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Narrative Coherence in Online Stories Told by Members of the Adoption Triad

Leslie Baxter ^a, Kristen Norwood ^b, Bryan Asbury ^a, Amber Jannusch ^a & Kristina M. Scharp ^a

^a Communication Studies, University of Iowa

^b Saint Louis University

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Narrative Coherence in Online Stories Told by Members of the Adoption Triad

Leslie Baxter

Communication Studies, University of Iowa

Kristen Norwood

Saint Louis University

Bryan Asbury, Amber Jannusch, and Kristina M. Scharp

Communication Studies, University of Iowa

Two hundred ninety-eight online narratives told by adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth mothers were rated for their narrative coherence, which consisted of five dimensions: sequential organization, orientation, causal explanation, congruence of affect with content, and sense-making. Overall, mean ratings across all adoption triad members suggested more incoherence than coherence, but relative differences were found among triad members. Adoptive parents scored the highest on sequential organization, orientation, and causal explanation. Birth mothers scored the highest on congruence of affect with content. Narrative coherence has been systematically correlated in the literature with psychological adjustment, and the implications of the study are discussed for their insights into how well adoption triad members have adjusted to the challenges associated with adoption.

Although adoption is a relatively common way that families are created, it is still a process that results in a family form often perceived as nonnormative, less preferable, and generally inferior to biologically based families (e.g., Fisher, 2003; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). As a consequence, each person involved in the adoption triad (the adoptive parent(s), the adoptee, and the birth mother) often bears some type of stigma, that is, a negatively valenced perception of deviance (Goffman, 1963). The perception of difference and lack of legitimacy that often accompany the adoption experience might motivate members of the adoption triad to formulate narratives which explain and justify their experiences with adoption to others as well as to themselves. As Galvin (2006a) explains, when families depart from normative expectations of family, as adoptive families do, “their definitional processes expand exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent” (p. 3).

One important kind of narrative is the adoption story, which has multiple tellers and might take on different features, depending on the perspective of the teller. For example, birth mothers

might construct stories to make sense of the relinquishment of a child; adoptive parents might make sense of gaining a non-biological child, perhaps after experiencing infertility; and adoptees might negotiate the experience of being relinquished by a birth mother and parented by others. With such different experiences of adoption, it is likely that adoption stories constructed by each of these members of the adoption triad differ in important ways.

One way adoption stories might differ is with respect to narrative coherence, the extent to which a story's structure displays an internal unity or consistency. Coherence could vary based on the position in the adoption triad because of complexities of information, emotion, circumstance, or perhaps varying degrees of social legitimation. Such differences, if they do exist, are consequential, as narrative coherence has been shown to relate in a bidirectional causal manner with psychological adjustment in a variety of contexts (e.g., Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; White, 2007). That is, coherence can both *reflect* a teller's (in)coherent experience and its risk to well-being as well as *construct* a sense-making of that experience, which in turn affects adjustment.

To the extent that narrative coherence has been studied in the adoption context, stories told by members of the adoption triad have been examined separately rather than comparatively. The present study compares the narrative coherence of online stories told by birth mothers, adoptees, and adoptive parents as one important way to understand how these parties reflect and construct the adoption experience. In the literature review, we turn first to an elaboration of the concept of narrative coherence and its circular relationship to psychological adjustment. Then we discuss how members of the adoption triad experience adoption as a challenging life event. We end by addressing how the present study contributes to the family communication literature on adoption.

NARRATIVE COHERENCE

Communication scholars study narrative in a variety of ways. Narrative can be conceptualized as an ontology, or way of being in the world; as an epistemology, or way of knowing the world; as an individual construction; or as a relational process (Koenig Kellas, 2008). We are interested in narrative as an epistemology: how stories function as a mode of sense-making, a communicative construction of meaning that allows an individual to not simply recall events but to make meaning of events and of his or her identity in light of those events.

In this sense, we are interested in stories as a way of organizing and understanding the experience of adoption. As individuals in the adoption triad tell stories about adoption, they create meaning for their experience and of themselves as adoptive parents, adopted persons, or birth mothers. The construction of a story plot is central to the concept of narrative coherence, which is conceptualized in the narrative literature as a structural feature characterized by internal consistency, order, and integration of parts (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Fiese & Sameroff, 1999; Fisher, 1987). Narrative scholars have identified five basic components of narrative coherence: sequential organization, orientation, causal explanation, congruence of affect with content, and sense-making (Baerger & McAdams; Fiese & Sameroff; Fisher; Gergen & Gergen, 1987; Labov, 1999; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Wainryb, 2005).

Stories are defined by the telling of events, actions, or episodes. To be considered coherent, a story must contain a recognizable plot structure, or *sequential organization*. That is, the story should be organized around episodes or events which should be presented in a sequential manner.

Labov (1999) describes the “skeleton” of a story as consisting of a series of “temporally ordered clauses” that tell about an event (p. 226). For example, a birth mother’s story might display sequential organization in presenting a chronology of the pregnancy, the decision to relinquish the child, efforts to find an appropriate parent, and the actual moment of relinquishment.

