MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMATICALLY DISTORTED COMMUNICATION IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION INDUSTRY WEBSITES

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMATICAELY
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INDUSTRY WEBSITES

Abstract

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This study addresses the question of whether U.S. intercountry adoption system web page
texts discursively construct orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption
in ways that support the interests of social elites at the expense of members of marginalized
social groups. I conducted a multimodal critical discourse analysis of web page texts using the
discourse-historical method. I found that four types of systematically distorted communication
(naturalization, neutralization, subjectification, and pacification) functioned individually and in
tandem to reinforce capitalist ideology by constructing children’s bodies as a legitimate medium
of exchange while precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large
amount of money that flows through the system contribute to child trafficking. I argue that this
cycle of commodification could be eliminated if the United States outlawed payment of per-child
program fees to foreign agents.

My analysis further revealed four additional processes of systematically distorted
communication (legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial) in web
page texts that repeatedly invoked the Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and
Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, commonly referred to as the Hague
Convention, to legitimize government encroachment into the private realm of the family. I conclude that government may have an appropriate role in intercountry adoption, but only if the practice is redefined from one in which prospective parents attempt to overcome the social stigma of childlessness to a means of challenging social inequity in the U.S. and abroad. To this end, I propose that federal law be amended to require agencies to offer more comprehensive pre-adoptive training and to provide families with subsidized, long-term access to post-adoption services.
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the cause of justice for orphaned children everywhere.
Chapter 1: Introduction

As the world enters the second decade of the 21st century, billions of people across the globe continue to suffer unspeakable misery due to a lack of access to sufficient food, clean water, basic shelter, and adequate medical care. According to the United Nations Millennium Report (2009), more than 1.4 billion people live in "extreme poverty" (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2009, p. 7) despite concerted international efforts to address structural, social, and economic inequalities that most severely impact the poor in developing nations. At last count, some 213 million of these socially- and economically-deprived individuals were orphaned children in the developing world (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the United States Agency for International Development, 2004). Although advocates claim that U.S. American families help to relieve the poverty, disease, and misery of such orphans by legally adopting infants and children from outside the United States in a practice known as intercountry adoption, a growing number of scholars have begun to argue that intercountry adoption has done little to alleviate the suffering of the vast majority of the world's neediest orphans--and may, in fact, be contributing to the continued suffering of disadvantaged children and families, both in the U.S. and abroad (Hollingsworth L. D., 2003; Hubinette T. , 2006; Herrmann & Kasper, 1992; Park Nelson, 2006; Briggs L. , 2007). Many of these scholars claim that intercountry adoption is, at its core, a colonialist project in which infants and children from far-off lands are literally and figuratively produced for the consumption of Western elites (Hubinette T. , 2006; Park Nelson, 2006). Dorow (2006), for example, writes,

Parents choose to adopt from China in part because of the imagined transformability of children's identities, made possible through legal and social "clean breaks" from birth family and birth country. These transformations are enacted by a political economy of material and symbolic values circulating through agencies, orphanages, officials, and
facilitators. But this is more than a specific way to reproduce the child, the parent, or the family. It produces children valued in particular ways for parents who are also valued in particular ways (p. 67).

This viewpoint reflects the general position of critical scholars such as Barker and Cheney (1994), Deetz (1985), Trethewey (1997), and Mumby (1987), who have individually and collectively labored to illuminate and contest problematic ideologies that buttress systems of social inequality in modern society. Hasenfeld (1992), for one, argues that in the United States, human service organizations are often so deeply entrenched in the capitalist framework upon which American society is built that grave social inequities can be perpetrated even though most human service organizations claim to represent the interests of members of disadvantaged social groups. In the U.S. welfare system, he notes, privatization and commodification often go hand in hand:

Whatever practices these firms institutionalize to optimize their profits inevitably produce moral consequences for their clients. First and foremost, recipients become commodified—their value to the firm is contingent on the revenues they generate. Hence, there is a potential that recipients with ‘‘problems’’ who require more attention and resources are likely to be defined as ‘‘unprofitable.’’ Second, if profits depend on reductions in the welfare rolls, the firms will have an incentive to terminate cases as expeditiously as possible. Therefore, greater emphasis will be placed on rapid placements, and most likely sanctions will be the preferred mode to enforce compliance and to close cases. More ominously, as commodities welfare recipients are in danger of being stripped of whatever minimal social rights they have left (Hasenfeld, 2000, p. 347).

Since intercountry adoption advocacy groups, adoption agencies, and other adoption professionals claim that their primary purpose is to defend the interests of defenseless orphans in the developing world, a critical examination of the intercountry adoption system is warranted to explore whether or not these individuals or organizations are profiting from the practice of intercountry adoption to the detriment of the orphans they claim to serve.
Since critical communication scholars contend that communication plays a key role in the (re)production of problematic social power structures, one may conduct such a critical examination by deconstructing the language and other symbols that adoption industry professionals and other advocates use to construct birthparents, orphaned children, adoptive parents, and other parties and processes associated with intercountry adoption. In other words, to determine whether or not the intercountry adoption system is contributing to social inequities rather than solving them, one may ask: "Do participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system discursively construct orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption itself in ways that support the interests of social elites at the expense of members of marginalized social groups?"

Despite the increasing acceptance of intercountry adoption as a means of family formation, communication researchers have thus far paid little attention to the practice. Indeed, although a handful of family communication scholars (e.g. Mason Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009) have responded to Galvin's (2003) call for communication scholars to investigate how families formed through transracial international adoption construct and communicate family identity, the communication implications of intercountry adoption have not yet caught the attention of most communication researchers, with the exception of health communication scholars Kline, Chatterjee and Karel (2009), who conducted a content analysis of news stories about adoption to determine "the types of news events covered about adoption" (2009, p. 56), and communication researchers working in the areas of language acquisition and pathology.

Language and pathology researchers (e.g. Geren, Snedeker, & Ax, 2005; Glennen S. L., 2007; Glennen & Masters, 2002; Krakow & Roberts, 2003) have focused their attention on the
short-term and long-term impacts of sudden language change and the unique challenges associated with "arrested language development" (Glennen S. , 2002, p. 333) among internationally-adopted children. Many of these studies (e.g. Glennen & Masters, 2002; Schoenbrodt, Carran, & Preis, 2007; Glennen S. L., 2007) represent attempts to develop clinical procedures for assessing and treating language delays among international adoptees. Language researchers have also been particularly interested in exploring English-language acquisition by Chinese children because of the linguistic dissimilarities between the two languages (Krakow & Roberts, 2003; Roberts, Pollock, Krakow, Price, Fulmer, & Wang, 2005; Geren, Snedeker, & Ax, 2005). Roberts, Pollock, Krakow, Price, Fulmer, & Wang (2005), for example, conducted a study of Chinese adoptees and found that language acquisition "proceeds rapidly in the majority of preschool-age children adopted as infants and toddlers" (2005, p. 93). Geren, Snedeker, and Ax (2005) obtained similar results in a study of preschool-aged Chinese adoptees in which they concluded that Chinese adoptees acquire English language skills at essentially the same rate as native-born English-speaking children. In another study, Krakow and Roberts (2003) studied English language acquisition in a sample of Chinese infants and found that eleven of the fifteen children in their study had developed English language vocabularies at or slightly above the norm for native English-speakers by the time they had reached two years of age. Roberts, Pollock, and Krakow (2005) later investigated whether Chinese adoptees who had exhibited language delays in an earlier study would "catch up" (2005, p. 76) with their adopted peers after an additional two years of English language exposure. Although more than half of the children did show significant improvement in speech and language skills in the later study, all of the children who had initially exhibited language delays continued to lag behind their adopted peers.
Researchers have also explored English language acquisition and development among Russian and Eastern Europe adoptees, albeit with mixed results. Using a sample of 130 children, Glennen & Masters (2002), for example, found that within approximately three years, children who had been adopted as infants had attained English language competency on par with native English speaking children of the same age, while children who had been adopted as toddlers were not far behind. However, Schoenbrodt, Carran, and Preis (2007) found that school-age adoptees continued to struggle with pragmatic language skills even after they had attained competency in other language skills. In another study, Glennen (2007) found that Eastern European toddlers who exhibited language delays at the time of their adoption were likely to exhibit continued language development delays one year later.

Although scholars in a variety of fields have also explored the psychological, sociological, cultural, and legal implications of intercountry adoption, the most compelling challenges to intercountry adoption have been raised by critical scholars in the fields of anthropology (Dorow S., 2006; Hubinette T., 2006), sociology (Quiroz P. A., 2007; George, 2006; Freundlich, 2000; Herrmann & Kasper, 1992), and law (O'Keefe, 2007; Smolin D. M., 2006). These scholars argue that the practice of intercountry adoption commodifies orphaned foreign children, transforming them into objects of value to be exchanged for money in the "transnational adoption marketplace" (Park Nelson, 2006, p. 103). Even though these researchers generally agree that the intercountry adoption system commodifies orphaned children, none have explicitly addressed the relationship between the social inequities that permit children to be transformed into objects of trade and the discursive constructions that may help to facilitate such transformations. Yet, critical communication researchers have convincingly shown that a wide variety of organizations and social systems reproduce their social power by using language
patterns that circumvent discussion and open dialogue (Deetz S. A., 1992; 1985; Meares, Oetzel, & Torres, 2004; Barker, 1993). A critical analysis of intercountry adoption industry discourse may thus provide some insight into the communication mechanisms by which the intercountry adoption system reproduces itself, perhaps at the expense of the children and families it claims to serve.

Purpose of this Study

My purpose in writing this dissertation is to investigate the extent, if any, to which the U.S. intercountry adoption industry masks problematic social and global inequities and reinforces capitalist ideology by using systematically distorted communication that discursively constructs orphaned foreign children as commodities, naturalizes global structural inequalities, and privileges the interests of social elites at the expense of marginalized social groups both inside and outside of the United States. I pursue this investigation by exploring the following:

i) Whether the U.S. intercountry adoption industry, which consists of a loosely-connected collection of public and private adoption agencies, social workers, adoption advocates, and U.S. State Department personnel, can be understood to constitute a "control-oriented, self-referential system" (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 182). If so, theory suggests that the intercountry adoption industry may employ systematically distorted communication to reproduce itself.

ii) Whether systematically distorted communication in the form of naturalization, neutralization, pacification, or subjectification of experience, are apparent in intercountry adoption system discourse. If so, such discourse may function to support capitalist ideology and social inequity by constructing children's bodies as a
legitimate medium of exchange and by supporting the notion that commerce represents a viable solution for social problems.

iii) Whether systematically distorted communication in the form of legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial are present in intercountry adoption system discourse. If so, such discourse may mask problematic social and global inequities both in the U.S. and abroad. Here, I am particularly interested in exploring the relationship between the discursive legitimation of government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats as arbiters of family structure and composition and of children's "best interests," as well as the possibility that intercountry adoption policy, as codified in the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (n.a., Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993) may best be understood as a form of imperialist encroachment into the private lives of children and families in the United States and around the world.

