s (Dator, 2019), we focus on this week because it is when 156 women read victim impact statements during an eight-day sentencing hearing for Nassar. Victim impact statements play an important role in an ethics of care perspective because they allow survivors to experience "social acknowledgement, a sense of control, an opportunity to tell [their] story" (Herman, 2005, p. 574). Relatedly, this time frame also encompassed key dates in the organizational response of the USOC, USAG, and MSU, including the resignation of top leaders.

Data collection

We looked at each of the organization's website during the specific time frame of January 19-24, 2018, to find the organization's official statements. We included three statements from MSU, two statements from USAG, and one statement from the USOC in our study. Additionally, we included media coverage of the Nassar abuse scandal gathered from Factiva. Limiting our search results to the January 19-24 dates, the search terms "Larry Nassar" and "USA Gymnastics" yielded 312 articles, "Larry Nassar" and "Michigan State University" yielded 69 articles, and "Larry Nassar" and "US Olympic Committee" yielded 29 articles (n = 410). Our sample was primarily comprised of news articles, but we also included sports, feature, opinion, and broadcast/radio transcripts to gain a more holistic understanding of the case. When removing duplicate articles that included mention of two or more of the organizations, the total number of articles analyzed was 300. Furthermore, we also drew from existing secondary research on abuse in gymnastics and competitive sports in general (e.g., Chotiner, 2018; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008; Ryan, 1995) to give a more complete picture of the landscape of abuse in competitive sport to juxtapose this with the landscapes of care.

Data analysis

Articles and media releases were uploaded to NVivo to help organize and qualitatively analyze the data. In alignment with Yin's (2009) strategies for case study research, we relied on theoretical propositions to guide our analysis. For the first research question, we focused on analyzing the organizational sources and responses, using the bad apple logic (Wingard, 2017) as

a lens through which to analyze the data. For the second research question, we took a deductive approach to the data, using the AMCC framework (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018) discussed in the literature review to guide our analysis as initial codes: physical, cultural, political/economic, and human landscapes. In each of the four landscapes, we then considered how the cross-cutting care considerations of relationships, interdependence, vulnerabilities, and reciprocity were present or not. We integrated existing secondary research on the topics of sport culture and abuse in each landscape of care to provide a more holistic interpretation of our data.

Results

RQ1: How, if at all, was the bad apple logic used in organizational responses to the Nassar scandal?

All three organizations—MSU, USAG, and the USOC—responded to Larry Nassar's abuse in playbook ways, meaning they enacted traditional image repair strategies. Each organization enacted the strategy of separation as part of the bad apple logic. For example, MSU spokesperson Jason Cody explained that the organization did not cover up Nassar's horrific conduct, stating, "Nassar preyed on his victims, changing their lives in terrible ways" (Michigan State University, 2018a, para. 3). Former MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon, in her apology statement, said she was "sorry a physician who called himself a Spartan so utterly betrayed your trust and everything for which the university stands" (Michigan State University, 2018b, para. 4). Former CEO of the USOC Scott Blackmun apologized for "the pain caused by this terrible man" (Blackmun, 2018, para. 2). Simon and Blackmun did acknowledge a larger failure in the organizations; however, the failures were limited to this specific case (not acting soon enough) rather than an acknowledgment of the larger culture of Olympic Gymnastics. All three of the organizations' leaders have either been ousted or resigned (Haag & Tracy, 2018; Macur & Belson, 2018; Ruiz & Futterman, 2018) in another instance of bad apple logic.

Bad apple logic facilitates an ethics of justice response from organizations that solve the problem by removing the bad apple(s) but not addressing the deeper cause or the harm done to individuals at a relational level. The MSU, USAG, and USOC responses followed this pattern. For example, USAG claimed it followed the correct procedures and left the rest to law enforcement—in this case the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In her January 24, 2018, statement on the sentencing of Nassar, former USAG CEO Kerry Perry said that "USA Gymnastics applauds Judge Rosemarie Aquilina for handing Nassar the maximum sentence of up to 175 years, in an effort to bring justice to those he abused and punish him for his horrific behavior" (U.S.A. Gymnastics, 2018b, para. 1). Simon, who praised the tireless work of law enforcement and cyber forensics at MSU, also deflected responsibility to the authorities. In her December 2017 statement, she claimed she had "been intensely focused on making sure nothing interfered with the criminal investigation or bringing Nassar to justice" (Michigan State

University, 2017, para. 3). This ethics of justice response was further cemented by the NCAA's investigation that found no wrongdoing on behalf of MSU. Ultimately, MSU, USAG, and the USOC remain a part of the larger system that enables bad apples to ferment.

RQ2: How, if at all, can the collective crisis of the Larry Nassar abuse case be understood through the AMCC framework?

Physical landscape

In the AMCC framework, the physical landscape considers "the physical, lived realities of consumers, message receivers, clients, stakeholders, publics, and partners" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, p. 31). When considering the collective crisis of the Larry Nassar abuse scandal, the multiple locations in which Nassar operated and was employed are part of what allowed the abuse to occur for so long. Child sexual abuse often thrives when adults are isolated with a child. In the same way, isolating organizational responses bounded by physical location isolates and silences the abuse, ignoring the interdependence of relationships. Although the organizational responses highlighted above are limited in their scope, it was overwhelmingly the media coverage of the abuse scandal and trial during the time frame analyzed that showed the larger network of abuse.

Mainstream media coverage implicated all three organizations to varying degrees, often centering around Nassar's shared employment status through MSU and USAG. One lede in an editorial talked about the sentencing of Nassar "having laid bare the utter and cataclysmic failures at USA Gymnastics, at Michigan State, and elsewhere, to keep the children in their care from harm" (Abraham, 2018, para. 2). Even when only one affiliation was highlighted in a headline, such as "Ex-USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar sentenced to 40-175 years in prison" (Reid, 2018a) and "Survivors slam MSU for response to Larry Nassar complaints" (Glor & LaPook, 2018), neither organization dominated the media coverage for its sole involvement in the crisis.

When each institution was implicated individually, the focus was primarily on a failure of organization leadership—with top leaders being named—and the need for an independent investigation. For MSU, calls primarily came for the resignation of then university President Simon whom Dey (2018) described as "hanging on to her job with bloody fingernails" (para. 2). MSU found its crisis being compounded when a "MSU trustee backs president, says there's more 'than just this Nassar thing'" (Yan, 2018, para. 2), which was viewed as a dismissive comment to the severity of this collective crisis. For MSU, accountability was framed as coming from the NCAA—"NCAA opens investigation into how Michigan State handled sexual abuse allegations against Larry Nassar" (King et al., 2018)—and the attorney general—"Michigan State University seeks Attorney General review of Nassar case; School asks state for review amid calls for president's resignation and public outrage over handling of abuse allegations" (Korn, 2018). The focus of these two entities as providing accountability for this crisis in the

context of MSU frames Nassar's abuse as a legal issue and with limited scope to athletics. The focus becomes more about what rules or laws were violated than the impact on the survivors, a clear indication of an ethics of justice approach rather than an ethics of care. In a *New York Times* editorial entitled, "U.S.A. Gymnastics Still Values Medals More Than Girls," Higa (2018) wrote that after the F.B.I. was contacted:

> Dr. Nassar was relieved of his assignments at U.S.A. Gymnastics two days later. But the organization did not contact Michigan State University or Twistars Gymnastics Club, whose athletes the doctor also treated and abused, and it has contended it did not have an obligation to do so…Legally, U.S.A. Gymnastics might be right. But can anyone credibly argue that was the morally acceptable thing to do? (Higa, 2018, para. 9)

Such editorial coverage rightly pointed out the flaws of an ethics of justice perspective and discussed how the abuse could have been prevented had any of the organizations stepped in to address the accusations or communicated with one another.

Cultural landscape

The cultural landscape of Olympic Gymnastics exemplifies traditional norms in gender roles (including masculine/feminine traits) and identities, social structures and norms, shared values, and shared personality traits. We acknowledge that this case involves more "newsworthy" victims of sexual assault because of their gender, race, and age (Marcel, 2013, p. 294; see also Gilchrist, 2010). Indeed, young female gymnasts embody the ideal of the "white American darling," an "ideal type against whom female athletes are commonly measured" (Butterworth, 2008, p. 266), and have more power behind their voices of resistance as their harm is more easily believed. Further, the high-profile nature of this case, due to the worldwide media spectacle that is Olympic Gymnastics, reinforces the perceived worthiness of the public's attention.

Interestingly, although the collective crisis primarily revolves around MSU and USAG, USOC is implicated in the coverage, but to a lesser degree and primarily in its investigative role and third-party accountability to USAG. However, USOC is also criticized heavily by survivors of Nassar's abuse for not acknowledging its role in preventing this abuse decades ago and doing too little too late. The focus of this criticism came from "six-time Olympic medal winner Aly Raisman" who "has ripped the US Olympic Committee saying it had 'failed' the young athletes and must be held accountable" (Agence France-Presse, 2018, para. 1). Rather than USOC having the credibility to serve in any sort of accountability role, gymnasts "Raisman and [Jordyn] Wieber charged that USA Gymnastics and the U.S. Olympic Committee 'emboldened' Nassar and 'enabled' his sexual abuse of more than 140 gymnasts and young athletes, creating what Raisman described as the 'worst epidemic of sexual abuse in the history of sports'" (Reid, 2018b para. 2). In this way, the extent of the collective crisis is revealed as the systems of accountability that are ostensibly in place in gymnastics are not working and not protecting the athletes. Institutional grooming takes place when "offenders manipulate entire systems or institutions into believing that they are no threat to children" (McAlinden, 2006, p. 339). That survivors

repeatedly informed parents and coaches of Nassar's behavior over decades illustrates the silencing and institutional grooming within elite gymnastics (Howley, 2018; Kwiatkowski et al., 2016). Gold medals were most important.

Political/economic landscape

The political/economic landscape considers how power disparities related to hierarchy and authority can create vulnerable publics (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Gendered violence, including sexual assault, abuse, and rape, is an epidemic plaguing all sports and all levels of sports participation. In their analysis of 159 cases of criminally defined abuse, Brackenridge et al. (2008) found that "nearly all (98%) cases were perpetrated by coaches, teachers, and instructors, who were predominately male and ranged in age from 16-63 years old" (pp. 395-396). As Anderson and White (2018) argued, sports help coaches and authority figures gain power, which then is used to teach obedience to their authority. This creates a relational power dynamic in which athletes or participants remain silent and deferential to their superiors.

This power dynamic is especially salient in an elite sport such as Olympic Gymnastics. This system creates circumstances "that allow for those who are dominant (especially White, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, able-bodied men) to perform acts of violence (sexual and otherwise)" without consequence (Cannella & Perez, 2012, p. 284). Like many other sports, Olympic gymnasts' routines are strict; their sporting and nonsporting activities are highly controlled and subject to the whims of coaches and, in this case, medical staff. Survivors illustrated how Nassar exploited his power through their harrowing stories of "anguished probing, under the guise of treatment...feeling helpless to challenge a doctor at that age" (Cacciola & Hauser, 2018, para. 6). Survivors also revealed Nassar's controlling practices—his treatments—such as when he gave McKayla Maroney a sleeping pill before a flight and then proceeded to treat (molest) her in his hotel room. In Raisman's victim impact statement, she attested:

> Imagine how it feels to be an innocent teenager in a foreign country hearing a knock on the door and it's you. I don't want you to be there, but I don't have a choice. Treatments with you were mandatory. You took advantage of that. You even told on us if we didn't want to be treated by you, knowing full well the troubles that would cause for us. (Gajanan, 2019, para. 11)

Although coaches and authority figures can maintain and exploit their forms of relational power, Fisher and Anders (2020) argue that "perpetration of abuse persists in sport spaces largely because athletes train and compete in relations of force that privilege structures and practices to which athletes are subordinate" (p. 129).

Economically, Olympic Gymnastics is part of the institution of corporate sport, which is marked by the "institutionalization, bureaucratization, commercialization, and spectacularization of elite sport as a mass entertainment product designed to generate maximum surplus value across myriad revenue streams" and "is now the accepted structural and ideological blueprint for

commercial sport organizations" (Andrews & Silk, 2018, p. 515). Survivor and gold medalist Raisman said of U.S.A. Gymnastics that "their biggest priority from the beginning and still today is their reputation, the medals they win and the money they make off of us" (Higa, 2018, para. 6).

Unfortunately, when such a high value is placed on the capital generated by elite sports, brand logic undermines all else (Proffitt & Corrigan, 2012). In an official statement, then MSU President Simon squarely articulates how protecting the financial and legal interests of the institution creates an antagonistic relationship with survivors:

> MSU is entitled to, and its insurers require, that we will mount an appropriate defense of these cases. This means MSU's lawyers are making arguments in defense of the claims of civil liability. There is nothing extraordinary about such legal efforts—they are typical at this stage of civil litigation. Given Nassar's horrendous acts, these arguments can seem disrespectful to the victims. Please know that the defenses raised on MSU's behalf are in no way a reflection of our view of the survivors, for whom we have the utmost respect and sympathy, but rather represent, as the Board has said, our desire "to protect MSU's educational and research missions." (Michigan State University, 2018b, para. 11)

Human landscape

The human landscape considers existing relationships, emotionality, and health at both an individual and collective level (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). Although specific organizations' responses (and lack of response) were critiqued in various media sources, victims' voices and stories often prominently came through in media coverage in ways that went unaddressed in the official organizational responses. For example, during her victim impact statement, Raisman highlighted the lack of care toward the survivors, saying that "neither U.S.A. Gymnastics nor the United States Olympic Committee had 'reached out to express sympathy or even offer support—not event to ask, 'How did this happen?' 'What do you think we can do to help?'" (Cacciola & Hauser, 2018, para. 19). It is through the survivor voices and victim impact statements highlighted in the news coverage that the systemic, collective crisis in the sport is addressed and critiqued. Survivor voices, not official organization responses, displayed vulnerability and emotionality in communication about the case.

Additionally, within the media landscape, conversations were focused not on issues of organizational reputation, but rather on the deep and lasting impact of abuse for more than 150 young women and girls. Headlines such as "Ex-sports doctor's victims draw strength from each other" (Webber & Eggert, 2018) focus on the support they have provided each other that none of the three institutions at the center of this crisis did. A particularly poignant lede in *The Atlantic* said:

> It was an arresting moment, even on a day full of them. The Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman stood in front of a courtroom last Friday and addressed Larry Nassar, the

> former Michigan State University doctor who's been accused by upwards of 150 women of sexually abusing them over more than two decades. "Larry," she said from the podium in the Lansing, Michigan, courtroom, "you do realize now that we, this group of women you so heartlessly abused over such a long period of time, are now a force, and you are nothing." (Putterman, 2018, para. 1)

The coverage also highlighted individual stories and experiences disclosed during the Nassar sentencing hearing. For instance, one headline in the Daily Mail reads, "'I f***ing hate you': National champ Mattie Larson reveals Larry Nassar assaulted her in front of U.S.A. Gymnastics rep and says she quit after giving herself a concussion to avoid pedophile doctor's abuse" (Spargo, 2018). The individual stories reveal the personal pain among Nassar's victims stemming from this collective trauma. Their individual pain was juxtaposed with the fact that more than 150 young women and girls came forward with similar stories of abuse. The power of the survivors' voices and coverage of the victim impact statements during Nassar's sentencing demonstrate the extent of the collective crisis in a way that centers the moral failure of all three institutions toward these athletes. The collective story of survivors—and collective spirit of resistance conjured by their voices—will inspire systemic change. Raisman specifically called out U.S.A. Gymnastics for "rotting from the inside" during her victim impact statement (Reid, 2018b, para. 1). Raisman also articulated how survivors are tired of organizations' statements claiming that "athlete care is the highest priority" while "all the while, this nightmare is happening" (Reid, 2018b, para. 22). Coverage of the Nassar case in *The New York Times* highlighted the need for change in these organizations by focusing on survivors' collective story, shared trauma, and the relief brought about by Nassar's sentencing (Cacciola, 2018).

Discussion

The Larry Nassar sexual abuse case was undoubtedly horrific and highlights the need to consider collective crises related to human abuse as public interest communications issues. As the current analysis demonstrates, this case of abuse was the outcome of an underlying rot that had been festering for decades in the sport of elite gymnastics at the hands of negligent leaders, parents, coaches, and organizations collectively—not because of a single bad apple (Wingard, 2017). This case highlights the conditions in which Nassar was enabled to abuse, including the shared responsibility of people within and across organizations and landscapes of care.

To compound the harm, organizations' responses were crafted from an ethics of justice perspective rather than from an ethics of care perspective, which was not surprising given past research in this area (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Tao & Kim, 2017). In addition to an organization-centric focus on following proper laws and procedures, the perspective of those creating laws and policies related to sexual violence is generally limited, and an ethics of rights and justice often requires only a minimal response from organizations. We believe a focus on ethics of care can be an impetus for change in both organizational policies and the legal system.

