

The US Adoption System: Media Depictions and Why They are Ignored

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Abstract

This study investigated the U.S. adoption system, media influence, and welfare spending. It was undertaken to understand how the media frames adoption and the U.S. adoption system and how certain factors influence how the public views welfare spending (welfare spending including foster care and adoption programs). The media presents the adoption process as long and complex, suggesting that social welfare programs that handle adoption and foster care may be underfunded. However, such presentation has not prompted a response from the public, suggesting that opinions about adoption are influenced by factors other than media portrayal. This research suggests that political leanings, family income, and confidence in the media are all partially influential to how people view how much money is spent on welfare programs. This research also suggests that other avenues would be more successful than the media in raising awareness about problems in adoptions, such as using conservative-leaning NGOs to inform conservative-leaning citizens.

Keywords: adoption, media, welfare spending

According to Engels, Phillips, and Dellacava (2007), 80% of children adopted internationally are adopted into the United States; this is despite large numbers of children in the United States waiting to be adopted. The disparity between the numbers of international adoptions and domestic adoptions raises many questions about what influences parents' decisions in adoption. One way to understand this disparity surrounds how the media's portrayal of adoption and the adoption process in the United States shapes parents' perceptions of domestic adoption. Many causes of parental preferences have already been explored, including the relationship between parental

preferences and race, gender, age, and health (Quiroz, 2008; Zhang & Lee, 2011). The perceptions of race, gender, age, and health have a direct relationship to which children are adopted and whether the adoption is international or domestic (Hogbacka, 2008; Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006). Focusing on domestic adoption, an area of concern is the funding of adoption. The amount of government funding put towards the foster care and adoption system is an important factor influencing how quickly adoptions are processed and how the public views the adoption process. One of the areas that remains understudied is how changes in adoption policy have impacted the presentation of adoption in the media, as well as how that presentation in the media is related to opinions of adoption and welfare spending.

The importance of this study lies in considering the welfare of children being adopted and children waiting to be adopted. Parents seeking to adopt children often consider their own preferences in children before the needs of children waiting to be adopted (Hogbacka, 2008; Roby & Shaw, 2006). Socially-constructed perceptions about the differences between adopting domestically versus internationally are also influential in the choices of parents seeking to adopt. The purpose of this transformational sequential mixed methods study was to explore the portrayal of the adoption process in the media and opinions of welfare spending in relation to adoption, using the social constructionist theory to frame the analysis. This paper explores the topic by reviewing previous relevant literature, describing qualitative and quantitative methods used, describing the results, and presenting conclusions based on the research.

Adoption is shaped by the preferences and tastes of parents. These preferences are varied and can be based on age, sex, race, cultural background, or healthiness (Hogbacka, 2008; Kahan, 2006; Quiroz, 2008; Zhang & Lee, 2011). Often these preferences are the deciding factor in whether parents pursue international adoption or domestic adoption. These preferences are conditioned by the structure of the parents' society and culture. Social norms and values assist in building the background of these preferences (Hogbacka, 2008). Parents' beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and ideas about issues such as race play an integral role in both international and domestic adoption decisions (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006).

A variety of reasons exist for why parents choose to adopt internationally. Zhang and Lee (2011) found that many parents believe that an internationally-adopted child offers an interesting challenge while a domestically-adopted child presents problems difficult to resolve. Quiroz (2008) has shown that international adoption has been preferred partly because of the perception of international children as “remediable and salvageable,” and the perception that children in the United States have behavioral and emotional problems that are difficult to resolve. However, also having an effect are perceptions of age, gender, race, and health. Hogbacka (2008) found that parents in both domestic and transnational adoptions favor the youngest children. Older children are harder to place and more likely to have behavioral problems (Zhang & Lee, 2011). Despite a rising trend toward multiethnic and multiracial families, parents continue to prefer children that are similar to them in race and ethnicity (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Kahan, 2006; Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006; Simon, 2009). Gender also influences adoptions; girls are sought after more than boys due to perceptions of adjustment and difficulty in raising. Hogbacka (2008) also found that parents favor the healthiest children. Wegar (2000) researched how media frames adoption and found that adoption is often portrayed in a negative light to elicit emotions and capture audiences’ attention. Tyebjee (2003) suggests that people who have actually adopted should be used in the media instead of ideological subtext when presenting adoption. Parents are sometimes willing to adopt problematic children, but express frustrations with the way the system is set up (Spake, 1998). Frustrations could in part be caused by the amount of government spending handling foster care and processing adoptions (Reitz, 1999). This information suggests we still need to study how adoption is presented in the media today and what that presentation in the media might mean for people’s support of increased funding for a better adoption system (Geen, Boots, & Tumlin, 1999; Reitz, 1999).