This study has the potential to provide important insights to theorists, researchers, and intercountry adoption practitioners alike. As a communication scholar, it is my primary intention to support and help extend critical communication theory by exploring how systematically distorted communication may operate in large, loosely-interconnected social systems. Although critical culturalists such as Gramsci (1971), Habermas (1984), Foucault (1971) and Hall (1985) have demonstrated that the social and political power of elites may be created by, reflected in, and resisted through language use, Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) suggest that organizational communication scholars are particularly interested in uncovering relationships between language and social power within organizational contexts. By examining whether or not a very loosely
aligned group of public- and private-sector organizations and individuals may together comprise a single self-referential system that uses distorted communication to reproduce itself, I hope to inspire critical organizational communication theorists to consider whether it is possible that other seemingly disparate sets of individuals and organizations may also use systematically distorted communication to strategically reflect and reproduce Western power, hegemony, and colonial aspirations.

The results of this study have the potential to provide valuable insight to adoption studies researchers who argue that infants and children in the developing world are commodified for the benefit of Western elites through intercountry adoption. By carefully examining how birth families, orphaned children, adoptive families, and the practice of intercountry adoption itself are discursively constructed within the intercountry adoption industry, I hope to help adoption studies researchers develop a better understanding of the mechanisms by which the intercountry adoption system may be reproducing and reinforcing itself at the expense of orphaned children in the developing world. Furthermore, by deconstructing intercountry adoption system discourse, I hope to provide adoption studies scholars with vital information that will explain the process by which children are commodified in intercountry adoption and to suggest more fruitful options for future social action.

This study may also provide intercountry adoption advocates with crucial information that will allow them to better address the types of structural and social inequities that have thus far been exacerbated, rather than solved, through intercountry adoption. Like the vast majority of researchers who study adoption, I also have a personal interest in the practice as an adoptive parent of two children from Russia. Charges that intercountry adoption leads to commodification and social inequity have forced me to consider difficult personal questions: What exactly was my
purpose in adopting children from a foreign country? Why did my husband and I choose to adopt children from Russia, and not from someplace else? Why do I feel so uncomfortable when my daughter asks, "How much did I cost, again?" More importantly, why do both of my children continue to ask that question, despite my repeated explanations that their father and I didn't "buy" them the way you buy a candy bar at the grocery store; we simply paid for services that allowed them to become part of our family. And what about the many children that my husband and I met, but did not adopt, when we were in Russia--whose responsibility are they? It is my fervent hope that this study will encourage all parties in the U.S. intercountry adoption system to scrutinize their personal and corporate roles within the system and to reconsider ways in which they may have contributed to, or may help to solve, the admittedly complex social and political problems that often have their most devastating impacts on the weakest and smallest members of global society. It is sobering to realize that for each of the approximately 17,000 orphaned foreign children adopted by U.S. families in 2008, approximately 12,500 children remained behind in their birth country, most without parental or institutional care or support (United Nations Children's Fund, 2005). Many of these children live alone or with siblings or other children on street corners, in sewers, on rooftops, or on massive urban garbage dumps; the lucky ones are placed in crowded, often poorly-equipped, state-run orphanages. If the "best interests" of children are truly of paramount importance, then it is unconscionable to tolerate practices that may consign even a single child--orphaned or not--to such a fate.

Research Questions

To determine the extent, if any, that participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system may contribute to social inequities by discursively constructing orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption in ways that support the interests of social elites at the
expense of members of marginalized social groups, I will ask the following four research questions:

RQ 1: How are orphaned children constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse?
RQ2: Do these discursive constructions of orphaned children function to reinforce capitalist ideology and if so, how?
RQ3: How are government and adoption industry professionals constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse?
RQ4: How do these discourses function to obscure encroachment into the private lives of families and children around the world?

Scope of the Study

A burgeoning list of books, journal articles, news stories, television programs, Web sites, listserv groups, and other sources of information on intercountry adoption demonstrate that the practice has become an increasingly popular albeit challenging means of creating a family. It is therefore not surprising that adoptive parents use language in strategic ways to deal with the many social challenges they may face. For example, in many cases, intercountry adoption can also be understood as transracial adoption, since the vast majority of adoptions involve White U.S. parents adopting children of color from Asia, Latin America, or Africa. In such cases, the literature shows that adoptive families often use colorblind discourse to manage perceived racial or ethnic differences between parents and children (Quiroz, 2007). Similarly, adoptive families are often encouraged to use "positive adoption language" in which terms such as "real parent" are replaced by the term, "birthparent," thereby using language to challenge "the myth that adoption is second best" (Positive Adoption Language, 1992). While it is important to understand the social implications of private adoption discourses such as these, I propose to undertake a critical
study of public intercountry adoption discourse in an effort to better understand how language and other semiotic signs impact and are impacted by this increasingly common social practice. In so doing, I take the position of Fairclough (1992) and other critical discourse analysts who recognize that language use is “a form of social practice [in which individuals] act upon the world and especially upon each other” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 63). Alvesson and Karreman (2000), for example, explain that discourse can be understood as language use that “…arranges and naturalizes the social world in a specific way and thus informs social practices. These practices constitute particular forms of subjectivity in which human subjects are managed and given a certain form, viewed as self-evident and rational” (2000, p. 1127). Thus, discourse does not only describe the social world, it also creates and organizes social structures within which “specific subject positions” (Lazar, 2000, p. 376) are made available to social actors.

Indeed, although adoption used to be treated as a private family matter, increasing numbers of mostly transracial intercountry adoptions have opened the door to expanded public dialogue about adoption in general and about intercountry adoption, in particular. Increased public acceptance of intercountry adoption as a means of family formation has been accompanied by increased mass media coverage of intercountry adoption and by a veritable explosion of intercountry adoption content on the World Wide Web (Volkman T. A., 2003; Quiroz P. A., 2007; Cartwright L. , 2003; DellaCava, 2004). It is therefore possible that U.S. families and individuals who use the Internet to obtain information about intercountry adoption may be exposed to systematically distorted communication that functions primarily to reproduce the intercountry adoption system rather than to meet the physical and social needs of orphaned children.
With these factors in mind, I determined to study public adoption discourse in the mass media. The term “mass media” has been used in a variety of different ways by communication scholars working in various traditions. I followed Janowitz (1968) in conceptualizing the mass media as those technologies that are widely used by members of specialized groups to disseminate messages to “large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audiences” (1968, p. 41). Using this definition, a wide variety of communication technologies, including the Internet, may be defined as “mass media.” Since the Internet is a major means by which intercountry adoption agencies promote their services to prospective clients across the country and an important source of information for prospective adoptive parents (Quiroz, 2007; Volkman, 2005), I studied texts and images that appeared in intercountry adoption agency websites and on the websites of intercountry adoption service providers, intercountry adoption content contained in the web pages of U.S. adoption advocacy organizations, and intercountry adoption content found in the websites of traditional mass media outlets. In this study, I do not conceptualize the mass media as a single, hegemonic *institution*. Indeed, although I do conceptualize the loose network of adoption advocates, government bureaucrats, and adoption service providers as belonging to a single social system, it is also clear that the messages that circulate through that system originate from a broad spectrum of public and private sources rather than from a single hegemonic entity.

The staggering volume of information available on the World Wide Web has required me to limit my study to ensure clarity. Therefore, I have adopted a purposive sampling strategy to identify and collect web-based intercountry adoption content for analysis. Although scholars “do not yet have a thorough understanding of individuals’ motivations for media use in view of their many options in today’s complex media environment” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001, p. 154), my decision to analyze web-based texts is in keeping with Flanagin and Metzger’s (2000) finding
that “the Internet is ranked second only to newspapers in its perceived credibility for reference and commercial information” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000, p. 530). Unfortunately, although users find the Internet as a whole to be a credible source of information, individual websites “may be considered to be analogous to individuals or organizations as information sources whose characteristics engender greater or lesser credibility” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007, p. 321). Wathen and Burkell (2002) explain that determinations of credibility are dependent upon interactions between "source characteristics (e.g., expertise, trustworthiness), message characteristics (related to message content, encompassing factors such as plausibility, internal consistency, and quality), and receiver characteristics (e.g., cultural background, previous beliefs)” (2002, p. 135). Although it is therefore impossible for me to select a sample of websites that are theoretically equal in credibility for all prospective parents, I have elected to select websites sponsored by the following types of organizations, for the following reasons:

1. **Web pages sponsored by universities, government agencies, such as the U.S. State Department, and non-governmental organizations that provide information and services to parents adopting from abroad.** In their study of consumer search behavior, Toms and Latter (2007) noted that participants “most commonly attended to the summaries and URLs provided as a means of selecting the most appropriate links to explore” (Toms & Latter, 2007, p. 230). Participants also reported that they believed that university and government websites were “reliable sources” (Toms & Latter, 2007) of health information. These findings suggest that prospective adoptive parents may likewise use URL and summary information to determine which websites are most relevant to their search and that they will also be likely to perceive university- or government-sponsored websites to be credible sources of information about intercountry adoption.
2. *Web pages sponsored by intercountry adoption service providers and intercountry adoption advocacy groups.* URL addresses for many of these websites end in .org, denoting their status as non-profit organizations, a factor that Rieh and Belkin (1998; 2002) found to be important to participants in their studies of website credibility.

3. *Intercountry adoption content produced by and posted in traditional news media websites.* While news organizations are not members of the intercountry adoption industry, it is likely that news stories in which adoption industry “experts” are cited will reflect intercountry adoption industry discourse. At the same time, websites of traditional media outlets have been identified as highly credible sources of information. Respondents to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000) survey reported, for example, that they consider a number of national news organization websites to be more believable than traditional newspapers or broadcast products produced by the same companies:

> Among online users…fully 54% give CNN.com a high believability rating, while only 40% give the same rating to CNN. With ABC News, 44% of online users rate the network’s website highly believable, compared with 29% who give the same rating to the organization itself (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2000, n.p.)

Flanagin and Metzger (2007) conducted an experiment in which they found that “news organization sites were perceived as more credible” (p. 332) than e-commerce, special interest, or personal websites. For this reason, I do not include personal web pages or blogs sponsored by prospective adopting parents, by parents who have completed adoptions, or by other private entities such as groups that sponsor student exchanges with the goal of encouraging prospective parents to consider adoption at a later date. While Johnson and Kaye (2010) and Johnson, Kaye, Bichard and Wong (Johnson, Kaye,
Bichard, & Wong, 2008) have argued that blogs may be viewed as moderately credible information sources, particularly by politically engaged audiences, it is also true that “infrequent, less experienced, blog users may be put off by the opinionated, diary-like nature of blogs and therefore judge them as not very credible” (Johnson & Kaye, 2010, p. 319).

4. Adoption Media and Marketing Media Web pages. In their study of consumer web search behavior, Toms and Latter (2007) found that after web page URL addresses, website titles were “the next most commonly used sources of information for selection” (Toms & Latter, 2007, p. 230). Adoption media and marketing media companies utilize page titles that match the type of search language a prospective parent might be likely to use during a web search. Page titles such as “Pros and Cons of Foreign Adoption” (Pros and Cons of Foreign Adoption, n.d.), for example, are likely to appear to prospective parents to be both unbiased (since both perspectives are included) and credible sources of information. Likewise, prospective parents who are concerned about the high cost of adoption may search for and choose a web page entitled, “International Adoptions and Adoption Subsidies” (International Adoptions and Adoption Subsidies, n.d.).

