

The Role of Storytelling in Promoting the Adoptions of Older Children

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## Abstract

The need for older children to be adopted out of foster care in the United States is very prevalent. Adoption and foster care organizations are constantly changing and shifting their marketing techniques and promotional materials in order to advocate for the adoption of children out of foster care. One strategy that many organizations employ is a storytelling strategy. These organizations tell the stories of broken children stuck in the foster care system with no hope of finding a forever family. They also tell redemption stories; stories of families that have sacrificed everything to adopt a needy child. Although stories are used to persuade people to adopt children, it is yet to be determined whether storytelling is an effective means of advocacy. In order to do that, this thesis will take the stories from 3 major adoption organizations and analyze them using Fisher's Narrative Paradigm.

*Key words: adoption, foster care, storytelling, narrative paradigm*

### The Role of Storytelling in Promoting Older Child Adoption

Storytelling is a tool that many nonprofit organizations have been employing over the past several years. It is used to advocate for a cause, to fundraise, to share thoughts, ideas, and information, as well as to stir empathy in the hearts of an organization's stakeholders. While many nonprofit organizations are using this tool to achieve various goals, the main type of organization that this thesis will focus on is foster care and adoption agencies. This thesis will start by explaining the need that there is for older child adoption and why adoption and foster care organizations need to be successful in recruiting people to adopt.

Foster care and adoption is a social issue that is often overlooked, yet the United States has thousands of foster kids stuck in the welfare system, waiting for a permanent home. Foster care and adoption organizations face a daunting task in their attempts to recruit American citizens to become permanent families for these children. While these organizations have numerous strategies employed to increase recruitment of adoptive families, the main strategy that this thesis will focus on is storytelling.

The need for older child adoptions will be shown and the stories being told by adoption organizations will be analyzed using the theory, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984). Many adoption organizations are nonprofits, meaning they do not receive any government funding, they rely on the support and donations of others. Their goal should not only be to recruit financial supporters of their organizations, but to recruit families to adopt. Recruiting families to adopt older children is especially challenging and in order to do so, adoption and foster care organizations need to share their most compelling stories to draw people in emotionally. There also must be truth and logic in the stories that are being told as emotions are important but cannot be the main determining factor of a person's adoption choice. Fisher's Narrative Paradigm

(Fisher, 1984) will be used to determine the effectiveness of storytelling by analyzing the stories of three major adoption organizations.

### **The Need for Older Child Adoption**

Because of the fallen nature of society, there is a huge need for adoptions to take place, particularly amongst children over the age of three. The word adopt means “to take voluntarily (a child of other parents) as one's own child” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). The need for adoption awareness and advocacy around the world is great, but this thesis will specifically focus on older child adoptions from foster care within the United States. According to a report done by the Children’s Bureau (2017), over 400,000 children are in the American foster care system, and over 100,000 are in need of adoption. Statistics on the Barker Adoption Foundation website claim, “By age ten, a child’s likelihood of being adopted goes down by 50 percent. An estimated 22,000 children “age out” of foster care every year with no family ties” (Barker webpage). These children need families and a place to call home, where they can feel safe and loved.

Unfortunately, the families that do consider adoption often only consider adopting infants or very young children. Many people see adopting older children as too much of a risk. Because of this, older children are left in the system and end up having to live a life fending for themselves with no one to truly love or care for them.

Adopting a child over the age of three can be incredibly challenging. Many times, older children in the foster care system have been through serious trauma. They have likely been moved around from foster home to foster home, and many of them have mental health and extreme behavioral issues as well as attachment disorders and difficulty in adjusting to living with a permanent family. Adopting an older child is often just the beginning of what can be an arduous journey, wrought with complications and obstacles that many families feel completely

unprepared for. One of the most challenging things for adoption organizations to do is to help families really understand the difficulties that might come along with adopting an older child. A study entitled, “Foster and Adoptive Parent Perspectives on Needs and Services: A Mixed Methods Study” (2018) surveyed adoptive families to try and better understand their needs. The study discusses some of the ways that parents may feel unprepared:

In the focus groups, parents expressed feeling ill-prepared to foster or adopt. Some attributed their lack of preparation to unrealistic expectations conveyed by child welfare staff or to poor communication about the background and needs of the children and about the fostering and adoptive process. (Barnett et al., p. 81)

Adoption organizations need to be sure that they are giving adoptive families realistic expectations of what adoption can really be like, especially when it comes to adopting an older child.

Adopting an older child is different from adopting a newborn or an infant simply because many of the older children are in the foster care system for longer periods of time and often become accustomed to life in the system and are used to having to fend for themselves. According to foster care statistics from 2017, the average amount of time that a child is in foster care is over 14 months (Child Welfare, 2019). This can cause many challenges as those children will likely have a harder time trusting people and forming attachments because they are often moved from foster home to foster home. The research done by Barnett et al. (2018) claims that, “When children change placements frequently, they are at higher risk for unhealthy attachments and relationships; disruptions to educational, medical, and mental health services; delayed permanency; and behavioral and mental health problems” (p. 75). This is evidence that the longer children are in foster care, the more likely they are to develop behavioral and mental

health issues, and the less chance they have of finding permanent placement with an adoptive family.

Children are placed in foster care for various reasons ranging from abuse, neglect, abandonment, or even the death of their parents (Children's Bureau, 2018). The Children's Bureau study (2018) found that many children, around 62%, are removed because of neglect from their parents. 36% are removed because their parents are abusing substances such as drugs and alcohol. When children are neglected and abused, there are always psychological and developmental consequences. The study by Barnett et al. (2018) found that "About half of children in foster care have mental health needs, in large part due to the maltreatment and trauma they have experienced. Foster and adoptive parents consistently rank children's mental health concerns as their most difficult challenge" (p. 75). The more challenges that a foster child has experienced, the more likely they are to have behavioral and mental health issues as well.