Previous research in this area has integrated the social constructionist theory (Zhang & Lee, 2011), and this theory is also applied to this study. The social constructionist theory is based on the belief that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). It is constructed through interaction, life experience, and social acceptance; actions are

based on subjective interpretations of reality. Therefore, meanings are not inherent but defined by experiences and interactions. Parents interact with society and draw from those personal experiences to create their preferences. As part of these personal experiences, parents interact with media, which also shapes how they perceive and understand adoption and the adoption process. Ultimately, this theory provides guidance to analyzing how different aspects of society interact and shape meaning toward adoption and adoption-oriented welfare funding.

Methods

This study explored how the media's portrayal of adoption and the adoption process affects the perceptions of adoptive parents. It also focused on welfare spending and investigated the factors affecting public opinion of welfare spending. The goals of this research were to identify general patterns and relationships and interpret cultural and historical significant phenomena. Based on these goals, this study was informed by the following research questions: (1) How do media frame adoption and the adoption process?, (2) How do political party affiliation, confidence in the press, and family income affect public opinion of welfare spending?

The first question led to considering what factors influence how people view media presentations, especially of the adoption system, and informed the second question which looked at three factors that influence the public's view of welfare spending. This study was based on two guiding propositions which are informed by both social constructionist theory and previous literature on adoption and its process. These guiding propositions connect to the research questions mentioned above and outline the study.

1. The way that the media portrays adoption and the adoption process influences the perceptions that the public associates with domestic adoption.
2. Political party affiliation, confidence in the press, and family income are all factors influencing public opinion of welfare spending.

This is a mixed-methods study that contains both a quantitative and qualitative analysis, giving both depth and breadth to the study. More specifically, this study is a sequential exploratory design mixed methods study where the quantitative analysis was framed by the qualitative analysis. There are benefits in performing both methods of analysis. The benefits of doing qualitative research are manifested in several ways. Qualitative research provides a holistic account that includes considering context-relevant information. It also benefits the study through its use of inductive analysis and emergent design. The collection and analysis of data here was shaped as it progressed due to the study's inductive nature. The quantitative research provided a certain amount of generalizability to this mixed-methods study. Overall, combining the two approaches broadened the perspective of the paper.

As with all research, I brought several biases to the collection and analysis of data. I was biased towards domestic adoption and believed that it is a relevant way to build a family, although I have never been adopted or adopted a child. In my limited experience with adoption, I have observed it as mostly a positive experience and do not associate many negative feelings with it. In order to keep my biases from skewing the data, I focused analysis on the meanings of adoption provided by media representatives studied instead of personally-constituted meanings.

Qualitatively, a content analysis on a series of articles from *The New York Times* was conducted. *The New York Times* was chosen because it is widely known and has a large circulation. The research is sequential; five articles were examined longitudinally over a twenty-year stretch to identify dominant patterns. The articles started in 1990 and another one every five years, ending in 2010. The articles were not chosen randomly, but were chosen because they addressed domestic adoption and the adoption process. A codebook was developed based on the research questions and guiding propositions.