Orientation refers to contextualizing the story: the details of who, what, when, and where. Coherent stories provide sufficient details for the audience to understand the characters involved in the events as well as the place and time in which the events occurred. Orientation details can appear at the beginning of the narrative, setting the stage for understanding the events that follow, or they can appear as context throughout the narrative, as the events unfold (Labov, 1999). For example, an adoptee’s adoption story might lack orientation in its failure to develop the character of the birth mother, an understandable feature in the absence of first-hand knowledge of her.

Coherent stories also provide *causal explanations* for events and actions. To supplement the details of who, what, when, and where, the audience must be able to understand the why, that is, what led to particular actions and events and to the responses that follow. For example, adoptive parents might demonstrate this feature by discussing their infertility as the reason they sought to adopt a child.

To achieve coherence, narrators must not simply recount events and actions but must respond to those events and actions with some tenor of emotion that is consistent in type and intensity with the content of the story: that is, *congruence of affect with content*. As Fiese and Sameroff (1999) note, “Affect varies not only in tone but also intensity. It is possible to have a mismatch of intensity with content as well as a mismatch between content and tone” (p. 10). For example, a birth mother story could display incongruence of affect with content in describing her emotional state as happy while also describing the tragedy of her pregnancy.

Finally, stories are not fully coherent without some element of *sense-making*: an integration, evaluation, or conclusion drawn about the events of the story. The narrator must engage in meaning-making instead of simply recall. Simply put, the narrative must have a point and that purpose must be clear to the audience. For example, a story by an adoptive parent that merely describes the various steps in the adoption process and ends with “and the baby was put in my arms” lacks closure that could be provided by this sort of conclusion: “This was the happiest day of my life and I urge all infertile couples to adopt.”

NARRATIVE COHERENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

Scholars of narrative have amassed substantial support for the claim that the ability to formulate a coherent story both reflects and produces psychological well-being (e.g. Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Clark, 1993; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; White, 2007). As Baerger and McAdams suggest, “Success in this endeavor both provides and reflects a sense of meaning, purpose, and connectedness to the world. Failure in this endeavor, in contrast, both provides and reflects a sense of discontinuity, detachment, and meaninglessness” (p. 75). In his study of life disruptions ranging from couple infertility, to midlife disruptions such as job loss or the death of family members, to the onset of chronic illness, Becker (1997) argues that stories are powerful symbolic devices to allow the narrator to make sense of his or her life and to present a positive identity to others. In particular, he argues that life is replete with a variety of kinds of disruptions, despite widespread cultural sentiments about the ideal life course as seamless and continuous. Conceptions of the

life course as it is related to family (e.g., adult independence from the family of origin, marriage, having children, raising those children in a secure family environment until they themselves are launched into adulthood) are particularly powerful, according to Becker, and those who deviate from these familial expectations of normalcy face psychological disorder.

People tell stories, argues Becker, in order to create a sense of order out of their disruptions. Stories, he concludes, are efforts at healing, and those who can construct stories in which the chaos of disruption is rendered coherent and legitimate are more psychologically adjusted. In addition to the catharsis of disclosure, telling a coherent story reduces the chaos of an experience, providing an integration of potentially disparate cognitive perceptions and emotions. Further, a coherent story makes experience legitimate to others, thereby reducing the stigma surrounding the disruption event.

As we discuss below, adoption potentially disrupts the cultural ideology of the “normal family” and therefore might present obstacles to coherent stories for those involved. Reciprocally, constructing incoherent stories might jeopardize well-being. The purpose of the study is to compare the narrative coherence of online stories told by adoption triad members, using this structural feature of stories to gain comparative insight into how these individuals render sense of their disruption from the cultural ideal of the familial life course (Becker, 1997). (In)coherence might well vary by one’s position in the adoption triad. If so, this could suggest differences in adjustment for triad members and so inform practices related to adoption facilitation and counseling.

THE (IN)COHERENCE OF THE ADOPTION EXPERIENCE

Cultural Meanings of Adoption

Adoption is a process often surrounded by cultural ambivalence in the United States (Fisher, 2003; Wegar, 2000), and thus, at its most general level, poses challenges to the well-being of those involved. Although many Americans believe that adoption serves a useful purpose in society, this apparent support is far from unqualified (The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997). Recent research shows that the ideal family form still consists of a heterosexual dyad with biological children (Baxter et al., 2009), so it is not surprising that adoptive families are perceived as less legitimate or that adoption is sometimes regarded as a last resort for those who cannot achieve pregnancy (Miall, 1987; Norwood & Baxter, 2011). Couples often opt for, or are led to try, expensive and invasive infertility treatments to achieve pregnancy before considering adoption (Holbrook, 1990). Miall found that infertile adoptive mothers reported positive experiences with adoption, but they also reported the perception that adoption was seen negatively in the larger community because people believe a biological tie is important for bonding and love and that adoptive parents are not *real* parents. In their recent analysis of online letters from prospective adoptive parents to birth mothers, Norwood and Baxter found these same themes.

In addition, adopted children are sometimes viewed as second-rate or as less desirable than biological children (Miall, 1987). Although adopted children are legally sanctioned, they represent a relationship of affection, not biology, for most adoptive parents. Yet, as Holtzman (2008) found in her hypothetical scenario study which compared attitudes toward biological bonds versus affectional bonds between parents and children, biological bonds still hold the privileged position.

