

Framing Adoption: The Media and Parental Decision Making

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Abstract

How is international adoption framed in the popular press? Do those framings shape adoption decision making? Using a multimethod approach of content analysis of newspaper reportage and in-depth interviews with international adoptive parents, this article examines the past two decades of popular press stories on international adoption and explores links between media frames and adoption decision making. Findings reveal that, although the majority of media frames on international adoption are negative, variations exist depending on the sending country profiled. Reportage on Russia adoption consists of more negative frames, whereas China adoption is more likely to be framed positively. These differences in media framings on Russia and China, the two most popular countries for international adoption into the United States from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, emerged in adoptive parents' narratives of adoption decision making.

Keywords

international adoption, media, adoption decision making, China adoption, Russia adoption

Despite variation in contemporary family forms in the United States, the dominant images of families in popular culture since post-World War II

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have largely reinforced the hegemonic “traditional” family: a monoracial, middle-class, heterosexual couple living together with their biological children (Garey & Hansen, 1998; Jacobson, 2008; Smith, 1993; Wegar, 1997). Media depictions do not reflect the diversity of form or practice of our actual families, but rather “comment upon” the family, revealing “public concerns and cultural shifts” (Hoover, Clark, & Alters, 2004; Taylor, 1989, p. 3). Media “comments” on families are important, scholars argue, because they not only entertain the general population but also shape dominant ideas of who and what families should look like; they offer “implicit lessons about family life and relations that often affect viewers’ expectations about the family as well as their own family interactions” (Bryant & Bryant, 2001; Douglas, 2003, p. 1).

Nonnormative family forms do exist, of course, in popular representations especially now given the diversity of media outlets (i.e., the Internet, cable television, newspapers, magazines, film, and radio). However, story lines involving diverse family forms are often milked for problems thought to besiege “nontraditional” families. Researchers generally understand this to be the case for depictions of adoptive families (Pertman, 2006; Wegar, 1997). As Christine Ward Gailey’s (2006) analysis of U.S. commercial films reveals, adoptive families, when they do make an appearance in popular cultural representations of families, are most often depicted as overwhelmed with problems: in the form of adoptees genetically disposed to evil or ruckus making (*The Bad Seed*, *The Omen*, *Problem Child*), dysfunctional adoptive parents (*Mommie Dearest*, *A.I.*), and damaged (and damaging) birthparents (*Losing Isaiah*). Although any one of these films in and of itself might not be particularly egregious, with few positive depictions to counterbalance them, they collectively cast adoption as clearly outside the norm.

Adoption has also been negatively portrayed in the news. Several studies examining adoption reportage have shown dominant media framings to be significantly negative in nature, despite the overwhelmingly positive outcomes associated with adoption for most children and parents (Fisher, 2003; Wegar, 1997). A 2009 study by Kline, Chatterjee, and Karel, which examined adoption broadcast news coverage from 2001 to 2005, found “the majority of adoption news stories reported on negatively charged news events like crime, negative international adoption cases, and adoption fraud” (p. 66). In her examination of articles published in 1997 in five national newspapers, Waggenspack (1998, p. 63) found “more than a 2:1 representation of negative outcomes of adoption.” Although these studies have examined depictions of adoption in general, less is known about variations that may exist in the coverage on international adoption.

Using a multimethod approach of content analysis of newspaper reportage and in-depth interviews with international adoptive parents, the present article examines the past two decades of popular press stories on international adoption and explores links between media framings and adoptive parents' decision making. In examining media representations of adoption and parents' decision making, I hope to add to our understandings of the cultural context in which people make choices when forming families via adoption. By isolating international placements from domestic adoption, I more carefully tease out variations in parental decision making and press coverage that exist by international adoptive country.

The link between news representations and adoption decision making is potentially an important factor, as the news is "the second most relied-upon source of information about adoption for Americans" (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002, cited in Kline, Karel, & Chatterjee, 2006, p. 487). In examining this link, however, I do not assume people to be passive recipients of media. Nor do I assume a causal link between media consumption and behavior. However, I do assume media stories to be potential important sources of information for prospective adopters.

Adoption Decision Making

Adoption historians have detailed how the overwhelming preference in the United States since the early 1900s among formal nonrelative adopters,¹ the majority of whom has always been White, has been for healthy, White infants (Melosh, 2002; Zelizer, 1985). In the early to mid-1900s, this preference was shaped by the stigma of adoption and the resulting desire to replicate as closely as possible the "natural" family form (Berebitsky, 2000; Modell, 1994). Children and parents were matched, therefore, throughout most of the 20th century as closely as possible along the lines of race, ethnicity, religion, and even temperament. This was thought to be psychologically best for all involved, and adoption policies guided this practice (Melosh, 2002). Children with disabilities and African American children were largely viewed as unadoptable and "excluded from the adoption market" (Berebitsky, 2000; Zelizer, 1985, p. 263). These policies upheld social norms regarding segregation along racial lines (Kim, 2008).