An ethics of rights and justice is insufficient because when issues of abuse are only seen on an individual level (either a single bad apple or a single organization), the moral failure of the entire system is not sufficiently addressed. Discarding the bad apple is often touted as the solution at the organizational level but is unlikely to result in larger systemic change when the collective crisis is so pervasive.

Simola's (2005) work regarding ethics of care in crisis prevention is particularly relevant in the Nassar case, especially while reading victim impact statements. Because of a lack of ethics of care in signal detection and uptake in acting upon warning signs, more than 150 young women experienced abuse. Victim impact statements allowed survivors to resist and reclaim their voice (Herman, 2005). However, survivor voices should be acknowledged far before a sentencing hearing for an abuser. That each organization did identify tangible policy changes and procedures for reporting abuse is a positive step. In addition to MSU, USAG, and the USOC, the NCAA—in the same month it released the results of its investigation into MSU—adopted a "Policy on Campus Sexual Violence" that promised:

> A positive and thriving athletics team culture that revolves around respect and empathy for all, fostering a climate in which all feel that they are respected, valued and contributing members of their teams, athletics programs and institutions; and creating an environment in which students (athletes and nonathletes alike) feel safe and secure, both emotionally and physically, and are free of fears of retaliation or reprisal. The positive culture exuded by a member institution's NCAA teams is the catalyst for a positive culture across an entire campus. (NCAA, 2018, para. 3)

However, the corrective action in this and other cases is often reactionary, and that is not enough when crises are preventable. Although the sentencing of Nassar made clear how he will pay for the crimes he committed, MSU, USAG, and USOC have yet to truly answer all the gymnasts and communities harmed by Nassar (McGraw, 2018). As Maroney said, "It is time to hold the leadership of Michigan State University, U.S.A. Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee accountable for allowing, and in some cases enabling, his crimes" (Abrams, 2018, para. 22). As all three organizational leaders are gone, their replacements must critically examine the practices that contributed to this culture of abuse across multiple organizations and landscapes of care. Furthermore, people in positions of power need to make laws and policies to recognize ethics of care and proactively prevent sexual abuse of the magnitude that we have seen in not only the Nassar scandal, but also other cases in sports organizations, the Catholic Church, and other powerful social institutions. Rather than focusing on organizations, public interest communicators must treat child sexual abuse as a collective public health issue and crisis (Letourneau et al., 2014).

Theoretical and practical implications

Crisis communication scholars, in this case and others within and beyond the context of sports, have used traditional strategies of image repair, including bolstering, shifting the blame, and separation for single organizations to illustrate how effectively crises are managed. These traditional crisis communication analyses illustrate image repair strategies to "redirect audiences, and to control the narrative" (Frederick et al., 2019, p. 2). Such perspectives largely evade an ethics of care, which distinguishes the AMCC framework as an innovative approach to understanding crises (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). However, in applying this framework, it became clear that news coverage of this case served as the site for critiques of traditional organizational responses and prioritized survivors' experiences and needs across all four landscapes of care. Media coverage illuminated the collective crisis at hand and established relational attachment, centered, and rehumanized the survivors by platforming their voices. In this way, the media coverage modeled the type of response we hope organizations might adopt. As such, we argue that media should be considered a fifth landscape of care, particularly in a collective crisis.

Yet, this is not to suggest that media coverage always follows an ethics of care. Media can also perpetrate a bad apple logic while focusing on episodic framing of child sexual abuse (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Previous research has found that child maltreatment is frequently mischaracterized as an isolated atrocity committed by a bad apple (Aubrun & Grady, 2003). However, in what may signal a shift in media coverage, Hove et al. (2013) found that most news articles on child maltreatment were framed thematically and focused on societal causes of and solutions for child maltreatment.

We also recognize the irony in the time frame selected for this study; the media coverage unfolded during an important point of the legal process despite our criticism of ethics of justice. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to cover the extensive body of literature regarding the influence of victim impact statements (e.g., Eiler et al., 2019; Roberts & Erez, 2004), we believe that the inclusion of survivor voices in subsequent media coverage offered an opportunity for open dialogue for other survivors of abuse (Madden & Alt, 2021). Even beyond this study, we believe that open dialogue facilitated by media (both traditional and social) can allow for the interplay of factors of interdependence, relationships, vulnerability, and reciprocity (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018) in this landscape of care.

One salient practical implication of adopting the AMCC framework for a collective crisis surrounding issues of abuse is recognizing that these crises are entirely preventable. Instead of an organization waiting for a crisis to happen, organizational communicators can advocate for prevention trainings, such as Stewards of Children, that provide recommendations for specific organizational policies related to working with children. For example, one such policy might ensure that an adult is never alone with a single child (Darkness to Light, 2021). By requiring employee training on child sexual abuse prevention, organizations can both help to prevent a crisis at their own institution and play an important role in public interest communications.

Limitations and future research

As with any research, our study has several limitations. First, the selection of the time frame for our analysis limited the scope of the data included for analysis. Although this selection was intentional to focus on the victim impact statements, Nassar's abuse ultimately persisted for decades. A case study more longitudinal in nature would certainly yield additional insights into the actions and inactions taken in this case. Related to the limited time frame for analysis, we also included a limited selection of documents for analysis. At the time of data collection, Factiva was the only news aggregation research tool available to the researchers. We recognize the limitations inherent in all individual databases, which certainly influenced which media sources we included. Additionally, though not included in the current study, social media discourse surrounding this case could provide a fruitful source of data as well and would offer further research opportunities to expand upon the fifth landscape of care we proposed.

Future research should continue to explore a feminist ethics of care within and around sports—from coaching practices on the field or in the gym, to organizational responses before, during, and in response to the harm of human beings, to media and public discourses about sports. Because of the important role that sports play in society, we believe that public interest communications scholars have an important role to play in developing a body of knowledge related to ethics of care and sports culture.

Conclusion

Care should come before image. This case is emblematic of the countless other cases where multiple organizations, and not a single bad apple, are responsible for harm across the physical, cultural, political/economic, and human landscapes of care. Organizations must acknowledge the collective nature of these cases and scholarship on crisis communication must continue to assess the ethics of responses rather than simply the effects of those responses. The humanity of those affected, particularly in cases of abuse, must be prioritized in all stages of communication.

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When "Tried and True" Advocacy Strategies Backfire: Narrative Messages Can Undermine State Legislator Support for Early Childcare Policies

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Abstract

A core principle of policy advocacy is that to engage decision makers in the urgency, complexity, and controversy of problems, advocates must effectively tell the story of those issues. Policy stories, or narratives, paint mental pictures of what a problem is, who is affected, and how it came to be. Yet, the persuasive effects of narratives on one key group, state legislators, remain understudied. Drawing from the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), media advocacy, and public interest communications, we sought to inform advocacy strategy by illuminating state legislators' responses to messages about public investments in quality childcare for all. Contrary to expectations, we found that narratives can have unintended effects challenging or even diminishing legislator support. We discuss implications for advocacy strategy.

Introduction

Early childhood care and education in the United States has added an acute crisis to what previously had been a chronic crisis (Biden, 2021). Providers of these essential services—overwhelmingly women and often persons of color—already were struggling under the prepandemic weight of high demand and insufficient pay and benefits as well as inadequate working conditions, limited educational tools and resources, and need for professional credentialing and ongoing training (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

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The recent experience of COVID-19 and the lockdowns, physical spacing, and reduced capacity orders that were required to contain it have left many providers in jeopardy if not forced them to close altogether. Meanwhile, families across the country are faced with difficult, if not impossible, decisions between remaining in the workforce and providing their own care and education for their youngest children while their providers are shuttered. And, although federal attention has turned to the need to offer financial support to see families and providers through the childcare emergency the pandemic has wrought, others have cautioned that this alone will not be sufficient: state and other policy makers also will need to address the sources of instability in access and provision of early childhood care and education that existed prior (Bassok et al., 2021; Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, 2020). As such, while the nation looks to a return to life with greater public mobility and the reopening of community resources such as early care centers,[1] it is instructive to know how state policymakers thought about early childcare and education before the pandemic, as this backdrop forms the foundation onto which the subsequent effects of COVID-19 overlaid. Our research explored state lawmaker reactions to advocacy messages encouraging state-level early care and education policy supports in the prepandemic months of late 2019.

A core principle of public policy advocacy is that to engage audiences—including policymakers—in the urgency, complexity, and controversy of the societal problems we face, advocates must effectively tell the story of those issues (Ganz, 2011; Ryan, 1991; Stone, 2002; Wallack et al., 1993). Policy stories, or "narratives,"[2] paint a mental picture of what a problem is, who is affected, and how it came to be. Furthermore, policy stories explain why the issue is important and deserves our immediate attention, who and what must be mobilized to resolve it, and present potential solutions to be considered. Quite simply, narratives provide "mental models" of complex or abstract issues for audiences to assess (Bower & Morrow, 1990, p. 44). As such, narratives can serve a key function within a comprehensive policy advocacy strategy (Dorfman et al., 2005).

Numerous resources and tools have been prepared to support policy advocates in constructing compelling and effective narratives about the issues they address (e.g., Berkeley Media Studies Group et al., 2018; Frameworks Institute, 2020; Opportunity Agenda, 2019). Although advocates, funders, and public interest communicators strongly recommend narrative as a core strategy (e.g., American Public Health Association, n.d.; Grant, 2019; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018), the effects of policy narratives among one key audience—state legislators—remain understudied. In particular, it is not clear whether narrative

[1] The final draft of this paper was prepared in early spring, 2021.

[2] We recognize that some distinguish between a broader form of narrative, meaning an overarching metanarrative, or societal-level set of issue portrayals that blend into a predominant set of perspectives and understandings (e.g., Roe 1994), and a single story, or a unique portrayal of an issue involving characters, setting, plot, and moral. For purposes of this paper, we refer interchangeably to a single policy narrative or story to reflect the specific issue portraits advocates and others use to convey specific examples of how social issues affect people and what proposed solutions may have to offer. This use of the term is also consistent with conceptual definitions employed in fields of communication, social psychology, and political science/policy studies all informing this work (see Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Green & Brock, 2002; Jones & McBeth, 2010).

appeals resonate along partisan lines, and further, what effects these messages might have on advocates' primary goal: state legislators' support for policy. Thus, our research explores how U.S. state legislators across the ideological spectrum respond to narrative appeals for policies supporting affordable, quality, early childcare for all, and whether those responses translate to shifts in support for related policies.[3]

Literature review

Narrative as advocacy strategy

Policy narratives are issue portrayals constructed of a setting (when, where, and under what conditions the problem takes place), characters (those affected and those responsible for cause and/or solution), plot (the contextual arc explaining relationships among story elements, key decision points and actions), and resolution (the critical takeaway(s) audiences should glean, notably including those surrounding the policy at issue) (e.g., Ganz, 2011; Jones & McBeth, 2010). Well-constructed narratives help audiences cognitively place evidence in context (Stone, 1989), understand and analyze the conditions in which problems occur and solutions may be possible (Iyengar, 1990; Lundell et al., 2013), think in more complex ways about the causes and solutions for social problems (Niederdeppe et al., 2014), and become absorbed into the narrative world at which time they are less likely to counterargue an underlying persuasive message (Green, 2006; Ratcliff & Sun, 2020). Narratives also emotively convey the situations portrayed so that we may better understand the situation and experiences of those affected—even if we may not have experienced those conditions ourselves (Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Oliver & Dillard, 2012).

Prior research demonstrates that narratives can engage audience members in support for a range of policies addressing the social determinants of health (Bandara et al., 2020; Niederdeppe et al., 2015). Notably, there is evidence that narratives can shift policy attitudes among both the general public (e.g., Bachhuber et al., 2015) and policymakers (e.g., Mosley & Gibson, 2017; Niederdeppe et al., 2016). More broadly, metaanalytic studies find that narratives are generally persuasive in shaping attitudes and beliefs among audiences (Braddock & Dillard, 2016) and enjoy a slight persuasive advantage (again on average) over nonnarrative messages in some messaging contexts (Shen et al., 2015).

Davidson (2017) chronicles a range of storytelling strategies and considerations employed by nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups, and others working to engage decision makers in science-based policy. A key feature of these strategies is grounding policy narratives in one or more shared values. Values are the deeply held touchstones we use to determine

[3] For ease of description, we refer to state legislators/ures throughout, although we recognize that the legislative bodies of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands are territorial. Our labeling is in no way meant to diminish this fact.

whether and why something matters (Haidt, 2012; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Lakoff, 2001). As such, social activist and scholar, Marshall Ganz, explains that although data and evidence can answer the How question, narratives can answer the critical Why question and in so doing connect audiences to urgency and calls for immediate and specific action (Ganz, 2011). Quite simply, Ganz (2011) asserts, "Public narrative is a leadership practice of translating values into action" (p. 274).

Political scientists and policy scholars have observed that narratives are critical in legislative spaces and that the public policy dynamic is, at essence, a contest of narratives (Boswell, 2013; Stone, 2002). In this tradition and leading with the assertion that "narratives are the lifeblood of politics" (McBeth et al., 2007, p. 88), the architects of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) provide a structure for understanding the mechanisms through which narratives exert their influence in the policy process (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2017). According to NPF, this competition for meaning operates at and through interacting levels of the policy dynamic: the individual micro-level of policy actors' attitudes, beliefs, intentions, affective response, and other cognitions; policy system meso-level involving the individuals, groups, coalitions, and organizations that exert pressure on powerholders to enact policy change; and societal macro-level including narratives that exist in institutions and cultures. Our research seeks to inform those advocates and others working to influence policy and policy systems at the meso-level by illuminating state legislators' micro-level responses to narrative appeals.

It is in this context that we sought to explore the potential role of values-based narratives in advocacy for policies that help ensure affordable, accessible, quality childcare for all. Quality early childcare and education (henceforth "childcare") for our youngest children, ages 0-5, has emerged as a critical social determinant of health (Chandra et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that quality early childcare benefits children (Anderson et al., 2003; Donoghue, 2017; Morrissey, 2019; Phillips et al., 2017), their parents (Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, 2016; Morrissey, 2017), and their professional providers (Otten et al., 2019). Evidence also suggests that quality early childcare confers broader societal and economic benefits (Cannon et al., 2017; Heckman et al., 2010). Despite strong evidence for the value of these policies, however, access and affordability of quality early childcare in the United States remain significant problems for many—particularly those from groups already most systemically marginalized. As such, childcare is fundamentally a social and health equity issue (Braveman et al., 2018).

We seek to inform early childcare policy advocacy efforts grounded in media advocacy (Wallack et al., 1993; Winett & Wallack, 1996) and public interest communications (Christiano, 2017; Fessmann, 2017), each of which relies on narrative communication to engage decision-making audiences in specific public policy initiatives. Media advocacy specifies that primary targets of such efforts be the decisionmakers with the power to enact the policy solution, and that secondary audiences be those positioned to directly influence the primary targets (Wallack et al., 1999). Therefore, the primary targets in media advocacy campaigns—those whose attention is most sought and for whom core messages are crafted—tend to be narrowly circumscribed. Similarly, public interest communications indicates that although audiences can be large, they

also can be as narrowly cast as single powerholders, depending upon the campaign's overarching strategy and specific goals (Christiano & Niemand, 2017; Fessmann, 2017). A key challenge is that these important decision-making audiences are often hard to access—or reticent to participate in—the critical formative message research required of any well-developed campaign.

We focus on state legislators as decisions about policies that can render quality childcare more affordable and accessible to all families (e.g., tuition subsidies, provider incentives)—as well as those that can help ensure the quality of programming for children and increase the professional stature of providers (e.g., program metrics and standards; provider training and fair wages)—often are determined or facilitated at the state level (Karch, 2013). Moreover, unlike general public audiences, who are likely to consider these issues from the perspectives of familial need and decision making, state legislators must transactionally consider how the systems that support early childhood care and education could operate at a population level, including attendant tradeoffs, cost- or risk-benefit equations, and political implications (Stone, 2002). We thus considered U.S. state legislators a critical audience to assess. Specifically, we explore how this key and understudied audience responds to policy narratives, as compared to other forms of values-based argument, and whether and how these responses translate to policy support, policy beliefs, and intention to act on behalf of the proposal.