The quantitative analysis looked at factors that influence public opinion of welfare spending. Specific factors included confidence in the press, political party affiliation, and total family income; these are frames of references that condition how parents socially construct their adoption perceptions. Opinion of welfare spending was the dependent variable. Descriptive statistics of independent and dependent variable(s)

showed general distributions of responses for each variable. Cross-tabs were used to explore the relationships between the variables, testing for significance and general patterns in the relationships. Finally, a regression analysis looked at the combined effect of confidence in the press, total family income, and political party affiliation on opinion of welfare spending. To simplify the political party affiliation variable, the variable was recoded in order to start the measurement at 1 instead of 0 and to eliminate the option “other,” since it is unclear what “other” actually means. Also, the total family income variable was recoded to reduce the categories of income offered in order to make the table easier to interpret. Choice in collapsing variables was informed by distribution of responses offered by descriptive statistics.

Secondary data came from the General Social Survey 2010 to focus on the United States because it offered the most recent data on the variables of interest. Welfare spending is prone to changes from year to year, and the most recent data offers the clearest picture of current perceptions. Variables were chosen based on the literature review, research question, and qualitative analysis. Since the qualitative analysis looked at the way that the media frames adoption, looking at confidence in the press provided more insight to the ways that media influences adoption. The other two independent variables were chosen because of their likely conditioning of parents’ socially constructed perceptions of adoption and welfare spending.

Results

The most dominant pattern from the qualitative analysis over the five articles was the presentation of the adoption process or the legal transfer of guardianship from biological parents or state to adoptive parents. The major pattern across the articles was the meaning of the adoption process as long and problematic.

Ms. Smith, an adoptive mother, said that New Jersey child welfare workers twice tried to discourage her from adopting her foster son. ‘There were a lot of postponements, a lot of promises made that weren’t kept, a lot of unreturned phone calls, a lot of dates set up and not done,’ she said. When the adoption

centers closed, her son's paperwork was lost for several weeks, and the new workers were poorly trained, she said. 'I think at one point he kind of didn't believe me that we were trying to adopt him,' she said of her son. (Kelley & Jones, 2005, p. 1)

All five articles contained references to the length of time and difficulty of the adoption process that needed to be changed, perhaps through new bills. Verhovek (1990) stated "this bill aims to speed things up for the purpose of administrative convenience" and "adoptions can take years" (p. 27). In addition, a second meaning of torture and cumbersome procedure to both parents wanting to adopt and children waiting to be adopted was emphasized. In the article by Kelley and Jones (2005), the domestic adoption process was described as "a tortuous procedure" and "cumbersome adoption procedure" (p. 1).

There were points in our lives in the past year where we wanted to just end this [adoption] and say we're not doing it anymore,' said Ms. Smith, who is 56 and lives in Vineland, about 40 miles south of Philadelphia. 'Or go back to our own lawyer to see if he could fix this mess'. (Kelley & Jones, 2005, p. 1)

The link in meanings from speed to tortuous/cumbersome procedure illustrated that there has been a gradual increase in complexity and decrease in skills to deal with such complexity. "What happened was the system changed and there was insufficient training", Kevin Ryan (New Jersey state advocate for children) said, "That's a recipe for a very bad outcome, one the state is working very hard to reverse" (Kelley & Jones, 2005, p. 1). Other important themes of adoption included transracial/multiethnic families created by adoption. Holmes (1995) writes about parents frustrated with the adoption system for denying them the right to adopt children on the basis of race, color, and nationality. Although one article made mention of parents desiring "white babies," this mention was made in reference to parents wanting to raise a child from the beginning (Sengupta, 2000, p. 1). This theme was not mentioned in later articles, suggesting that the system became more open to

parents adopting children of different race, color, or nationality.

Other themes emerged regarding the number of children waiting to be adopted. The large numbers of children waiting to be adopted were presented in over half of the articles. Kelley and Jones (2005) write, "So far this year, according to the panel's report, there were 2,192 children available for adoption, and they waited about 10 months before being placed with a family" (p. 2). Children waiting to be adopted were generally presented in a positive light; however, there were mentions of children referred to as hard-to-adopt. Hard-to-adopt children are described as older children, children with physical and emotional problems, and children that are not white. In the articles, the patterns of children waiting were synonymous with the description of hard-to-adopt.