Adoption stigma and racial segregation, which both decreased dramatically in the last quarter of the 20th century, no longer determine adoption placements (Melosh, 2002). African American children, older children, and children with disabilities are now part of the adoption system. Indeed, Black children are now overrepresented in the system (Dalmage, 2006, p. 217). The

growth of international adoption further expanded the options available to those wanting to adopt.

As “matching” no longer dominates adoption policy, and a wider array of children (by race, age, ability, and nation of origin) are available for placement, contemporary adopters face a series of decisions on whether to pursue a domestic foster care, domestic private, or international placement. Preferences along the lines of race, age, and ability status can be seen in the choices made by contemporary adopters. These preferences are reflected, for example, in the “differential rates of adoption for different groups of children as well as categories of “waiting children”” (Kim 2008, p. 393). Black children, Dorothy Roberts (2002, p. 159) argues, are the “least likely to be adopted.” Interview-based research has shown that many international adoptive parents prefer overseas adoptions precisely because young, healthy, non-African American children are available (Dorow, 2006b; Jacobson, 2008; Kim, 2008).

For those choosing the international route, the country of origin of the child is an important decision. That choice forces parents to contemplate whether or not they would like to adopt across or within race (as both White and children of color are available overseas). Adopters are also asked whether they could parent an older child and/or one who comes with known medical or psychological issues. The structure of adoption requires potential adopters to explicitly express their parameters.

Although infertility, humanitarian impulses, and prior experience with adoption bring many to adoption (Malm & Welti, 2010), existing research has revealed important factors (some structural, others personal) that steer prospective parents on certain adoption paths; these include differences by type of adoption (i.e., domestic foster care, domestic private, or international) in terms of cost, program acceptance (especially concerning the sexual orientation, age, and marital status of prospective adopters), wait time, extended family support or criticism, and preferences for children by race, gender, and age (Brown, Smalling, Groza, & Ryan, 2009; Dorow, 2006a; Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Hollingsworth & Ruffin, 2002; Zhang & Lee, 2011). Although these factors are generally understood to shape the choice of one country over another, little is known about the role media play in formulating those preferences.

Method

Twenty-one years of U.S. newspaper accounts of adoption, from January 1, 1990, through December 31, 2010, were examined for this article. *LexisNexis* data searches using the key terms “international adoption,” “intercountry

adoption,” and “inter-country adoption” yielded 6,644 articles. I narrowed my search to three newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. These newspapers were selected for their relatively large and broad national readership (Adams & Coltrane, 2006, p. 26; Waggenpack, 1998, p. 63).

LexisNexis searches using the key terms listed above yielded 384 articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* combined. After removing articles that were duplicates, announcements for meetings, letters to the editor, or were actually not about international adoption (but mentioned the term), I had a total of 150 articles for analysis (72 from *The New York Times*, 48 from *The Washington Post*, and 30 from *USA Today*).

Using a content analytic approach, I analyzed the articles for the general overall story line or “frame” of international adoption provided in each. According to Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993, p. 118), a frame is a “central organizing idea, suggesting what is at issue. It deals with the pattern-organizing aspect of meaning.” The public is ultimately trained to understand phenomena in particular ways, as media frames “provide the boundaries of reasonable discourse and the limits of rational argument” (Adams & Coltrane, 2006, p. 25). In directing the public’s “attention to some issues over others,” media frames inform “our perceptions of social life, crucially shaping individual and collective action” (Saguy, Gruys, & Gong, 2010, p. 586).

In my analysis of media frames, I looked for patterns: of the articles’ topics, style of language, overall tone, and the adoptive countries mentioned, and named each accordingly. In looking for those patterns, I addressed the following questions: Are frames predominantly negative or positive in terms of their depictions of adoption (i.e., Was adoption framed as a problematic practice? Was stigmatizing or normalizing language used? Were negative or positive character traits attached to adoptive parents or adopted children?). I also examined whether certain countries were associated with particular types of framings.

Additional data for this article came from a qualitative study on parental experiences with international adoption. I completed 46 in-depth, semistructured interviews with U.S. adoptive parents (40 mothers and 6 of their husbands) with children internationally adopted as infants and toddlers in the 1990s. Half of my sample adopted their child(ren) from Russia; the other half of the sample adopted from China. China- and Russia-adoptive parents were selected as they led in overseas placements into the United States from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2012). The majority of newspaper articles on international adoption, as will be discussed below, were also on those two countries.