Contextualizing the current study

The research literature with a focus on values-based narrative messaging, early childhood care and education policy, and state legislator audiences is limited. It is not, however, entirely unexplored. One notable cluster of projects emerged around the early 2000s, an interval that (not coincidentally) also saw a resurgence of attention to early childhood care and education policy at both state and national levels (Karch, 2013). Although these studies now are older, they also are of important conceptual bearing for the current study. One such project, involving both public opinion work and key informant interviews with policy professionals who could speak to the interests and priorities of state legislators, recommended the use of messages that highlight the benefits of early care and education not only for children and families, but also for the functioning of broader society (Dorfman et al., 2004). This research further recommended developing rigorously contextual messages that clearly link current circumstances and potential benefits to the solutions presented, so that all associations are clear and dots connected for audiences.

Other work conducted in this same interval took the form of policy case studies that assessed early childcare and education messaging used in policy advocacy at state and local levels. These authors highlighted the importance of describing early childcare as both a professionalized industry and contributor to economic development. They found these portrayals effective both for generating public and community leader support and for distinguishing such services from welfare programming (Stoney, 2004; Warner et al., 2003). Proponents of the economic

development argument cautioned, however, that such benefits should only be described as secondary to the primary outcomes—advancement of children's wellbeing and development—to ensure that public and decision-maker focus remains on the quality of programming for children, and not merely access to childcare placements that benefit working parents (Warner et al., 2003).

This concern also was reflected in a series of analyses and projects extending over a decade and conducted by a group of scholars and practitioners from the cognitive linguistics and framing arenas. They cautioned that focus on parental return to work can activate deeply entrenched perceptions of what they termed "child storage," which requires only conditions of safety and security, and not quality programs that enhance social and cognitive development (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, p. 10; see also Gilliam & Bales, 2004). Indeed, even the term childcare, they cautioned, can invoke conceptually limiting images of "babysitting" and storage, rather than advancing images of enriching experiences that prepare children for school and life (Lakoff & Grady, 1998, p.14). At the same time, however, these authors acknowledged that messages must incorporate the economic realities that leave some families with no choice but to have parents in the workforce (Frameworks Institute, 2014; Lakoff & Grady, 1998). Thus, among these authors' recommendations were that messages emphasize the benefits of quality programming for children's social and cognitive development and highlight the broader socioeconomic outcomes that advantage everyone (Bales, 2008; Frameworks Institute, 2005). Indeed, these elements were found to resonate well with state legislators and legislative staff in focus groups and interviews (Frameworks Institute, 2005). These authors also recommended that messages emphasize the need to ensure trained and specialized professional early care and education providers (Lakoff & Grady, 1998) as well as highlight an equity frame emphasizing access to early childhood care for all, regardless of income (Gilliam & Bales, 2004).

This collected work informs our thinking about the current project although we recognize that, having been conducted more than a decade ago, political and social issues contexts may have shifted. Our own more recent work (Niederdeppe et al., in press) found that a highly contextual narrative structured around the value of equity (i.e., advancing policies that assure all families have what they need for wellbeing, irrespective of a community's starting point) increased support for early childhood care policies among U.S. general public audiences relative to a control message. Important from an advocacy perspective, this narrative also was more effective than a simple propolicy advocacy message in generating support among audiences who were initially least likely to support such policies. Moreover, we found that these effects both transcended self-described political identity and extended spillover benefits by also increasing support for other child-facing policies (Niederdeppe et al., in press).

What these studies collectively suggest is that values-based communication involving elements of narrative have helped audiences connect to, and generate support for, early childcare policies. What we do not know is whether and which values-based narratives can help move key audiences on these issues today, and in particular whether messages structured around the value of *equity* can be persuasive. As such, we sought to examine to what extent narratives exert similar effects on elected partisan audiences—state legislators—who can be difficult to access

and thus who remain understudied. Specifically, we explored the effects on policy support of three different message types relative to a non-message control condition, beliefs about the pros and cons of the policy, and intention to advocate for early childcare initiatives. The messages explored were a values-based *narrative* involving specific characters in their context, a plot (problem portrait and key decision points), and resolution (policy outcome); a simple *propolicy message* involving problem description and policy benefits but lacking identifiable characters and their story arc; and a combination of *abridged narrative* (including all story components) *with simple propolicy message*. We explored all three message conditions because each is a strategy used by advocates in policy settings. Consistent with the policies presented and prior research described above, all messages were structured around the value of *equity*, emphasizing the importance of all families having access to the affordable, quality childcare options they need, irrespective of who they are and where they live.[4] Based on these research foundations, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1 (Preregistered[5], PH1): Messages that include the narrative will outperform the control group in promoting policy support and advocacy intentions (i.e., the narrative policy appeal will outperform the no-message control condition in promoting early childcare policy support and advocacy intentions among state legislators).

Hypothesis 2 (Preregistered, PH2): Both the narrative and narrative+argument condition will outperform the policy argument condition in shaping these outcomes (i.e., the narrative and the combination of abridged narrative with simple propolicy message would outperform the simple propolicy argument condition, alone, in generating state legislator policy support and advocacy intentions).

We also tested additional hypotheses about message effects on specific propolicy beliefs as well as common beliefs about the limitations of the policy. We conceptualized these additional hypotheses as explanatory variables to understand the potential for message-targeted beliefs to shape whether or not the message achieved its persuasive goal: increasing support for early childcare policies and advocacy intentions related to these policies. We considered these hypotheses secondary and, for the sake of simplicity and parsimony, did not preregister them:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The narrative message will outperform the no-message control condition in promoting message-targeted beliefs in favor of the policy.

[4] We used the complete narrative context including the characters' situation, story plot with fundamental conflict, and proposed solution to convey the value of equity: everyone getting what they need to succeed, irrespective of starting point. We did not use the word equity, specifically, as it is often conflated with equality (i.e., everyone getting the same), and because audiences' definitions of the term often are not shared. See for example an approach to standardizing the definition of equity in health by Braveman and Gruskin (2003).

[5] We preregistered several study hypotheses and analytic procedures through the Open Science Foundation (OSF), (https://osf.io/mg4zk/?view_only=9aa62661343b4f629979a5160ed1fe04).

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Both the narrative and narrative+simple propolicy message conditions will outperform the simple propolicy argument in promoting message-targeted beliefs in favor of the policy.

Based on our prior work (Skurka et al., 2019; Skurka et al., 2020) and the political reality that many state policy issues have the potential for polarization among office holders whose elections are driven by partisan identities and voter preferences, we also explored the roles of party affiliation and fiscal and social ideologies on message effects:

RQ1: How will state legislators' political party affiliation influence the message effects hypothesized above?

RQ2: How will state legislators' fiscal and social ideologies influence the message effects hypothesized above?

Method

Study design overview

We recruited state legislators using a commercially available comprehensive database from the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) including contact information for all state legislators in the 50 U.S. states and U.S. territories.[6] We invited all 7,387 current (at the time of the study) state legislators with a valid email address (14 additional legislators in the database had invalid or missing emails) to participate in the online survey experiment. Initial invitation emails were sent August 30, 2019. Eight reminder emails were sent between September 9 and November 25, 2019. A total of 6,641 initial nonrespondents also received three rounds of telephone reminder calls, beginning September 4 and concluding November 19, 2019.

We received 834 initial responses including 242 who provided consent and answered at least one of the questions that followed and 592 who consented and completed the survey. We first excluded participants with missing data for either main outcome variable (targeted policy support or policy advocacy intentions), which reduced our sample to 681 responses. We then examined recorded time spent on each message prompt and removed respondents who spent fewer than 20

[6] This research was supported by the Evidence for Action Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation [grant no. 76134]. This research was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Boards at both sponsoring universities (Cornell University and Portland State University). All respondents provided electronic informed consent prior to participation. Details are available from the Cornell University Institutional Review Board for Human Participants. The preregistered full study instrument, including message prompts and survey items, are presented on the OSF website (https://osf.io/mg4zk/?view_only=9aa62661343b4f629979a5160ed1fe04).

seconds on any study message (a preregistered analytic decision) as brief interactions are an indicator of insufficient engagement to successfully complete the survey task. Removing those participants who dedicated insufficient time to messages reduced the final analytic sample to 623 respondents.

Respondents completed the study in a median of 18.2 minutes spread across an average of 4.7 days and spent an average of 2.5 minutes reading messages (*Mdn* = 1.7 minutes) in conditions other than the no-message control. Analysis of patterns of completion revealed a bimodal distribution of time to completion—395 respondents (63%) completed the survey in an hour or less, while 228 respondents (37%) took more than an hour to complete. This difference was driven by the fact that some legislators opened and/or began the survey but did not complete the study in that initial sitting; instead, they went back to complete it in days following, often following one of the email reminders.

We considered dropping respondents who took more than an hour to complete the study (under an assumption that they completed it in multiple sittings) but decided not to do so for several reasons. First, we did not preregister formal criteria for dropping respondents due to excessive time to completion and were thus hesitant to impose new criteria post facto. Second, both theory and data suggest that the effects of narrative messages are likely to endure over a period of at least several days. Multiple theorists have argued that unique elements of narrative processing, including cognitive and emotional connections with characters and vivid imagining of story elements, could make narrative effects more likely to endure than other forms of messaging (e.g., Appel & Richter, 2007; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Cohen, 2001; Green & Brock, 2002). The accumulated empirical evidence also supports this assertion: a meta-analysis of 14 studies with 51 effect size estimates at time 1 (immediately after exposure) and 66 estimates at time 2 (an average of two weeks later) found that narrative message effects were comparable across baseline (Cohen's $d = .14$, $p = .003$) and subsequent assessments (Cohen's $d = .16$, $p = .001$) (Oschatz & Marker, 2020). Third, in our own data, we found no evidence of differences in estimated effect sizes between respondents who completed the study in less than one hour versus those who completed the study over a longer time span. Specifically, we performed analyses for all four outcome variables that included an indicator variable for time to completion (*tcompletion* = 1 if <=1hour, 0 if >1 hour), indicator variables for study condition (excluding the no message control group), and interaction items between the time to completion variable and each study condition (y^ = β*condition2 + β*condition3 + β*condition4 + β**tcompletion* + β*condition2 by *tcompletion* + β*condition3 by *tcompletion* + β*condition4 by *tcompletion* + ε), and inclusion of these interaction terms did not improve the model significantly (*p* values ranged from 0.18 to 0.83 across outcomes). Furthermore, we ran stratified analyses of each time to completion group (≤1 hour and 0 if >1 hour) and found that coefficients did not change meaningfully in magnitude or direction. Thus, our preregistration, theory, prior evidence, and our own data each supported the decision to analyze all 623 cases.

Message conditions and content

Respondents were asked initial questions assessing their preexisting support for targeted childcare policies in the United States along with questions about other public health or social policies to avoid presensitizing the focal topic. We then randomly assigned respondents to one of four message conditions: a propolicy narrative ("narrative"), simple propolicy message ("simple-pro"), combined abridged propolicy narrative with simple propolicy message ("simple-pro + narrative"), or a no-message control ("control") (see Table 1). Respondents were asked to read one of the three messages or no message at all (control). After reading their assigned message, respondents were presented the balance of the survey including questions about their postexposure policy support, advocacy intentions, message-targeted beliefs, demographics, and general fiscal and social ideologies—the latter of which have been shown to be uniquely influential in reasoning among policymakers (Purtle et al., 2018).

Table 1

Message Conditions Study Arms

Arm	*Approach*
Arm 1	Control condition—no message
Arm 2	Simple propolicy message
Arm 3	Propolicy narrative
Arm 4	Simple propolicy message + abridged propolicy narrative

All of the propolicy messages (simple-pro, narrative, and narrative+simple-pro) were structured around three targeted policies advanced by early childhood researchers and advocates: 1) state subsidies to families to help pay for childcare during parents' working hours; 2) state financial incentives to childcare companies/organizations to increase the number of high-quality and affordable facilities available across all communities; and 3) state financial incentives to childcare companies/organizations to provide professional providers ongoing training and to assure a living wage.

The *simple propolicy message* (Arm 2) asserted, without accompanying narrative elements, the importance of investing in accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare for all. It argued that state and local leaders should endorse policies that support families and the professionals who provide high-quality childcare. The message was structured around the value of equity by emphasizing support for all families particularly those starting with the least resources. The simple-pro message was 521 words (see preregistration link below for full text of all message conditions).

The *narrative message* (Arm 3) made the same propolicy arguments as in the simple-pro condition, embedded within a story about a couple named Alisha and Jason. The couple were described as working parents in Denver, CO, who recently had their second baby and were struggling to find high quality affordable childcare for their two young children so that Alisha could return to work. In telling the story of how Alisha and Jason worked to resolve the problem on their own, the narrative made the case that theirs was an increasingly common challenge for families in many communities: parents often must work to support their families in today's economy; access to affordable quality care is not available to everyone, everywhere; and the cost of childcare is so inaccessible for many young families that it forces impossible decisions about which life necessities to prioritize. The narrative further pointed to the familial, developmental, and socioeconomic benefits of access to quality childcare; placed Alisha and Jason's struggles in a broader social context; and related that context to the proposed solution by describing how specific policies could help ensure that all families have the childcare they need. This emphasis on meeting family needs irrespective of who they are and where they live was the core of the equity value message. The narrative message was 671 words.

The combined condition of *simple-pro + narrative* (Arm 4) asked respondents to read two separate but sequential messages. To eliminate redundancy across the two message prompts, the narrative message was abridged to avoid repeating arguments in the simple-pro message. The abridged narrative was 383 words, and the simple-pro message was 523 words.

Participants

Respondents were predominantly male (56.6%), an average of 58.1 years old (*Mdn* = 61.0), and highly educated (87.9% with college or advanced degree). Most identified as White (83.5%), 22.9% reported being parents, and 15.6% reported that they had children under the age of 5. More than half described themselves as Democrats (59.2%), 37.2% said they were Republicans, 2.7% reported being Independents, and <1% indicated "another party/no preference." Because we anticipated some would identify as Independents or unaffiliated, we also asked respondents to choose which of the two major parties, Democrat or Republican, most closely fit their perspectives. We used this closest party choice for the balance of our analyses, with 60.1% identifying as Democrats and 39.1% as Republicans.

In terms of ideology, 45.4% described themselves as socially liberal, 30.6% described themselves as socially moderate, and 24.0% socially conservative. At the same time, 21.3% described themselves as fiscally liberal, while 45.2% described themselves as fiscally moderate, and 33.5% described themselves as fiscally conservative. Of topical relevance to the messages tested, 202 respondents (35.5%) reported serving on the Health Committee in their state legislatures, while 197 respondents (34.7%) reported serving on their state's legislative Education Committee.

All but one state (Virginia) were represented in this study, as were two U.S. territories, Guam and Puerto Rico. Notably, some states (e.g., New Hampshire, Maine) contributed more

respondents than others (e.g., California, Florida), although to some extent this may be explained by variations in the size of state/territorial legislative bodies. As proportions of their legislatures, Guam (26.7%), Maine (21.0%), Utah (20.6%), New Mexico (17.9%), and Idaho (15.2%) participated most, while Virginia (0%), American Samoa (0%), Ohio (0.8%), California (1.7%), and Michigan (1.4%) participated least.

Respondent demographics and descriptive characteristics are presented in Table 2. We compared participant demographics to those in the state legislator database (gender, political party, and legislative chamber). Male legislators were less likely to participate than female legislators (B = -0.41, $p < .001$), and Republicans were less likely to participate than Democrats (B = -0.37, $p < .001$), but rates of participation were comparable across chambers (e.g., House Representatives versus Senators; House as comparison group: B = -0.16, p = .115).