A further condition of some adoptions that potentially increases perceptions of deviance, and therefore stigma, is racial difference in which the lack of biological ties between parents and children is more readily observable (Galvin, 2003; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). Samuels (2009) found that transracial adoptees struggled with stigma associated with looking different from their adoptive families. Interestingly, however, physical difference can be stigmatizing for an adoptee even in adoptions that are not transracial (e.g., March, 2000).

To summarize, adoption is often stigmatized as non-normative, posing a life disrupting experience and a threat to psychological well-being for those involved in it. Such stigma positions adoptive families to be more discourse dependent than other families (Galvin, 2006b); that is, adoptive families have to rely heavily on communication, including stories, to establish and legitimize their identities. It is important to have coherent stories to present to others in order to legitimate identity against the normative backdrop of biological ties and to construct meanings through those stories that enhance the narrators' psychological adjustment. Although the body of work on the societal meaning of adoption is important in establishing a cultural backdrop for storytelling, it is important to understand the specific challenges of adoption potentially present for each member of the triad. Over the past two decades, adoption researchers have increasingly noted the significance of all three positions within the adoption triad in rendering a more complete understanding of contemporary adoption (e.g., Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994).

The Adoption Triad

The adoptive parent

The position of adoptive parents might seem, on its face, to be the least thorny position of the adoption triad. After all, adoptive parents presumably know for certain they want a child, and their experiences with adoption seem to be those of gain instead of loss. However, the position of adoptive parents might not be so uncomplicated, because they often face unique challenges in the processes of moving toward adoption and negotiating family identity post-adoption. In fact, Miall (1987) observes that some adoption agencies provide adoptive parents with incongruent messages, telling them on the one hand that they are the real parents yet at the same time asking when they will tell the children they are not the real parents. Further, as Waterman (2001) notes, adoptive parents might face feelings of loss in the adoption process, which could be less obvious than those felt by adoptees and birth parents, but still detrimental to their psychological adjustment. For example, adoptive parents might grieve the loss of biological children and/or prior lost pregnancies.

In light of the societal views of the adoptive family discussed above, adoptive parents carry some degree of stigma and much communicative responsibility. Adoptive parents are called upon to construct a variety of stories about their adoption process, given that it is a non-normative path to creating family. They must account for why they chose adoption to birth mothers (e.g., Wahl, McBride, & Schrodt, 2005), to outsiders (e.g., Suter, 2008), and to the adopted child (e.g., Harrigan, 2009). They must present themselves as worthy parents to an agency and/or to potential birth mothers (e.g., Norwood & Baxter, 2011) and construct an entrance story or adoption narrative for their child (e.g., Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

We could identify only a single study that focused explicitly on narrative coherence in adoptive parent stories (Grotevant, Fravel, Gorall, & Piper, 1999). However, the stories analyzed in the study were solicited through interviews in which parents answered an extensive set of questions. The interview context is arguably the most frequent method by which stories are solicited (Riessman, 2008), and interviews are very useful for eliciting in-depth content that can subsequently be analyzed thematically. However, for the researcher interested in the narrative coherence of intact stories, interview questions could be viewed as biasing (e.g., Thompson et al., 2009). The task of interviewers is to probe, in part, for missing or incomplete information, and if coherence is evaluated for the story as it is elicited through the assistance of interviewer questions, the assessment of coherence could be inflated. Furthermore, given the stigma that is often associated with adoption, stories told to researchers might differ substantially from those told to non-researchers because of a social desirability effect.

The birth mother

Historically, treatment of birth mothers (usually young and single) was negative. Feelings of limited power, pressure to place the child for adoption, and lack of information about the adoptive families and the child were common for birth mothers' experiences (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984). The birth mother is still a stigmatized member of the adoption triad (Holman Jones, 2005), as she is often assumed to be immoral and selfish and to feel no love or inadequate love for her baby (Wegar, 2000). Given this level of stigma, birth mothers might struggle to account for their decisions to relinquish their children.

They might feel called to respond to the cultural depiction of themselves as selfish or immoral, and in doing so must navigate complex meanings of motherhood and morality. Further complicating their experiences, the relinquishment of a child can result in a sense of loss and grief (Blanton & Deschner, 1990; Fravel et al., 2000). This grief is thought to be an ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), since the child that is missing for the birth mother is physically absent yet not dead and still often thought about (Fravel et al.). Telling the story of the adoption might help a birth mother make sense of the experience in a way that helps her cope with this sense of loss.

In light of the stigma that still accompanies a woman's identity as a birth mother, birth mothers might tell their stories in order to gain legitimation and to enhance their own psychological well-being. Because the dominant narrative in the culture at large condemns birth mothers for not being good mothers (the kind that keep and care for their children), birth mothers might have to construct stories which explain why they placed children for adoption so that they can still be seen as moral individuals and perhaps even as good mothers. Further, as open adoptions become more common and birth mothers are connected in some way to the children they relinquished (Fravel et al., 2000; Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1996), they might anticipate telling the story of the adoption to the birth parents and to the child. For all of these reasons, birth mothers' stories and their coherence are important to investigate. Unfortunately, we could locate no study that focused on the narrative coherence of birth mother stories.