I do not include websites sponsored by adoption agencies that facilitate both intercountry and domestic adoption. Since such agencies frequently use their websites both to solicit families interested in intercountry adoption and to promote their services to birthmothers seeking to relinquish their children for adoption, discourse in the websites of these agencies may be substantially different from discourse in websites sponsored by intercountry adoption agencies that typically obtain referrals only through contact with government officials, lawyers, or facilitators.
**Method of Analysis**

The relative scarcity of communication research in the area of intercountry adoption and the wide range of theoretical approaches available to communication scholars has presented a unique opportunity for me to choose from among many methodological approaches in designing this study. However, in keeping with Corbin and Strauss' (2008) admonition that "the research question should dictate the methodological approach" (p. 12), I determined that it was most appropriate to undertake this study using a qualitative research method, as a qualitative approach would allow me to analyze intercountry adoption discourse in its "situated form, content, and experience" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18) on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, as I am in agreement with Kellner and Durham (2006), who argue that "all artifacts of the established culture and society are laden with meaning, values, biases, and messages that advance relations of power and subordination...[and that] cultural texts are saturated with social meanings" (2006, p. xiv), I have elected to use a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach (Iedema, 2003). This approach has allowed me to capture and reveal the complex relationships between intercountry adoption industry discourse and the social structures that are both supported and challenged by it. In short, use of a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach has enabled me to delve into the "social meanings" of intercountry adoption texts on the World Wide Web and thus has allowed me to shed light on "linkages between discourse, ideology and power [that] may well be unclear to those involved" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 134) in the social practice of intercountry adoption.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Capitalism and Critical Theory

Communication scholars who approach their work from a critical perspective seek to expose how communication is implicated in the reproduction of "social conditions that privilege some groups...over others" (Muller & Craig, 2007, p. 425). Critical theory is founded upon the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1845-46/1968/2007), who powerfully argued that ideology and power imbalances in society are directly linked to existing socioeconomic conditions. In Marxist theory, capitalism is conceptualized as a historically-situated socioeconomic system in which members of the working classes "sell" their labor capacity to capitalists, who extract as much surplus value from the commodities as possible and then use that surplus value to generate even more capital (Marx, 1906/1915). Marx maintained that in capitalist systems, social, political, and legal structures work together to support the efforts of social elites, who derive the maximum benefit possible for themselves by exploiting and devaluing other members of the social system--particularly members of the working classes (Marx, 1973). Under capitalist regimes, the economy forms "the base, or foundation, of society, and cultural, legal, political, and other forms of life are conceived as 'superstructures' which grow out of and serve to reproduce the economic base" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 3). Although contemporary critical theorists generally recognize that economics alone cannot account for all social power imbalances, Marx's work continues to inform contemporary critical theory, in part because Marx's "plurality of doctrines... ambiguous use of terminology, and unfinished drafts" (Leeb, 2007, p. 833) provide a rich repository of ideas from which critical scholars may draw as they challenge social inequity and attempt to stimulate positive social change. Moreover, as Stuart Hall (1996) notes, the significant and enduring influence of Marxist theory stems from
…the questions that Marxism as a theoretical project put on the agenda: the power, the
global reach and history-making capacities of capital; the question of class; the complex
relationships between power...and exploitation; the question of a general theory which
could, in a critical way, connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life,
politics and theory, theory and practice, economic, political, ideological questions, and so
on (Hall, 1996, p. 279).

These questions continue to challenge critical scholars today.

One notable group of scholars who attempted, early on, to address some of these
questions, most particularly "the rise of what they perceived as major threats to individual
freedom--Fascism, Stalinism, and consumer capitalism coupled with the increasingly powerful
mass media or 'culture industry'" (Strine, 1991, p. 196), were scholars associated with the
Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. These so-called “Frankfurt School” scholars generally
based their work on classical Marxist theory, although they also challenged many of Marx's
assumptions. Indeed, Strine (1991) notes that the original Frankfurt School scholars "had as their
founding agenda the revision of orthodox Marxist theory and critique in order to account for
social and political changes that had occurred since Marx's death" (1991, p. 196). Frankfurt
School scholars Horkheimer and Adorno (2006/1944), for example, expanded upon Marx's
critique of capitalism by arguing that the mass-mediated “culture industry” (2006/1944, p. 41)
also exerted powerful social control over individuals, particularly in capitalist societies. They
decried what they saw as a fusion of entertainment and advertising in such cultural products as
radio broadcasts, films, magazines, and newspapers and argued that individuals were thereby
stripped of their individuality and subjected to "ideological illusion" (p. 60) and manipulation:

The montage character of the culture industry, the synthetic, controlled manner in which
its products are assembled--factory-like not only in the film studio but also, virtually, in
the compilation of the cheap biographies, journalistic novels, and hit songs--predisposes
it to advertising: the individual moment, in being detachable, replaceable, estranged even
technically from any coherence of meaning, lends itself to purposes outside the work...
Advertising and the culture industry are merging technically no less than economically.
In both, the same thing appears in countless places, and the mechanical repetition of the
same culture product is already that of the same propaganda slogan. In both, under the dictate of effectiveness, technique is becoming psychotechnique, a procedure for manipulating human beings (p. 69).

In other words, as the line between advertising and entertainment has blurred, individuals have been subjected to increasingly uniform messages that support the power of cultural elites and prevent ordinary individuals from recognizing questionable ideologies in mass media presentations.

Although Frankfurt School scholars such as Herzog (1941) and Lowenthal (1961) generally agreed with Horkheimer and Adorno that the culture industry "promotes the needs of dominant corporate interests, plays a principal role in ideological reproduction, and enculturates the populace into the dominant system of needs, thought, and behavior" (Kellner & Durham, 2006, p. xx), some scholars have labeled Horkheimer and Adorno's attitudes as "manipulative, reductive, and elitist" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 5). Jansen (2007), for example, notes that some scholars argue that the pair did not sufficiently understand American pop culture; while Keller and Durham (2006) note that the two may have based their arguments on an assumed level of homogeneity among U.S. cultural products that simply did not exist in the 1930s and ‘40s. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno are generally credited for having provided "a model of a critical and multidimensional mode of cultural criticism that overcomes the divide between approaches that solely focus on political economy, texts, or audiences" (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 5).

Another scholar who challenged the "economistic explanations of capitalist relations of domination, and [argued] instead for a focus on the...cultural and ideological dimensions of power (Mumby, 1997, p. 9) was Antonio Gramsci (1947/1971). Gramsci moved beyond the core Marxist focus on economy and class struggle when he proposed a theory of hegemony to explain
the process by which some social groups come to be dominated by others (Mumby, 1997).

Gramsci (1947/1971) defined hegemony as

The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige and consequent confidence which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (1947/1971, p. 12).

Gramsci theorized that few individuals recognize the presence and influence of hegemonic forces because hegemonic ideologies often appear to be simple “common sense” (Mumby, 1997, p. 350). Although Gramsci (1971) noted that the mass media is implicated in the establishment and reinforcement of hegemonic influence in society (Kellner & Durham, 2006), he stopped short of focusing specific attention on the role of communication in processes of hegemonic social domination.

One critical scholar did, however, focus specific attention on the role of communication in society. Jürgen Habermas (1981/1984) made a significant contribution both to critical theory and to communication theory when he developed the *Theory of Communicative Action* in which he conceptualized individuals as functioning in "a symbolically structured lifeworld that is constituted in the interpretive accomplishments of its members and only reproduced through communication" (Habermas, 1981/1984, p. 398, italics added). Habermas argued that "communication functions both as the principal constitutive element in the move toward understanding and truth and as a means for the exercise of power and domination in society" (Mumby, 1997, p. 11, italics added). The theory of communicative action was an important departure from previous critical theories that had thus far focused primarily on "distortions of consciousness, thought and meanings" (Deetz, 2005, p. 98) without explicitly linking these distortions to communication or language use.
Foucault: Discourse, Power, and the Social Construction of Meaning

Although many Frankfurt School scholars addressed the problem of power in their critiques of society, Michel Foucault brought the topic to the forefront in his seminal works that described how social power operated in and through discourse. Although he was not associated with the Frankfurt School, Foucault, like Habermas, sought to “transform the critique of reason through shifting the level of analysis to social practice” (McCarthy, 1994, p. 248). Unlike many scholars associated with the Frankfurt School, however, Foucault soundly rejected the Marxist conceptualization of “the mode of production [as] the totalizing center of history” (Poster, 1984, p. 95). Instead, Foucault (1976/1994) sought to “discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, [and] thoughts” (Foucault, 1976/1994, p. 35). Power, for Foucault, is not something that an individual or group simply wields over another. Rather, he wrote, “power produces knowledge” (Foucault, 1977, p. 27, italics added) as it is expressed and contested through discourse. Foucault broadly conceptualized discourse as “ways of speaking and seeing, [as well as] the whole ensemble of practices which [serve] as supports for…knowledge” (Foucault, 1980, p. 112). For Foucault, then, discourse is not simply a linguistic expression or reproduction of truth as objective external reality. Rather, he argued,

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 131).

Foucault explored the complex interplay between discourse, truth, and power in a variety of fields including medicine, psychiatry, and law.
Although Foucault (1980) and Habermas (1981/1984) were contemporaries who both sought to address the relationships between communication and social power, the two scholars embraced very different ontological perspectives (Kelly, 1994). Foucault (1976/1994) took a decidedly post-structuralist approach in his theorizing, bypassing what he called “global, totalitarian theories” (1976/1994, p. 20) and favoring instead the “local character of criticism” (p. 20). Foucault saw this as “an autonomous, noncentralized kind of theoretical production, one that is to say whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought” (p. 20). Habermas, on the other hand, worked within the established framework of critical theory to explicitly “separate critique and power [with the understanding that] the role of critique is to hold power in abeyance and then to justify the universal norms pragmatically presupposed in ethical, political, and social theory” (Kelly, 1994, p. 2). Likewise, although Habermas (2001) and Foucault (1976/1994) generally agreed that truth is socially determined, Habermas limited truth to the realm of language in defining truth as “a relation between sentences and the reality about which we make sentences” (Habermas, 2001, p. 91). The validity of any statement, according to Habermas, is determined not by measuring the statement against some external object or scale, but rather by critically evaluating the likelihood that one could convince potential interlocutors that the statement is true, a condition that Habermas referred to as “consensus” (p. 89).

Systematically Distorted Communication

Habermas (2001) conceptualized discourse as a specific type of communicative practice by which individuals attempt to reach consensus; individuals engage in discourse with the expectation that “an ideal speech situation” (2001, p. 97) is at least theoretically possible:

How is it possible to design an ideal speech situation by means of the speech acts that every competent speaker knows how to perform? In terms of distinguishing between a true and a false consensus, we call a speech situation ideal if communication is impeded
neither by external contingent forces nor, more importantly by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself (p. 97).