As with most international adoptive parents (Ishizawa, Kenny, Kubo, & Stevens, 2006), all but three of my participants were White and middle class.² The majority of participants were educated professionals. Their average age at the time of the adoption of their children was 40 years. Participants were recruited through postings on adoption group listservs (including *Families with Children from China* and *Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption*), word of mouth, and snowball sampling.

In my analysis of the interview data, I first combed the transcripts for mention of media. The major focus of the interviews was the ways in which adoptive parents engaged with the birth culture of their children. Part of my interviews, however, explored the route to adoption and the decision to pursue a Russia or China placement. Near the beginning of each of my interviews I asked, "Can you tell me about the process of deciding to adopt your daughter/son?" What usually followed was a long narrative of adoption decision making ending at the arrival of the child in their new home. It was in these narratives that media accounts of adoption largely emerged. The existence of these media accounts in my data was therefore naturally occurring (as much as is possible in an interview setting) rather than being responses to specific questions on media. This was important as I wanted to capture adopters' own interpretations and presentations of the various forces, media included, that shaped their decisions.

I looked for patterns in the interview data in terms of the particular story or overall media frame recounted by participants, the point in the adoption narrative that the media account was placed, and the self-reported impact of that account. Finally, I explored any correspondence between patterns in the interview data and in the newspaper reportage. Influenced by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), my goal was to develop, from parents' own narratives, an understanding of the ways in which media framings are part of the context in which adoption decisions are made.

Results and Discussion

Media Frames of International Adoption

Starting in the early 1990s, there began a significant increase in adoption-related press coverage, especially for stories on international adoption. This media interest parallels the dramatic rise in the numbers of international adoptions, notably from China and Russia, into the United States. As shown in Table 1, in 1990, there were 7,093 international adoptions and 19 articles in U.S. newspapers. Fifteen years later there were 22,728 adoptions and 622 newspaper articles.³

Table 1. Adoption Placements and Articles on International Adoption by Year.

	International Adoptions into the United States	Articles in U.S. newspapers
1990	7,093	19
1991	8,481	30
1992	6,472	59
1993	7,377	59
1994	8,333	106
1995	8,987	137
1996	10,641	261
1997	12,743	217
1998	15,774	270
1999	16,363	289
2000	17,718	467
2001	19,237	483
2002	20,099	505
2003	21,616	497
2004	22,884	554
2005	22,728	622
2006	20,680	540
2007	19,609	593
2008	17,475	343
2009	12,753	232
2010	11,058	361

Source. Bureau of Consular Affairs (2012) and author completed LexisNexis data searches.

My analysis of the selected 150 newspaper articles confirms previous scholarship on media and adoption that found reportage on adoption to be overwhelmingly negative. Of the 150 articles analyzed, I found 71% (106) to be negative in nature. The overarching frame for this negative reportage was one that promoted the idea that international adoption was fraught with uncertainty, problems, and danger, especially for adopters. As can be seen in Table 2, within this “international adoption is dangerous” frame, articles focused on such topics as problems with the international adoption systems (both in the United States and in sending countries), damaged children, and scandals.

The most popular type of article within the “international adoption is dangerous” frame was “problems with the system.” These stories detail problems with the structure, the procedures, or the experiences associated with the

Table 2. Negative Frames of International Adoption by Coding Type.

Negatively framed stories	106 (71%)
Problems with the system	42
Damaged children	22
Scandals	18
Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)	6
Scarcity of children available	4
Celebrities (preferences given/excesses)	4
Adoption industry dilemmas	3
Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)	2
Domestic adoption preferred	2
Birth families	2
Unusually big families	1

international adoption system. These can be problems with the system in the United States (e.g., in terms of laws of citizenship) or with sending countries. An example of this type of reportage can be found in a 2007 *New York Times* article titled, “A Taste of Family Life in the U.S., but Adoption Is in Limbo,” by Jane Gross. This article showcased the Prozzo family, their experiences with a summer “host-to-adoption” program, and their decision to pursue an adoption of the young Ukrainian girl they had hosted. The article read in part,

In the largely unregulated world of international adoptions, these programs often lead to happily-ever-after, but sometimes end painfully. Ukraine and Russia place formidable obstacles in the path of parents, among them inaccurate information about children’s availability and health status. Multiple families can wind up competing for the same child. And children themselves know they are auditioning for what the industry calls their “forever families.” Then there is an entrenched system of favors—requests for cash or gifts from facilitators, translators, judges, and others who handle the mechanics of adoption overseas.