Despite all of the challenges that they may bring, older children still need families. They need to be able to experience some stability in their lives before reaching adulthood. They need to be allowed to just be children. AdoptUSKids mentions the hardships of aging out of the foster care system and states:

Each year, approximately 20,000 youth will age out of the foster care system when they turn 18 or 21, or when they finish high school (depending upon the state in which they live.) These children are at increased risk of poor educational outcomes, experiencing homelessness, and being unemployed. (2019, para. 4)

If children do not find permanency during their teenage years, they are likely to have a really hard time adjusting to life on their own after foster care. Most of them will not go to college, they will have difficulties in finding a stable job, and many will end up on the streets, involved in

crime. According to statistics from the National Conference of State Legislatures (2019) on children aging out of the foster care system:

- **1 in 4** were involved in the criminal justice system within 2 years of leaving care.
- **30 percent** of 21-year-old former foster youth reported criminal justice system involvement.
- By age 26, the **majority of young women** and **four-fifths** of young men in the study had been arrested; nearly one-third of those young women and almost two-thirds of the young men had spent at least one night in jail since they were 18 years old. (para. 9)

When a family is willing to adopt an older child, these statistics decrease drastically, and children are able to live more normal lives without their main focus being on survival.

Finding families to adopt older children can be almost as challenging as actually adopting a child because of the struggles that they may have. Families are not likely to want to adopt an older child with severe behavioral or mental issues, and many families only want to adopt infants. Because of the challenges presented, adoption organizations must work harder to promote older-child adoptions. Many organizations have recruitment campaigns and strategies, as well as curriculums and guides to help older foster children achieve permanency, yet somehow, adoption rates are still low. Numerous resources, organizations, and agencies in the United States advocate for this cause. Many of these organizations main goals is to recruit families to adopt the children that are stuck in the system. In order to recruit families, they have multiple strategies in place. The National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids created a unique recruitment strategy. This particular strategy employs customer service concepts to recruit families to adopt. According to the article that outlines this strategy, entitled, “Using Customer Service Concepts to Enhance Recruitment and Retention Practices”



(2013), “A family’s perception of how they are treated during their interactions with an agency and its staff members can have a major impact on their decision to become foster, adoptive, or kinship parents, and subsequently, on their decision to continue in that role” (AdoptUSKids, pp. 3-4). This is just one example of a strategy that an adoption organization may employ to attempt to recruit families. Another strategy that is used by many adoption organizations is storytelling, which is the main strategy that this thesis will analyze.

### **Defining Storytelling**

Storytelling can be a powerful tool used to persuade. When a person or an organization tells a story, it allows them to connect with the audience in a way that they otherwise would be unable to. According to Harvard Graduate School of Education professors, Soule and Wilson, (2002) storytelling is defined as the “Sharing of knowledge and experiences through narrative and anecdotes in order to communicate lessons, complex ideas, concepts, and causal connections” (p. 6). Using storytelling in the promotional materials of brands and organizations is proving to be an effective means in the sharing of knowledge as well as something that creates a connection with an audience.

Storytelling is used in organizations to fundraise, to raise awareness for a cause, to promote a movement, and to stir empathy in the hearts of the audience. When used correctly, stories will contain a clear call to action and will create an emotional connection. Denning (2002) believes that storytelling is effective in creating an emotional connection because stories are about the irregularities in people’s lives. Based on Denning’s research, Soule and Wilson (2002) state, “Stories of the unexpected prompt emotional responses because they suggest the potential threat of not being in control of our lives, but simultaneously offer a way of understanding and responding to our futures” (p. 4). When the unexpected happens in someone’s life, they want to

feel a connection to others. People want to feel as if they are not alone, as if there are others walking through the same things, which is why storytelling is effective in causing people to feel an emotional connection.

Stories are effective in not only creating an emotional connection, but also in persuading people. Persuasion employs the three rhetorical appeals known as ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos has to do with credibility. It is when the speaker or writer can show their audience that they are an expert in whatever field they are persuading in. Logos is all about logic and backing up statements with facts and reasoning. Pathos is the main appeal that storytelling employs; it appeals to a person's emotions. When a person feels an emotional connection to a story, they are more likely to change their behavior or take some type of action, which is the purpose of persuasion.

While adoption organizations may use all three rhetorical appeals in their storytelling, the central one that is often focused on is pathos. In today's age, emotional appeals are proving to be more effective than simply sharing facts or statistics. Creating empathy in the hearts of the audience is important when attempting to persuade or when implementing a call to action. Siegel (2016) did a study on storytelling within the nonprofit sector and discusses the importance of using stories to create empathy:

Empathy allows the reader to see the world from another point of view by developing a shared perspective that results in shared emotion. In contrast, sympathy develops the emotions of sorrow and pity for another person's conditions, but neglects the shared component of walking in another person's shoes. Thus, empathy is the emotional response that will lead to action. (p. 11)

It is not enough to simply cause people to feel sorry for children in need of adoption. Pity is not a strong enough emotion to cause someone to change their entire life to adopt an older child.

Empathy on the other hand, helps the audience to walk in the shoes of the child and see life from their perspective. Thus, when a story can cause someone to feel empathy, they are more likely to be willing to act.

In the article (2014), “Why Your Brain Loves Good Storytelling”, Zak implies that to make a story most effective, organizations must “Make your people empathize with the pain the customer experienced” (para. 7). When people feel empathy for a child in pain or in a tough situation, “they will also feel the pleasure of its resolution – all the more if some heroics went in to reducing suffering or struggle, or producing joy” (Zak, 2014, para. 7). The stories told by adoption organizations typically start out showing the suffering or struggles of a child and then showing how their suffering is improved by the family who adopts them. The families are often painted as the heroes, the children as the victims, and the children’s surrounding events, as the villains. This follows a very typical storytelling format and allows people to relate to the stories being told.