Thus, Habermas explicitly differentiated between communication that is strategically designed to achieve understanding (i.e. an ideal speech situation) and communication that is either intentionally or unintentionally designed to deceive. Habermas called strategically deceptive communication "systematically distorted communication" (1981/1984, p. 332), and conceptualized it as a type of communication pathology in which "at least one of the parties behaves with an orientation to success, but leaves others to believe that all the presuppositions of communicative action are satisfied" (p. 332). Sinclair (2005) used Habermas’ conceptualization of systematically distorted communication to support his claim that problematic child protection policies are the result of ideologies that privilege the perspectives of child welfare workers over parents and children. Sinclair suggested that social workers use discourses of retribution; bureaucratic, legal or scientific imperative; family or social dysfunction; or social or individual risk to justify a wide range of interventions and placement decisions that mask the ways in which problematic power differentials may have a deleterious effect on poor children and their families:

In the case of child protection, ‘the best interests of the child’ is the norm that lies at the heart of child protection practice. However, this is open to interpretation. What, for instance, is the child’s ‘best interest’? Who decides? And what of the child? Does the child have an opinion about his or her best interests, and will the child be listened to in any case? What a parent or child perceives to be the child’s best interest may be in stark contrast to that of the child protection worker. If so, the parent or child may not accept that the worker is justified in his or her judgement (sic) and actions (2005, p. 229).

Sinclair used a hypothetical case study to demonstrate how social workers use systematically distorted communication to describe and justify intervention methods to support “surveillance and control of a marginalized population” (p. 228) but fail to reflect “genuine concern about child abuse and neglect” (p. 228).
Stanley Deetz (1992) combined Habermas' (1981/1984) notions of systematically distorted communication, Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, and Foucault's (1980) ideas about discourse and power to explain the means by which individuals and social institutions such as the family have become increasingly subject to the business imperatives of major corporations, a condition that he dubbed the "corporate colonization of the life world" (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 13). Deetz (1992) argued that organizations and social systems exert control over individuals through processes of systematically distorted communication and “discursive closure” (p. 187) that function to suppress conflict in such a way that problematic power relationships are reproduced both within the organizations or systems and within society as a whole. Systematically distorted communication, for Deetz, is

…an ongoing process within particular systems as they strategically (though latently) work to reproduce, rather than produce themselves. It is shown in systems that …are unable to form a relation to the outside on the outside’s own terms; they respond to shadows of themselves cast on the events around them. In this form they translate all back to their own conceptual relations, thus precluding alternative discourses or conflicts with contrary institutional interpretive schemes. Such systems largely fool themselves in presuming themselves to be referential and purposively directed to an actual outside. In order for this to happen and be sustained, active processes of discursive closure occur in the internal discourses (1992, p. 187).

In other words, organizations and other social systems use specific discursive moves to sustain and preserve organizational identities that are essentially illusory. As a result, individuals are constrained when responding to social conditions within and outside of organizations to interact with other system members in ways that “preclude careful discussion of and decision making regarding the values implicit in experience, identity, and representation” (p. 189). In all, Deetz (1992) identified eight specific communication practices that result in discursive closure. Each of these processes of discursive closure will be explained in detail in the following sections.

Disqualification.
The discursive practice of *disqualification* excludes individuals from active participation in discourse production. Individual perspectives may be excluded on the basis of gender, rank or position within an organization or system, real or perceived lack of professional qualification or experience, or similar factors. Deetz (1992) explains,

> Socially produced notions of expertise, professional qualification, and specialization are central to qualification and to the imposition of the opposite, the disqualification process….expertise clearly functions as an ideological fiction, and imaginary relation, but further it reproduces itself by proclaiming who has the capacity to determine and question it (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 189).

When disqualification occurs, individual perspectives are discounted or excluded from consideration regardless of the validity of the claims being made. Thus, Bean (2009) found practices of disqualification following the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center when family members of 9/11 survivors spoke frankly about their desire to “assign concrete and specific responsibility for the catastrophe” (2009, p. 429). Although family representatives were initially “able to criticize national security elites severely without significant resistance because their status as victims provided them a moral authority that opponents lacked” (p. 438), government elites and conservative media personalities used a variety of discursive strategies to resist and criticize family members’ repeated calls for an independent commission to investigate the tragedy. Ad hominem attacks were common. The four most vocal of the 9/11 widows were collectively referred to as the “Jersey Girls” by Wall Street Journal editorial columnist Dorothy Rabinowitz (2004), who characterized their activism as a “spectacle” (¶14), and their opinions as “mind-numbingly obvious, or obviously false and irrelevant” (¶8). Conservative author Ann Coulter similarly questioned the widows’ motives when she wrote, “These broads are…reveling in their status as celebrities…I’ve never seen people enjoying their husbands’ deaths so much” (Coulter, 2007, p. 103).
Not only were the views and activism of the widows and family representatives discounted by conservative pundits, the most vocal of the 9/11 survivors was also explicitly excluded from participating in the 9/11 commission that was finally formed after the Bush Administration acquiesced to the family members’ demands for an independent investigation of the tragedy (Bean, 2009). Indeed, Bean (2009) notes that family activists were not only excluded from positions on the 9/11 commission, they were also denied the opportunity to be considered for positions on the 9/11 commission support staff when Commissioners adopted a policy stipulating that staff members could not have “an activist political history” (2009, p. 447). Commissioners justified their decision to exclude 9/11 activists by claiming they preferred to work with people who would bring a new and different viewpoint to the discussion. Commissioners identified those family members who were invited to testify before the commission “as laypeople and victims rather than competent stakeholders in policy debate (2009, pp. 446-447). Although commissioners were careful to praise the courage with which family members faced the tragedy of 9/11, Bean notes that “such praise positioned the commissioners as insiders and experts with more dispassionate, authoritative, and legitimate perspectives on accountability than the families” (p.447).

Although individual perspectives may be disqualified on the basis of lack of professional qualification, scholars have also identified discursive practices of disqualification on the basis of gender (Mattei, 1998), social class (Kingfisher, 2007), and professional rank or status (Leonardi and Jackson, 2003) in a variety of organizational and social settings. In a case study of corporate mergers, Leonardi and Jackson (2003), for example, found that organizations used a variety of discursive strategies, including disqualification, to manage the dissemination of public information during mergers. “Only certain individuals are granted access to media outlets”
(2003, p. 625), they wrote, noting that “the nature of mergers may even silence executives” (p. 625). Indeed, they noted that in at least one case, the CEO of a company that was in the process of being acquired “explicitly refused opportunities to speak publicly in any detail” (p. 625) about the acquisition. Likewise, Kingfisher (2007) found disqualification on the basis of social class in a study that demonstrated that the perspectives of homeless persons were disqualified in citywide discussions about the proposed relocation of a homeless shelter in a small central Canadian town. Kingfisher argued that since homeless persons in the community lacked access to official communication about public hearings to be held on the proposed relocation, they were effectively excluded from participation in the discursive construction of homelessness in their own community. Kingfisher noted that the perspectives of the two homeless persons who did manage to attend one hearing lacked the “therapeutic and medical vocabularies” (Kingfisher, 2007, p. 97) employed by social workers and other purported experts who, in some cases, had been specifically invited to testify about the proposed changes. While homeless persons were disqualified from participating in local-level political proceedings, Mattei (1998) found a similar phenomenon at a national level, as their analysis of U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee proceedings revealed that Judiciary Committee members similarly used a variety of discursive moves to disqualify the testimony of women, even though the women had been deemed to hold sufficient expertise in the law to have been invited to testify during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice David Souter. Specifically,

> Senators from both parties were more likely to undermine the authority of female witnesses than that of males, particularly through higher rates of empirical questions, disagreements, challenges, the citation of other authorities to contradict women's testimony, and the characterization of women's words as unreasonable (1998, p. 459).

In short, although women’s perspectives had been solicited, their testimony was largely discounted as the powerful male Senators on the Judiciary Committee used a variety of
discursive strategies to discount their perspectives as unimportant as or less qualified than the perspectives of males who testified before the committee.

These studies individually and collectively demonstrate that organizations use disqualification to suppress conflict by preventing members of non-dominant groups from participating in the discursive construction of organizational, political, and social norms. In each of the preceding cases, scholars demonstrated that problematic power relationships can be reproduced both within organizations or systems and within society as a whole through practices of disqualification. While disqualification limits the expression of individual perspectives by excluding individuals from active participation in discourse production, naturalization focuses attention on beliefs.

Naturalization.

In processes of naturalization, socially constructed notions of reality are treated as if they are in fact “transparent renderings of the external world” (Deetz, 1992, p. 190). Naturalization, according to Deetz (1992), occurs when “one view of the subject matter is frozen as the way the thing is” (1992, p. 190). This is in contrast to conditions of open discourse, in which socio-historical influences are acknowledged and opened to free examination and dialogue. When a specific belief is construed as natural, then that belief is accepted while alternative explanations are effectively quashed. Thus, Deetz notes, “naturalism always plays in the privileging and marginalizing of discourses” (p. 191). Like the other processes of discursive closure, naturalization functions to reinforce the social power held by those in authority; naturalization is pathological to the extent that it precludes discussion and the possibility of organizational change, regardless of the potential benefits of such change. In organizations, managers may use naturalization to control employees even when naturalization prevents employees from
performing at peak levels. Markham (1996), for example, conducted an ethnographic case study in a small environmental design company that specialized in developing large mall-like retail spaces. The two principals in the eight-person office had adopted a “participative organizational design” (1996, p. 398) approach because they believed that “employees who are empowered through participation in decisions affecting their work lives are more likely to be committed to their job, their fellow workers, and the company” (p. 398). However, Markham argued, although management sought to engender creativity and participation by telling creative employees that the “job requires autonomy and self-direction” (p. 416), their employees experienced high levels of ambiguity because the top creative manager was also prone to near-violent outbursts whenever he believed decisions were being made without his express approval. To cope with the ambiguity and tension that resulted from the combination of highly contradictory messages and sometimes “humiliating, public, and vicious censure” (p. 416), Markham argued that

> “Both management and the designers naturalize and neutralize the ambiguous and often explosive organizational reality with expressions such as, ‘That’s just how it works here,’ or ‘It’s just a process.’ This process of naturalization effectively denies alternative interpretations of ambiguous meaning structures and thus reifies predominant organizational practices” (pp. 409-410).

In other words, the extreme levels of ambiguity and tension that in another system might have been challenged or rejected was discursively constructed by managers and creative personnel alike as “a ‘natural’ part of the creative process, beyond the control or direction of either [the creative manager] or the organization” (p. 410). By constructing dysfunctional organizational practices as a normal part of the creative process, management maintained rigid control over the creative staff and, by extension, over all of the company’s creative output, while claiming to foster innovation and originality. Interestingly, Markham maintained contact with her subjects after the study was concluded and learned that employees who subsequently left the company to
work elsewhere expressed surprise when they learned that in other organizations, the creative process was not necessarily fraught with tension and discomfort. Markham concluded her study with the suggestion that “designers stayed at FED for as long as they did precisely because they were able to naturalize and rationalize the system as unavoidable, the ‘natural design’ of design” (p. 416).

Leonardi (2008) also identified pathological processes of naturalization in multinational organizational contexts. Leonardi argued that multinational corporations use naturalization discourse to make “indeterminate interaction[s] between technology and culture seem in some way antithetical to ‘nature,’ ‘science,’ and/or ‘progress’ (p. 980). When managers use what he called a “discourse of inevitability” (2008, p. 980) to introduce new technologies to employees in global markets, “those who interact with [the] new technology come to believe that they cannot use the technology in ways other than were intended by those who developed and implemented it [i.e. Western-based corporate managers] because doing so would mean intervening socially in the “natural order” of the world” (p. 980). By constructing technological change as inevitable and Western understandings of technology as immutable, managers who hope to speed up processes of technological adaptation may actually extend or even stop the adjustment process altogether by preventing employees from devising more culturally appropriate ways of using technology.