Table 2

Participant Demographics and Descriptive Characteristics

	Frequency or Mean	% or SD	χ^2 or F, p value [1]
Age	61	58.11	F (3, 549) = 1.14, p = 0.331
Education			χ^2 (9) = 13.93, p = 0.125
Less than high school	0	0.00	
High school diploma/ Equivalent	9	1.60	
Some college/ Technical school	59	10.46	
Bachelor	195	34.57	
Advanced degrees	301	53.37	
Household Income			χ^2 (12) = 13.79, p = 0.314
$0-$24,999	2	0.37	
$25,000-$49,999	39	7.29	
$50,000-$74,999	59	11.03	
$75,000-$99,999	99	18.51	
100,000 or more	336	62.80	
Gender			χ^2 (6) = 6.97, p = 0.324
Female	238	43.27	
Male	311	56.55	
Transgender/ Non-binary	1	0.18	

Party			χ^2 (9) = 5.98, p = 0.742
Republican	211	37.28	
Democrat	335	59.19	
Independent	15	2.65	
Another party/ No preference	5	0.88	
Closest Party Choice			χ^2 (3) = 3.49, p = 0.322
Democrat	344	60.89	
Republican	221	39.12	
Social Ideology			χ^2 (18) = 12.72, p = 0.808
Extremely liberal	65	11.48	
Liberal	192	33.92	
Slightly liberal	58	10.25	
Moderate	76	13.43	
Slightly conservative	39	6.89	
Conservative	113	19.97	
Extremely conservative	23	4.06	
Social Ideology (Collapsed)			χ^2 (6) = 7.57, p = 0.271
Conservative	136	24.03	
Liberal	257	45.41	
Moderate	173	30.57	
Fiscal Ideology			χ^2 (18) = 16.38, p = 0.566
Extremely liberal	20	3.53	
Liberal	101	17.81	
Slightly liberal	68	11.99	
Moderate	128	22.58	
Slightly conservative	60	10.58	
Conservative	150	26.46	
Extremely conservative	40	7.06	
Fiscal Ideology (Collapsed)			χ^2 (6) = 4.66, p = 0.588
Conservative	190	33.51	
Liberal	121	21.34	
Moderate	256	45.15	

Race			
White	474	83.45	χ^2 (3) = 2.86, p = 0.413
Black	47	8.28	χ^2 (3) = 0.14, p = 0.987
Hispanic/Latinx	25	4.51	χ^2 (3) = 0.72, p = 0.869
Another Race	41	7.22	χ^2 (3) = 2.07, p = 0.558
Parents (with children under 5)	97	15.57	χ^2 (3) = 1.46, p = 0.692
Parents	128	22.86	χ^2 (3) = 2.68, p = 0.443
Health Committee	202	35.50	χ^2 (3) = 4.33, p = 0.228
Education Committee	197	34.68	χ^2 (3) = 7.74, p = 0.052
Total	623		

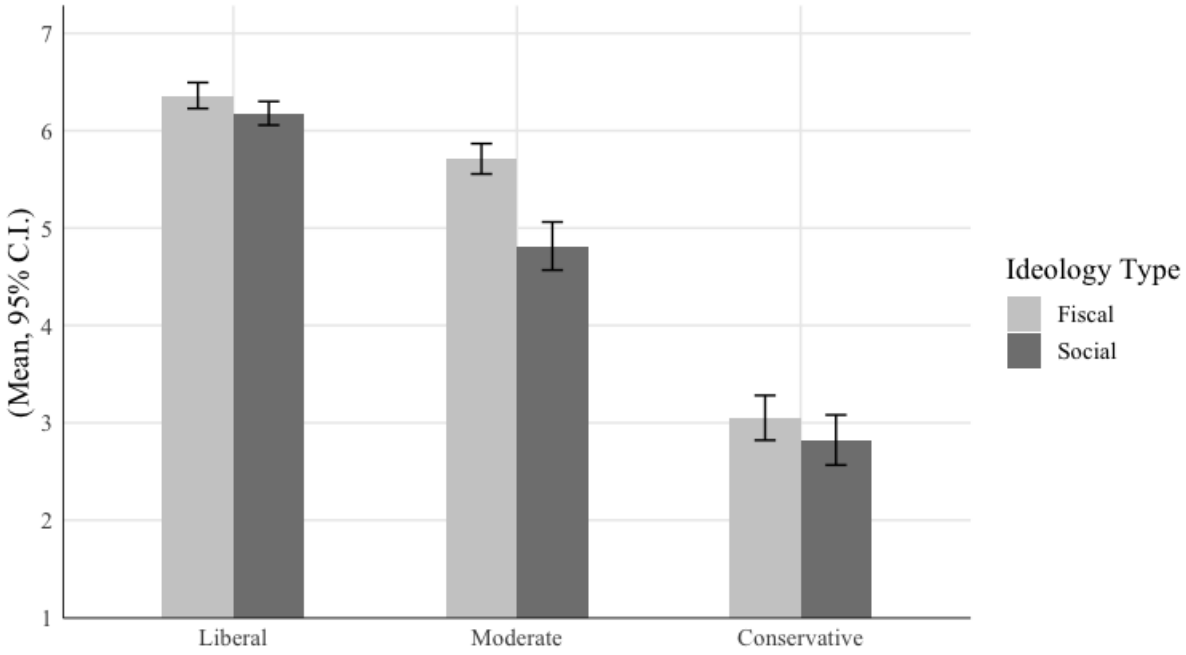
Note: The columns labeled, "χ2 or F for diff. by randomized group, p" present a formal test of whether the demographic characteristic was balanced between randomized groups.

Prior to message exposure, we asked participants to rate their relative levels of support or opposition (ranging from 1, strongly oppose, to 7, strongly support) to the three targeted policies for increasing affordable, high-quality childcare for all as well as to a series of nonchildcare public health and social policies as distraction items. The three items on targeted childcare policy support comprised a reliable composite measure (M = 4.94, SD = 1.90, *Cronbach's* α = 0.93) and indicated that those identifying as fiscally or socially liberal, as well as those identifying as fiscally or socially moderate,[7] exhibited significantly greater preexisting support for the targeted childcare policies incorporated in study messages than did those identifying as fiscally or socially conservative (Figure 1).

[7] We aggregated fiscal and social ideologies from 7-points to 3-points, as follows: very liberal + liberal = liberal; slightly liberal + moderate + slightly conservative = moderate; conservative + very conservative = conservative.

Figure 1

Preexisting Targeted Policy Beliefs by Fiscal and Social Ideologies



Measures

Postexposure policy support

After reading the messages to which they were randomly assigned, we asked respondents to rate on a scale ranging from 1, strongly oppose, to 7, strongly support, their relative support for seven policies designed to ensure affordable, high-quality childcare for all. Three of these policies were the targeted policies explicitly incorporated in the message prompts. Both the targeted policy support items (M = 4.93, SD = 1.90, *Cronbach's* α = 0.94) and the remaining four non-targeted childcare policy support items (M = 5.12, SD = 1.58, *Cronbach's* α = 0.89) comprised separate reliable composite measures.

Postexposure advocacy intentions

For each of the three targeted policies, we then asked respondents how likely they were (ranging from 1, very unlikely, to 7, very likely) to "discuss the policy with other legislators," "introduce the policy for debate," and "ask a staffer to prepare a brief on the policy." The nine targeted policy advocacy intention items comprised a reliable composite measure (M = 4.31, SD = 1.55, *Cronbach's* α = 0.96).

Postexposure propolicy and antipolicy beliefs

Finally, we asked respondents to rate their levels of agreement (ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree) with seven message-targeted beliefs about childcare policies. Four of the seven belief statements were in support of the policy: "Accessible, affordable, and high-quality early childcare is a sound investment for American society," "High-quality early childcare should be made more affordable because the cost is too high for many families," "All children deserve a strong start in life through high-quality childcare," and "High-quality early childcare is essential to the health of communities, businesses, and the local economy." These four propolicy belief items comprised a reliable composite measure (M = 5.76, SD = 1.44, *Cronbach's* α = 0.93). The remaining three statements were in opposition to the policy: "State investment in early childcare programs is wasteful government spending," "State investment in early childcare is not necessary because parents should take responsibility for planning, budgeting, and caring for the children they chose to have," and "State investment in quality childcare is not necessary because parents should plan to stay home with their young children." These three antipolicy belief items comprised a reliable composite measure (M = 2.48, SD = 1.63, *Cronbach's* α = 0.92).

Analysis

We used R Studio Version 1.2.5019 for all analyses. As preregistered on OSF, we first used χ^2 and ANOVA to test whether the demographics of each randomized group were comparable. Neither the ANOVA test nor the 15 χ^2 statistical tests were significant at $p < .05$.

We estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models using indicator variables for the message conditions to test hypotheses about the effects of the simple-pro, narrative, and narrative+simple-pro messages on state legislators' levels of policy support and advocacy intentions (*PH1*, *PH2*) as well as targeted beliefs (*H3*, *H4*). We rotated the comparison group to test for differences, first using the control group (Arm 1) as the comparison (*PH1*, *H3*) and then using the simple-pro message (Arm 2) as the comparison (*PH2*, *H4*).

Finally, we created interaction terms between political party affiliation (Republican, Democrat) and dummy variables for the randomized message conditions to test whether the effects of message condition differed by party affiliation (*RQ1*). We also created interaction terms between social and fiscal ideology and dummy variables for the randomized message conditions to test effects by fiscal and social ideologies (*RQ2*).

Results

Message effects on targeted policy support

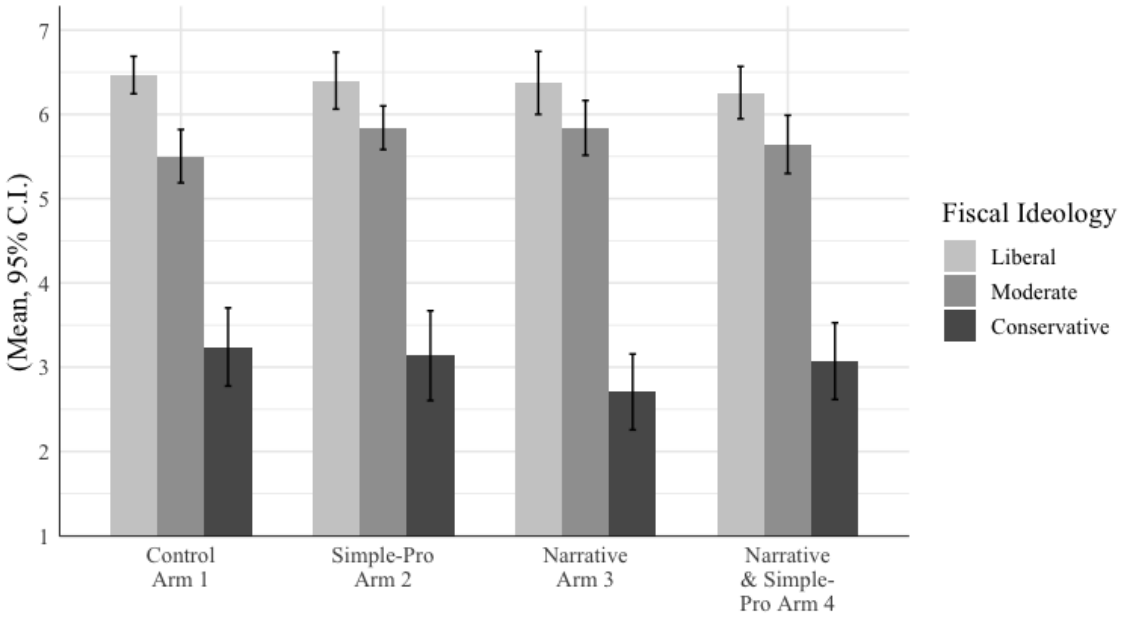
We first assessed the relative effects of the narrative, simple-pro, and combined narrative+simple-pro message conditions on targeted policy support. Contrary to our hypotheses, neither the narrative message (B = -0.27, β = -0.06, p = .210) nor the simple-pro message (B = 0.04, β = -0.01, p = .862) outperformed the no-exposure control group on overall targeted policy support. PH1 was thus rejected for the policy support outcome. Similarly, neither the narrative alone (B = -0.31, β = -0.07, p = .174) nor the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro (B = -0.27, β = -0.06, p = .215) outperformed the simple-pro message on targeted policy support, overall. *PH2* was thus rejected for the policy support outcome.

We next explored the role of political party affiliation (Republican or Democrat) in message effects on policy support (addressing *RQ1*). In step 1, we regressed targeted policy support on the three dummy coded message variables (with the control arm as the reference group) and state legislators' party affiliation (with Democrats as the reference group). Party affiliation was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, with Republicans having significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages as compared to Democrats by almost 3 points on a 7-point scale (B = -2.96, β = -0.76, p < .001). In step 2, we added the interaction terms between party affiliation and dummy coded message variables into the model. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R square change is .004, F change is 1.81, p = .144) indicating that message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by party affiliation.

We next assessed the potential interactions of ideology (liberal, moderate, and conservative) with message strategy and the resultant effects on targeted policy support (addressing *RQ2*). We began with fiscal ideology as each of the targeted policies discussed would require state investments. In step 1, we regressed targeted policy support on the three dummy coded message variables (with the control arm as the reference group) and fiscal ideology (with liberals as the reference group). Fiscal ideology was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, and both conservatives (B = -3.34, β = -0.83, p < .001) and moderates (B = -0.69, β = -0.18, p < .001) showed significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages than liberals. Moderates' scores were, however, much closer to liberals than conservatives. We then added the interaction terms between fiscal ideology and the dummy coded message variables into the model. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R-square = .006, F = 1.15, p = .332) indicating that (null) message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by fiscal ideology (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of State Legislators' Targeted Policy Support Across Message Conditions



We continued with a parallel analysis of social ideology using the same 2-step modeling strategy. In step 1, social ideology was a significant predictor of targeted policy support, and both conservatives (B = -3.36, β = -0.75, $p < .001$) and moderates (B = -1.34, β = -0.33, $p < .001$) showed significantly less support for the policies incorporated in study messages than liberals. In contrast to fiscal ideology, social moderates scored roughly midway between liberals and conservatives. We then added the interaction terms between fiscal ideology and the dummy coded message variables. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R-square = .006, F = 1.07, p = .382) indicating that (null) message effects on targeted policy support did not differ by social ideology.

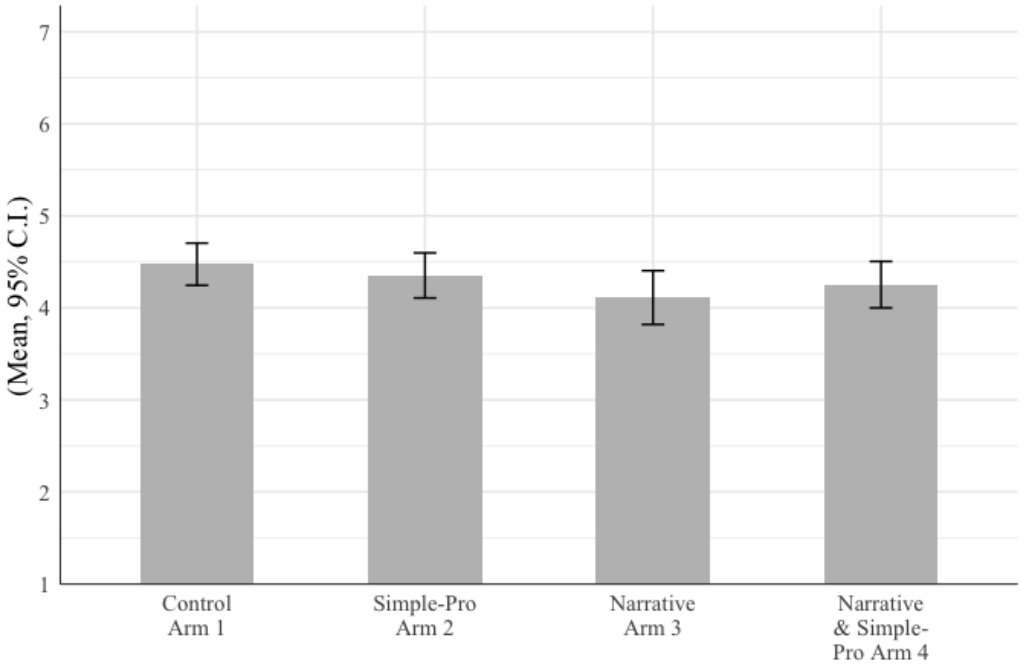
Message effects on advocacy intentions

Contrary to study hypotheses, the narrative message also did not outperform the no-exposure control group (B = -0.36, β = -0.10, p = .044) or the simple-pro message (B = -0.24, β = -0.07, p = .205) in promoting advocacy intentions. Indeed, the narrative message produced *lower* levels of state legislator advocacy intentions than did receiving no message at all, a result consistent with what is known as a backfire or boomerang effect, or when information perceived yields cognitive effects that are opposite of those intended (see Byrne & Hart, 2009; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). The combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro messages did not outperform the simple

propolicy message (B = -0.10, β = -0.03, p = .590) in promoting advocacy intentions. Thus, both *PH1* and *PH2* were rejected for advocacy intentions.