The adoptee

Although adoptive parents and birth mothers are active agents in the adoption process (even if their choices are constrained by life circumstances), the adopted child might have the very

different experience of being relinquished and adopted with no agency in the matter. Although biological offspring similarly have no control over the families into which they are born, the fact that they are *born* into the families creates a normative experience, and therefore one that likely goes unquestioned. Informed adoptees, however, know that someone made a decision not to parent them and that others made a decision to take them in.

Research has shown that adoptees often experience uncertainty and ambiguous loss about their adoption (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Powell & Afifi, 2005). However, research has also shown adoptees to have equally high or higher self-esteem than their non-adoptive peers (e.g., Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994). Clearly, the identity work of an adopted person is complex. Grotevant and colleagues (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Essau, 2000) argue that adopted persons must make sense of their identities internally as well as in relation to their biological and adopted family members and the larger cultural constructions of adoption.

Narrative research on the adoptee experience is limited. Some research suggests that adoptee adjustment is affected by the way in which parents construct stories of adoption with the adopted child (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2000). In fact, Kranstuber and Koenig Kellas (in press) found that adoptees whose stories (constructed by and with their adoptive parents) contained the theme of being chosen had higher self-esteem than those whose stories did not reflect this theme. Penny, Borders, and Portnoy (2007) found adoptees' emotional well-being to be associated with the ways they reconstructed their adoption experiences through stories. In particular, adoptees classified as having little awareness of negative issues related to adoption, or as having explored and come to peace with such issues, reported more positive psychosocial well-being than adoptees classified as drowning in awareness of issues or who were dealing with feelings of anger, resentment, and loss. We could identify only one study that focused explicitly on the narrative coherence of adoptee stories. Dunbar and Grotevant (2004) studied adolescent identity stories in order to investigate narrative coherence and integration of adoptive person's identities. However, these stories were solicited in an interview context, with extensive use of an interview protocol. As noted here, this method has limitations with respect to assessing intact narrative coherence.

In general, adoption researchers in family studies have paid only limited attention to the role of communication in the adoption process. To the extent that communication is considered, it is usually linked to the study of closed versus open adoptions. Communication is viewed in this body of work as information transmission in which the adoptee and the adopted family have access to identifying information concerning the birth mother (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). The other symbolic work performed by communication, including the sense-making and legitimation functions discussed to this point, has gone unconsidered. As we have reviewed, work on the narrative coherence of adoption stories is rare, and it is researched separately for each member of the adoption triad. All three positions in the adoption triad can reasonably be expected to tell stories whose coherence is limited although possibly in different ways.

ADOPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Although family studies scholars have devoted considerable attention to adoption, communication scholars have only recently turned to the study of adoption, in part responding to Galvin's (2006a, 2006b) calls for research on discourse-dependent family forms. In particular, Galvin

(2006b) has called for scholarly attention to how adoption is discursively constructed, including the study of how Internet sites are used to construct representations of adoption.

To date, communication scholars have examined adoption largely in the context of international adoptions and from the perspective of the adoptive parents (e.g., Manning, 2006; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). We focus in the present study on domestic adoption for several reasons. Because it is usually illegal to relinquish a child for adoption in many of the nations from which U.S. parents adopt children (e.g., China), the perspective of the birth mother is usually absent from international adoptions.

In addition, international adoptions involve added complexity at the level of national governments; domestic adoptions in the U.S. are handled at the state level, whereas international adoptions are handled at three government levels: the state, the U.S. federal government, and the national government of the adoptee's country of birth. Such bureaucratic complexity might be related in systematic ways to narrative coherence. Finally, international adoptions are less prevalent than domestic ones in the U.S. For the most recent time period for which data are available (2009–2010), domestic adoptions were over four times as common as international adoptions, with 55,112 adoptions occurring within the U.S. through public agency involvement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011) compared to only 12,782 international adoptions (U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics, 2010).

Grotevant and colleagues (Grotevant et al., 1999) described adoption as both an event and a long-term process of which stories are an important part. Adoption stories are likely to be told in many venues, including repeated tellings to the adopted child and to fellow immediate and extended family members, as well as tellings to outsiders. Within such stories, the meaning of adoption and the adopted family is constructed. The bulk of narrative research by communication scholars to date has relied on the interview method in which members of the adoption triad, typically the adoptive parent(s), have been asked to talk about the stories they tell (e.g., Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). Talking about, in contrast to telling, is thus one step removed from the actual performance of a story (Langellier & Peterson, 1993).

In its focus on stories told online, the present study steps outside of the interview context to hear adoption stories as intact performances, elicited only by the selected website's request for users to share their stories. Although cyberspace storytelling is not a performance in its "living immediacy" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 163) of a materially situated, embodied telling to specific others who are co-present, it is a performance nonetheless. As Langellier and Peterson argue, the digital world is a site of lived experience in most American lives. Although cyberspace storytelling lacks the interactive quality of conversational storytelling, it is still storytelling that attends to the audience. The particular websites we employed simply asked users to share their adoption stories.

The audience in this instance is what Mead (1934) referred to as the generalized other: the teller's sense of societal others, in general. Given this audience, cyberspace narrators might be especially sensitive to the cultural meanings associated with adoption. In viewing cyberspace storytelling as performative, we emphasize its function as a communication practice, one that is enacted digitally for others' consumption in order to make sense of some personal experience of the narrator. Additionally, in telling a story, a narrator constructs a meaning of the experience for himself or herself. In contrast to extant work on adoption stories by communication scholars, we are not examining reports about stories told but instead examining the stories themselves.