When it comes to storytelling within organizations, Zak (2014) also discusses how people are more motivated by an organization’s transcendent purpose versus their transactional purpose. The transcendent purpose is how the organization improves lives, whereas the transactional purpose is how the organization sells goods or services (para. 7). Zak states that “Transcendent purpose is effectively communicated through stories – for example, by describing the pitiable situations of actual, named customers and how their problems were solved by your efforts” (para. 7). When it comes to adoption organizations, the customers that Zak mentions would be the children in need of adoption. Adoption organizations are attempting to appeal to people’s

emotions, often by describing the traumatic situations that the children have been through, and then by showing the families how those situations can be improved upon by adoption. This can be done in a way that is ethical as well as unethical. For instance, it would be unethical for an organization to exploit a child's suffering for monetary gain. Organizations must be careful to tell their stories in a way that inspires action and promotes the adoption of older children.

### **The Narrative Paradigm**

The Narrative Paradigm is a way to determine if stories are being told effectively or not. It was created by Walter Fisher in the year 1984. Fisher was a "professor emeritus at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication" (Griffin, 2014, p. 308) and is mostly known for his conception of the narrative paradigm. Fisher was a firm believer that storytelling often was a better means of persuasion than logic or rationality. The narrative paradigm is defined as, "A theoretical framework that views narrative as the basis of all human communication" (Griffin, 2014, p. 312). The paradigm is based on five key assumptions which are as follows:

1. People are essentially storytellers.
2. We make decisions on the basis of good reasons, which vary depending on the communication situation, media, and genre (philosophical, technological, rhetorical, or artistic).
3. History, biography, culture, and character determine what we consider good reasons.
4. Narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories.
5. The world is a set of stories from which we choose, and thus constantly re-create, our lives. (Griffin, 2014, p. 312)

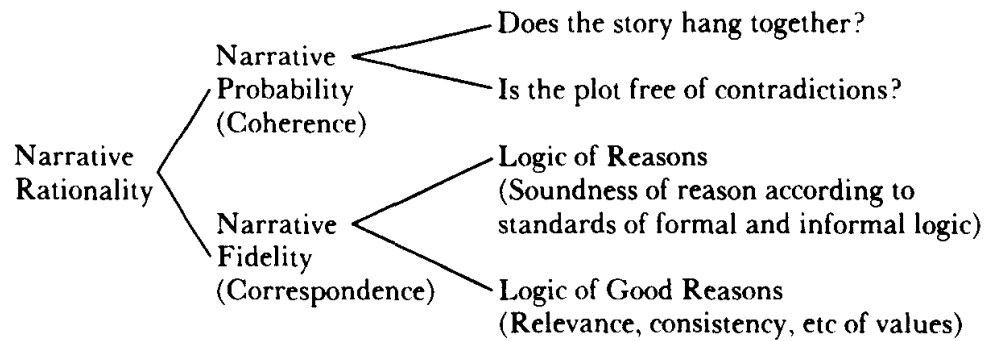
The first assumption is fairly self-explanatory. Human beings were created to tell stories and have done so from the beginning of time. Stories are how people constantly communicate on a day-to-day basis. They make up many human traditions, they permeate entertainment, and even create realities that do not exist. Stories make up the news and social media, they make up the movies that are watched and many of the books that are read. When someone asks another person about how their day was, the person usually responds by telling stories of various events that happened throughout their day. So much of human communication relies simply on telling stories.

The second assumption says that people make decisions from stories based on whether or not they think the reasons or values within the story are good enough. Those good reasons also depend on what the communication situation is and would vary depending on the genre of the information being shared. The third assumption ties directly into this and explains that the background and demographics of a person are the main determining factors of what they consider to be good reasons within a story. The fourth assumption is probably the most important in applying the paradigm to stories. There are three key terms in this assumption that need to be defined, narrative rationality, narrative coherence, and narrative fidelity. Narrative rationality is “A way to evaluate the worth of stories based on the twin standards of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity” (Griffin, 2014, p. 312). Narrative coherence and fidelity are the two key standards that determine whether a story can be considered good or bad. Narrative coherence has to do with whether a story feels real and probable to its audience or not. It is defined as, “Internal consistency with characters acting in a reliable fashion; the story hangs together” (Griffin, 2014, p. 313). Stories that are the most narratively coherent, are going to be the stories in which the characters act in a consistent manner to what is known to the audience. Coherence is all about a

story's reliability. If the characters in the story are not acting in a manner consistent with what is to be expected, people are not likely to trust the story or the storyteller.

Narrative fidelity is defined as, "Congruence between values embedded in a message and what listeners regard as truthful and humane; the story strikes a responsive chord" (Griffin, 2014, p. 314). Narrative fidelity is about the values that are within the story and how the audience relates to or views those values. Fisher believes that there is an ideal audience for the stories being told and that the audience must view the story as truthful and humane (Griffin, 2014). This comes back to what Fisher calls the logic of good reasons, which is when a story gives reasons that are good enough to drive the audience to some type of action. In narrative fidelity, the audience of the story does not necessarily have to relate to the setting of the story, but there need to be aspects of the story that ring true with the people hearing it. So even if a story is a fantasy story about worlds that do not exist, in order for it to be considered a good story, the characters must have traits that the audience can relate to. There must be underlying values within the messages being shared that the audience understands and connects with. Narrative coherence and fidelity are the main aspects of the narrative paradigm that are used to determine whether a story can be considered good or bad.

Warnick, who is known for challenging Fisher's paradigm, wrote an article (1987) entitled, "The Narrative Paradigm: Another Story." This article gives a visual representation of narrative rationality which is shown in Figure 1 below (p. 173):



This image displays the main criteria by which Fisher would analyze a story and determine it to be either effective or ineffective. When it comes to narrative fidelity and the logic of good reasons, there are five issues that Fisher believed were important. Those include:

(1) the values embedded in the message, (2) the relevance of those values to decisions made, (3) the consequence of adhering to those values, (4) the overlap of the worldview of the audience, and (5) conformity with what the audience members believe is ‘an ideal basis for conduct’. (Griffin, 2014, p. 314)

While many scholars argue that Fisher’s use of coherence and fidelity are “too tightly linked with normative concepts or rationality”, these criteria can still be an effective method to determine whether a story or piece of rhetoric is good or bad (Griffin, 2014, p. 316). Fisher’s fifth and final assumption explains that people’s lives are defined by the stories that they tell. People are continually creating and recreating stories of their lives to express themselves to those around them and give meaning to the various things that they experience throughout life.