Figure 3

State Legislators' Advocacy Intentions Across Message Conditions

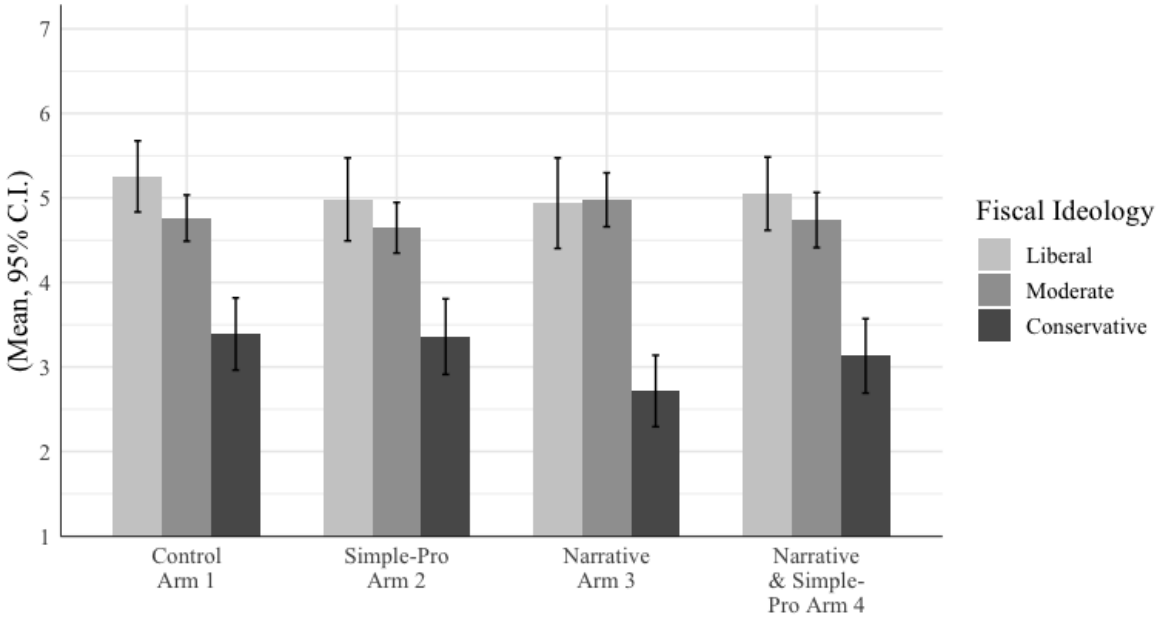


We then conducted regression analyses to compare message effects on advocacy intentions by party affiliation (again addressing RQ1). Party affiliation was a significant predictor of advocacy intentions with Republicans having significantly lower advocacy intentions compared to Democrats (B = -1.71, β = -0.54, p < .001). Adding the interaction items again did not improve model fit (R square change is .007, F change is 1.87, p = .134); message effects on advocacy intentions (the backfire effect of the narrative message) did not differ by party affiliation.

We repeated the regression analysis to compare the effects of fiscal ideology and message conditions on advocacy intentions. Fiscal ideology was a significant predictor, and both fiscal conservatives (B = -1.93, β = -0.59, p < .001) and fiscal moderates (B = -0.30, β = -0.10, p < .001) ranked significantly lower on advocacy intentions than fiscal liberals. Again, moderates' scores more closely approximated those of liberals than conservatives. Adding the interaction items did not improve the model fit (R-square = .012, F = 1.52, p = .171) indicating that message effects on advocacy intentions did not differ by fiscal ideology (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of Legislators' Advocacy Intentions Across Message Conditions



We again repeated the analysis to compare the effects of social ideology and message conditions on advocacy intentions. Social ideology was a significant predictor of advocacy intentions, and both conservatives (B = -1.99, β = -0.55, $p < .001$) and moderates (B = -0.64, β = -0.19, $p < .001$) were less likely to report intentions to advocate for childcare policies than liberals. Again, in contrast to fiscal ideology, social moderates scored roughly between liberals and conservatives. Adding interaction terms between message conditions and social ideology did not improve model fit (R-square = .012, F = 1.52, p = .168). Message effects on advocacy intentions did not differ by social ideology.

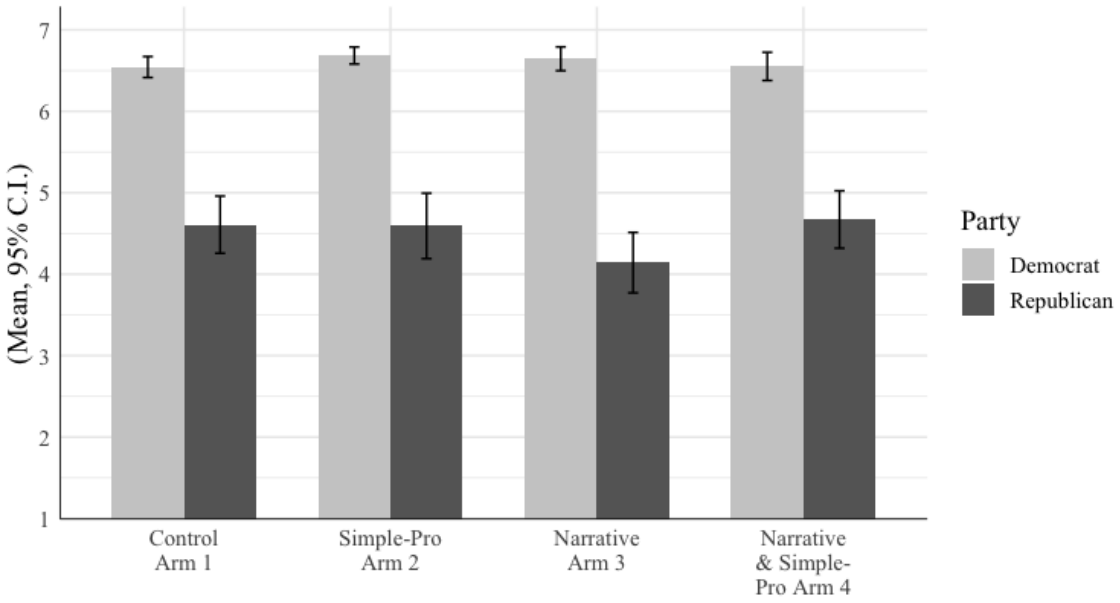
Message effects on policy beliefs

Again, contrary to our hypotheses, the narrative message performed marginally worse than the no-exposure control group (B = -0.30, β = -0.09, p = .063) and performed significantly worse than simple propolicy message (B = -0.37, β = -0.11, p = .031) in promoting propolicy beliefs in the overall sample. These results are again consistent with a backfire or boomerang effect. Further, the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro did not outperform the simple-pro message alone (B = -0.18, β = -0.05, p = .297) in promoting propolicy beliefs overall. Thus, *H3* and *H4* were rejected. The narrative also performed significantly worse than both the control (B = 0.42, β = 0.11, p = .022) and the simple-pro message (B = 0.49, β = 0.13, p = .012) in reducing antipolicy beliefs. Further, the combined strategy of narrative+simple-pro did not differ from the simple-pro message (B = 0.30, β = 0.08, p = .121) in reducing antipolicy beliefs.

We repeated the regression analyses assessing the interactions of political party affiliation and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs (addressing RQ1). Political party affiliation was a significant predictor of propolicy beliefs with Republicans ranking propolicy beliefs significantly lower than Democrats (B = -2.09, β = -0.72, p < .001). Adding the interaction items significantly improved model fit (R-square = .007, F = 2.66, p = .047). Specifically, the coefficient for the narrative*Republican dummy variable was both negative and significant (using the control condition as the comparison; B = -0.57, β = -0.12, p = .017) indicating that the narrative message had a stronger deleterious effect on propolicy beliefs among Republicans compared to Democrats (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Political Party Affiliation as a Predictor of Legislators' Propolicy Beliefs Across Message Conditions



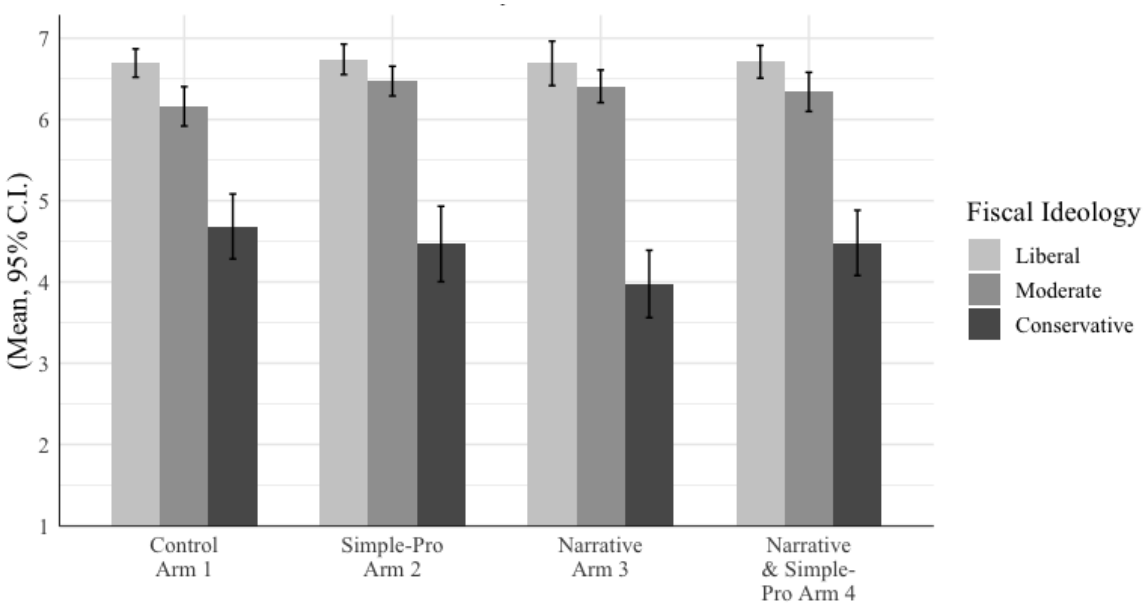
Party affiliation was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs with Republicans agreeing with antipolicy beliefs much more strongly than Democrats (B = 2.41, β = 0.72, p < .001). Adding interaction items did not improve model fit (R-square = .004, F =1.75, p = .156) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by party affiliation.

We next compared effects of fiscal ideology and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs. Fiscal ideology was a predictor of propolicy beliefs, as both fiscal conservatives (B = -2.30, β = -0.75, p < .001) and fiscal moderates (B = -0.38, β = -0.13, p < .001) had significantly lower agreement with propolicy beliefs than did fiscal liberals (although moderates' scores were much closer to fiscal liberals across all conditions). Adding the interaction items marginally improved model fit (R-square = .007, F = 2.05, p = .057). Specifically, the coefficient for the

narrative*fiscal conservatives dummy variable was both negative and significant (using the control condition as the comparison group; B = -0.70, β = -0.14, p = .040) meaning that the narrative had a stronger deleterious effect on propolicy beliefs among fiscal conservatives compared to fiscal liberals (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Fiscal Ideology as a Predictor of Legislators' Propolicy Beliefs Across Message Conditions



Fiscal ideology was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs, as both fiscal conservatives (B = 2.74, β = 0.78, p < .001) and fiscal moderates (B = 0.49, β = 0.15, p < .001) registered stronger antipolicy beliefs than did fiscal liberals. Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit, however (R-square = .006, F = 1.06, p = .384) indicating that message effects on anti-policy beliefs did not differ by fiscal ideology.

The final step of the analysis compared social ideology and message condition on pro and antipolicy beliefs. Social ideology was a predictor, as both social conservatives (B = -2.38, β = -0.70, p < .001) and social moderates (B = -0.85, β = -0.27, p < .001) had significantly lower agreement with propolicy beliefs than did social liberals (with moderates' scores roughly midway between social conservatives and liberals). Adding the interaction items did not improve model fit (R-square = .012, F = 1.93, p = .075) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by social ideology. Social ideology was also a significant predictor of antipolicy beliefs, as both social conservatives (B = 2.87, β = 0.74, p < .001) and social moderates (B = 1.04, β = 0.29, p < .001) registered stronger antipolicy beliefs than did social liberals. Adding interaction items did not improve model fit (R-square = .006, F = 1.14, p = .335) indicating that message effects on antipolicy beliefs did not differ by social ideology.

Discussion

Contrary to expectations and prior research, the current study found that neither the narrative nor simple propolicy appeal was effective in persuading state legislators to support or advocate for state investments in accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare for all. In fact, exposure to a narrative message diminished advocacy intentions overall and reduced propolicy beliefs among those identifying as Republicans and fiscal conservatives. What, then, does this mean for policy advocates who are commonly advised and trained to personalize and tell the story of the issue in appealing to the legislators they wish to persuade? Further, what implications do the results offer for broader theorizing about the conditions under which stories can persuade key audiences?

We offer a number of potential explanations for the effects we observed. First, respondents identifying as fiscally and socially liberal entered the study with very high levels of preexisting targeted policy support scoring at 6.36 and 6.18 on a 7-point scale, respectively. As such, there was not much room to shift support upward. Although the messaging strategies assessed did not significantly enhance enthusiasm for the targeted policy initiatives among these groups, it is also important that they, by and large, did not dampen preexisting support. The observed negative effect on advocacy intentions, while not significantly moderated by fiscal ideology, appears to be driven by declines among fiscal conservatives, as shown in Figure 4. This tendency also held among those identifying as fiscally moderate, whose entering levels of enthusiasm for policies also were high (5.71 on the 7-point scale) and whose response patterns approximated and generally mirrored—albeit at a slightly lesser magnitude—those of liberals across all measures. Thus, as an advocacy strategy, each message approach described here could help to reinforce preexisting support among those initially inclined toward the policy.

The same cannot be said for those identifying as fiscal conservatives and Republicans. Their entering levels of support for the policy initiatives presented ranked at near 3.0 ("slightly oppose") on the 7-point scale (3.05, 3.17, respectively), which would have provided room for increase had the narrative message not undermined propolicy beliefs in these groups. We are not the first to have observed a backfire or boomerang effect in persuasive messaging (see Byrne & Hart, 2009); others have demonstrated that such effects can result from partisan reasoning (Gollust et al., 2009; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Our findings suggest there is a risk that advocates may, in communicating with partisan decision makers, inadvertently encourage retrenchment into prior beliefs through message choice. It is a risk that those seeking to persuade such audiences should consider in both advocacy strategy and message design.

It is particularly noteworthy that the equity-based narrative and simple-pro messages presented in this study were the same as those that proved effective in eliciting policy support among general public (non-legislative) audiences in a study also conducted during fall 2019. In that general public study, the narrative proved more effective than the control message in increasing policy support, irrespective of respondents' political party affiliation, and was more effective than the simple-pro message in generating policy support among audiences initially least likely to support the policies (Niederdeppe et al., in press).

We can only surmise the reasons for such stark differences across audiences. First, it is important to recognize that early childcare policy debates were not new to the state and territorial legislatures surveyed; most had recently or were currently considering related issues. As such, the policies presented in messages were likely not abstractions and instead those that respondents could envision in context and relative to others they have addressed and will consider. In addition to potentially having been primed on the issue of state support for childcare, in general, respondents also may have had in mind their own legislative records on these and similar initiatives, which could have shaped their thinking in this study independent of the messages presented. However, we also emphasize that we found no evidence that participation in health or education committees moderated the pattern of effects on any outcome (results available upon request).

It is also important that this survey was conducted in a highly polarized partisan era across all levels of society including state legislatures (Doherty et al., 2019). To some unknown extent, we surmise that the sharp divides observed throughout the study may have been well-established from the start and rooted in transactional political histories within the legislatures in which respondents serve. These contexts were not a feature of our assessment, however, and as such remain only a conjecture.

It also may be notable that the messages tested were structured around the value of equity. This structure was important because equity is a core value underlying the policy strategies proposed. We were confident in the approach as the same equity-based messages resonated well *across* political ideologies in the general public study just conducted. We also thought this recent outcome particularly compelling as previous work had found that the value of equity resonated more strongly on the ideological left than right (Skurka et al., 2019). The present study may reflect that earlier pattern of value polarization, given this effect was not observed with these same messages in our more recent general public work. The combined advocacy takeaway may be that the value of equity remains challenging to convey to political conservatives in highly partisan settings and that there are subtleties to the conditions in which it resonates that we do not yet fully understand. We also cannot escape the possibility that, despite these many plausible arguments to explain the differences we observed, our findings may simply reveal that narrative messaging is not an effective strategy on this issue with state legislators.

Still, our study offers strategic implications for policy advocates working to advance accessible, affordable, quality childcare for all. At a fundamental level, if legislative bodies are highly polarized and the most partisan members unlikely to move from their initial positions, it may be those in the middle—often identifying as moderate on an issue—who become important persuasive foci (for examples of stakeholder mapping, see UNICEF, 2010). Our analysis may offer some utility to that approach. As described previously, fiscal moderates presented with high initial levels of policy support and demonstrated message response patterns much like liberals, across all measures. Similarly, social moderates' initial levels of policy support also began in the positive range, although more tempered, and their responses reflected (albeit at a lesser magnitude than fiscal moderates) the general patterns of liberal audiences. These patterns

suggest that moderates' policy perspectives may be reinforced, though perhaps not moved toward even greater support, through messaging. Further, fiscal moderates consistently presented with higher levels of policy support than did social moderates. This finding may be instructive to advocates developing strategy on this issue, specifically in determining with whom to focus and when.