Further, our study differs from most communication research on adoption narratives in that it focuses on the structure of stories. To a large extent, existing adoption narrative research by

communication scholars has focused on the content of the story, usually by performing a thematic analysis of some sort (e.g., Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010; Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, in press; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001). This study examines instead the structural feature of narrative coherence instead of thematic content.

RESEARCH QUESTION

As reviewed here, narrative coherence is integrally related to psychological adjustment across a variety of life experiences. Put simply, story coherence both reflects and affects the teller's well-being. No member of the adoption triad is immune to challenges that could impact the narrative coherence of their adoption stories. In examining the relative coherence of birth mother, adoptive parent, and adoptee stories, researchers can establish whether some role positions in the adoption triad are more resistant to coherence than others. Such evidence could provide a rationale for future researchers and practitioners to target the more challenging adoption triad role position(s), and to seek explanation for why other role positions might be less disruptive or at least easier to reconstruct as coherent. Researchers can also gain preliminary insight into how members of the adoption triad cope with the challenges of their disruption experience through storytelling (Becker, 1997). Those who tell less coherent stories could be counseled in ways to reframe or restory their experiences, thereby positively affecting their well-being (e.g., White, 2007). In examining a sample of adoption stories posted online, we thus seek to examine the relative coherence of narratives from all three positions of the adoption triangle.

METHOD

Sample of Stories

With IRB approval, a total of 300 adoption stories, 100 each from the perspective of the adoptive parent(s), the birth mother, and the adoptee, were randomly sampled from the adoption stories posted on two websites: www.stories.adoption.com and www.experienceproject.com. Two stories were subsequently eliminated from further analysis: one birth mother story was written by a birth father who was attempting to represent the viewpoint of the birth mother; one story by adoptive parents was downloaded twice. The web page www.stories.adoption.com is part of the www.adoption.com website, a general website devoted to stories, forums, blogs, news, and information related to the process of international and domestic adoption, while the website www.experienceproject.com is a general collection of over eight million stories on a wide range of experiences. These websites were selected because they solicited stories from anyone in the adoption triad, and the uniform structure of each website guaranteed that no systematic differences due to website design would distinguish adoptive parent, birth mother, and adoptee stories, unlike websites that specialized in a certain perspective on adoption. In addition, neither of these websites was advocacy-based. To the knowledge of the researchers, the birth mothers, adoptees, and adoptive parents were not involved in the same adoption event. Sample size was determined by statistical power estimates; for a three-way comparison of the triad groups with a medium effect size, the projected power was .92 (Cohen, 1969).

A given text counted as a story if it was posted in response to the website solicitation (e.g., “Share your story.”) or the author self-identified the text as a story (e.g., “This is my story of how I gave up my child.”). Sampling was limited to domestic adoptions. Both websites mark “international adoption” with a topic label and tabs different from “adoption,” the latter referring only to domestic adoptions. We limited ourselves to stories that appeared under the “adoption story” topic search and tabs. All stories were open to the public and were not password-protected; given that the stories were in the public domain, permission from the website administrators was not required for IRB approval. Whenever a story contained any specific information (e.g., reference to a first name or a place of residence), it was changed when the story was downloaded to a Word file. Although it is reasonable to infer that the narrators of the birth mother stories were female, we do not know the sex of adoptees or adoptive parents; occasional self-references in the stories (e.g., references in an adoptee story to status as a “daughter” or reference in an adoptive parent story to “my husband and I”) suggest a sample that was disproportionately female for the latter two groups. Because the websites protected the identities of the narrators, no systematic demographic information is available with respect to sex, age, race or ethnicity, educational background, or elapsed time since the adoption.

Stories were personal narratives that captured the different perspectives of members of the adoption triad. Birth mother stories were largely about why the child was relinquished for adoption, the process of arranging the adoption plan, and feelings of loss and grief subsequent to the relinquishment. Stories told by adoptive parents focused on why and how the parents turned to adoption, the process of adoption, and the joys and challenges of adoption. Adoptee stories often seemed to focus on identity—efforts to make sense of why they were placed for adoption, who they were in relation to missing information and relationships with birth parents, and how adoption affected their lives.

Procedures

Development of the rating manual

Although we benefited from the work of other scholars who have developed rating manuals for narrative coherence (see Fiese & Spagnola, 2005), we found it important to develop our own manual adapted to the context of the present study. A number of narrative scholars have noted that story forms and structures are integrally linked to the particularity of what they are about (e.g., Herman, 2009). Given the highly contextual nature of narrative coherence, it is not surprising that operationalizations of this concept vary substantially from one study to the next (Fiese & Spagnola). Although the rating scheme developed by Fiese and colleagues (Fiese & Sameroff, 1999) has been used in the context of adoption, some of its scales (e.g., flexibility) are not reflected in the conceptualization of narrative coherence reviewed here, and other scales in their scheme (e.g., internal consistency) combine several coherence features into a single rating.

The researchers met several times to develop and revise the rating manual.¹ For each story, raters recorded the narrator’s position in the adoption triad and rated the story for each of the five components of narrative coherence as presented in the literature review, using 5-point scales

¹A copy of the complete rater manual is available from the first author at leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu for researchers interested in the detailed instructions provided to raters.

whose endpoints were marks as *very low presence of the feature* and *very high presence of the feature*.