The faces are achingly familiar, for they are the famously hard-to-adopt foster children in the city's custody, many of them older, some of them with physical or emotional problems, all of them legally severed from their birth parents but lacking adoptive homes of their own. (Sengupta, 2000, p. 1)

A final theme is the issue of finances in relation to adoption. Many parents choose foster care adoption because private adoption is financially out of reach.

Katherine and Larry, the only white couple in the room that night, had driven in from Highland falls in upstate Orange County, to look through the family album. They, too, had unsuccessfully tried for years to have their own child. They, too, had heard that private adoptions would be beyond their financial reach (Sengupta, 2000, p. 1)

Financial reasons are not the only explanation for why people adopt through the foster care system. A key point brought out in two of the articles is that many of the parents adopting foster children are/were foster parents.

But money is only part of it, they say. Like Ada Jurado, 48, who has taken in several foster children over the years, many would-be adoptive parents say they are driven by their consciences and determined to act on those consciences locally. (Sengupta, 2000, p.1)

Here we see that finances may be important in some situations, but other reasons such as a drive to help children in foster care can also be a motivator in choosing to adopt through the foster care system.

To summarize, the most dominant patterns regarding the themes of adoption included the length of process, the torturous and cumbersome complexity of the process, hard-to-adopt children, and the financial aspect of adoption. The articles generally reflected the need of children to be adopted, the desire of parents to adopt, and the barriers complicating the matter. This analysis shows that the media portrays a broken adoption system in need of attention and suggests that one of the issues could be that the system is underfunded. If the public truly listened to the media, it would logically follow that there would be more support for increased government funding for adoption. However, the continued presentation of a broken system leads to the idea that the lack of support is not due to media portrayal but the result of other factors such as, but not limited to, political ideology, family income, and amount of confidence in the media. Although other possibilities regarding the lack of response could be a disinterest in the system because of its complexities leading parents to choose other avenues to adopt.

These quantitative results build upon the qualitative results and particularly address the second research question. Mainly, how do political party affiliation, confidence in the press, and family income affect public opinion of welfare? The dependent variable, opinion of welfare spending, has three answers ascending as follows: too little, about right, and too much. The mean was 2.18 and the standard deviation was 0.79. Although welfare is often considered limited to assistance for needy families, this definition of welfare is broad and includes foster care and adoption programs. The second variable was confidence in the press with three possible answers: 1-

a great deal, 2- only some, and 3- hardly any. The mean was 2.34 with a standard deviation of 0.66. The third variable was political party affiliation; its answers ranged from 1-Strong Democrat to 7-Strong Republican. The mean was 3.65 (somewhere in-between Near Democrat and Independent) and the standard deviation measured 9.95. The fourth variable was total family income; it was measured on a continuous scale with possible answers from 1-12. One measured less than \$1,000 and the answers proceed up to twelve which measured \$25,000 or more. The mean was found at 3.39 and the standard deviation was 1.76. These results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequencies: Opinion of Welfare Spending	Frequency	Percent
Too Little	234	11.4
About Right	338	16.5
Too Much	408	20
Total	980	47.9
Missing	1064	52.1
Frequencies: Confidence in Press		
A Great Deal	140	6.8
Only Some	621	30.4
Hardly Any	594	29.1
Total	1355	66.3
Missing	689	33.7
Frequencies: Political Party Affiliation		
Strong Democrat	348	17
Not Strong Democrat	348	17
Independent, Near Democrat	265	13
Independent	360	17.6
Independent, Near Republican	197	9.6
Not Strong Republican	277	13.6
Strong Republican	184	9
Total	1979	96.8
Missing	65	3.2
Frequencies: Total Family Income		
LT \$1,000-\$9,999	205	10
\$10,000-\$19,999	246	12
\$20,000-\$24,999	141	6.9
\$25,000 or more	1213	59.3
Total	1805	88.3
Missing	239	11.7

To begin, we can reject the null hypothesis that there are no significant relationships between or among these variables. In order to understand the relationships between the dependent variable and the independent variables, a multivariate ordinary least-squares regression analysis was conducted. The software used to run the analysis was SPSS. The first model of the analysis studied the effect of confidence in the press on opinion of welfare spending. The

number of responses measured 548 and the resulting correlation was positively and statistically significant at the 5% level. The results in Table 2 show a positive relationship such that for a one unit increase in confidence in the press there was a .122 increase in opinion of welfare spending. In other words, people that were not confident in the press were more likely to think that welfare spending is too high.