This article, and other “problems with the system” pieces, cast the adoption process, especially from the Ukraine and Russia, as unstable and fraught with unseemly characteristics such as bribes, adoptions failing to transpire because of deception or bureaucratic fumbling, and excruciatingly long waits due to bureaucratic inefficiency. Despite the fact that since the early 1990s, the majority of international adoption placements are thought to have been “stringently managed and rigorously policed” (Waggenspack, 1998, p. 69), the 42 “problems with the system” articles communicated a clear message that international adoption is a risky venture for prospective parents.

The second most popular type of article within the “international adoption is dangerous” framing centers on “damaged” children. The 22 articles with this theme depict serious physical, emotional, and psychological problems experienced by adoptees, especially because of the effects of institutionalization and fetal-alcohol syndrome (FAS). They cast adoptees as “damaged goods” and offer few avenues for resolving children’s injuries. They serve as warnings to prospective adoptive parents about the type of risk they would be taking should they chance one of these placements. Typical of these articles, “Romanian Adoptees may Bring Problems to New Homes,” a 1994 *USA Today* piece by Marilyn Elias, warns parents of the problems international adoptees may face.

The more time children have spent in orphanages, and the older they are when getting out, the worse they tend to do, reports Dr. Dana Johnson of the University of Minnesota Medical School. Johnson has completed the only scientific study of Romanian adoptees’ health upon arrival in the U.S. About 20% of 65 kids he evaluated tested positive for hepatitis B; only 10% of those over 1 year old were developmentally normal, he reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. All children who were both healthy and developmentally on track either were infants who lived only briefly in orphanages or they were toddlers who lived with birth families until adoption. “That doesn’t mean people shouldn’t adopt these children,” Johnson emphasizes, “but families should know their kids may be at risk and make informed decisions about whether they can handle it”

Despite the fact that Johnson’s study was on a limited number of adoptees from one sending country (Romania), Elias’s piece, like other articles with this frame of “damaged children,” tends to cast adoptees’ damaged health status as endemic to the international adoption system. Even though many of these articles speculate on the positive impact a loving adoptive home can have on adoptees’ health, these articles never fully resolve the risk parents take by adopting these “damaged children.” They tend to transmit a take-home message of uncertainty and danger.

Scandals are also popular topics for international adoption reportage. In all, 18 such articles appeared over the course of the last 21 years in the three newspapers analyzed. A recent scandal that received press coverage in each of the three newspapers is the case of 7-year-old Artyom Savelyev, who was returned (unaccompanied) to Russia by Torry Ann Hansen, his adoptive American mother, when she decided she no longer wanted to parent him because of what she called his “psychopathic issues.” Like most adoption scandal stories, articles on the Hansen case tended to generalize rather than isolate the disturbing aspects of the case. They had titles such as “The Lonely

Table 3. Positive Frames of International Adoption by Coding Type.

Positively framed stories	44 (29%)
Culture keeping	17
Saving children	10
Adoption works	5
U.S. laws/policies to help adopters	3
Adoption support groups	2
Problems with adoptees surmountable	2
Children healthy	2
Children available	2
International adoption preferred	1

Lives of Russia's Orphans" (*The Washington Post*, 2010), and "In Some Adoptions, Love Doesn't Conquer All" (*The New York Times*, 2010).

Other scandals reported in the analyzed articles include the 1997 case of Richard and Karen Thorne who were found guilty of using excessive punishment to discipline their two recently adopted children on the plane home from Russia. *The New York Times* ran five stories on the Thornes in 1997 with titles such as "Couple Accused of Beating Daughters Tell of Adoption Ordeal." Like all stories with the frame of "international adoption is dangerous," scandal stories paint a particular picture of international adoption as decidedly risky and problematic.

Positive Reportage on International Adoption

On the opposite end of the spectrum was reportage with the dominant frame of "adoption is safe." The 44 articles with this frame, totaling 29% of all articles analyzed, focus on topics such as engagement with birth culture and saving children (Table 3).

At 17 articles, the most popular positively framed story was that which focused on cultural engagement. These articles detail the activities and groups international adoptive parents interact with to connect their children to their cultures of birth. An example of such an article is a 1997 *New York Times* article by Janny Scott titled, "Orphan Girls of China at Home in New York." Scott writes about China-adoptive parents and how "they have undertaken the complicated task of raising Chinese children in their mostly Caucasian, upper-middle-class world, while cultivating their daughters' original heritage to a degree that previous generations of parents of foreign-born adoptees have not." Although these articles often paint a picture of a complicated

negotiation parents undergo in coming to understandings of culture, the tenor of these articles is decidedly positive as they detail the importance of what I call culture keeping (Jacobson, 2008), the enjoyment many have in keeping culture, and the resources available to parents.