Importantly, this research also reinforces the subtleties of advocacy strategy and communication targets recommended in both media advocacy and public interest communications. We found that telling the story, a common advocacy tactic, can have unintended effects that challenge or even harm advocacy efforts. Thus, as always in planning communication strategy, context and knowledge of specific audiences (i.e., the potential micro-level effects on state legislators) matter. Moreover, these findings, taken in combination with those of the overlapping general public study, may suggest the need to situationally reorder the primacy of advocacy communication targets. Specifically, these findings may indicate a need to shift, in some circumstances, from the traditional media advocacy and public interest communications' emphasis on powerholders or decision makers as the primary audience to those who are in positions to influence them and who typically are considered secondary audiences. In other words, if polarization or entrenchment on issues is leading to resistance among decision-maker audiences, advocates may consider working through audiences who can be persuasively reached through messages: in this case, constituents who, in turn, can provide political permission to their legislative representatives to shift their views on the issue.

From a theoretical perspective, these results also complicate the question of the conditions under which narrative messages may persuade or may backfire (see Byrne & Hart, 2009). As noted in the introduction, metaanalyses find that narrative messages can persuade and tend to produce a small but positive effect on attitudes and beliefs among audiences (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Shen et al., 2015). At the same time, most of this work has been conducted with convenience samples (e.g., students, volunteers in web-based panels), and thus research has rarely tested the effects of narratives on policy makers. Policy makers are audiences for whom, among other differences from the general public, (a) the stakes of adopting a position are likely higher in that they have vested authority to allocate resources, (b) advocacy messages compete with many other inputs including budgetary limitations, negotiations with other legislators, and (c) legislators may themselves strategically use stories to advance their own policy goals. Stories that resonate among the general public, like those tested here, thus may be read with much greater skepticism by these engaged audiences, particularly those who are inclined to oppose the message's articulated position. It is also important that average effects, as estimated in a metaanalysis, do not guarantee that a particular message strategy will be helpful in each context in which it is used. Indeed, even strategies that work on average may backfire under some conditions if the average effect size is characterized by a great deal of variance in the direction and magnitude of effects. All told, these results invite a need to test strategic narratives among a broader set of audiences and populations to identify the boundaries and even pitfalls of narrative persuasion.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, although our sample included participants from all 50 states and two territories, respondents represented only approximately 10% of eligible state and territorial legislators. Distribution of participants across legislatures was also uneven with some states or territories relatively overrepresented as compared to others. Democrats, also, were more likely to respond to our survey, and female legislators were represented in our sample in greater proportion (43.3%) than they appear in statehouses (29%; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). As such, our findings may not be generalizable to U.S. state and territorial legislatures overall.

Second, when a study has negative and unanticipated findings, it is also important to ask whether the instruments applied were flawed: in this context, the messages tested. We acknowledge that it was not possible in a study exploring childcare policies and those involving family subsidies in particular to avoid these labels as would have been recommended by the cognitive linguistics and framing research described previously (e.g., Gilliam & Bales, 2004; Lakoff & Grady, 1998). Instead, we sought to couch both in their broader societal contexts—also as recommended in this literature—while emphasizing the child and socioeconomic benefits to be realized. Perhaps the more significant limitation is that our narrative, in particular, told a story of a family challenged by return to work following the birth of a second child. Emphasis on parental work was cautioned in this prior research, even while these studies also emphasized the need to convey families' hard economic realities. We determined that working with the types of stories with which legislators likely are challenged in their districts was important enough to construct this story while linking the circumstances portrayed to broader societal contexts and the critical policy choices faced. Moreover, the simple-pro message, which did not have the same return to work emphasis, did not fare better. And, as previously described, these same study messages garnered a positive outcome among general public audiences in the research we conducted quasicontemporaneously. All told, these conditions reinforce our thinking that the differences observed across studies were more likely rooted in audience and context than in the messages themselves.

Finally, it is also important to note that this work was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated widespread physical distancing procedures that effectively shuttered many childcare facilities nationwide. The experiences of struggling families during (as of this writing) these past 13 months—and the magnified inequities in access and affordability across populations that have resulted—have cast a stark spotlight on the importance of affordable quality childcare for all our youngest community members. We acknowledge that it is possible that state legislators' perspectives on early childcare policies may have shifted as a result of this recent history and the experiences of their constituents over the course of these many affected months. However, as we noted at the outset, early childcare and education were at crises levels across the United States prior to the pandemic. And, as demonstrated in our findings, some legislators (Democrats and Moderates) began at very high levels of policy support, and we think

it very unlikely that the added emergency could have dampened it. We are left to only wonder, then, whether this crisis-upon-crisis has sufficiently moved the needle into support among those who were deeply reticent (by our measures) to support these policies in the latter months leading up to the pandemic. It is certainly a question worthy of exploration.

Conclusion

In this research we responded to the call among NPF researchers for "empirical study of how such narrative political tactics of interest groups, the media, and elites actually influence decision-maker behavior and opinion" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 345). In so doing we found that state legislator audiences responded both differently than anticipated to policy narratives and in contrast to common wisdom about advocacy messaging with elected leaders.

We wish to conclude by agreeing with Boswell (2013) that "an improved understanding of narrative can aid in the study of deliberative systems more generally" (p. 633). Our research may help answer that question if only by indicating that there are subtleties to the advocacy messaging formula that remain to be fully appreciated and that one established advocacy strategy—in this case, narrative messaging—may not fit all circumstances or audiences. The media advocacy prime directive, then, does not change: overarching goals and policy strategy must always drive message strategy.

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Severe Allergies, Price Increases, and Supply Shortages: How News and Frames of the 2016 EpiPen Crisis Continue the Conversation of U.S. Pharmaceutical Pricing

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Abstract

Controlling pharmaceutical prescription costs has been an interest in the United States for decades. In 2016, EpiPen experienced a 600% price increase. This exploratory framing study focuses on news coverage of EpiPen's price increase and related pharmaceutical price increase stories through analyzing three U.S. television news programs' coverage. Within 30 news segments that discussed EpiPen or medication price increases, analysis revealed four frames: economic, attribution of responsibility, morality and human interest, and conflict and powerlessness. This study provides a larger understanding of how the crisis of medication price increases is understood and implications for practitioners and individuals aiming to make medications more accessible.

Introduction

In January 2017, President Donald Trump put pharmaceutical drug companies in the spotlight when he stated that they were "getting away with murder" and vowed to bring drug prices and spending down (Johnson, 2017, para. 1). Years prior to President Trump's call to the pharmaceutical industry, the Clinton administration introduced a healthcare reform bill that attempted to eliminate pharmaceutical manufacturers' tax breaks and accused the industry of profiting from ill Americans (Fritz, 1993). Pharmaceutical drug pricing has been an issue on both sides of the political aisle reentering public discourse every few decades.

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Beginning in 2016, the pharmaceutical company Mylan and its well-known brand medication EpiPen experienced a pharmaceutical crisis. The crisis first began with a price increase driven by the company's CEO, Heather Bresch. After buying the rights to EpiPen in 2007, Mylan slowly increased the price of the medication from approximately $100 for two auto-injectors to a current price of around $650 to $700 (Anderson, 2020; Pollack, 2016). Following this price increase, EpiPen also experienced an availability shortage due to manufacturing issues. EpiPen is the lead brand name epinephrine auto-injector medication for severe allergic reactions, which result in anaphylaxis and possibly death if not treated right away by medical professionals (Medline Plus, 2018). In 2015, more than 3.6 million EpiPen prescriptions were written and 70% of those were for commercially insured patients (Rockoff, 2016). In 2018, there were about 2 million EpiPen prescriptions (Epinephrine summary for 2018, n.d.). The decline in prescription rates is likely due to the increase in popularity of competitor generics (Mangan, 2017). Because such a large segment of the population uses EpiPen, the purpose of this study was to analyze the EpiPen pricing and product shortage crisis through how it is framed in television news.

Pricing in the pharmaceutical industry is mostly unregulated in the United States (Drake & Uhlman, 1993), allowing pharmaceutical companies to essentially set their own prices. Though there have been proposed government bills in recent congressional sessions to curb drug prices, no single solution has been found (Hancock, 2017). Many Americans only encounter issues associated with high prices when they are trying to gain access to a life-saving medication from a doctor or pharmacy. Those without insurance feel the pain of high medication prices more often. Depending on the insurance formulary tier of the required medicine, even insured Americans could be monetarily affected (AARP Bulletin, 2017). The EpiPen crisis is a recent example of rising medication prices. Studying how it is framed can shed light on an issue often kept out of the public domain. Public interest communications is, simply put, communication on behalf of the public (Fessmann, 2017). Keeping an issue such as medication prices out of the public domain serves the public relations efforts of pharmaceutical companies.

Due to the nature of news acting as a fourth estate (Hirst, 2013), news outlets should not be participating in the public relations efforts of pharmaceutical companies. Instead, news coverage of an issue such as medication price increases should act in the interest of the public and aim to create change regarding the issue at hand (Fessmann, 2017). Framing research indicates that news frames suggest to audiences ways to interpret an issue or event (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Also, framing choices affect public opinion about who is responsible for causing and solving social issues, such as rising medication prices (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

The current study delves deeper into the 2016 EpiPen crisis and how it was framed on television news. The study deploys a framing analysis of television news stories from the major national news networks that covered the Mylan EpiPen price hike and shortage. Medication prices impact drug access and availability, among other considerations, which have major impacts on the health of individuals and communities, keeping medication prices in line with the aim of public interest communications (Fessmann, 2017). Understanding the frames that enter public discourse is essential to crafting public interest communications campaigns that can then

create change in the organizational structures that dictate who can and cannot have access to life-saving medications (Fessmann, 2017).

Literature review

Media framing and health news

News frames combine information into a package that can influence audiences and how they think about an issue (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). According to Entman (1993), frames define problems, provide causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions. Frames ultimately render information more accessible to audiences and applicable to their own experiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). News can act as a frame builder and a frame setter influencing not only message creation, but also the effects of message exposure by introducing both the issue and its relevant considerations. News can be a frame builder and setter especially for issues that seem to come about suddenly, such as the EpiPen price hike and shortage (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Previous studies have indicated there are common frames used by the news media (Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). In studying how the citizens in democracies make sense of the political world by reinterpreting the information provided by the mass media, Neuman et al. (1992) determined five common frames used by news media and audiences for discussing current affairs: human impact, powerlessness, economics, moral values, and conflict. The human impact frame focuses on individuals and groups affected, providing a face and emotional angle to the topic. The powerlessness frame looks at the dominant forces over less empowered individuals or groups. The economic frame centers profits and losses or how an event will economically affect individuals, groups, organizations, regions, or even countries. The moral frame makes indirect references to religious tenets or moral guidelines. Finally, the conflict frame emphasizes problems among people, organizations, or countries but can also be used to establish a sort of contest with winners and losers (Neuman et al., 1992). In a study of how European political news was framed in press and televised news, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that serious news outlets used the attribution of responsibility frame most frequently. The attribution of responsibility frame, defined as attributing causing or solving an event or issue to a government, individual, or group, was most used in national print and television news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

According to Coombs and Holladay (2004), a crisis can be defined as “an event for which people seek causes and make attributions” (p. 97). Using this definition, prescription medication price increases such as with the EpiPen can be classified as a crisis for both the pharmaceutical company and those taking the medication. Following Christiano and Neimand (2017), this crisis could thus be considered a public interest communications crisis depending on how it is handled. How the media frame a crisis event, the cause of the crisis, and the actor responsible for the

event influences the public's understanding of the event as well as the impression of the organizations involved (Coombs, 2006). According to Iyengar (1991), there are two distinct news frames to consider while dealing with crises: the episodic frame and the thematic frame. The episodic frame focuses on certain individuals or specific events and the thematic frame places issues at the societal or governmental level. Additionally, the solutions to these issues can be at the individual or societal level. The news media's framing choices ultimately affect public opinion about who is responsible for causing and solving social issues, such as rising medication prices (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The framing used by the media to cover the EpiPen price increases potentially accomplishes considerations 8 and 9 in Downes' (2017) considerations for building positive change through public interest communications: increasing awareness about those who work in the public policy process and pushing organizations missions (and actions) to serve the social good.

In a review of framing research, de Vreese (2005) argued that framing studies should specify the conditions in which frames emerge and how they help form public opinion. The news media, well recognized as frame creators, are often intermediaries used to cover and translate vital health information into easily understood forms for the public. According to Viswanath et al. (2008), community health sources and the media organization together set the health news agenda, and because reporters need health experts to explain technical information, sometimes a story may be cut and not part of that day's news cycle. Reporters without training in the health field rely on health experts for reporting health news stories. Moreover, health reporters will cover a story based on audience interest, the reporter's ability to humanize the topic, and the ability to shoot video for a specific topic (Tanner, 2004).

Often, while reporting health information, news organizations' choice of frames depends on the size and ownership of the organization and the education level of the reporter. According to Wallington et al. (2010), for health reporting, privately-owned organizations valued educating people to make informed decisions as well as providing entertainment; small media organizations valued developing the public's health and science literacy. In terms of using frames, large organizations used the economic frame often and the human-interest angle less often. Large organizations are also more likely to use the controversial news angle (Wallington et al., 2010).

Medication prices and health-industry responsibility

Previous research has explored the intersection of framing and healthcare in the United States. In a study of media framing regarding who is responsible for rising healthcare costs, Kim et al. (2015) considered five potential causes (patients, providers, insurance companies, government, and pharmaceutical companies) and the frequency of these causes in news coverage from 1993 to 2010. Among the five main cause areas, pharmaceutical companies were least mentioned, though there was a focus on this specific cause from 1998-2002. Kim et al. (2015) suggested the increased mention of pharmaceutical companies was due to the 2000 election, which centered the

affordability of prescription drugs for senior citizens, rising prescription drug costs, and President Bush's signing of the Medicare Modernization Act.

Typically, media coverage of pharmaceutical companies focuses on novel treatments and their availability. New treatments can have very high per patient/per treatment price tags. For example, hepatitis C treatments cost about $84,000 per treatment, and a cholesterol drug costs almost $15,000 per patient (Leopold et al., 2016). According to Drake and Uhlman (1993), drug companies can circumvent government price holds through their patents for chemical compounds. When a patent expires, generic versions of the medicine come to market and the drug company selling the brand name medication increases prices to make up for lost market share. Furthermore, the U.S. Supreme Court previously ruled that pharmaceutical companies' pricing information is proprietary, so they do not have to reveal it to the public (Drake & Uhlman, 1993).

Though prescription drug companies charge high costs for their medications, they are mentioned least frequently as a cause for rising costs and are recognized instead for their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts abroad (Kim et al., 2015). For example, Novartis Pharmaceuticals' CSR efforts include the Healthy Family Initiative in India that provided health education to 24 million people and diagnoses and treatment to 2.5 million people (Novartis, 2016). Although these efforts seem to do good, Dutta (2019) argued that they do not actually create lasting change, stating, "Development and public good are often paradoxically co-opted within efforts of community relations and CSR to strategically achieve goals of privatized organizational effectiveness" (p. 53). Although pharmaceutical companies participate in CSR abroad, the topic of prescription medications and pricing is often treated in a traditional public relations style as opposed to public interest communications as a way to build trust in the community (Fessmann, 2017). In this way, according to Fessmann's (2017) delineation of the differences between public relations and public interest communications, focusing on public relations with U.S. audiences allows Big Pharma to continue its business practices—including raising medication prices—while participating in public interest communications would force them to potentially change their structures.

The United States is one of the few industrialized nations that does not control medication prices, unlike other countries with national healthcare systems. Pharmaceutical companies often give reasons for the exorbitant prices for their products. For example, the allergy pill Claritin's price was raised 13 times in five years (Angell, 2004). Other more recent medication price increases include Deraprim, which went from nearly $14 per pill to $750 per pill, and insulin, which cost $21 in 1999 and is now over $300 (Pollack, 2015; Rajkumar, 2020). The reason for price increases is mainly for investment into research and development (Lueck, 2003). Although prices continue to rise, there have been some recommended strategies to cope with the rising costs: industry offering to reduce prices; government agencies mandating discounts for Medicare Part D and lawsuits against pharmaceutical companies; insurance companies mandating use of generics, requiring prior authorization, and co-payment plans; patients going abroad for cheaper medicines or forgoing treatment; and implementing price control regulations (Leopold et al.,

2016). Each of these has major implications for the U.S. healthcare system and the individuals whose lives often depend on medications with high price tags. However, the issue of prescription medication prices in the United States does not just affect the individuals taking the medications, or even those fighting for lowered costs; it also impacts prescription drug companies, the pharmacies that carry medications, insurance companies, and many others. In this way, the issue of medication price increases fits with Fessmann's (2016) definition of public interest communications, which involves "the development and implementation of science-based, strategic communications with the goal of significant and sustained positive behavior change or action on an issue that transcends the particular objectives of any single organization" (p. 16). Medication prices affect a host of people and organizations, and the topic is much larger than any of the single players in the arena.