Just as naturalization can contribute to problems within organizations, naturalization can also function to exacerbate social problems in larger systems. Williams (2008), for example, investigated mass media coverage of the Enron scandal and found widespread reportage incorporating discourses of naturalization in which sources “attribute[d] the scandals to the actions of a handful of ‘bad apples’ produced in conjunction with the natural excesses of the
market and an investing public that should have known better” (p. 477). Such attributions, he argued,

…remain grounded within a basic set of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding ‘the market’ as a reified sphere of activity operating according to specific rules and principles, and thus generating certain practical regularities. More importantly, these regularities are not viewed as expressions of social or political logics and interests, but rather as manifestations of the natural laws of economic exchange (p. 479).

In short, by framing the social and political conditions that led to the collapse of Enron as a result of the “natural laws of economic exchange” (p. 479), organizational sources quoted in mass media reports “reproduce[d] existing social, economic, and political relations” (p. 492) and restricted options for financial reform through the discursive practice of naturalization.

Clair (1998) brings a feminist perspective to the concept of naturalization, which she refers to as “reification” (Clair, 1998, p. 38). Invoking Deetz (1992), she argues that actions that are discursively constructed as ‘natural’ are discursively constructed as if they were impossible to change. Individuals may therefore attempt to excuse oppressive practices such as sexual harassment with a suggestion that the behavior is natural. She argues, “To say ‘boys will be boys’ implies that males are biologically determined to behave in certain ways toward women” (p. 39). Since naturalization, like all processes of discursive closure, effectively precludes “any sense of choice” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1999, p. 199), such oppressive practices are reinforced rather than acknowledged as problematic.

Neutralization.

The third manifestation of discursive closure, as conceptualized by Deetz (1992), is neutralization. Neutralization “refers to the process by which value positions become hidden and value-laden activities are treated as if they were value-free” (1992, p. 191). Deetz argued that “judgments disguised as descriptions often effectively block the open construction of the ‘facts’”
As a result, any presentation of supposed ‘factual’ information should be understood to rest upon a foundation of values that constrain or limit the manner in which the information can be presented. For example, in academic research and publishing ideological positions are often presented as if they were, in fact, mirror images of specific external realities (Deetz S., 1995), rather than socially-constructed understandings about those realities. In such cases, Deetz argues, “value-laden research methods, conceptions, and activities” (1995, p. 53) are masked by claims of objectivity that effectively prohibit further discussion. Neutralization occurs when these “presumed ‘objective’ claims [are used to] hide both the activities that produced the claim and the values carried with them” (1992, p. 191); thus, “just giving the ‘data’ or the ‘facts’ hides the criteria used to choose certain observations rather than others” (1992, pp.191-192). Although few researchers have identified specific instances of neutralization in organizational and social contexts, Lyon (2007) very clearly demonstrated that processes of neutralization were used by pharmaceutical giant Merck, which was shown to have neutralized the potential dangers of its Vioxx product by failing to inform doctors and patients of possible dangers associated with use of the drug. Lyon demonstrated that by applying a strategy designed to “position the number of heart attacks among Vioxx patients as the statistical norm” (p. 383) rather than as an indication of possible dangerous side effects of the drug, Merck “thwarted physicians’ and patients’ abilities to make an informed choice” (2007, p. 376) about the drug’s suitability for some patients. In other words, Merck’s marketing messages neutralized important information so Merck executives could accomplish their primary goal: to bring the product to market regardless of the possible risk to some patients.

*Topical avoidance.*
In the study described above, Lyon (2007) also found that Merck used *topical avoidance*, a discursive strategy in which certain topics are understood to be taboo in particular social settings, to manage physicians’ and patients’ concerns about the safety of Vioxx. Sales staff were initially trained to avoid discussing potential health risks of the drug and later given scripts to help them address specific questions by turning the topic to the company’s claim that Vioxx was safe. While Lyon explained Merck’s strategies with regard to stakeholders outside the organization, Deetz (1992) notes that topical avoidance can also take place within organizations, as in “the corporate prohibition against expression of personal doubts and problems at home” (1992, p. 192). In a study of an influential U.K. advertising agency, Hackley (2000) found that managers used topical avoidance to exclude one type of discourse common to other advertising agencies. Although Hackley identified eight different discursive themes that were used to direct agency activities, Hackley suggested that one theme, the so-called “power of creativity repertoire” (p. 247) was “present by its absence [and] silenced by the others” (p. 247). In short, Hackley argued,

> Discursive forms which manifested themselves in the agency tended to have the effect of privileging certain warrants, positions and discursive repertoires over others. What resulted was a kind of discursive silence in which dissent, rebellion and non-instrumental interests were whitewashed from the public discourse of the agency (p. 244).

By discouraging “power of creativity” (p. 247) discourse, managers effectively stripped creative staff of the power they might otherwise have claimed by virtue of their creative activity. Topical avoidance has also been identified by researchers studying inter-ethnic marriages (Benjamin & Barash, 2004) and organizational mergers (Leonardi & Jackson, 2003).

*Subjectification of Experience.*

The discursive practice known as *subjectification of experience* privileges the experiences of some individuals over others and thus limits constructive dialogue. As a result, “the privilege
of the personal precludes the examination of…social formation[s]” (Deetz S. A., 1992, pp. 193-194). In other words, by claiming that a position or opinion is “a matter of opinion” (p. 194), discussion and dialogue are inhibited. This is problematic, argues Deetz, because “the difference between different people’s opinions represents the opportunity to escape from self-blinders…and indicates that more is to be learned about the issue” (p. 194). Alternative views are quelled and the status quo is preserved when alternative views are attributed to individual difference, rather than to potential problems within the system. Kärremon and Alvesson (2010) argue that subjectification of experience can create ethical dilemmas for some individuals. In an ethnographic study incorporating in-depth interpersonal interviews and participant observation at a major Swedish newspaper, they found that journalists struggled between their personal and professional obligations when employment policies allowed them to “…maintain their own ethical standards and judgments, as long as they [didn’t] interfere with newsmaking procedures” (Karreman & Alvesson, 2010, p. 67). By framing moral judgments as “expressions of attitude, preference or feeling,” (p. 62), contradictions between reporters’ personal belief systems and professional actions were eliminated, but not resolved. In another study, Thackaberry (2004) found a similar practice in her analysis of a firefighters’ self-study sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service. She found firefighters generally took two sharply different positions with regard to the immutability of the Forest Service’s wild land firefighting rules. Thackaberry argued, “Rather than try to resolve the conflict between the orders are orders and the orders are guidelines perspectives, the report simply characterized these as two differing opinions” (2004, p. 343, italics in original). This lack of resolution between the two perspectives prevented U.S. Forest Service managers from recognizing the “potential shift in social valuing” (p. 351) that led
firefighters to perceive a lack of fairness within the agency, particularly when the agency attempted to make “determinations of blame in the wake of tragedy” (p. 351).

Meaning denial.

Another form of discursive closure occurs when message recipients must determine which of two possible interpretations was actually meant by a speaker. According to Deetz (1992), *meaning denial* “happens when one possible interpretation of a statement is both placed in the interaction and denied as meant” (1992, p. 194). Meaning denial shuts down open communication by “shift[ing] meaning production to a positioned listener, thus enabling the produced speaker control without responsibility and precluding the critical examination of what was said (because it was not said)” (p. 194). In organizational contexts, meaning denial has been shown to have been used to silence workers who verbalized dissatisfaction with company policies or questioned managerial decision-making. In a study of organizational shunning, for example, Anderson (2009) found that individuals who had been subjected to “systematic exclusion” (2009, p. 36) reported that efforts to address perceived injustices or other difficulties were effectively shut down by managers and supervisors who shifted responsibility for the problems back to the individuals:

When Respondent 1 tried to talk to her manager about the dynamics of exclusion within the work group, the manager’s response was, “Why don’t you try harder to get along with other people.” Implicit in this statement was the assertion that the victim was to blame for the shunning. Respondent 3 was told by a top decision-maker to “just leave the people who did this to you alone.” Such mixed messages inverted the burden of responsibility, placing the target in the role of initiator of their own torment. This symbolic reversal of responsibility reinforced the uncertainty and unpredictability of the target’s social environment.

Meaning denial, sometimes referred to as plausible deniability, has even been shown to function in the United States Supreme Court. Dunlop and Wright (2010) argued that Supreme Court justices used plausible deniability in a ruling that purportedly clarified the level of detailed
information plaintiffs would be required to provide to prevent federal judges from dismissing cases brought by citizens against the U.S. government. Although the justices stipulated that the ruling did not “apply any heightened pleading standard, nor…seek to broaden the scope of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 9, which can only be accomplished by the process of amending the Federal Rules and not by judicial interpretation” (Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 2007), their ruling clarified the pleading standards for such cases in such a way that plaintiffs could be required to provide more detailed information at the outset of a case than had previously been necessary. As a result, since “plaintiffs claiming they were the victims of employment discrimination, a defective product, an antitrust conspiracy or a policy of harsh treatment in detention may not know exactly who harmed them and how before filing suit” (Liptak, 2009), the court provided what law expert Stephen B. Burbank characterized as a “blank check for federal judges to get rid of cases they disfavor” (Liptak, 2009, p. para. 14) without specifically requiring plaintiffs to provide detailed information before cases can go to trial.

*Legitimation.*

Another process through which discursive closure can occur is *legitimation*, in which one or more claims are privileged over others on the basis of assumed rather than actual superior value. Deetz (1992) explains that the “invocation of higher order explanatory devices” (1992, p. 195), “master narratives” (p. 196), or “moral fictions” (p. 196) conceals equally viable options and thus suppresses the potential for open conflict in organizational settings. Thackaberry (2004) found that a financial imperative served as a powerful discursive tool for officials, who legitimated the agency’s wild land firefighting rules and regulations, discussed above, through the use of a “currency metaphor: orders are orders that should be followed because they have
‘come at too high a price’” (2004, p. 348) to be ignored. Indeed, metaphors have been shown to have been used to legitimize organizational decisions in other cases, as well.

In private businesses, Wilcox (2007) has argued that managers use processes of legitimation to maintain control over corporate policies and structures. Specifically, Wilcox (2007) found that the CEO of an Australian airline used what she called “pre-scripts” (2007, p. 10) as “symbolic or discursive resources that reinforced the inherent worth of cost-reduction over other possible strategies” (p. 11). One such pre-script allowed the new CEO to cement his own power to shift money and resources away from the company’s human resource department by invoking a “sense of hardship and inevitable belt tightening” (p. 11) in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack. Likewise, Erkama and Vaara (2010) found that managers at Volvo used discourses of legitimation to support their decision to shut down the company’s bus division in 1998, a move that had been strongly challenged by employees and community members alike. Managers legitimated their decision by claiming that “the corporation had no choice but to move production from relatively expensive to more inexpensive locations” (2010, p. 831). Interestingly, in this case, middle-level managers used discursive moves of their own in an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to de-legitimize the company’s decision: “Managers did not challenge the inevitability of globalization per se, but the specific idea in investing in Wroclaw [Poland]” (p. 831), where the bus division was to be moved. Interestingly, the authors concluded that human concerns took a back seat to financial imperatives, which, they argue, could have been due to the influence of a powerful globalization narrative. Nevertheless, they note, “What is crucial—and perhaps counter-intuitive—is that this rhetoric is ultimately mythical, resting on the ever-present myth of the necessity of change, this time translated into the language of
organizational restructuring” (p. 833). By using such myths to legitimize organizational change, managers thus effectively preclude any discussion of other viable alternatives.