Another type of positively framed reportage focuses on saving children. One such *New York Times* article from 1995, titled "Now Chosen, Chinese Girls Take to U.S." by Elaine Louie, profiled the LaPlant family and their adoption of a girl from China. The article tells of how the LaPlant's adopted the girl after she was rejected by a single woman. When Mr. LaPlant traveled to pick up his new daughter, renamed MaCai, "he showed her a photograph album of her new family, with a collage showing how she would look in her room at home. At night, terrified, she wept. But after two days, she took his hand and smiled." The depiction of MaCai LaPlant's adoption is typical of "saving children" stories in which adoption is framed as a triumph story, complete with struggle and ultimate victory, which frees adoptees from difficult orphanage conditions or potentially tragic futures. These stories contain none of the unresolved risk prominent in negative adoption stories. Instead, they end positively for both children and adoptive parents.

Similarly positive stories describe upbeat adoption outcomes for particular families. An example of an "Adoption Works" article is a 1992 *Washington Post* piece by Avis Thomas-Lester titled, "A Family, East-West Style; Russian Baby Adopted by Catharpin Couple." This article covers the moment Sasha Schultis joined his family at which he walked up to his new mother "and raised his arms to be picked up." She picked him up and "he put his head on my shoulder and I cried," she said. "All the nurses were crying. Everybody in the orphanage was crying." Like the feel-good story of Sasha's homecoming, positive reportage conveys the idea that it is possible to find your child through international adoption and to have a happy outcome.

Comparisons of Negative and Positive Framed Reportage

As more Americans found their children through international adoption, the negative press on overseas placements increased. From 1990 to 1999, out of 52 stories on international adoption, 30 were negative stories and 22 were positive. From 2000 to 2010 by contrast, out of 98 articles, 74 were negative and 25 were positive. This represents an 88.4% increase in articles on international adoption, mostly due to the 146% increase in negative press.

When examining the relationship between media framing and international adoptive country, interesting aspects emerge. Though China has been the number one country from which Americans internationally adopted

since 1990 (Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2012; Office of Children's Issues, U.S. Department of State, 2010), Russia adoption drew the most media interest of any international adoptive country, even including general international adoption stories (i.e., those that were not on one country but rather covered multiple countries). Whereas China adoption was the topic of 20 articles in the three analyzed newspapers, twice that number were on Russia adoption.

Stories on Russia adoption were more likely to be negatively framed than those on China. Whereas China-focused reportage was near evenly balanced between negative (11) and positive (9) articles, nearly three times as many negative Russia adoption stories (29) were published as were positive ones (11). The most popular Russia adoption stories were ones that had the theme of "damaged children." These stories depicted Russia adoptees as particularly prone to emotional and psychological damage because of the effects of FAS and institutionalization. For example, an April 2010 *New York Times* article titled, "Russian Adoptees Get a Respite on the Range," detailed the experiences of Russia adoptees with behavioral issues sent to live on a therapeutic ranch for children whose parents can no longer care for them. As can be seen in the excerpt below, clear connections are made between Russia and troubled placements.

In Russia, vodka's curse has been woven through history since the early czars. One widely cited study concluded that Russia's rate of fetal alcohol syndrome was eight times that of the rest of the world. Exposure in utero to alcohol can cause irreversible brain damage, with visible manifestations that include smaller eyes and a smaller upper lip with the lip's groove flattened. Even those with lesser exposure can have an interior rewiring of their brain chemistry, according to extensive medical research. Isolation in infancy—in an understaffed orphanage or with a drunken parent—compounds those problems

Although a significant minority (10% to 15%) of Russia adoptees are estimated to suffer from FAS (Miller, 2005, p. 56), this condition and others, such as "reactive attachment disorder" (RAD),⁴ are so often linked to Russia adoptees in the news that readers might get the impression that the rates are much higher. The link between FAS, RAD, and Russia adoptees can especially be seen in articles on adoption scandals. In the 21 years analyzed for this research, there were 18 newspaper articles on various adoption-related scandals. Eleven of those articles were on five reported Russia adoption scandals. (The remaining seven scandal articles were on Mexico [3], Haiti [2], Cambodia [1], and Guatemala [1].) Three of the five reported Russia scandals involved the death of a Russian adoptee at the hands of an adoptive parent

(the Hilt, Pavlis, and Polreis cases), one was the Hansen case, and one was the Thorne case.⁵ In each of the Russia adoption scandal articles, the psychological health of Russia adoptees (rather than the adopters) is problematized and used to contextualize the abuse or questionable behavior engaged in by the adoptive parents. FAS and RAD are often mentioned or implied even if the child in question had not been diagnosed by a psychologist or counselor. In these ways, the FAS- and RAD-damaged child is largely “the face” of Russia adoption in the news.