Interrater reliability checks

Three of the researchers served as raters for the study. Training occurred in four stages and involved approximately 30 hours of joint training activity; this is consistent with the 20–40 hour range reported in the narrative research (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005). Stage 1, which involved all of the researchers, was devoted to the development and refinement of the rating manual based on the researchers' reading and discussion of 10 stories like those analyzed in the study itself. Reliability was not calculated for this round. Stages 2–4 involved independent rating activity by the three raters; for each stage, 10 stories like those analyzed in the actual study were evaluated. Raters met at the end of each round to resolve rating discrepancies and to further refine the rating manual through clarifications and the explication of additional decision rules. Reliability values were calculated for each round. For stages 2–4, intraclass correlation reliability values were calculated and deemed adequate for rating the stories in the data set. Across the 30 training stories values were .93 for sequential organization, .81 for orientation, .85 for congruence of affect with content, .80 for causal explanation, and .83 for sense-making. These values are well within the reliability norms of other narrative research (Fiese & Spagnola, 2005).

Rating activity for the study involved stratified random sampling of the 298 stories, grouped by narrator perspective with 99 stories representing a story told by a birth mother, 100 stories representing a story told by an adoptee, and 99 stories representing a story told by an adoptive parent. Within each group, the three raters were randomly assigned to a story through systematic random sampling. Raters reported that each story took from 20–30 minutes to code. In order to check reliability for the stories analyzed for the study, a random 20% of stories were selected for rating by all three raters. Given the large number of stories, reliability was checked at the half-way point and at the end of rating activity in order to ensure that rater drift had not taken place. Reliability values were adequate for both first and second halves of rating. Overall, the intraclass correlation reliability values for the combined overlapping sample of 60 stories were: .88 (sequential organization); .89 (orientation); .90 (congruence of affect with content); .84 (causal explanation); and .85 (sense-making).

RESULTS

The five components of narrative coherence were interdependent. Table 1 reports the intercorrelation values. In light of this interdependence, a one-way MANOVA test was employed as an omnibus test to determine whether overall statistical significance was present. Adoption triad position served as the between-subjects factor and the five ratings served as the dependent variables. Mean scores and standard deviations are reported in Table 2. The Levene tests for the equality of error variances were all nonsignificant, thus the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met in the data. Additionally, Box's M ($M = 39.18$; $F(30, 275709.6) = 1.27$, $p = .144$) indicated that the data did not violate the assumption of equality of covariances. Thus, the MANOVA test was statistically valid.

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix of Narrative Coherence Components

	1	2	3	4	5
Sequential Organization (1)	–	.39	.21	.43	.16
Orientation (2)		–	.45	.51	.28
Congruence Affect-Content (3)			–	.27	.36
Causal Explanation (4)				–	.22
Sense-making (5)					–

Note. All correlation values are significant at $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the Five Narrative Coherence Components by Adoption Triad Perspective

Component	Birth Mother	Adoptee	Adoptive Parent
Sequential Organization	M = 2.72 (SD = 1.42)	2.55 (1.30)	3.70 (1.29)
Orientation	2.04 (1.24)	2.30 (1.13)	2.60 (1.20)
Congruence Affect-Content	2.73 (1.35)	2.23 (1.22)	2.43 (1.26)
Causal Explanation	2.26 (1.31)	2.51 (1.39)	2.94 (1.40)
Sense-making	2.49 (1.31)	2.52 (1.31)	2.81 (1.21)

The omnibus Pillai's Trace value of .22 ($F(10, 584) = 7.08, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .11$) indicated a significant effect for adoption triad position. Thus, it was appropriate to proceed to a follow-up assessment of how the dependent variables functioned to produce this overall difference by triad position. Field (2005) recommends that a MANOVA test should be followed up with both a discriminant analysis and ANOVAs, the former to understand interaction effects among dependent variables and the latter to understand how each dependent variable is functioning independently.

The follow-up discriminant analysis identified two significant canonical discriminant functions with canonical correlation values of .39 ($Wilks' \lambda = .79; X^2(10) = 67.69, p < .0001$) and .26 ($Wilks' \lambda = .93; X^2(4) = 20.02, p < .0001$), respectively. The first canonical function was largely comprised of the sequential organization component, whose standardized canonical coefficient was .78. The centroid scores for the adoptive parent, adoptee, and birth mother groups were .58, $-.18$, and $-.40$, respectively. The high score of the adoptive parent group suggests their greater sequential organization. The second canonical function was largely a function of two components: congruence of affect with content (standardized canonical coefficient value of .88) and orientation (standardized canonical coefficient value of $-.69$). The centroid scores for the adoptive parent, adoptee, and birth mother groups were .08, $-.36$, and .28, respectively. The birth mother group appears to be comparatively highest on the congruence of affect with content while lowest on orientation.