### **Applying the Narrative Paradigm to Adoption Stories**

Now that the need for older children to be adopted has been shown and storytelling and the narrative paradigm have both been defined, this study will apply the paradigm to three separate stories from three separate adoption and foster care organizations. Each of the stories

chosen are about families who have adopted a child over the age of three from the United States. Before analyzing the stories, background information will be given on each of the organizations, outlining the overall mission of each organization and how effective they have been at completing that mission.

### **Organization #1 – AdoptUSKids**

AdoptUSKids (2013) is a national organization specializing in helping children find forever families. They work with families around the United States who are pursuing adoption or foster care. The organizations overarching mission, outlined on their website, is to,

- Raise public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families for children in the public child welfare system
- Assist US states, territories, and tribes to recruit, engage, develop and support foster and adoptive families.

While AdoptUSKids is not an adoption agency, it focuses on supporting and assisting families through the adoption and foster care process. They help connect families with adoption agencies as well as provide numerous services, such as providing information and resources to families at no cost to their clients.

AdoptUSKids (2013) differs from hundreds of other adoption organizations because they focus primarily on achieving permanency for older children in the foster care system.

AdoptUSKids acknowledges the difficulties that families may be faced with in adopting or fostering older children, but they provide numerous resources to help families along the way. Some of the resources include help in finding support groups for the family and the child, obtaining financial support, assistance in medical and mental health, as well as access various other resources. Like many adoption organizations, AdoptUSKids has a blog that allows them to



inform families and supporters on various issues concerning the organization and to further advocate their cause. One of the ways AdoptUSKids uses their blog to promote older child adoptions is by sharing stories of adoptive children and families. One of the stories on their blog is about a single woman fostering and adopting a 13-year-old girl. This story will be analyzed using Fisher's narrative paradigm to determine whether it has the potential to be more effective in convincing someone to adopt than a logical argument would be.

**Overview of story #1.** Field shares of going from foster care to adoption and encourages others to do the same. At the beginning of the story, Field (2019) states, "I had a demanding—but rewarding—job, traveled frequently with my boyfriend, friends, and family, and enjoyed all that Washington, DC, had to offer. But something was missing" (para. 1). This statement shows the normalcy of regular life, while also displaying discontent and longing for something more. Showing this discontentment allows the audience to connect with the story right from the start. A person can go about their life, doing all the things that they enjoy, yet still feel that they are missing out on something more. Field's initial statement can be effective because it is relatable to people which can aid in establishing narrative coherence.

After her initial statement in the story, Field (2019) then moves on to describing how she first became interested in foster care and adoption. Initially, she began mentoring at-risk or struggling children, but decided to take it a step further and pursue foster care after she realized the impact that she could have in a child's life. She then moves into discussing the first few children she was able to foster and the adjustment she had to make to learn how to be a parent. She talks about all the things that she did with her foster children and the connection that she created even in short amounts of time.

Field (2019) tells about how she met the girl who later became her daughter. Meeting a foster child for the first time can be uncomfortable and awkward for the child and the parent, but this time it was different for Field:

When they started to leave, Mikalah hugged me. This 13-year-old girl who was in the middle of what had to be the most tumultuous few weeks of her life had the wherewithal and the grace to make me feel comfortable, and I was completely won over. (2019, para. 13)

This encounter that Field experiences draws the audience in emotionally and allows them to feel an emotional connection; it is a heart-warming moment. This moment that Field is describing portrays narrative fidelity; it “strikes a responsive chord” (Griffin, 2014, p. 314) with the audience.

A few months after first meeting her foster daughter, Field’s decided to pursue adoption when it became clear that Mikalah would be unable to return to her family. Field shares about how her and Mikalah quickly bonded and says, “We quickly became a family and, in all honesty, it seemed like we had always been together” (Field, 2019, para. 14). One of the main underlying values of this story, and of many adoption stories, is the value of family. The target audience that this story is trying to reach are those considering fostering and adoption of older children. That being said, the target audience is likely going to value family, and therefore; the logic of good reasons can be applicable.

Field (2019) wraps up her story by telling the audience about all the things her and her daughter have done together and all that her daughter has accomplished since being adopted. She finishes with a call to action, stating, “Whatever it is, don’t be afraid to take that first step. There’s at least one child out there who will be glad you did, and, I predict, it will be the best

decision you ever made” (Field, 2019, para. 19). Field seems to have had a relatively easy time adjusting to adopting an older child and did not really discuss any major issues her and her daughter faced. Perhaps this was because Mikalah was only in foster care for a very brief period of her life and was quickly adopted. Whatever the case, this is not the experience that many people have when adopting or fostering older children, and it is for that reason that stories must be catered to an ideal audience. For an audience who has had difficult experiences with fostering and adopting older children, the story seems unrealistic. For an audience who has never fostered or adopted an older child, or who has only had good experiences with fostering and adoption, this story holds narrative rationality and will likely be more effective in persuading someone to adopt.

*Application of the Narrative Paradigm to story #1.* Field’s explanation of her experience falls into the first assumption of Fisher’s Paradigm because the details of her experience are laid out as a story, which proves Fisher’s point that people are essentially storytellers. The second assumption applies because while Field’s does not explicitly state the reasons that she thinks people should adopt, she does however instill the value of saving a child’s life by fostering or adopting. When it comes to the third assumption by Fisher, this value works fairly well because it appeals to a large audience. There are not many people in the world who would not value saving the life of a child, despite whatever their background might be. The fourth assumption is what mainly determines if this story is effective or not. While there are several aspects of the story that display narrative rationality, including narrative coherence and narrative fidelity, the story needs to be placed into the chart of Figure 1 in order to truly determine whether it is a good or bad story. When looking at the coherence in this story, or whether the story “hangs together” or not, there are several questions that need to be answered. First, is the story staying consistent?