Often, legitimation discourses are reported and repeated in the mass media when corporate leaders are quoted in news stories about major corporate changes. For example, discursive legitimation of Volvo’s decision to close its bus plant was often reported in the press (Erkama & Vaara, 2010), as was Tata Motors’ plan to build a new factory in a rural part of India in which they planned to manufacture “the world’s cheapest car, the Nano” (Mitra, 2010, p. 573). Mitra (2010) analyzed newspaper coverage of the launch of Tata Motors’ new product and planned construction of the new factory and found Indian national newspaper coverage functioned to legitimate the company’s decision by “emphasizing history-in-the-making, fame on the global stage, national identity, assurances of economic growth, community welfare, rational pronouncements by experts, and technological advances as safeguards” (p. 585). This linkage between corporate interests, systematically distorted communication, and media coverage was predicted by Deetz (1992), who noted that “media messages elaborate ideology into common sense and everyday practices by reproducing social conflict in terms derived from the dominant ideology” (p. 53).

Pacification.

The final type of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure theorized by Deetz (1992) is pacification, a process in which in which conflicts are discursively acknowledged while underlying problems remain unaddressed. Deetz notes, "Messages that pacify tend to discount the significance of the issue, the solvability of the issue, or the ability of the participant to do anything about the issue. Thus discussion is made either trivial, implying that the issues are not worth the effort, or futile, implying that the magnitude of the issue exceeds the limits of capacity" (p. 196).
Thackaberry (2004) found pacification in her analysis of the firefighter self-study, mentioned previously. She noted that the imperative of independent judgment appeared dead last in the study’s list of 82 safety enhancement recommendations, and only “in the context of safe practices, standards, and procedures” (2004, p. 337) – although those very standards and procedures had been challenged by firefighters who argued that overall safety would be greatly enhanced if organizational policies were modified to allow individual firefighters freedom to determine how best to function while working on the fire line. Pacification likewise appears in Leonardi’s (2008) study of organizational mergers, with managers using discourses suggesting the “inevitability of technological change” (2008, p. 627) to preclude attempts to discuss other possible options.

The most damaging effect of discursive closure through pacification may be the way in which pacification has been historically used to silence members of powerless groups in society. Patterson (2000), for example, argues that the voices of women are silenced by Western social conventions that privilege male speech over female speech:

Historically, folk culture has held, and continues to hold, that it is women who talk too much, despite an enormous quantitative literature that contradicts that folk wisdom…[as a result,] any female talk [may] normatively [be seen as] “a lot” or “too much,” morally suspect, and consuming the time of the “natural” speakers (2000, p. 670).

Thus, women’s perspectives are trivialized by age-old discourses of pacification that construct women’s perspectives as unimportant and their social contributions as generally worthless in comparison to the contributions and perspectives of men.

*Theoretical extensions and challenges.*

While organizational scholars such as Deetz (1992), Thackaberry, (2004), Wilcox (2007) and Leonardi (2008) have focused attention on the ways in which discursive closure functions *within* organizations to influence organizational members to behave in particular ways, a few
scholars (Prasad & Elmes, 2005; Norton, 2008) have demonstrated that discursive closure also operates among and between organizations in larger social systems. Prasad and Elmes (2005), for example, found that environmental managers working in corporate, advocacy, and academic organizations used similar discourses that invoked “economic utilitarianism, compromise and interorganizational collaboration” (2005, p. 845) to achieve internal organizational goals and external political goals, albeit sometimes at the expense of the very “environmental priorities” (p. 858) they were putatively attempting to achieve. Norton (2008) likewise found that members of different political alliances adjusted the ways in which they defined “appropriate” public land use during property rights disputes to accomplish important objectives. Not only did Norton identify particular discursive strategies used by various stakeholders in the “decade-long conflict over public lands in the southern part of the U.S. state of Utah…Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument” (p. 210), Norton also noted that the discursive strategies used by various stakeholders changed over time. Local residents initially responded to government plans to set aside land for a national monument with discourse that naturalized “preexisting, symbolic rights emanating from a force beyond government” (2008, p. 220). Local government officials responded with discourse that legitimated “an instrumental orientation where property is redistributed through interorganizational negotiations to serve collective needs” (p. 221). The fact that these were strategies of discursive closure rather than attempts at true dialogue can be seen in the development of strategic responses to each new discourse that, in turn, attempted to reframe the discussion by invoking supposed “universal norms” to justify opposing positions. Norton notes, for example, that government discourses of legitimacy were met with the formation of a landowner advocacy group that challenged the legitimacy of the proposed annexation by invoking claims that naturalized the so-called rights of local residents, which
“must be secure because they are derived from God, and the American way of life stands upon their preservation” (p. 223). In these examples, communication originating from both organizational and non-organizational sources had a powerful influence on individuals inside and outside of formal organizational contexts.

In addition to the studies outlined above, one theoretical extension has been proposed for Deetz’ (1992) conceptualization of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure. First, although Deetz (1992) did not theorize specific causal relationships between the eight processes of discursive closure, Vaara and Tienari (2002) have suggested that the discursive practices of legitimization and justification should be understood as “steps in a process” (p. 296) leading to naturalization. In a study of 526 stories appearing in three newspapers and one business magazine reporting on a series of corporate mergers and acquisitions in Finland, they concluded that “the dominance of…rationalistic discourses [representing legitimization and justification] in media texts contributes to the [eventual] naturalization of mergers and acquisitions and to the normalization of…practices such as downsizing” (p. 296). They also suggested that discursive processes of naturalization might explain why Finnish companies continued to initiate mergers and acquisitions in spite of the significant business challenges that frequently accompanied such moves.

As the previous discussion shows, few scholars outside the field of organizational and management communication have used the theoretical construct of systematically distorted communication to explore and explain how organizations use language to maintain organizational identities and accomplish organizational goals. Fewer still have explored how systematically distorted communication operates among and between organizations in larger social systems.
Critical scholars in a broad range of fields including feminist studies (e.g. McCullough, 2010), psychology (e.g. Kelman, 2001), critical race theory (e.g. Crenshaw, 2007), and the arts (e.g. Preziosi, 1989; Harvie, 1995) have sometimes used the terminology of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure (e.g. legitimation, naturalization, etc.) to theorize and explain a variety of social problems without using the specific theoretical construct advanced by Deetz (1992). For example, van Leeuwen (2007) proposed that processes of legitimation could be subdivided into four interrelated discursive strategies, each of which functioned to further the discourse in a particular direction. He suggested that the following four discursive strategies functioned together to legitimize a particular perspective on compulsory education:

1) ‘authorization’, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority is vested; 2) ‘moral evaluation’, legitimation by reference to discourses of value; 3) rationalization, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the social knowledges that endow them with cognitive validity; and 4) mythopoesis, legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions (p. 91).

Clearly, van Leeuwen here conceptualizes legitimation as a process, as does Deetz (1992). However, since he also refers to processes of naturalization and neutralization by the names ‘authorization’ and ‘moral evaluation’ and postulates that both result in the legitimation of a particular position, it appears that he is not using the term ‘legitimation’ in the way Deetz (1992) did. While this is not an error on van Leeuwen’s (2007) part (since he does not cite Deetz [1992] nor does he refer to the theory of discursive closure,) and despite the fact that van Leeuwen’s (2007) work clearly identifies links between discourse and social practice, this example demonstrates that the simple use of a theoretical term does not necessarily imply the concomitant use of a particular theoretical concept. Thus, I have been careful to exclude studies that use the
terms “naturalize,” “neutralize,” and even “plausible deniability” that do not also specifically allude to practices of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure.

Critical Theory, Marginalized Groups, Mass Media, and Intercountry Adoption

Critical theorists have developed many theoretical constructs besides the notions of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure to focus attention on the ways in which communication is implicated in the oppression and commodification of marginalized social groups. I will next discuss two of these concepts, Orientalism and commodification, and explain their particular relevance to the practice of intercountry adoption.

Orientalism.

In his highly influential work on Orientalism, Edward Said (1979) argued that Western notions of individual and social superiority are embedded in imagined differences between Western civilization and the mysterious and exotic Orient. As the West’s “great complementary opposite” (1979, p. 58), the Orient represents the ideological antithesis of the West. Said explained, for example, that the Orient and its Others are discursively constructed in Western literary and academic texts through the use of “representative figures, or tropes” (p. 71) that reflect and reproduce the power, hegemony, and colonial aspirations of the West. He argued that "typical encapsulations: the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, [and] the polemical confrontation…are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West” (p. 58). Said noted that over time, the United States came to represent "the major Western power" (p. 46), while the developing world, (which encompasses not only Asia proper, but also the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and parts of the former Soviet Union,) was referred to as the East regardless of its geographical relationship to the North American continent.
Just as Western culture has objectified the Orient as a suitable subject for Western domination, the Oriental Other has come to represent the quintessential outsider against whom Western cultural identity is measured:

The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal"...The Oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks (Said, 1979, p. 40, italics in original).

Feminist scholars (e.g. hooks, 2001; Ansari, 2008; Lalvani, 1995) also argue that “Orientalist imaginations are gendered” (Ansari, 2008, p. 51). Women in the developing world, in particular, are entrapped within discourses of Otherness that objectify their bodies as sources of “fantasy, novelty and mystery” (Lalvani, 1995, p. 274) while simultaneously depicting them as “inherently victimized and in need of help” (Ansari, 2008, p. 51). Ansari argues that “Orientalism…invites a material intervention in the form of a humanistic, developmentalist project that celebrates attempts to ‘bring’ modernity to those deemed to live outside of it, while also celebrating the reconstruction of ‘lost’ civilization” (Ansari, 2008, p. 51).

A growing chorus of adoption studies scholars (e.g. Cartwright L. , 2003; Dorow, 2006; George, 2006; Hübinette, 2006; Nelson, 2006) has begun to argue that intercountry adoption practices are deeply embedded in Orientalist ideology. Intercountry adoption has historically been characterized as a “rescue mission” (Hubinette T. , 2006, p. 139) by proponents who argue that it represents the best way to save children in need. Hübinette (2006), however, notes that the vast majority of intercountry adoptions completed during the past 50 years have involved children from countries that “fall under the American sphere of influence and have been exposed to American military intervention, presence, or occupation” (2006, p. 145). Indeed, the political underpinnings of intercountry adoption extend back to the period immediately following World

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War II, when some U.S. families adopted children orphaned by the war in Europe (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, n.d.; Klein, 2003). Later, at the conclusion of the Korean War, Americans began adopting children from South Korea so that in the decade between 1953 and 1963, the vast majority of the nearly 9,000 Asian children adopted by Americans originated in South Korea (Klein, 2003). After the Vietnam War, adoptions from Asia surged again (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, n.d.), facilitated in part by a U.S. government humanitarian program dubbed “Operation Babylift” that transferred hundreds of Amerasian children fathered by U.S. servicemen to adoptive homes in the U.S. (Choy & Choy, 2006). Klein (2003) and Briggs (2003) both note that between 1949 and 1961, intercountry adoption reflected and reinforced American Cold War ideology and U.S. government foreign policy aims. Briggs (2003) notes, for example, that Harry Truman specifically instructed U.S. Army photographers to photograph emaciated children, women, and elderly individuals after the conclusion of World War II in hopes that such images could be used to silence those who opposed U.S. plans to “[provide] food aid to former enemies at a time when the United States was still experiencing shortages” (2003, p. 186). Briggs writes:

Although sending members of the army out to take sentimentalized photos to document the devastation to women and children that they themselves had caused sounds almost like a bad joke, it was a taste of things to come. In the years that followed, Americans became ever more schooled in how to believe that only US intervention could solve the problems that US intervention had wrought (p. 187).