The one-way ANOVAs indicated that only sense-making failed to produce a significant difference by adoption triad perspective ($F(2, 295) = 1.84, p = .16$). Sequential organization produced a significant effect ($F(2, 295) = 21.38, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .13$). Post hoc Tukey tests suggested that adoptive parents were higher in this coherence feature than either of the other two triad groups. This outcome is consistent with the discriminant analysis findings. Orientation ($F(2, 295) = 5.39$,

$p < .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$) also produced a significant effect, and post hoc tests suggested that adoptive parents were significantly higher on this feature than the birth mother group. This outcome is consistent with the discriminant analysis finding in which the birth mother stories were rated lowest on a vector partially comprised of orientation.

Congruence of affect with content ($F(2, 295) = 3.82$, $p < .02$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) produced a significant effect, and the post hoc tests suggested that birth mothers were significantly higher than adoptees. This outcome is also consistent with the discriminant analysis findings with respect to the second canonical function. Last, causal explanation ($F(2, 295) = 6.23$, $p < .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$) produced a significant difference, with post hoc tests indicating that the adoptive parent group was significantly higher than either of the other two groups. Because of its interdependence with other coherence indicators, especially orientation and sequential organization (see Table 1), causal explanation did not contribute independently to either canonical function.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to compare the narrative coherence of 298 online adoption stories told by adoption triad members with respect to five constituent dimensions: sequential organization, orientation, causal explanation, congruence of affect with content, and sense-making. No overall differences emerged for the sense-making dimension, but the other four dimensions resulted in significant differences among the adoption triad role positions. Sequential organization emerged as the most important component of narrative coherence, serving as the defining feature of the first canonical function in the discriminant analysis and producing the largest effect size in the ANOVAs.

Adoptive parents were highest of the three groups on sequential organization, whereas birth mothers were rated lowest. The coherence components of orientation and congruence of affect with content formed the second canonical function in the discriminant analysis. In conjunction with the ANOVA findings, birth mothers were highest on congruence whereas the adoptees were lowest, and birth mothers were lowest on orientation whereas adoptive parents were highest. Although the ANOVA found that adoptive parents were the highest on causal explanation, this factor did not contribute substantially to the discriminant analysis findings because of its pattern of intercorrelations with orientation and with congruence. We first discuss the implications of these findings for adoption research, then we turn to a discussion of the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

Implications of the Findings

The findings suggest a complex answer to the question of whether and how narrative coherence varies by the teller's position in the adoption triad. Overall, however, the results indicate fairly low mean scores for all groups on all components (only the mean sequential organization score for the adoptive parent group was above the midpoint on a five-point scale). That is, adoption stories in our sample were more incoherent than they were coherent. Because narrative coherence is linked theoretically to the psychological well-being of narrators, the general pattern of incoherence in the findings suggest that adoption triad members may be experiencing challenges

to their psychological adjustment. The link is likely a reciprocal one in which the story both represents and influences the teller's well-being.

On the one hand, the teller might have experienced any of the challenges discussed above which are associated with adoption, which resulted in problematic psychological adjustment, and the story merely reflects that problematic experience. As suggested in the review of literature, adoption is a stigmatized departure from the normative life course script, thereby positioning adoption triad members to experience difficulties. Additionally, as discussed in the literature review, the mixed messages, mixed emotions, and complexities in meanings involved in adoption might result in uncertainty, which could make it difficult to produce a story high in the components of narrative coherence.

On the other hand, how a teller constructs a story affects the meaning of an experience and thereby affects, not just reflects, experiential (in)coherence and well-being. Incoherence in our sample of adoption stories suggests that the narrators might benefit from the narrative therapy practice of reframing and restorying, learning how to construct more coherent stories with possible benefits to their well-being (White, 2007). However, it is important to recognize that variation existed across our story sample, and not all stories were incoherent. Furthermore, tellers' positions in the adoption triad also related systematically to the coherence of their stories.

The findings that adoptive parents' stories were rated more coherent in terms of sequential organization, causal explanation, and orientation, might be partially explained by several factors discussed in the literature review, including narrative obligation and practice, the availability of information, and level and time of involvement in the adoption process. As discussed, adoptive parents carry a heavy burden of narrative construction. They must tell their stories to birth mothers, to their families and friends, to strangers, and most importantly to the children they adopt. Because they are so frequently called upon to do so, adoptive parents might become well practiced in constructing narratives of adoption that take into account a sequencing of events (e.g., infertility, the decision to adopt, qualifying with an adoption agency, being chosen by birth mother, being granted a child), an orientation to those events (who, what, when, where), and how those events are related (causal explanation).

In addition to recounting stories frequently, adoptive parents might also have the most information with which to do so, enabling a more coherent story than is the case for the birth mother or the adopted child. Adoptive parents have unlimited information about themselves and their situation, about the child's life with them, and in open adoptions, they could have unlimited information about not only the child's background (medical and family history) but about the birth mother, as well. Further, because adoptive parents are often couples, there are two storytellers in the adoptive parent unit, perhaps affording the opportunity for enhanced narrative coherence through joint memories and storytelling efforts. Adoptive parents might have been involved in the adoption process for a longer period of time than the other triad parties and gone through many phases: desiring a child, perhaps trying to achieve pregnancy, going through background checks and interviews, waiting on a child, gaining the child, and raising the child. Possibly because of this protracted time period, adoptive parents are better able to produce details for sequential organization.