While the stories characters maintain consistency throughout the story, there is not consistency with what is normal for foster and adoptive families of older children to experience. The story only gives a very brief overview of the details and does not go into any of the hardships that come along with adjusting to foster care and adoption. Even if a foster child has not experienced severe neglect and abuse, being removed from their home is a traumatic experience itself and would bear repercussions. This story does not show that whatsoever. Instead, it paints a picture of foster care and adoption being an easy and normal occurrence, when in reality it is often a severe struggle that includes all of the people involved.

Another question regarding consistency is asked by a scholar writing on and breaking down the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984). This question asks, “Are the values confirmed or validated in the personal experience of the audience and the life stories or statements of credible others?” (Moran, 2016, p. 23) Within the story told by Fields, the answer to this question depends on the ideal audience that is trying to be reached. If the audience are potential adoptive families who know little about adopting an older child from foster care, then the answer to this question would be yes. While there may be an affirmative answer, that does not make this a good story. If the story is trying to reach the type of audience mentioned above and they are persuaded to adopt based on this story, they are likely going to be in for a rude awakening as this story does not necessarily give an accurate portrayal of what it is like to adopt an older child.

Anyone who knows what foster care and the adoption of older children is really like will not feel that this story is probable, and they will therefore disregard it as a means of persuading them to foster or adopt. In order for this to be a good story, the plot would have to be free of contradictions. This means that the story would need to align with what the audience already knows to be true. If the audience knows that almost all foster children have suffered some type of

traumatic events and are going to struggle with mental, emotional, developmental, and behavioral issues, then this story is not free from contradictions because it displays none of those issues. So the question must be asked, why does story not display any of the real challenges and struggles that come along with adopting an older child? In Field's case, (2019) there may have really not been any serious issues and maybe it was an easy adoption, but that is the exception and not to be expected very often. Another option is that the author of the story could have purposely been vague or left out details in order to try to make adoption seem easier than it is, and ultimately to try to persuade others to adopt. If this is the case, then the story is told in a way that is unethical. It is setting up potential adoptive families with false expectations which will serve neither them nor the child being adopted. In answer to the question of whether or not the story holds narrative coherence, the answer remains, no it does not. If it were, it would need to be free of contradictions and it would need to hang together with the audience's previous knowledge on the issue.

While the story does not maintain narrative coherence, there is still a possibility that it could contain narrative fidelity. In Figure 1, it shows that in order for a story to be effective, it must fit in with the logic of reasons, meaning that there is sound reasoning that can be backed up with logic. It also must fit into the logic of good reasons which determines a story's relevance and consistency of the values displayed in the story. In order to determine if this story portrays the logic of reasons, the Toulmin method of argumentation will be used. This method is used to determine whether or not an argument is solid and can be backed up with logical reasoning. The method was "Developed by philosopher Stephen E. Toulmin, the Toulmin method is a style of argumentation that breaks arguments down into six component parts: **claim, grounds, warrant, quantifier, rebuttal, and backing**" ("owl.perdure.edu"). The main parts of this method are the

claim, grounds, and warrant. These key aspects are what will be focused on and are described as follows:

A **claim** is the assertion that authors would like to prove to their audience. It is, in other words, the main argument. The **grounds** of an argument are the evidence and facts that help support the claim. Finally, the **warrant**, which is either implied or stated explicitly, is the assumption that links the grounds to the claim. (“owl.perdue.edu”)

Now that the Toulmin method has been defined, it will be applied to statement from Field’s story in order to determine if story applies to narrative fidelity.

The statement that has been chosen is the ending statement in Field’s story which says, “I predict, it will be the best decision you ever made” (Field, 2019, para. 19). In this statement, Field’s is giving a call to action and persuading people to take the first steps to foster or adopt. When applied to the Toulmin model, this statement is the claim. Field’s is claiming that taking steps to foster or adopt a child will be the best decision that the audience could ever make. The grounds of the argument in this case is Field’s story itself. Her laying out the story in a way that makes her foster care and adoption choice appear like the best decision she ever made is the ground of her claim. The warrant then would be that because her own experience changed her life for the better, then that will be everyone else’s experience as well. This is faulty logic. There is no guarantee that someone else’s experience will be as positive as hers was, and therefore, the reasoning is not sound, and the story does not fit within the bounds of the logic of reasons within narrative fidelity.

The final prong of Figure 1 is the logic of good reasons which has to do with the relevance and consistency of values throughout the story. The questions that need to be asked to determine this are from the same study on the narrative paradigm mentioned above. The

questions are as follows, “Are the values in the message appropriate to the kind of decision, change in belief or behavior, asked of the audience? Are values omitted, distorted, or misrepresented?” (Moran, 2016, p. 23). The values that are in the story are the values of family and making a difference in someone else’s life. The value of changing someone else’s life is appropriate to this story, and it could be effective in persuading someone to adopt or foster who does not really understand the potential struggle involved. In order to be effective in persuading families informed on all the issues that may arise with adopting an older child, the value would need to be emphasized stronger throughout the story.

In answer to the second question, the value of making a difference might not be misrepresented, but the value of family is not shown in the most accurate light. Family life, especially adoptive family life, is often a struggle and can be extremely challenging, which the author does not really discuss in her dialogue. While the story may be close to fitting into the logic of good reasons prong, it does not fit into any of the other prongs within narrative fidelity or coherence and is therefore an ineffective story in promoting older child adoptions. The fifth and final assumption by Fisher applies to this story because it is a narrative chosen by the organization to be told in order re-create an experience lived by an adoptive family for the purpose of persuading others to adopt.

### **Organization #2 – Gladney Center for Adoption**

The Gladney Center for Adoption has been established for over 130 years and is a leading adoption organization in the United States as well as internationally. Gladney was founded in in 1887 by a Methodist minister who had a heart for orphans and was taken over years later by Gladney, who turned it into what it is today. There are now over 16 Gladney associations all over the country and it has become a well-known adoption organization.

Gladney's mission is "Creating bright futures through adoption" ("Gladney About Page"). While their mission statement is brief, they also outline their overall vision for the organization, which is stated, "For the sake of the children and those who love them, Gladney is dedicated to creating the finest adoption experience possible while forging new paths in serving the mission of adoption" (Gladney About Page). While Gladney has been around for such a long time, they have been able to consistently grow and change and are always making strides in the area of adoption.