Table 2: Regression statistics for effects of level of Confidence in the Press, Political Party Affiliation, and Total Family Income on opinion of welfare spending.

	1	2	3
Confidence in Press	.122*	.079	.077
Political Party Affiliation		.118***	.112***
Total Family Income			.088**
R-Squared	.01*	.093***	.104**
Df	1	2	3
N	548	548	548

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, two tailed tests

Source: General Social Survey: 2010

In the third model of the regression analysis, all three independent variables were used, and it yielded interesting results. The effect of confidence in the press on opinion of welfare spending, controlling for political party affiliation and total family income, changed from a .122 increase to a .077 increase in opinion of welfare spending for every one unit increase in confidence in the press. The significance of this relationship was drastically affected by both political party affiliation and total family income, leaving the relationship not significant in Models 2 and 3. On the other hand, when analyzing the effect of political party affiliation on opinion of welfare spending, controlling for confidence in the press and total family income, a .112 increase in opinion of welfare spending occurs for every one unit increase towards more Republican. A move from Democrat to more Republican corresponds with an increase in thinking that too much money is put toward welfare spending. This relationship was significant at the 0.1% level. Finally, the effect of total family income on opinion of welfare spending, controlling for confidence in the press and political party affiliation, shows that a one-unit increase in total family income leads to .03 increase towards thinking welfare spending is too high.

Similar to the relationship between political party affiliation and opinion of welfare spending, an increase in family income generally leads to an increase in thinking that welfare spending is too high. This relationship was significant at the 5% level. In Model 1, about 1% of the variance in answers on opinion of welfare spending is explained by the confidence in the press. By adding political party affiliation and total family income, the variance explained jumps to 10.4%.

Of particular note is the change in level of significance in the relationship between confidence in the press and opinion of welfare spending from Model 1 to Model 3. The addition of political party affiliation and total family income as independent variables suppresses the effect of confidence in the press. Due to the suppression of confidence in the press by political party affiliation and total family income, it seemed useful to explore the relationship between these three factors. Several interaction effects were attempted, but they yielded no significant results. However, crosstabs did give some insight into the relationship between confidence in the press, political party affiliation, and total family income. The relationship between confidence in the press and total family income was negative; as income increased confidence in the press decreased, illustrated in Table 3. This crosstabulation was significant at the .05 level using a chi-square test of significance.

Table 3: Crosstabulation of Confidence in Press and Total Family Income

			Total Family Income				Total
			Less than \$1,000- \$9,999	\$10,000- \$19,999	\$20,000- \$24,999	\$25,000 or more	
CONFIDENCE IN PRESS	A GREAT DEAL	Count % within Second total family income	25 17.9%	14 9.4%	17 17.2%	72 8.9%	128 10.7%
	ONLY SOME	Count % within Second total family income	60 42.9%	66 44.3%	46 46.5%	373 46.0%	545 45.5%
	HARDLY ANY	Count % within Second total family income	55 39.3%	69 46.3%	36 36.4%	365 45.1%	525 43.8%
Total		Count % within Second total family income	140 100.0%	149 100.0%	99 100.0%	810 100.0%	1198 100.0%