Klein (2003) explains that similar types of images were used at the beginning of the Cold War to justify U.S. intervention in Asia, and intercountry adoption came to represent just the kind of intervention that could satisfy Orientalist notions of Western superiority. By painting American parents as benevolent rescuers of “weak and vulnerable” (2003, p. 176) Asian children, early adoption advocates who promoted Asian adoption in U.S. newspaper and popular magazine
feature stories (Briggs L., 2003) also naturalized “unequal power relations” (Klein, 2003, p. 175) between the U.S. and Asia.

*Orientalist ideology and the American mass media.*

American mass media have historically supported and reinforced Orientalist ideology by using language, images, and highly stylized performances of racial difference to attract audiences. Racial stereotypes are particularly attractive to producers of entertainment media because they provide quick and easy “shortcuts to character development” (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003, p. 65). Thus, early American films that depicted Asian males as devious, cunning and dangerous and Asian women as prostitutes (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003) have given way to present-day television and movie depictions in which “narratives of romance and sexuality...justify white men’s possession of the bodies of [Asian] women of color” (Sun, 2003, p. 659). Advertising similarly relies on racially stereotyped portrayals to promote consumption of commodities (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). Mastro and Stern (2003), for example, discovered distinct differences in the ways Latino/a, Black, Asian, and White characters were portrayed in U.S. prime-time television ads. Western supremacy is likewise produced and reproduced in print and broadcast television news and documentary programming (Gandy, Jr., 1998). Western news programming, for example, appeals to the sensibilities of dominant audience members by “play[ing] down the direct or indirect effects or legacies of Western colonialism, corporate practices, military intervention, international trade, and politics” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 26).

Although more than 250,000 children were adopted from abroad in the years between 1971 and 2001, intercountry adoption was rarely mentioned in the mass media between 1970 and 1990. Radio and television news broadcasts began to address the topic of adoption more
frequently, however, with the next spike in adoptions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, n.d.), which occurred in the mid- to late 1990s. This spike, which saw adoptions of children from outside the U.S. grow from a total of 6,472 children in 1992 (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, n.d.) to 22,990 children in 2004 (Total Adoptions to the United States, n.d.), significantly increased media coverage and public awareness of intercountry adoption. For example, the Hallmark Channel produced and aired a 13-week series of documentary-style programs about adoption in 2002 (Hallmark Does Adoption, 2002) that was the first such series to cover the topic of adoption in depth. Like the feature magazine stories of the 1950s, the Hallmark Channel series gave viewers access to images and perspectives about intercountry adoption that had largely been unavailable to members of the public except through direct contact with an adoptive family. At the same time, however, the series relied heavily on the same types of Orientalist tropes used in other types of media to describe foreign adoptees and privileged the perspectives of American adoptive parents over those of birthparents and the children themselves.

Even when documentary film producers attempt to foreground adoptee perspectives and experiences, Orientalist notions are replicated and reinforced (Choy & Choy, 2006) in mass media depictions of intercountry adoption. For example, Choy and Choy (2006) argue that in the critically-acclaimed 2002 documentary film, *Daughter from Danang*, Orientalist tropes and stereotyped images reinforced Western notions of superiority:

The complex range of [Vietnamese adoptee Heidi Bub’s] emotions upon her return to Vietnam is simplified as a West-meets-East culture clash. Heidi’s voice-overs, inflected with a thick southern accent, strike a sharp contrast to the tinny, ‘Oriental’ music that accompanies virtually every transitional scene to Vietnam. The otherness of Vietnam is magnified by scenes featuring Heidi’s typically American descriptions of the lack of modern toilets, air conditioning, and privacy. She cannot tolerate the spiciness of the food or the pungent smells of the open-air marketplace (2006, p. 229).
Choy and Choy (2006) do note that some adoptee-produced documentary films do a better job of “portraying their subjects—who happen to include the filmmakers themselves—as multidimensional human beings and as agents in the making of their own stories” (p. 229). Nevertheless, they point out that “filmmakers and film cameras do not merely record what ‘really’ happened, but rather participate in constructing the viewer’s understanding” (p. 229, italics in original). In short, journalists and producers, who are constrained by journalistic conventions and marketplace imperatives that privilege dominant social perspectives including Orientalist notions of racial and ethnic difference (van Dijk, 1995), often portray dominant political and cultural identities as “self-evident cultural assumptions” (Lull, 2003), thus naturalizing Orientalist notions of Western power and hegemony.

Commodification.

Another effect of social power imbalances occurs when the bodies of members of particular social groups are assigned differing social value on the basis of such factors as race, gender, or sexual orientation in a process known as commodification. Again, the general concept of the commodity can be traced back to Marx (1973), who defined commodities as objects produced through human labor to "[satisfy] human wants of some sort or another" (1906/1915, p. 41). Marx argued that commodities are "transformed" (Marx, 1973, p. 142) in the process of exchange so that their value is no longer the simple sum of the value of the labor required to produce them plus the value of the raw materials from which they are crafted. Instead, through exchange, commodities become an "abstraction from the matter they are composed of and all their natural qualities" (p. 142), with the result that "the social connection between persons is transformed into a social relation between things" (p. 157). Poster (1984) explains,

Commodities [were] a source of concern to Marx because human properties are invested in things, or become fetishized. The object appears to be the subject. But what is worse is
that the reverse is also true: the subject appears to be the object. Labor itself becomes a commodity, a thing. Just as there is, under capitalism, a market for soy beans, so there is a market for soy bean pickers. Work is subject to the double character that all commodities have: it has a use value and an exchange value. As a consequence, human qualities are evaluated in the same terms that one uses to evaluate things (1984, p. 50).

Although Marx did note, in passing, that humans become commodities in the slave trade due to their role as “instruments of production” (Marx, 1973, p. 166), Appadurai (1986) moved beyond the "production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity" (1986, p. 13) when he argued that objects and individuals may more properly be understood to "[move] in and out of the commodity state" (p. 13) at different times and in differing contexts. "The commodity situation in the social life of any 'thing,'" wrote Appadurai, "[should] be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability...for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (p. 13). Thus, he argued, some items not commonly thought of as commodities may, at times, be treated as commodities. For example, he noted that women's bodies develop "exchange values" (p. 15) during marriage contract negotiations in some cultures.

Appadurai (1986) also differentiated between ordinary commodities and luxury goods. He defined as luxury goods those items "whose principal use is rhetorical and social" (1986, p. 38) rather than merely functional. Luxury goods are characterized by the following features:

(1) restriction, either by price or by law, to elites; (2) complexity of acquisition, which may or may not be a function of real 'scarcity'; (3) semiotic virtuosity, that is, the capacity to signal fairly complex social messages... (4) specialized knowledge as a prerequisite for their 'appropriate' consumption...and (5) a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person, and personality (1986, p. 38).

By “looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things” (Appadurai, 1986, p. 13), Appadurai opened the door for scholars to expand the notion of the commodity to include not only things, but also ideas and even people. bell hooks (2001), for example, has argued that
ethnicity and race have been commodified by Western elites, who exploit members of socially marginalized groups:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other (2001, p. 367).

One way in which dominant Westerners may (re)produce their power over racially-different others is through intercountry adoption. The explicit link between adoption and the commodification of orphaned children has been clearly developed by Zelizer (1985), who traced the historical trajectory of domestic adoption from its inception as a practice designed to move potentially useful but relatively low-value orphaned children into families where they could contribute to the adoptive family’s economic survival, to a period in which adoption was “sentimentalized” (1985, p. 201) so that children were no longer adopted for their capacity to contribute to the family’s economic base. Instead, children came to be valued so highly as to be seen as “priceless” (p. 198) because of the emotional benefits that families could gain by adopting a child. This focus on emotional benefits led to “an unprecedented demand for children under three, especially for infants” (p. 192) and it also created a heightened demand for girls over boys and for blue-eyed children over dark-eyed ones that was reflected in a growing black market in which adopters paid hefty sums for suitable white infants. Still, Zelizer, notes, ...

…scarcity alone cannot determine value. A reduced supply raised the price of babies only because there was a growing number of enthusiastic buyers for white, healthy infants. The market exploited, but did not create the infatuation with priceless babies. In sharp contrast, older children found few customers. Deprived of their former labor value, they were excluded from the new emotional market. Therefore, while the agencies’ waiting lists for babies had the names of hundreds of impatient parents, it was virtually impossible to find homes for children older than six, who had become both economically and sentimentally ‘useless’ (p. 200).
Interestingly, Zelizer notes that public outcry over the growing black market in babies led to the passage of laws that made it illegal to receive payment for placing children for adoption, although the payment of “professional fees” (p. 203) for adoption-related services was allowed.

Today, most U.S. adoption agencies operate as non-profit institutions, although domestic adoptions, particularly adoptions of children from the foster care system, are administered in many cases by state agencies. While the children offered by private and public adoption agencies are not individually priced, so-called “program fees” vary. Thus, in a study of U.S. adoption agency websites, Quiroz (2007) found that orphaned children were “categorized, labeled, described, and priced along racial lines” (2007, p. 50), with agencies grouping children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds into different “programs” at varying fee levels. Quiroz noted that African-American and mixed-black children consistently appeared at the bottom of the social value hierarchy, while White infants were at the top and Latino and non-black mixed-race children fell in the middle. Park Nelson (2006) explained that racial stratification is also a major feature of intercountry adoption because the relatively high cost adoption “encourages the marketplace behavior of parents and the treatment of children like merchandise” (Park Nelson, 2006, p. 100). In a sense, parents involved in intercountry adoption “shop” (p. 100) for foreign children who represent the commodities in the “international marketplace” (p. 89).