In the year of 2018, Gladney was able to place 248 children with adoptive families. Gladney assists people in adopting newborn babies as well as children from around the world. In the year of 2000, Gladney introduced their New Beginnings Program which "connects families with children in the foster care system that are immediately available for adoption. We believe that all children deserve loving, permanent homes" ("Foster Adoptions"). Their main focus is on finding adoptive families for children over the age of 7 waiting in the foster system in Texas. They even have a home for pre-teen and teenage girls in the foster system who are waiting to be adopted. Gladney also offers a variety of other resources to adoptive families, including extensive post-adoption services, which many other organizations often lack. They have an entire staff dedicated to walking through post-adoption with families. On their website, Gladney has a tab entitled "Success Stories" which contains the story that is going to be discussed next.

**Overview of story #2.** This particular story is different from the last one simply because it is told by someone who interviewed the adoptive family member versus the actual family member telling the story and the author remains anonymous. The story is similar to the last one in that the adoptive family member, Tanya Orr, started mentoring children which led her to the desire to adopt. The beginning of the story explains the experience that Orr had with the child



she mentored. The author states, “It was this relationship that served as a catalyst, igniting a spark in her which over time grew into a flame of desire for adoption” (“The Gift”, n.d., para. 2). Orr eventually marries and moves to a different state, away from the young girl she was mentoring, but her heart for adoption was still burning. Orr and her husband wanted to adopt a girl between the ages of 5-7, but to do this they had to wait for the right opportunity.

The story talks about the time that they spend waiting, which is often many families’ experiences in the process of adoption. The author talks of the waiting process and says:

After putting together a "forever family" portfolio, home visits from Gladney, and narrowing the match profile, they were off...to wait, and wait, and wait. It seemed that finding a girl between the ages of 5-7 who matched their profile, turned out to be more harrowing than previously imagined. Thus, they waited. (“The Gift”, n.d., para. 6)

Being real about the waiting process of adoption is something that gives this story narrative coherence. Most families have to spend months and sometimes even years waiting to either be paired with a child or for the system to release the child for adoption if they still have living family members. Orr and her husband end up having to wait three years before meeting their soon-to-be daughter and even have a son of their own during that time. Those who have been through this process before will be able to relate to this aspect of the story as it shows one of the struggles of adopting an older child.

Finally, Orr and her family receive an email about six-year-old girl who is in need of a family. Orr states, “There is no such thing as a 'perfect child'; what we need to do is just say YES” (“The Gift”, n.d., para. 7). So that is what they did. The family adopts this girl as their own and makes her a permanent part of their family, but the story does not end there. The author goes into explaining some of the difficulties of the transition of having an older adopted child,

which continues to show narrative coherence. This is also where narrative fidelity begins to come into play. In the story, Orr expresses how she sees the difficulties as gifts. She claims that all of the challenges and doubts are what make life worth living (“The Gift”, n.d., para. 8). The story ends with the following statement from Orr:

We thought we were going to help her, but the reality is that she has helped us. Loving an adopted child is like seeing through the eyes of God; it is loving unconditionally with God's love. It is natural to love your biological child; this is easy. Your biological child takes on some of your traits; they look and act like you in similar ways. Adopted children are not anything like you. You rely on God to give you this love for them. It has helped me understand God's love for us. (“The Gift”, n.d., para. 9)

This ending statement is what really gives the story narrative fidelity. The underlying value here is having faith in God despite the circumstances being challenging. Orr owns up to the fact that adoption is hard and that it is not always easy to love someone who is not a biological part of the family. While there are these difficulties, the value of having faith in God makes it worth it to Orr as well as to those reading this story who have the same values. This story appeals to a very specific audience, those who are believers in God and who are seeking to adopt. To those who fit within the ideal audience, this story holds narrative rationality. It also holds narrative rationality to those who have adopted older children before, because it outlines some of the difficulties and does not make light of the challenges adoptive families may face.

*Application of the Narrative Paradigm to story #2.* Like the first story, this story also holds true with Fisher's first assumption because it is an experience told through the lens of a narrative. The second assumption is applicable because there are clear good reasons or values that the author gives in persuading others to adopt. The value of faith and understanding the love

of God through adoption is the main good reason given. This value is geared towards a more specific audience, one that likely holds Christian values, and so the third assumption can be applied, but is more narrowly applied. While there are some aspects of the story that relate to narrative coherence and fidelity, it needs to be put into the Figure 1 chart to truly be able to determine the story's effectiveness and whether or not it can fit into the fourth assumption by Fisher. The first question relating to narrative coherence is, does the story hang together? In a way, the story does hang together in the fact that it gives a more accurate portrayal of the adoption process. It does this through showing the reality of the fact that often times, a lot of waiting is involved within the adoption process. This is something that is common knowledge when it comes to adoption and so the fact that the author discusses it in some detail gives the story an aspect that does indeed hang together. Throughout the rest of the story, the author does mention that adoption is a challenge and that the transition was not always easy.

The next question that should be asked is, is the plot free of contradiction? As with the last story, the characters in this story remain consistent and seem to hold the same values throughout the entirety of the story. The plot of the story shows the process that Orr was a part of in adopting her child and gives a small glimpse into the challenges that come with adoption without going into too much detail. Most people that are considering adoption or foster care are aware that it is going to be a challenge. The fact that the author of the story includes this information within the story helps it to remain free from contradicting what the audience already knows to be true. The author could have given more details of the specific challenges Orr and her family faced in order to help the audience relate and have a better understanding. Even so, the story still holds narrative coherence because it hangs together and is free from contradiction.