Birth mothers, on the other hand, could feel they have only a few months to make decisions about adoption as many adopted children are relinquished very soon after birth (Blanton & Deschner, 1990). Such time compression might produce a blurring of discrete events, thereby limiting sequential organization, orientation, and causal explanation. On the other hand, the decision to relinquish the child might not be a one-time event, but an experience of ambivalence and

uncertainty that stretches over the course of the pregnancy and perhaps throughout the post-relinquishment period as well, thereby limiting sequential organization. Further, obstacles to birth mothers' coherence in orientation might be related to lack of information. Depending on the conditions of the adoption, birth mothers might have some, very little, or no information about the child and the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2006).

Adoptees' ability to produce coherent narratives in terms of orientation, sequential organization, and causal explanation could be affected by the second-hand information they have acquired about the adoption event itself, given that most were relinquished shortly after birth. The identity issues surrounding what it means to be an adopted child are fluid and last throughout the adoptee's life (Grotevant et al., 2000). The initial entrance story (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001) might be too static and incomplete to serve as a coherent resource as the child matures. The child thus might find himself or herself coping with too little information, or with confusing information, as he or she matures.

Birth mothers produced the highest score with respect to congruence of affect with content, significantly higher than the stories told by adoptees in particular. As discussed in the literature review, adoptees appear to have a unique position in the adoption process; they are both surrendered and sought. Although all three positions might come with some experience of ambiguous loss, adoptees literally lose a family *and* gain a family, and this experience of gain and loss, of being given up and taken in, is likely one that incites mixed and uncertain emotions (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Penny et al., 2007). Although birth mothers could experience an array of potentially conflicting emotions about adoption, from happiness about giving the child a better life to sadness about having to relinquish the child (Blanton & Deschner, 1990; Fravel et al., 2000), a cultural expectation of how a birth mother *should* feel might be present. One way a birth mother might defend herself against the stigma she faces is to express what society considers appropriate emotions with regard to both the loss and the gain. This could explain why birth mothers in the study produced more coherent affect tied to events.

The narrative coherence feature of sense-making failed to discriminate among the three adoption triad role positions at a statistically significant level. This might be a product of our sample of online stories, particularly as these tellers were not asked to draw conclusions about their experiences, as might be the case in interviews or other online stories. Advocacy-based online stories, for example stories told by birth mothers who are arguing for adoption instead of abortion, might be more advisory or persuasive in nature than the stories in this sample and thus might feature a more explicit moral or conclusion.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Because of the anonymous nature of our data, we could not collect information about the narrators that might be important for understanding differences in narrative coherence, including sex, age, race and ethnicity, education level, level of openness of the adoption, and length of time since adoption. For example, older adoptees and/or those who have had more time to process their experiences with adoption might produce more coherent stories because they might have more information or be more reflective, or both.

Further, our study did not measure directly the psychological adjustment of adoption triad members. Instead, we relied on the established link in existing research between narrative coherence and psychological adjustment in arguing for the importance of studying narrative

coherence. Future research should directly examine the relationship between narrative coherence and psychological adjustment for all members of the adoption triad.

The stories in our sample described different adoption events, but it would be worthwhile to compare the narrative coherence of triad members from the same triad. This might allow for a greater understanding of the differences that make a difference among the positions of the triad, since differences of the adoption event itself would be controlled. Of course, collecting such data would be difficult, especially in closed adoptions. However, even comparing the coherence of adoptive parents and their adoptive children might be fruitful, since our results showed adoptees' stories to be generally less coherent than adoptive parents' stories.

Researchers could usefully pursue several directions in future research. One important issue to explore is that of narrative coherence and level of openness in adoption. We had hoped to be able to investigate this relationship in the present study but due to the nature of the stories were unable to decipher any consistent indicators of openness. Research has shown that openness can play an important role in coherence and adjustment, although findings are inconsistent with respect to the birth mother (Blanton & Deschner, 1990; Fravel et al., 2000), the adoptive parent (Grotevant et al., 1999; Grotevant et al., 1994), and the adoptee (Brodzinsky, 2006; Powell & Afifi, 2005). Notably absent from the adoption triad is the birth father's experience. Future researchers could productively examine birth father stories of adoption and compare them to those of birth mothers with respect to narrative coherence. Another direction for scholars to pursue would be to examine different kinds of stories. We examined adoption stories, broadly construed, and included whatever type of story narrators provided, but it might be the case that stories of adoption differ based on audience and function. For example, entrance stories (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001) told to adopted children by adoptive parents might differ in narrative coherence from stories adoptive parents tell to strangers, including interviewers.

Online stories might differ systematically from stories told face-to-face because of the immediacy of the audience in the latter context. Future research on narrative coherence also should determine how its constituent components function differently in leading audience members to hear some stories as more or less coherent than others. For example, when stories are told as a form of advice-giving (e.g., adoptive parents advising prospective adoptive parents on how to adopt), sense-making might emerge as a very salient feature in determining whether a story is regarded as coherent. Narrative coherence is not a unitary construct but instead is a multidimensional cluster of components, each of which merits investigation.

Stories both reveal and produce the meanings that tellers make of their experiences, and the psychological well-being that is associated with those meanings. Our findings shed preliminary, comparative insight on the narrative coherence of online adoption stories told by members of the adoption triad, suggesting that, in general, adoptees and birth mothers might benefit from interventions designed to help them restory their experiences in order to construct them more coherently, both to themselves as well as to others.

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