There were *no* “damaged children” or scandal stories featuring China adoptees in stories on international adoption, even though China adoptees were also abused and killed by their adoptive parents during the years analyzed in this article (Miller, Chan, Reece, Tirella, & Pertman, 2007). There were only three China-focused stories on problems with the system. The most popular type of story on China had the positive frame of culture keeping. The most popular negative stories featuring China adoption (totaling six) were on the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic of 2003 and how medical precautions were halting or slowing down adoptions. Only three other negative stories on China were published. These were on changes to the system, such as new regulations on marriage and health statuses of adopters that curtailed the ability of Americans to adopt. Neither the SARS nor the problems with the system articles on China contained nearly the negativity than did those on “damaged” Russia adoptees or scandals. Moreover, the negativity in them was not focused on the character of the children as it was for stories on Russia adoption. Rather, negative China adoption news stories focused on roadblocks to getting children out of China and into the arms of their adoptive parents. China adoptees are neither characterized in the press as “risky children” nor are their placements framed as problematic as is the case for Russia adoption.

Overall, my analysis confirms other research that finds negative stories dominate the press on adoption. Out of 150 articles analyzed, 71% were negative in nature whereas 29% were positive. However, when examining international adoption alone, interesting distinctions emerge, especially between China and Russia reportage. The presence of China adoption in the news articles analyzed was largely positive, whereas that of Russia was largely negative. Russian children were largely framed as “damaged goods” and the Russia adoption process as sketchy and full of risk. Chinese children were largely viewed in the press through the relatively positive frame of culture. The “risk” of Russian adoption dominant in the press was largely absent for China adoption. Was this distinction between China and Russia adoption understood by adoptive parents and integrated into their adoption decision

making? What role does information derived from the press play in decisions they make about from where to adopt their children?

Adoption Decisions

Typical of adopters (Fisher, 2003; Hollingsworth, 2000), the majority of my sample (75%) came to adoption via infertility. Having experienced infertility and, for most, several (if not years of) attempts at infertility treatment, an important condition of pursuing yet another attempt to parent was mitigating risk. My participants reported that the biggest risk they faced was not actually receiving a child. That risk was closely followed by the possibility that they would not receive a healthy child.

My analysis uncovered that media depictions of adoption were part of the terrain of negotiating risk in adoption decision making. Nearly half (48%) of my participants spontaneously mentioned media stories of adoption during my interviews with them. My analysis reveals several important points in the adoption decision-making process where media stories shaped participants' adoption trajectories away from risk and toward what they understood as relative safety. The first was in learning about the "dangers" of domestic placements.

"Dangerous" Domestic Placements

As other researchers have found, participants in my study were leery of domestic adoption due to concerns about birth mothers renegeing on agreements (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2007; Dorow, 2006a). No figures exist on the prevalence of adoption interrupted by birth parents, yet this was a major concern for the women and men with whom I spoke. When discussing these fears of birth mothers, participants in my study often recounted media stories of disrupted placements. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were several high profile cases in the media (e.g., Baby Richard, Baby Jessica, and Baby M) of birth parents renegeing on agreements. Like many participants, Eloise Nolan,⁶ a China-adoptive mother, spoke of the fears such events and the resulting news coverage generated, and the way they shaped her decision to pursue an international placement.

You see those horror stories on TV when they come back after two or three years and take these children. I could never, after going through so many losses prior—I know no one will ever come knocking on my door to take my child back! [*laughter*]
I guess it's kind of a fear, you know?

As Kline et al. (2009) report, most domestic adoption news events, like disrupted placements, are negative in nature. Interestingly, however, in my analysis of reportage I found only one story with the explicit theme of advocating for international adoption over domestic placements because of the fear of birth parents. This 1999 *Washington Post* article titled, "Americans Adopting More Foreign-Born Children," characterized international adoption as "less complicated" than domestic adoption. It went on to state that adoptive parents are

fueled by well-publicized horror stories . . . such as when birth parents change their minds after agreeing to an adoption. Such battles often end up in court. "The attorney could simply say-and they do say: 'Hey, domestic adoption is too risky. We can get you a healthy kid from Russia or China in six months,'" said William Pierce of the National Council for Adoption. "They say, 'I don't trust the courts, I don't trust the American system. I want to adopt from another country.'"

As my research and others studies have shown, negative adoption stories, such as those on disrupted adoptions, are not equally balanced by positive ones. So while participants in my study were reading about the horrific experiences of disrupted adoptions, they were not hearing about the many positive domestic placements. Not surprisingly, participants reported that they felt safer with an international adoption because of the complete forfeiture of parental rights.