While the story does align with narrative coherence, in order for it to be an effective story in promoting older child adoptions, it also needs to align with narrative fidelity. The first prong of Figure 1, the logic of reasons, is what will be looked at first in order to determine the fidelity of the story. The Toulmin method will be applied to conclude whether or not the story fits within the logic of reasons. The statement from the story that will be used as the claim in this method is Orr's statement that says, "We thought we were going to help her, but the reality is that she has helped us" ("The Gift", n.d., para. 9). The grounds of this claim is the following paragraph where the author talks about how adopting a child showed her and her family what God's love looks like. She describes how it is not always easy to love an adopted child because they are not like the family in many ways, but through this, Orr and her family were able to learn to love as God does. The author of this story does not really give a direct call to action like the author of the last story, but implies through the above statement and the paragraph that follows that adoption is worth it because of the way it changes the child as well as the family for the better. When applied to the Toulmin method, this implication would be the warrant that links the grounds to the claim. The claim is that adoption helped Orr's family, the grounds are that they learned how to love unconditionally, and the warrant is that because of the challenges that an adopted child may bring to a family, it helps the family grow and change.

After applying the Toulmin method to this claim, it can be seen that there is sound reasoning within Orr's statement and throughout the story, showing that it does fit into the logic of reasons within narrative fidelity. The story will also need to be applied to the logic of good reasons to be determined as an adequate narrative. In the minds of an audience that are Christ-followers and are considering older child adoption, the values in this story are relevant. A person who is a believer in Christ will have a desire not only to make a difference in someone's else's

life, but also desire to have a better understanding of God's unconditional love in their own life. This makes the values relevant to the ideal audience of Christians, but those who are outside of the Christian faith may not feel that this value has any relevance to them. The Gladney Center for Adoption is not necessarily a faith-based organization and their main target audience is not just Christians. Because of that, the values in the story would only be effective in persuading a very specific audience to adopt an older child.

In conclusion of the analysis of the fourth assumption, the story does hold narrative fidelity and coherence, but only in the eyes of a specific, ideal audience. This story would be more effective if it was used by a distinctly Christian adoption agency that is targeting believers, but as it is not, the story will not likely be very effective promoting the adoption of older children. The story needs to be aligned with the audience's beliefs and behaviors in order to be considered an effective narrative. While it does have the underlying value of making a difference in a child's life, the main focus is that it helped Orr and her family grow in their walk with God, which many people may not care about, and so it does not give reason enough for a person to uproot their entire life and deal with the challenges and struggles of adopting an older child. In regard to the fifth assumption by Fisher, the experience shared by Orr is chosen by the adoption organization in attempts to give the audience a story to relate to and ultimately, to persuade others to adopt. Despite its possible ineffectiveness, it is a meaningful story which can give some insight to potential adoptive families on certain aspects of what it may be like to foster and adopt an older child.

### **Organization #3 – The Barker Adoption Foundation**

The final organization that will be discussed is the Barker Adoption Foundation. This nonprofit adoption agency was founded in 1945 and is licensed in Maryland, Washington, D.C.,

as well as in the state of Virginia. Like the previous two organizations, Barker offers a variety of services and resources, but their main focus is on adoption. Their mission statement says, “Barker provides lifelong services for all in the adoption constellation and advocates for ethical, respectful, and child-centered adoption practices” (“Our Barker Mission and Values”). There is also an entire list of values laid out on their website, including things like, integrity, compassion, and inclusiveness that define who Barker is as an organization.

Some of the services offered by Barker are things like crisis pregnancy and adoption counseling, domestic infant adoptions, international adoptions, and older-child adoptions from foster care in the United States. They also have post-adoption services available as well as community education programs that inform people on adoption. According to their website, “Barker has placed more than 7,500 children into the welcoming arms of adoptive parents and provided counseling and related support services to more than 30,000 women and their families who are considering placing a child for adoption” (“A Rich History”). This is proof that their organization is being effective and making a difference in the lives of children and their families.

**Overview of story #3.** The story that was chosen to be evaluated from Barker is told from the perspective of the adopted child years after their experience in foster care. The story begins by the author, Criner, going into detail about what their life was like in the foster care system and stating:

As a foster child, I experienced multiple broken promises from families that assured me they were my forever homes. I found myself being traumatized all over again. Being moved from one home to another, one family to the next was exhausting and heartbreaking. As a result, I developed social-emotional issues and began displaying challenging behaviors at school and at home. I began to self-sabotage my placements

because I knew that sooner or later, I would be sent away to another family who would then send me away to another temporary placement or a group home. (Criner, 2019, para. 2)

This paragraph portrays exactly what many foster care children experience. Criner is incredibly open about what the consequences of foster care can look like in a child's life and does not hesitate to explain the challenges. She shares about how when she was 12 years old, she was placed with a foster parent who was willing to take on all of the challenges that came with fostering a child with so many issues. At this point, Criner had been placed in 15 different homes and was separated from the siblings that she loved. She was officially adopted at 15 years old and proceeded to have extreme behavioral issues, eventually leading to spending time in a juvenile detention center.

During this time, Criner attempted to convince her foster parent that the situation was not working, and she would be better off on her own. Her foster parent refused to accept this and kept on fighting for her which was what ultimately made all of the difference. Criner began working with a new therapist, was moved to a different school, and was able to become a part of some of the school communities. Because of the love that she felt from her foster parent and those in her school community, Criner began to change. She talks about how she had grown tired of pushing people away and she wanted to finally have some stability in her life:

I remember vividly the days when my mom would say to me “Toni, you can act out as much as you want, but I’m not giving you back to the foster care system. *All families have their issues but that doesn’t mean we just walk away.*” I thought she was the craziest woman in the world for saying this and sticking with me. But her words

gradually restored the faith that I had lost of finding my forever family and love. (Criner, 2019, para. 7)

In the end, it was the consistency that Criner's foster parent maintained that allowed her to realize that she was worth loving. Criner also talks about how it took more than just her foster parent to help her change. It was all the people in her life that were willing to go out of their way to help an at-risk child. She then tells about her life as an adult, going into detail about some of her college experience and then discussing the work that she does now. Criner has dedicated her life to helping at-risk children, just like she was, and has a goal to establish an organization that helps children who age out of the foster care system. She ends her story with a call to action, stating, "I want families to know that older foster youth are worth loving too. It is never too late to make a difference in a child's life. Trust me. I am proof" (Criner, 2019, para. 12). Criner's story is one that is realistic, informative, and inspiring.