Previous literature on agenda building indicates that the amount of news coverage an issue receives does not equate to the seriousness of the issue at hand (Kim et al., 2011; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Tanner & Friedman, 2011). The media will heavily cover an issue when events are deemed newsworthy and are thought to attract audience interest (Kim et al., 2015). The decisions a journalist makes in terms of what to cover and how to cover it contribute to the ideas citizens and policymakers have about an issue, such as the EpiPen price increase and shortage, and will therefore impact how they respond to the issue (Kim et al., 2002; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

The aforementioned areas of scholarship jointly inform the current study about the EpiPen price increase and product shortage. Due to the seemingly politically charged focus rising medication prices have recently taken, and the fact that this topic has not been studied widely, established frames from Neuman et al. (1992) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) served as a basis for the current analysis of framing medication pricing in the United States. Based on previous research, the following research question guided the study:

RQ: How has the topic of medication price increases been framed using the previously determined frames of human impact, powerlessness, economics, moral values, conflict, and attribution of responsibility?

Method

News segment selection

Evening television news was selected as a medium for analysis because evening network news programs averaged about 5.2 million viewers in 2017 and 5.3 million viewers in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2019). The average audience size for evening news was larger than morning news programs, which averaged 3 million viewers (Pew Research Center, 2019). More specific statistics for each of the major three network news outlets also indicate high viewership. For the

2017-2018 season, ABC and NBC's evening news programs each had more than 8 million viewers and CBS's evening news program had more than 6 million viewers. NBC led the key 25 to 54 demographic with ABC and CBS in second and third place, respectively (Katz, 2018). Because of the high viewership numbers for evening news as compared to morning news and the high viewership for each of the three main networks' evening news programs, news segments from these networks were selected for inclusion because it was likely more Americans saw the news as presented by these networks. The Internet Archive was used to access the news segments on EpiPen's price increase.

The news segments under study ranged in air date from August 2016 to the end of November 2018. August 2016 was chosen as the start date for data collection because, according to Czarnecki (2016), the EpiPen crisis began in the news cycle when Senator Bernie Sanders tweeted out an NBC news story reporting the price hike. In May 2018, the FDA announced a manufacturing shortage of the EpiPen and the approval of a generic epinephrine auto-injector (Scutti, 2018; U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2018). November 2018 was chosen as the end month because healthcare and medication prices were one of the key issues across the country leading up to the 2018 election (Brownstein, 2018). Including coverage up to this date helps place EpiPen's price increase within a larger national conversation on medication pricing.

The Internet Archive search was completed using an advanced search allowing the researcher to input the chosen start and end dates and the desired networks. Keywords used in the search were "EpiPen," "EpiPen shortage," "drug/pharmaceutical price increase," and "Mylan Pharmaceuticals." The original sample totaled 151 news segments. All clips were reviewed to ensure the news segments were stories dedicated to the topic. Items were removed from the final sample if: they were a Direct to Consumer (DTC) commercial; they did not discuss medication prices within the news segment; they discussed a medication that was not EpiPen; or there were multiple videos uploaded that contained the same segment that just played in a different media market. For example, if the same news segment was categorized under the station call letters WCAU and KPNX, then only one was included. The final sample totaled 30 news segments.

Coding

All segments in the final sample (n = 30) were viewed multiple times. Coding was then completed using a coding sheet (see Appendix). Each reference to pharmaceutical companies, EpiPen, allergies, pricing, and shortage was coded separately in case any given news clip contained instances relating to multiple themes and frames. Coded topics included information such as air date, reporter, headline, and illustrative elements such as charts, quotes, and illustrations. Interview sources for the news story were noted as well as described. Lastly, the researcher noted the frames and framing techniques that appeared in the segments using the previously determined frames from Neuman et al. (1992) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). To ensure rigor as well as verification and trustworthiness of the results, analyses were conducted throughout the process from the start of data collection to the writing of the final study

(Morse et al., 2002). Both the researcher and a second coder coded about 20% of the sample (seven segments) and discussed codes and findings. After agreement was reached, the remaining segments in the sample were analyzed and coded until the overall frame in each news segment was determined.

Results

The final sample included 30 news segments from ABC, CBS, and NBC's evening news programs. Six segments came from ABC, seven from CBS, and 17 from NBC. Twenty-three of the news segments were specifically about the EpiPen. The rest of the segments covered drug pricing in America more generally. These stories were focused on reaction to the EpiPen price increase such as insurance companies dropping coverage of the medication, ways to find more affordable medications, and potential government solutions. In the analysis, four frames were identified: the economic frame, attribution of responsibility, morality and human interest, and conflict and powerlessness.

The results section explores each of the frames present in the news coverage of the EpiPen price increase. Each section of the results covers the respective frame in more detail and includes examples. A breakdown of how often each frame appeared in the sample is included in Table 1 at the end of the results.

Economic frame

The economic frame appeared in EpiPen news coverage in two ways: discussions of profits and losses for Mylan and the impact for those affected, specifically the families who rely on EpiPen. For Mylan, the economic frame focused on how the price increases of EpiPen allowed Bresch to make approximately $19 million per year. Even though EpiPen is costly for consumers, the active ingredient epinephrine itself costs only around $3 and the high cost to consumers derives instead from the plastic auto-injector ("EpiPen Makers Surprise Move," 2016). Mylan could monopolize the epinephrine auto-injector market after the FDA removed a competitor's product. In a Securities and Exchange Commission filing for Wall Street, Bresch noted that investors would see opportunities for a price per EpiPen increase ("EpiPen Makers Surprise Move," 2016). In one story, Martin Shkreli, the ex-CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals who made headlines for raising the price of the HIV medication Deraprim, came to Mylan's defense stating, "Mylan [the company] is a good guy. They have one product where they are finally starting to make a little bit of money and everyone is going crazy over it" ("Soaring Costs," 2016b,16:43). Additionally, when Mylan announced it would offer a generic version of the auto-injector at $300, Meg Tirrell of CNBC argued that Mylan did not help change the current situation, noting, "It is an identical product and they are calling it an authorized generic. In this case Mylan still has the whole market of the generic and of the branded" ("EpiPen Makers Surprise Move," 2016, 10:43).

For the average consumer of EpiPen, the economic frame focused more so on product affordability. During the news segments on Bresch's Congressional hearing, the senators focused on how the medicine was kept out of reach of the average consumer such that Mylan could maximize profits at the expense of the consumers ("Congress Grills CEO," 2016). One mother was worried about how she would be able to afford her son's EpiPen over time if the prices continued to increase. As a result, she turned to a pharmacy that imported the medicine from Canada and could therefore offer a lower price ("Outrage over 400% EpiPen," 2016). Additionally, Julie Brown, a University of Washington pediatric E.R. doctor, noted how the price increases have prevented the medicine from being available to those who need it, stating, "I've heard numerous stories of people who have actually chosen to go without an auto-injector at all because they simply couldn't afford one" ("Congress Grills CEO," 2016, 17:52). When the generic epinephrine auto-injectors were announced, concerns arose regarding both price and ease of use. Mylan's generic cost $300, CVS's generic cost $110, and Teva Pharmaceuticals had not yet announced its price. Some parents featured in these segments were worried about the generics being affordable and easy to use; one parent who was trained in using CVS's generic did not find it easy to use and was not comfortable letting her child use it ("Cheaper Competitor to Costly EpiPen," 2017). One reporter even worried that parents may stick to the brand they know rather than use the cheaper generic option, thereby defeating the affordability of the generics ("EpiPen Maker's Surprise Move," 2016).

Attribution of responsibility

Overall, insurance companies, drug makers, and pharmaceutical benefits managers blamed each other for high medication prices, each refusing to claim responsibility. For the EpiPen crisis, Bresch and Mylan Pharmaceuticals attempted to blame the overall healthcare industry. To defend the price increase, Mylan released a statement noting that the higher price "better reflects important product features and value the product provides" ("Outrage over 400% EpiPen," 2016, 17:57). Instead, when interviewed, Bresch claimed the price hike was the result of too many middlemen demanding a part of the profits, stating, "The reality is in the brand pharmaceutical market this isn't an EpiPen issue, this isn't a Mylan issue, this is a healthcare issue" ("EpiPen Outrage," 2016, 02:33). In this example, attribution of responsibility displaced blame to the healthcare industry as a whole and included Mylan as one of many actors impacted by larger problems in the industry.

The responsibility frame centered Congress and the President as agents to help solve the issue of rising medication prices. Congress was mentioned as focusing on price controls to benefit Americans, as many Congress members viewed the issue as price gouging and benefitting the pharmaceutical company and its executives over the American public ("Congress Grills CEO," 2016; "Outrage over 400% EpiPen," 2016) and discount coupons from Mylan were seen as a public relations stunt ("EpiPen Outrage," 2016). Presidential solutions were mentioned in stories centered on the Republican-proposed national healthcare bill to replace the Affordable

Healthcare Act. The proposed solutions included allowing the government to negotiate lower prices. When price controls were brought up as a possible solution, Bresch said, "I hope not. I don't think the answer is price controls. There are outliers grabbing headlines, but it is not the answer" ("Skyrocketing Costs," 2016, 18:28). Solutions proposed for Big Pharma included hastening approval for generic drugs, justifying price increases, and approving imported medications. In early 2018, President Trump's proposed healthcare plan aimed to rectify the issue by requiring DTC ads to include medication costs, banning the pharmacist gag rule, and providing companies with incentives to cut list prices and out-of-pocket costs.

Morality and human-interest frames

The morality and human-interest frames emerged when parts of the news stories emphasized that children use EpiPen most often. To do so, news segments introduced viewers to families who relied on EpiPen to make sure their children stay alive. For example, two of CBS Evening News' stories followed a family with a young daughter, whose life was saved twice because of EpiPen. They describe what happened as she experienced anaphylactic shock, recalling, "her lips turned blue, she started swelling. She wasn't able to breathe" ("Soaring Costs," 2016a, 16:17). The parents said they often lived in fear wondering if their daughter had her EpiPen. One mother affected by the EpiPen price increase called EpiPen "a life-or-death medicine" ("Soaring Prices," 2016, 10:58). She described the struggle of listening to her child go through anaphylactic shock and knowing that it is up to her (the parent) to administer the drug. All the parents interviewed did whatever they could to make sure their children stayed alive. This type of parental involvement also was reflected in the story about the EpiPen shortage. In this story, two mothers were interviewed about their difficulties trying to locate the medicine. One mother made clear the necessity of EpiPen, explaining, "You have to have it if you have a severe allergy" ("Critical EpiPen Shortage," 2018, 16:31). Another mother expressed difficulty finding the medicine, "I started calling, and calling, and calling, and it didn't matter who I called Walgreens, CVS, Tomthom, Albertson, nobody had it" ("Critical EpiPen Shortage," 2018, 16:36).

Conflict and powerlessness frames

The conflict frame present in these news segments seemed to pit pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies against each other, where patients became the victims. In other words, the news segments that used these frames depicted the EpiPen price increase as something that individuals and families could not control and to which they could only react. They were smaller players in a larger competition between the pharmaceutical companies and the insurance companies. In one example, it was reported that insurance companies were dropping coverage of 200 common medications with the goal of forcing makers to stop the dramatic price increases. Even Cigna, an insurance company serving 86 million customers, announced it would stop covering EpiPen under its insurance plans. The individuals who rely on these medications were

left wondering how they would afford them in the battle between the insurance and pharmaceutical companies. Insurance companies stopped coverage of medications, including EpiPen, to encourage pharmaceutical companies to stop dramatic price increases ("Hundreds of Prescriptions," 2016). Additionally, high deductible insurance plans were emphasized meaning patients would be covering more of the cost for the medicine than in other types of plans ("Soaring Prices," 2016).

Although many stories depicted the patient or family as powerless in the larger conflict between insurers and Big Pharma, other stories instead focused on ways patients derived power in an unfair situation. These stories focused on laws and policies that affected patients' access to medications and the potential for direct action. For example, one such story focused on the gag clause, which prevented pharmacists from telling patients if they were paying the lowest price for a medication ("New Law Allows," 2018). This story advised patients to circumvent the gag clause by directly asking pharmacists about the lowest possible price for a given medicine. Later stories reported on a new law, signed by President Trump, banning the pharmaceutical gag clause ("New Law Allows," 2018). Additionally, stories on medication prices educated patients on ways to help cut the cost of their medicines by using manufacturer coupons and shopping around at different pharmacies ("Finding the Cheapest Prices," 2017). Overall, in these stories, patients were depicted as largely powerless against the pricing conflict between pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies, though some of the information provided (such as the gag clause, manufacturer coupons, and going to different pharmacies) did give patients a potential sense of power in a situation they could not otherwise control.

Table 1

Frequency of Frames and Frame Characteristics in EpiPen Coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC

Frame identified	*Topic identified within frame*	*Frequency*
Economic	Profits and losses for Mylan	3
	Cost and affordability for families	6
	Total	9
Attribution of responsibility	Health care industry (e.g., Mylan, benefits managers)	4
	The government and policymakers	4
	Total	8
Morality/Human interest	Children and families who use EpiPen	4
	Total	4
Conflict/Powerlessness	Patient as victim (result of pharma versus insurance; pharmaceutical company/manufacturer error)	5
	Patient as powerful (if they do X)	4
	Total	9

Discussion

Although this study of pharmaceutical medication pricing was exploratory in nature, the findings contribute to understandings of how crises are framed by the media. Understanding the frames used can provide an avenue for understanding how audiences are led to think about an issue, which can then serve as a potential catalyst for change. This study deployed previously determined news frames from Neumann et al. (1992) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). Using frames from these previous studies provided further confirmation regarding the longevity of the frames and allowed for greater understanding of a topic that has not been widely studied. Therefore, the results reflect how audiences are led to think about the issue of EpiPen pricing; how the public understand the issue can serve as a catalyst for change through the work of public interest communicators.

This study has impacts for framing theory, public interest communications, and crisis communications. Regarding the EpiPen price increase, the news media used all the common news frames: economic, attribution of responsibility, morality/human interest, and conflict/powerlessness. The economic frame appeared most often. The crisis was mainly attributed to problems with the U.S. healthcare system in general; specifically, pharmaceutical prices have gone unregulated by the government, which leaves pharmaceutical companies to

make their own pricing decisions. Therefore, the media framing situated Bresch and pharmaceutical company greed as the main actors responsible for the price increase.

Additionally, the EpiPen price increase was framed using both episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991). Episodically, news coverage focused on specific families and children affected and Bresch. The episodic coverage also focused on the economic impact for the families involved. Thematically, news coverage situated the price increase at both societal and government levels. At the societal level the coverage highlighted affected families, and at the government level coverage included governmental hearings, laws, and other governmental limitations and ideas that impacted the crisis. In terms of finding solutions for the price increase, coverage showed that many families were powerless to the whims of their insurance companies. Even individual-level solutions (e.g., using manufacturer coupons or rebates) were construed as insufficient solutions in the long term. Therefore, the government was depicted as having to step in and find long-term solutions for the pricing crisis. The news coverage indicated that many of the potential government-level solutions, including those discussed by President Trump, have not been implemented, which could lead to future price increases. However, some government-level solutions (e.g., reversing the pharmacist gag rule) have helped patients affected by the price increase.

Implications

The results of the current study support findings from previous literature. As with the EpiPen crisis, medication price increases are likely to be covered in news (Tanner, 2004) because there is a large audience interest. EpiPen constitutes 87% of all prescribed epinephrine auto-injectors, totaling approximately 3.6 million kits (“Soaring Prices,” 2016), though generic auto-injectors are gaining in popularity (“Epinephrine Usage Summary for 2018,” n.d.; Mangan, 2017). Additionally, humanizing the EpiPen story is possible because of the large number of children and families who use the product and are affected by the price increase. The results also support previous work indicating that the economic frame is often used by large news organizations to report health news and that the human interest and morality frames are used less frequently (Wallington et al., 2010).

Drake and Uhlman (1993) described how, when generic versions of a medication are put on the market, the company that owns the brand name medication will raise prices of its medicine to make up for lost market share, but the EpiPen price increase does not seem to follow this trend. Specifically, Mylan introduced its own generic version at a lower cost because of its brand name’s increased price. Additionally, the news stories, which discussed the generic versions of the epinephrine auto-injectors, expressed concern that the generic versions of the medication would not help the situation because parents often chose to continue with the brand name with which they were familiar.