Table 4: Crosstabulation of Confidence in Press and Political Party Affiliation

			Political Party Affiliation							Total
			Strong Democrat	Not Strong Democrat	Independent Near Democrat	Independent	Independent Near Republican	Not Strong Republican	Strong Republican	
CONFIDENCE IN PRESS	A GREAT DEAL	Count % within political party	36 15.3%	32 13.4%	22 12.2%	18 7.7%	12 9.4%	13 7.1%	6 5.0%	139 10.6%
	ONLY SOME	Count % within political party	106 45.1%	114 47.9%	87 48.1%	118 50.6%	51 39.8%	88 48.1%	39 32.8%	603 45.8%
	HARDLY ANY	Count % within political party	93 39.6%	92 38.7%	72 39.8%	97 41.6%	65 50.8%	82 44.8%	74 62.2%	575 43.7%
Total		Count % within political party	235 100.0%	238 100.0%	181 100.0%	233 100.0%	128 100.0%	183 100.0%	119 100.0%	1317 100.0%

The relationship between political party affiliation and confidence in the press also gave some insight into the two variables' relationship. People answering anywhere in the Republican answers seem to have decreasing confidence in the press; people answering in the Democrat range of the answers tend to have more confidence in the press, as shown in Table 4. This relationship is significant at the 0.1% level.

Discussion

Previous studies have been done on how adoption is perceived by parents, social workers, and members of the judicial system. That previous literature covers how certain characteristics interact with parents, influencing their opinions and perceptions of adoption and the adoption process. The lack of knowledge lies in the area of examining the media's presentation of adoption and the relationship between that presentation and other socially-constructed perceptions of adoption. The qualitative portion of this study focused on answering the first research question, which addressed how media frames adoption and adoption processes. A content analysis of five articles from the New York Times from 1990 through 2010 presented the adoption process growing increasingly complex. Adoption was presented as long and problematic, increasingly over the twenty-year span of analysis. The system and policy of

adoption may need to be overviewed and changed to more easily accommodate children and parents wanting to adopt, according to this meaning of adoption offered by the media. Finally, challenges with numbers of children needing adoption, hard-to-adopt children, and costs of adoption were dominant meanings in these later articles, and these challenges can be linked to prevalent meanings of a long and arduous adoption process as described above. This suggests that adoption as a welfare system is likely underfunded.

The results and conclusions of the qualitative portion of the study informed the quantitative analysis, which was also linked to the second research question and guiding proposition. The analysis looked at the factors influencing public opinion of welfare spending. The logic behind doing so was informed by a social constructionist perspective that even though the media was presenting a message that the adoption system was broken, the public would not believe the legitimacy of such a message. Instead, people socially construct reality according to a variety of social, cultural, political, and economic influences. Different people will interpret the legitimacy of the messages in the media in different ways. The results indicate that confidence in the press has a direct influence on opinion of welfare spending. However, that influence is suppressed and no longer significant when considered in conjunction with political party affiliation and total family income. This loss of significance has interesting implications to consider. With more conservative political party affiliation, confidence in the press declined and opinion of welfare spending tended toward believing too much money goes to welfare. The results were similar relating total family income to confidence in press and opinion of welfare spending. As total family income increased, confidence in the press decreased, and the opinion of welfare was that too much money was going to welfare spending. This leads to the practical conclusion that the media or press would not be the best way to reach conservatives or wealthy elites about the underfunding of adoption. In other words, the press may suggest that adoption is underfunded, but this venue would not be an effective way to raise awareness among more conservative or wealthier people. This

suggests that other avenues should be pursued to show to certain groups that adoption is underfunded. Conservative-leaning NGOs might be a possible solution to spreading news about adoption being underfunded. The public may be more willing to believe adoption is underfunded when presented by an NGO versus the media.

While what is offered here is significant for understanding the challenges to adoption in the United States, this research also provides a foundation for further research expanding on this knowledge. Further directions could take the form of investigating how different forms of media have different levels of impact on how people view the amount of money spent on welfare. Particularly important would be a study of whether conservatives and wealthy elites would have more confidence in information about the adoption system needing help when presented by conservative leaning NGOs instead of the media. In the end, the hope from this study is that any further research will be undertaken with the applied goal of improving the adoption process for both children and parents.

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