Not only does the author succeed in allowing her audience to feel empathy for her situation, but narrative coherence is also seen throughout this story in Criner's life. She acts in a way that is to be expected from someone who has been placed in 15 foster homes by the age of 12. Her openness about the struggles that she faced as a foster and adopted child gives the story its reliability and allows the story to hang together. Narrative fidelity is evident in the values of the story. One of the main underlying values throughout the narrative is perseverance. Criner's foster parent refuses to give up on her and that is what ultimately changes Criner's life.

Portraying how Criner's foster parent's perseverance is what changed her life, inspires the audience to be willing to do the same. They see the impact that never giving up on someone can have, which often will strike a responsive chord within the hearts and minds of the audience. The



ideal audience that this story appeals to is an audience who will value being able to change someone else's life even if it means making sacrifices and doing what is hard.

*Application of the Narrative Paradigm to story #3.* The first of Fisher's assumptions holds true with the story told on Barker's website for the same reason the last two stories did; because it is an experience retold as a narrative. The good reasons in the story, which have to do with the second assumption, are values such as changing someone's life and perseverance. In order to be effective in persuading someone to adopt, these values have to align with a person's historical, biographical, and cultural background according to Fisher's third assumption. These are relatively universal good reasons or values and can therefore be effective in promoting older child adoptions. To truly determine the effectiveness of the story, it needs to be analyzed using Fisher's fourth assumption. The story clearly holds aspects of narrative coherence and fidelity, but it needs to be determined if it can be completely applied to Figure 1. It was mentioned above that the story does hang together, but what causes it to do so? The story hangs together because it gives a truthful portrayal of the issues that many foster children experience. Criner gives an accurate depiction of the challenges in the life of an older foster child, but also gives hope that change really can happen. She does not leave out any details of her difficult past, but instead lays them all out and allows the audience to see the reality of adopting an older child out of foster care.

Because of the honesty and openness of the author, the story's plot is free from contradictions. The plot of this narrative is all about how the author's life was changed for the better by her foster parent and others who were willing to persevere and sacrifice in order to make a positive impact in her life. This narrative hangs together with what the audience already knows to be true because it does not leave out the struggles of adopting, which makes it reliable

and truthful in the minds of the audience. If the story only told the good parts, it would not seem as believable and the narrative would not hold either coherence or fidelity, but this story portrays all the hard struggles that older foster children face, and it therefore does not contradict the previous knowledge of the audience. It also gives hope to the audience by showing them that the struggles can be overcome, and a better life can be achieved for the foster or adoptive child. Criner's story is an accurate depiction of many foster care and adoptive families stories and because of this, it holds narrative coherence.

The story also holds narrative fidelity because there is sound reasoning throughout the narrative and the values are relevant and consistent. To show that there is sound reasoning, a statement from within the narrative will be analyzed using the Toulmin method. The statement is a quote from Criner (2019) that says, "Although my path to success was rocky, I steadily began to earn the respect of those who knew me. It was all thanks to my mom's unwavering love and commitment to ensuring that I succeeded and found my balance in this world (para. 11). This is the claim and the grounds that support the claim are the facts that show the change that happened in Criner's life. The story shows that she was able to turn her entire life around because of the constant love and support from her foster parent and the others around her. The warrant then would be that with the proper love and support, a foster or adoptive child can thrive and become successful later on in life.

The final prong of Figure 1, the logic of good reasons, will be assessed in this story to determine if this a good narrative that can be effective in promoting older-child adoptions. As stated earlier, one of the main underlying values of this narrative is perseverance. This value is relevant and consistent with the story. Criner shows that fostering and adopting an older child has many challenges, but also shows that with perseverance, it can be a story of hope and

redemption. This value stays consistent throughout the entire story and it helps the audience to see that if this is something that they value, they can change a child's life forever which is also a value in the narrative. Because of the relevance and consistency of the values throughout the narrative, Criner's story aligns with the prongs of narrative fidelity.

This story has proven to hold both narrative coherence and fidelity, which therefore, makes it a good story. When applied to the fifth assumption within the Narrative Paradigm, it can be seen that Criner's experience was a story chosen and re-created for the purpose of promoting older child adoptions. Out of the three different narratives that have been outlined in this thesis, this story would likely be the most effective in promoting the adoption of older children. Not only is it realistic and informational, but it also gives hope and inspires people to consider adopting an older child. Criner's narrative can draw in a broader audience than the past two stories because of its values and its level of realism, making it more effective.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the three stories outlined above are different. They are each told from different perspectives, they are from different organizations, and are about different people, yet they all have the same goal: to show people the value in older-child adoption. While each of the narratives give real-life foster care and adoption stories, not all of them meet the criteria for narrative rationality. The first two stories, while sweet and inspirational, do not hold enough narrative rationality to be able to effectively promote older-child adoptions. They do not give enough realistic evidence of the challenges that may face an older child in foster care as well as the struggles that may be experienced by the entire family. One might even go so far as to say that the stories by AdoptUSKids and Gladney Center for Adoption present an inaccurate representation of what fostering and adopting an older child is really like. In order for the stories

to be truly effective, these organizations should model their stories after the one analyzed above by the Barker Adoption Foundation. This narrative is raw and real and gives a much more accurate portrayal of the serious issues facing older foster and adopted children, yet it also gives hope and shows that success can be achieved. Adoption organizations need to continue using narratives to promote older-child adoptions if they want to be successful in fulfilling their missions, but they must do so in way that genuinely prepares families for what it may be like.

The need for older-child adoptions to take place is great, and while adoption organizations have a difficult task in persuading people to adopt older children, the Barker Adoption Foundation story is proof that it can be done. The need for storytelling is proving to be more and more effective in the nonprofit realm, especially when promoting a cause like older-child adoptions. If organizations can continue to share stories that show accurate representations of adopting an older child, while also providing hope for success, then the statistics of older children stuck in the foster care system could drastically lower and lives could be changed for the better.

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