Other factors contribute to the decision to pursue an overseas placement instead of a domestic one; in particular, race and age (Dorow, 2006b; Jacobson 2008; Kim, 2008). The desire for a non-African American infant strongly shaped many participants' decisions to adopt from overseas. The oversupply of older Black children available domestically, especially in state adoptions (as compared with private ones), scared many as they felt both unprepared to parent a Black child (in terms of giving the child an adequate "racial education") and unwilling to grapple with extended-family disapproval. None of my participants, however, spoke of *media depictions* of race as shaping their decisions.

Learning About International Adoption

The second way media shaped adoption decision making was in learning about international adoption. As the numbers of stories on international adoption in the news grew, larger numbers of people were exposed to this relatively new route to family formation via the news. Jamie Naylor, a

China-adoptive mother, spoke of her “a-ha” international adoption moment that occurred because of the media.

I heard on the radio while taking a shower Elizabeth Bartholet (who I suspect you know) speak of her experience of going to South America and I thought, “now that’s way cool!” I went from 0 to 100 in terms of thinking about adoption. As I was getting out of the shower I kind of knew that that was going to be our path.

Although most reportage on international adoption is negative, Jamie and several others in my study were influenced by positive stories to pursue an overseas placement. The majority of my participants, however, did not mention positive reportage propelling them toward international adoption. Rather, already primed by the negative press on domestic adoption, other factors, such as meeting a family that had successfully adopted internationally, opened overseas placements as a possible route to parenthood.

Problematic Eastern European Adoptions

The most prevalent way media shaped adoption decision making was in exposure to negative framings of Russia adoption. In their narratives of adoption, a third of my sample spontaneously spoke of media stories that portrayed Russia adoption as highly problematic. The comments of Shawn Albright, a Russia-adoptive father, were typical of the concerns that grew from media reports on Russia adoptees. Shawn spoke of how those concerns were dominant during the time that he and his wife adopted their daughter.

There was a number of things on TV at the time where there was a lot of concern on our side about the health of the children and are they up to where they need to be from a child development perspective. I think at the time that we adopted her, other issues at the time were—acclimated kind of bonding issues, where if the child was passed around so much maybe they lose that ability to bond—and that was maybe the biggest concern that we had. Would she bond, would she adjust?

Though Shawn had serious concerns about the health and bonding capabilities of children from Russia, he and his wife pursued Russian adoption because, as he told me, “we wanted a child that looked like us. That was the biggest thing.”

China-adoptive mothers, on the other hand, often cited press articles on problematic Russia adoption as one of the reasons they turned away from Russia and toward China. Priscilla Anderson, for example, explained how the news reports of Russia adoptees affected her decision making: “I have heard

scary things about Russian kids and their attachment problems. And the Chinese babies from what I heard are healthy and well-loved at the time that they were put into the system.” As with Priscilla, the pre-adoptive understanding of the healthy Chinese baby drew many to China adoption. Priscilla’s additional comments were indicative of this focus: “We just said China, great, without having any history with the country or anything. But it is just that we wanted a healthy baby. That was completely the motivation.” Priscilla, like many China-adoptive mothers, held the opinion that China adoptees were the most healthy available internationally due to the unique factors that shape child abandonment in China, notably the one-child policy (Jacobson, 2008).

The absence in the press of articles focusing on health and behavioral issues experienced by some China adoptees coupled with the dominance of “damaged children” articles about Russia adoptees gave prospective adoptive parents the impression that China adoptees were healthy and Russia adoptees were unhealthy (especially in terms of their psychological and emotional health). Typical of this juxtaposition, were the comments of Carey Sykes, a China-adoptive mother,

At the time there were lots of stories about Russia and Romania that had not-so-healthy children, or whatever, but the stories—the information about China was much better, so we just thought let’s give it a go. My husband was very concerned about the health.

Despite the media depictions of Russia adoptees as “damaged” and China adoptees as “healthy,” the majority of adoptees from *both* China and Russia have experienced institutionalization that can have serious consequences for child outcomes. We also know that some Chinese-born children are treated for both medical and psychological issues once adopted, as are children from all sending nations. Part of the reason for this is that “foreign children are often sicker than their U.S. counterparts because they do not receive the same infant vaccinations” (Nicholson, 2002, p. 481). The differences in medical care, coupled with living in a group setting, result in higher rates of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, pneumonia, diphtheria, hepatitis B, measles, and HIV infection among international adoptees as compared with native-born children (Miller, 2005; Nicholson, 2002).