In terms of medication pricing issues overall in the United States, the stories that aired during the EpiPen coverage indicate that there was a larger competition at play between the pharmaceutical companies and insurance companies, which had negative implications for the patients involved. Legislative wins such as the ban on the pharmacist gag rule worked in the favor of patients, so parents especially could afford their children's medications. Additionally, in terms of ways of coping with rising costs for EpiPen (Leopold et al., 2016), patients often went without the medication, again putting the child patient's life at risk. Previous scholarship (Kim et al., 2011; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Tanner & Friedman, 2011) indicates news coverage of a topic does not always equate to the gravity of the issue. The coverage of the EpiPen price increase fits this description especially considering the small amount of evening news coverage it received. Journalists covered the EpiPen crisis heavily in August 2016 and then only sporadically until November 2018.

Although the economic frame was prominent in the news coverage, the moral focus of the pricing increase could potentially have had more influence on how the public and policymakers viewed this issue, therefore setting the agenda for how pharmaceutical pricing was handled. The moral and human-interest focus was not necessarily a main frame of each story. Instead, the moral and human-interest frames were added by comments parents made in interviews and the statements from Senators in the Congressional hearings. Morality was also apparent through the mentions that children were the primary consumers of EpiPen. Focusing on children in these stories, and the idea that medication should not be kept from innocent children whose lives are put at risk if that occurs, is a prime example of moral values in these news stories. The economic framing of the EpiPen could indicate that the journalists were aiming to make citizens and policymakers more aware of high medication prices and their effects, possibly to help create policy change around the issue. In this way, public interest communicators can use the coverage of this issue to build on sentiment created through the framing choices made by news organizations to create what Coffman (2002) calls a public will campaign aimed at mobilizing public action for policy change.

Pharmaceutical prices in the United States have been a focus of presidential administrations since President Clinton's healthcare reform bill that attempted but failed to make change in the pharmaceutical industry (Fritz, 1993). Ultimately, not much has been accomplished to help make medications more affordable and the pharmaceutical industry remains largely unchecked. We are reminded of this when events such as the EpiPen price hike become part of the news cycle. Framing makes current issues more salient to audiences and provides a toolkit for thinking about such issues. Understanding the frames used and the solutions presented in the news coverage is an important starting point for activists and communicators looking to create long-term policy change as well as campaigns to educate patients and families. Though pricing models appear difficult to control, a continuous campaign might focus on long-term institutional change while also pushing for smaller-scale behavioral changes among individual consumers.

Limitations

This study set out to describe the frames journalists used when reporting on the EpiPen price increase. This study is exploratory in nature and focused on the framing of one specific instance of a much larger topic. Therefore, results are only specific to the EpiPen price increase and are not generalizable to other medication price increases or related topics. Choosing to focus on the EpiPen price increase allows for a better understanding of this specific case and provides greater insight into an issue not often discussed in the public discourse. Other limitations of this study are related to the make-up of the sample. The final sample (n = 30) included video news clips from three different major-network evening news programs. Many of the videos included in the sample came from NBC's *Nightly News with Lester Holt*. Though CBS and ABC are also represented in the sample, there is unequal representation; this may be attributed to CBS and ABC's relative lack of coverage of the EpiPen pricing issue and related stories on medication pricing. Additionally, the sample size is small but indicative of the nature of television news in general. Evening news programs are typically 30 minutes in length with one space for commercials; actual news reporting time is about 22 minutes (Hallin, n.d.; "Press Coverage of the News," n.d.; Thoman, n.d.). Stories are often reported in less than 45 seconds to allow for coverage of a variety of topics ("Press Coverage of the News," n.d.). Due to news values (Zajechowski, n.d.) and EpiPen's possibly being deemed less newsworthy by the reporters, producers, and others at the networks, its coverage may have been cut in favor of other news events especially after it was covered at length during the end of August 2016.

Future research

Due to the limited focus of this study, more research in pharmaceutical price increases is needed. One area of potential further inquiry is an analysis of the real effects that the frames found in stories such as the EpiPen coverage have on how citizens and policymakers respond to current issues (Kim et al., 2002; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The EpiPen price increase is just one example of medication price increases in the United States. Future research could explore price increases of other medications beyond the scope of the current study, such as insulin and Turing Pharmaceuticals' Deraphrim. An additional area of inquiry could focus on differences in reporting about various medication price increases. Such inquiry could provide more consistent evidence about the frames journalists use while reporting on this topic.

As mentioned, the sample in this study was limited to three networks' evening news shows. Other studies could focus on other networks (such as CNN, Fox, and MSNBC) and how framing choices shift with the political leanings and audiences of various television news networks. Future studies also might consider morning television news shows, which typically air for longer periods and can cover news events from many different angles. It is possible that morning news shows framed the EpiPen price increase in other ways or focused on different characteristics of

the crisis, such as potential solutions. Additional inquiry also could focus on print news coverage of the topic, which may have framed the coverage differently. These areas of inquiry would build on the foundation provided by this study and could offer other valuable insights on pharmaceutical companies and the healthcare industry.

Finally, future research is necessary to explore how demographic variables such as race play into the topic of medication price increases. In all the segments included in the sample, the patients and families interviewed appeared to be Caucasian, though the impacts of medication price increases are not limited to this racial group. It is necessary to understand how such issues affect minority groups and to further investigate why minority groups were not present in these stories.

Conclusion

The effort to control the cost of pharmaceutical prescriptions has been an important topic to patients, politicians, insurance companies, and other healthcare players for decades, from the Clinton administration to the Trump administration and beyond. Television news media have been critical for the discussion of these healthcare topics. This framing study explored the evening news coverage in the United States about the 2016 EpiPen price increase and shortage crisis. Analysis revealed four common frames: economic, attribution of responsibility, morality and human interest, and conflict and powerlessness. The most common frames for this news event were economic and attribution of responsibility. Frames of human interest and morality were more common among the people interviewed. Other news segments highlighted the conflict and powerlessness frames of medication pricing coverage, showing patients and families as victims in this situation while also providing potential suggestions to take control of the situation.

Reporting this news event mainly from the economic frame can affect how policymakers and the public understand the issue and choose to solve it. Framing the topic in such a way allows news outlets to take part in a larger conversation about the nature of healthcare and how it helps and hurts patients. By bringing up this topic in the news, the media are act as the fourth estate and raise awareness about the issue of medication prices in the United States. Doing this potentially allows for a public will campaign that can mobilize for policy change regarding pharmaceutical companies and medication prices that can make medications more accessible and benefit healthcare for all. The EpiPen price increase is just one example in a growing trend of pharmaceutical price increases that have major implications for healthcare in the United States. Considering news framing on these topics is important for individuals looking to create change in this area, whether it is in policy change or educational campaigns for patients. Understanding how people in the United States are taught to think about the issue of medication pricing can help to create change so that medications, especially those that are critical and potentially lifesaving, are accessible for all.

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Appendix

Coding Sheet

1. Item ID (also include link to the source for the episode in Internet Archive)
2. Network (ABC, CBS, NBC)
3. Date of broadcast (MM/DD/YYYY)
4. Reporter name
5. Graphic elements included in the clips
    a. Graph (Describe)
    b. Illustration (Describe)
    c. Pull Quote (Describe)
    d. Other (Describe)
6. Lead of news segment
7. Overview/Summary of news story
8. Rising medication prices mentioned? Y/N
    a. How?

9. EpiPen mentioned? Y/N
    a. How?
10. Sources used in story and direct quotes from the segment (e.g., a parent, a doctor, etc.)
11. Framing category/Type used—Choose from below definitions:
    a. Economic frames discuss profits and losses or how an event will economically affect individuals, groups, organizations, regions, or even countries (Neuman et al., 1992)
    b. Attribution of responsibility frame is defined as attributing causing or solving an event or issue to a government, individual, or group, was most used in national print and television news (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000)
    c. The moral frame makes indirect references to religious tenets or moral guidelines (Neuman et al., 1992)
    d. The human impact frame focuses on individuals and groups affected, providing a face and emotional angle to the topic (Neuman et al., 1992)
    e. Conflict frame emphasizes problems among people, organizations, or countries but can also be used to establish a sort of contest with winners and losers (Neuman et al., 1992)
    f. The powerlessness frame looks at the dominant forces over less empowered individuals or groups (Neuman et al., 1992)
12. Why did you choose the frame you did? Explain reasoning, provide quotes that illustrate the frame chosen.

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Book Review: *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice*

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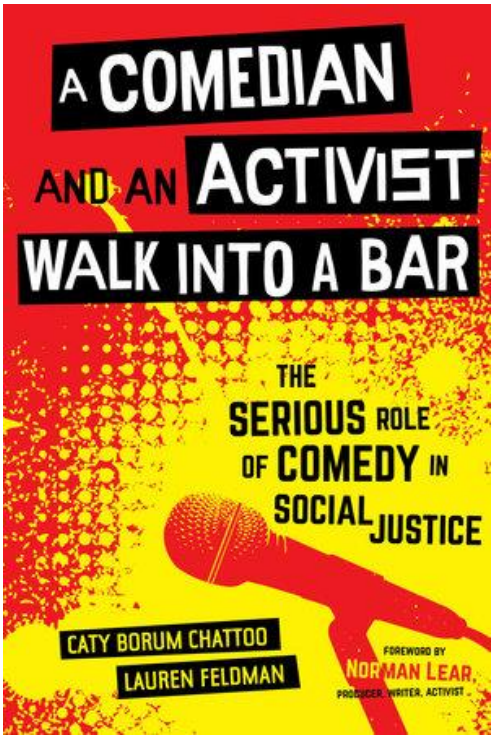

A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar offers a compelling and innovative account of the critical role mediated comedy plays in U.S. society today. As co-authors Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman argue, filmed comedic performance (ranging from standup to sketch) should not be viewed as simply escapist leisure, but can serve as a powerful form of social commentary, critique, and advocacy. To be sure, comedy for film and television has long been a riveting subject of historical inquiry, as have screen pioneers of the comedy arts such as the Marx Brothers, Lucille Ball, and Richard Pryor. However, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* focuses on our contemporary media landscape and explicitly comedy geared toward a progressive social purpose. Borum Chattoo and Feldman's fascinating project builds on the research of scholars Henry Jenkins, Bambi Haggins, and Amber Day, while also enriching the broader field of civic media, which examines how

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legacy cultural forms and emerging technologies make democratic politics more equitable and participatory.

Importantly, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* makes three incisive contributions to the disciplines of communication, cultural sociology, film studies, and media industry studies. First, it provides a persuasive frame for understanding the social justice work of an emerging cadre of feature-length films, shorts, series, and specials within our streaming environment. Second, it gives voice to comedy writers, producers, and performers' textured reflections on their craft as well as what they see as opportunities and challenges in their respective professions. Third, it analyzes with precision and depth the various forms of progressive change mediated comedy can engender. *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* ultimately elevates the stakes surrounding the crucial place of comedy in civil society and the importance of political discourse in comedic performance.

Each of the book's seven chapters examines a different dimension of the comedy-social justice relationship. Chapter One sketches the cultural context of its recent rise to prominence. Over the last 15 years, the intersection of social movements (Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Me Too), technological innovations, and seismic shifts in the entertainment industries has led to a flourishing of critical comedy across cable stations such as Comedy Central, commercial streamers such as Netflix, video sharing and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and online hubs such as Funny or Die and College Humor. In Chapter Two, Borum Chattoo and Feldman turn their attention to viewer engagement, highlighting what comedy can achieve. They make legible comedy's capacity to increase attention to pressing crises, lower resistance to persuasion, dismantle social barriers, and facilitate everyday discussion about topical issues (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, pp. 41-55). Examples from disparate areas of our media culture help to illustrate comedy's sphere of influence; for example, Tina Fey's biting impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* and John Oliver's segment on the magnitude of net neutrality on *Last Week Tonight.*

Chapter Three concentrates more on the media objects themselves, providing a taxonomy of five central genres, each with distinct stylistic conventions and a form of address. These genres are not totally new but have been reimagined or reinvigorated in recent years. Satirical news (e.g., *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*) delivers a kind of rapid response to the news cycle. Sitcoms (e.g., *Black-ish, Fresh Off the Boat, Modern Family*) revise what have frequently been white-washed and heteronormative story constructs, spotlighting instead the lives of immigrants, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. Stand-up (e.g., Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, Ali Wong's *Baby Cobra*) features comedians sharing barbed insights about a wide breadth of topical issues through the intimate presentation of their on-stage personae. Sketch (e.g., *Saturday Night Live, Key & Peele*) uses scripted ensemble performance to comment on current events and cultural debates. Lastly, documentary (e.g., *The Problem with Apu, United Shades of America*) functions as a meta genre, interweaving aspects of different formats into a coherent narrative, often with a guiding rhetorical claim. Essential to the social justice charge of these different genres, as Borum Chattoo and Feldman note, is the effort to ensure that grassroots calls for

inclusion translate to a diversity of talent and subject matter not only on screen, but also behind the camera in a below- and above-the-line capacity.

The next two chapters explore subject-centered case studies, including how comedy can combat the climate crisis and reframe narratives of poverty. For the former, Borum Chattoo and Feldman pair textual analysis of programming that sounds the alarm for global warming and critiques climate change denialism, with an original survey study of over 800 viewers' responses to climate-themed news and comedy shorts. Combining these critical studies and social science approaches yields a more nuanced understanding of comedy's rhetorical craft as well as its resonance with a cross-section of viewers. For the latter subject, Borum Chattoo and Feldman investigate comedy that takes aim at exploitive poverty porn TV, providing alternative ways to engage with socioeconomic inequities within and beyond the United States. A key example is Hasan Minhaj's *Stand Up Planet* (2014), a project where Borum Chattoo herself served as producer. Through interviews with local standup comics, the multi-part documentary project educates viewers about the crisis of sanitation management in India along with struggles to reduce the spread of HIV in South Africa. Minhaj's on-the-ground interactions offer a compassionate lens through which to better recognize how structural failures and discrimination impact underserved communities.

Chapter Six features the voices of comedy professionals themselves, drawn from 17 original interviews conducted for this book. It was refreshing to see the perspectives of these individuals, so often excerpted as mere sound bites in mainstream media, receive expansive treatment. Borum Chattoo and Feldman note the shared investment among their interviewees in "punching up, not down," which involves taking swings at those in power (and especially individuals who abuse it) rather than diminishing those who are oppressed or marginalized (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, p. 147). Particularly moving were the sentiments of African American comedian Franchesca Ramsey, who discusses both how she has had to fight racism within the profession as well as strategies for leveraging social media to heighten her visibility, build a following, and gain a foothold in the industry. Comedians are also quick to say that although they have certainly enjoyed seizing recent opportunities to speak truth to power, the for-profit pursuits of corporate studios pose an inveterate challenge. Nato Green comments, "The nature of capitalist entertainment is to make money—it's not to end racism or promote social equity or solve the world's problems" (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2020, p. 140). In turn, comedians must navigate pressures to meet the desires of risk-averse companies who are always worried about their bottom line.

With its focus on urgent collaborations among comedians, media outlets, and progressive organizations, Chapter Seven is one of the most valuable sections of the book. These collaborations involve social movement participants or individuals with subject area expertise contributing to a film or TV show. For a more co-creative effort, social organizers partner with entertainment professionals on a project directly connected to a campaign or cause. As Borum Chattoo and Feldman assert, productive partnerships require common goals and mutual respect, not simply air-dropping a message into a sitcom or flashing the face of a celebrity on screen to

drive interest in a pressing issue. A poignant case study in this chapter centers on sexual assault survivor Amanda Nguyen's organization Rise joining forces with the sketch comedy studio Funny or Die. Their film, *Even Supervillains Think Our Sexual Assault Laws Are Insane* (2016), put pressure on Barack Obama to sign the Survivors' Bill of Rights Act in 2016 along with individual legislatures to adopt local versions of the federal policy.

The concluding chapter looks toward the future, commenting how the Open Society Foundations, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and The Center for Media and Social Impact (where Borum Chattoo serves as the executive director) pursue crucial research to better understand comedy as a vehicle for social justice and imagine new forms of collaborative cultural production. Borum Chattoo and Feldman also contend that these organizations, together with grassroots efforts and support from industry allies, must devise new ways to make Hollywood more inclusive (pushing the big studios beyond talk and tokenism), especially in the executive ranks.

With its robust array of case studies and savvy interdisciplinary methodology, *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar* lays the groundwork for future research. One area of inquiry could involve media outlets that provide a direct challenge to commercial companies. What platforms might offer comedy professionals more freedom with their craft or social message? Might alternative models include a solid base of public funding or an artist-led co-op structure? Additionally, employing a comparative framework could help to position comedy within a broader cultural sphere. What are the points of similarity and difference between comedy and other socially engaged genres such as horror and sci-fi? Also, how might we research the weaponization of humor that aims to demean, discredit, or marginalize?

A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar will no doubt be a touchstone for such pursuits. To this end, the book will be of great interest to students and scholars, as well as those who work for nonprofits, the policy sector, and the media industries.