It is difficult to compare the health statuses of international adoptees from different countries. Health information on adoptees is lacking and often unreliable (Hellerstedt et al, 2008). Also what we *do* know about international adoptees’ health postadoption comes largely from studies of medical and psychological clinical populations (i.e., children for whom care is being

sought) and not from general adoptee populations (Waggenspack, 1998). The medical literature on the postadoption status of international adoptees points to health issues and developmental delays found among *both* China and Russia adopted children, although differences have been noted. These medical studies, however, are relatively new and have small sample sizes. For example, in their study of 123 infants and toddlers adopted from China, East Asia, and Russia, Pomerleau et al. (2005) found craniofacial abnormalities and eczema more prevalent in the Chinese group and gastrointestinal infections and “neurological signs more frequent in the Russian group” (p. 450). Nicholson (2002) notes rickets and emotional and psychological problems prevalent among Russian adoptees and “anemia, rickets, asthma, tuberculosis, lead poisoning, and malnutrition” as the most medical conditions found among China adoptees (p. 482). Although patterns have been found across populations in these clinical-based studies, the most important factors for health issues and delays emphasized in the literature are the length of time children spend in institutionalized care and the intensity of preadoptive deprivation, both of which can be highly individualized (Meese, 2005; Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2008).

Despite the negative press Russia adoption received, many Americans chose to find their children in Russia during the two decades analyzed in this article. For the majority of my sample, it was the relatively high prospect of receiving a White child that propelled this decision.⁷ Russia-adoptive parents in my sample managed uncertainty about the health of prospective children in several ways—none of which involved the popular press. Rather, prospective adopters sought out the Russia adoption community (to witness successful adoptions) and the medical community (to evaluate specific children), which led to the development of a whole subspecialty in pediatrics: adoptive medicine.

Conclusion

In contrast to prior research on adoption reportage, my analysis focused exclusively on international adoption found important differences by country of origin. Stories on Russia adoption were most prominent in the news reportage analyzed. They also were more likely to be negative in nature, with almost three times as many negative Russia stories as positive ones. This dominant framing gives a strong impression that Russia adoption was dangerous and risky in terms of both the process and the type of children available. There were fewer stories on China adoption, though China was the number one source of children adopted internationally into the United States in the years analyzed. China reportage was also more likely to be positive, with nearly half of all China adoption stories positively framed.

My analysis makes clear that news reportage on international adoption did shape the decisions the parents in my sample made regarding the country of origin of their intended children. Newspaper reportage was not the only factor that influenced their choices, however, the negative press on Russia adoption, especially those stories on “damaged children,” directed many prospective parents toward China. They also gave Russia-adoptive parents, many of whom were committed to adopting a White child, pause and motivation for pursuing additional medical evaluations of referred children. My analysis also reveals that some adopters, despite their serious concerns about the health of prospective children, prioritize the racial status of their children.

Newspaper reportage is notoriously problem focused (i.e., “if it bleeds, it leads”). This is an issue for alternative forms of family formation, as the news is an important source of information on these routes to parenthood in the United States. For adoption, negative media framing shapes the cultural context in which people think about this route to family formation. Adoption researchers and the medical community acknowledge that no concrete conclusive data exist that can predict the health outcomes or procedural difficulties of a particular adoption by country of origin. However, my analysis reveals that newspaper reportage presents a relatively fully articulated story of negative Russia adoptions and positive China ones which, in turn, shapes the decisions some people make about the countries from which to seek children.

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Notes

1. As compared with known kin adopters, such as grandparents and stepparents.
2. Race was self-identified by participants. Class status was determined using a combination of income, occupation, education, and self-identification.
3. As can be seen as well, as the numbers of international adoptions has declined in the past several years, so too has reportage on this phenomenon.
4. Reactive attachment disorder, characterized by [omit empty line and add quotation marks around quote] “children who are considered to be unable or unwilling to bond with a parental (most often maternal) figure, . . . is thought by psychologists and psychiatrists to result when a serious interruption occurs in the bonding between mother and child during the child’s first twenty-six months of life” (Stryker 2010, p. 3).
5. Using news accounts as data, Miller et al (2007) estimated that “since 1996, there have been 18 fatalities (in 17 families) of internationally adopted children because of suspected or proven cases of abuse and/or neglect by their adoptive parents . . . (14 adopted from Russia, 2 from China, 2 from Guatemala)” (pp. 378-379). These numbers are estimates as there are no “official mechanisms for capturing information about . . . cases of murder and serious abuse to children in foster or adoptive care” in the United States (Barth & Hodorowicz, 2011, p. 87). Because of this lack of basic information on exact numbers of deaths and more complex information on their causes, the exact reasons why more Russian adoptees have allegedly been murdered and any links to FAS and RAD is speculative.
6. The names of all study participants are pseudonyms.
7. Not all children adopted out of Russia are phenotypically characterized as White within the U.S. racial schema.

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