Like any other commodity, orphaned children are “marketed” in various ways by adoption agencies and facilitators (Freundlich, 2000). Photos and descriptions of older, special needs children are sometimes featured in local news programs or on child welfare agency websites “in an attempt to personalize children in foster care in the hope of attracting adoptive parents who otherwise may not act upon an interest in adopting” (Freundlich, 2000, p. 109). Although most intercountry adoption agencies no longer post photos of specific children
available for adoption on agency web sites, they typically do list “the types of children which the agency places for adoption…by race and/or gender [along with] the fees charged for each such group” (p. 112). Adoption agencies also advertise their services in other types of media, including print magazines, outdoor ads, and yellow pages listings. Freundlich (2000) conducted a review of ads appearing in Adoptive Families magazine in 1998 and 1999 in which she notes that most such ads were placed by agencies specializing in intercountry adoption. She found that ads often included references to the specific geographic locations in which the agencies worked. Ads that included images of children often featured captions that reinforced Orientalist stereotypes (e.g. “China dolls”) (p. 116). Although some agency ads used child-centered logos and slogans, others use slogans and logos that appeared to have been designed to “respond to adult frustrations and desires” (p. 117). In general, Freundlich concluded,

…some agencies professionally presented information that conveyed a commitment to quality services for children and families. By contrast, however, the advertising of others—with the selected logos, pictures, and tag lines—conveyed a decidedly different message, ranging from pandering to paternalistic. In a disturbing number of cases, there was a marked consumer-oriented flavor in which children were glowingly presented as highly desirable products for ‘buying’ customers (p. 117).

In short, when adoption agencies advertise their services, they often present orphaned children as products, rather than as people.

Western colonial power and White privilege are also reflected in discourses of “color-blind individualism” that are sometimes used by adoption agencies and other advocates (Quiroz, 2007). Indeed, Quiroz (2007) notes that some adoption supporters have attempted to discount the importance of race in adoption with the audacious suggestion that “racism can be eradicated through transracial and transnational adoption” (2007, p. 18, italics added). However, notions of racial difference are not eradicated when White parents adopt children of color. If anything, racial difference becomes even more transparent. Volkman (2003), for example, notes,
A recurrent theme in the adoption world is how to respond to racist, rude, ridiculous, or simply awkward questions from strangers (or sometimes from friends and relatives). These typically occur in public venues, like grocery checkout lines. 'Is she yours? Is she real? Is she natural? Where did you get her? How much did she cost? Are they really sisters? In China they don't like girls, do they?' One list member reported a colleague's remark: 'What a lovely baby, it's just too bad she's a communist' (2003, p. 36).

In an effort to avoid the politically-objectionable social construction of race, some adoption advocates use politically-neutral terms like culture or ethnicity to allude to difference. One reading of the word 'culture' in intercountry adoption was offered by Park Nelson (2006), who argued that adoptive parents typically express a particular interested in the “cultural enrichment” (2006, p. 93) they expect to obtain by bringing a child from another country into their home and family. For these adoptive parents, "culture" represents a particular type of commodity that can only be obtained by adopting a child from a foreign country (Park Nelson, 2006).

*Intercountry Adoption Research*

Although adoption of non-biologically-related children has a long history, scholars have only recently become interested in the study of adoption (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Adoption research has also taken different trajectories in different academic fields. In the field of psychology, for example, researchers have focused their attention on the relationships between adoption and behavior, including deviant behavior, adoptee resilience, and family dynamics and adjustment (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Some of this research (e.g. Colvert, et al., 2008; Gunnar, van Dulmen, & International Adoption Project Team, 2007) has focused specifically on internationally-adopted children. Another approach has been taken by sociologists and child welfare specialists who have conducted longitudinal studies of adoptees (Verhulst, 2000; Hoopes, 1982) and others who have studied a variety of problematic issues in adoption policy (e.g. Dickens, 2009; Bunkers, Groza, & Lauer, 2009; Smolin., 2006; Fieweger, 1991; Quiroz, June 2007) in an effort to inform child welfare practice. Researchers have worked to provide
information to help adoptees and families address challenges associated with post-adoption adjustment, including attachment (Gray, 2002; Stams, Juffer, & Van IJzendoorn, 2002), post-institutional effects (Wilson S. L., 2003; Rutter, et al., 2009), and identity development of adoptees (Hubinette T., 2004; Suter, 2008). In the field of anthropology, a number of scholars including Volkman (2006), Dorow (2006), Yngvesson (2006), Cartwright (2005), and Briggs (2007) have explored the intersections of intercountry adoption and culture. Other researchers have attempted to contextualize modern adoption practices by providing accounts of the historical antecedents of modern adoption practice (e.g. Kahan, 2006; Hajto, 2009) and accounts of changes in international adoption law and policy (e.g. Selman, 2002; Heimerle, 2004). While most of this research has been conducted by “white adoptive parent[s] of children of color or…social worker[s] involved in the adoption industry” (Oparah, Shin, & Trenka, 2006, p. 3), a recent development is the rise in “adoptee-generated research and cultural production” (Choy & Choy, 2006, p. 222) sometimes referred to as “adoption studies” (Choy & Choy, 2006, p. 222) research. Like critical research in communication and other fields, adoption studies researchers seek to challenge hidden power relations in society, particularly as they impact the social identities of foreign children who have been adopted into Western families. While the vast majority of adoption studies work reflects the perspectives of adoptees, many of whom were adopted across racial as well as national boundaries, a few non-adoptee researchers, including Cartwright (2003), Briggs (2006) and Dorow (2006), have also taken a critical approach to the study of adoption.

From Theory to Praxis: Engaging Communication Studies and Adoption Studies

The previous discussion has provided a general review of the history of critical theory and explained how communication is implicated in social processes of oppression and in the
social subjugation of socially and economically powerless individuals and groups by socially powerful and wealthy ones. Although scholars have used many different theoretical constructs to explain how individuals and groups can be marginalized through discourse, I believe the theory of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure, as conceptualized by Deetz (1992), offers a particularly useful framework for studying public adoption discourse in the mass media. Not only have communication scholars begun to call for more nuanced explorations of adoption, identity, and communication (Galvin, 2003), but adoptees themselves have begun to argue that early adoptee studies elevated the priorities and perspectives of adopting parents and so-called adoption “professionals” over the perspectives and concerns of the thousands upon thousands of orphaned children whose lives have been inescapably changed by the practice of intercountry adoption. While adoption studies scholarship has begun to illuminate some of the less palatable dimensions of intercountry adoption practice, such as, for example, the fact that intercountry adoption has historically been associated with Western empire building and military force (Hubinette T., 2006), few scholars, outside of Quiroz (2007); McIlvenny and Raudaskoski (2005); Cartwright (2005; 2003); Briggs (2003); Choy and Choy (2006); and Kline, Chatterjee, and Karel (2009) have focused specific attention on the question of how orphans are depicted in the mass media. Of these, none have explored the question from a communication theory perspective, and only Quiroz (2007) and McIlvenny and Raudaskoski (2005) have specifically examined Internet depictions of orphaned children. However, neither of these studies addressed the specific questions that I address in this study: Quiroz (2007) focused her attention on the ways in which colorblind depictions of race functioned to commodify children in domestic adoption agency websites (although she did concede that a similar phenomenon appeared to operate in intercountry adoption agency websites,) while McIlvenny and Raudaskoski (2005)
examined websites produced by prospective adoptive parents to determine how parents use such websites to manage “their experience of the lengthy adoption process” (McIlvenny & Raudaskoski, 2005, p. 71, *italics added*). In addition, although Briggs (2003) and Cartwright (2003; 2005) both explored visual representations of orphaned children, neither examined the interplay between textual and image-based depictions. In short, to my knowledge, no research has yet been done to systematically study intercountry adoption provider websites to determine whether and if so, how orphaned children are discursively commodified in such websites. I fill the gap with this study.
Chapter 3: Method

Modern scholars use a fairly wide range of methodologies when conducting communication research. Muller and Craig (2007) suggest that this is partly due to the ubiquitous nature of human communication and partly due to the fact that scholars have applied the theoretical and methodological perspectives of a variety of academic disciplines, including rhetoric, social psychology, and semiotics, among others, to the study of communication. The resulting multiplicity of theoretical and methodological perspectives taken by scholars in the field of communication allows a great deal of latitude when selecting a specific method for any particular study (Muller & Craig, 2007). While communication scholars may therefore choose from among a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research methods when conducting research (Craig, 2007), those who choose qualitative research methods do so in an effort “to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18).

In the same way, intercultural communication researchers have approached the study of communication among, between, and about individuals of different cultural groups from a variety of theoretical viewpoints (Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida, & Ogawa, 2005) using a broad range of quantitative and quantitative research methods. Indeed, intercultural communication researchers often approach similar issues and topics from very different, yet complementary perspectives. For example, Oetzel's (2005) effective intercultural workgroup communication theory was developed through multiple quantitative studies examining the effects of diversity on decision-making processes in small groups and workgroups. At the same time, Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, and Ginossar (2004) used qualitative interviews and muted group theory to identify and explain employee perceptions of "organizational injustice or mistreatment" (2004, p.
10) in a culturally-diverse business environment. Thus, although Gudykunst (2005) claims that "the vast majority of [intercultural and cross-cultural communication] theories proposed to date are objectivistic in nature" (2005, p. 25), it is also true that communication researchers have successfully used qualitative research methods to study the relationships between communication and culture. Indeed, Philipson and Carbaugh (1986) identified more than 200 scholarly articles reporting the results of qualitative ethnographic studies of communication among cultural groups in the U.S. and abroad. These included Philipson's (1975) seminal ethnographic study of communication patterns among males in a predominantly blue-collar south-side Chicago neighborhood that he dubbed "Teamsterville," Basso's (1970) research highlighting the role of silence in Western Apache culture, and Katriel's (1985) study of so-called "griping" (1985, p. 99) behavior among middle-class Israelis. More recently, Martin and Nakayama (1999) have noted that intercultural communication and mass media researchers are increasingly open to the use of qualitative research methods and that communication scholars are also becoming more comfortable incorporating feminist, rhetorical, critical, and dialectical theories into their research on communication, conflict, and culture.

Traditional qualitative methods include participant observation, interpersonal interviews, focus groups, case studies, and ethnography (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Lindlof and Taylor (2002), however, insist that qualitative research has "no particular defining method" (2002, p. 18). Instead, they note that qualitative research approaches are generally characterized by the meticulous accounts of human interaction and "intimate knowledge of situated practice" (2002, p. 28) that they produce. Qualitative researchers often develop "grounded theory" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1) by using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, in which data are grouped, labeled, categorized, and organized, until theory emerges. This inductive
method of theory development makes qualitative research especially useful for scholars who wish to conduct exploratory research on “questions about culture, interpretation, and power” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18).

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Multimodal critical discourse analysis is a qualitative research methodology that has been used by scholars to analyze communication content on the World Wide Web (Lemke, 2002; Anderson, Streelasky, & Anderson, 2007; Scollon & Levine, 2004). Multimodal critical discourse analysis is a relatively new extension of critical discourse analysis, which, in turn, has been called "one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Although critical discourse analysis has been referred to as both a theory and a method (Fairclough, 2001), its use as a research methodology has been complicated by the vast array of "theoretical positions" (Meyer, 2001, p. 20) that have been taken by researchers who have used a wide range of analytical methods under the critical discourse analysis appellation.

As a result, scholars who use critical discourse analysis methods to study social phenomena may apply vastly different criteria when making methodological decisions, particularly with regard to the size and scope of their studies (Wodak, 2001) and the selection of texts and specific procedures to be used during data analysis (Meyer, 2001). Thus, in reviewing the range of scholarly activities that fall under the banner of critical discourse analysis, Meyer (2001) has concluded that critical discourse analysis "must not be understood as a single method but rather as an approach, which constitutes itself at different levels" (2001, p. 14). Even the acknowledged experts in the field take widely varying approaches: van Dijk (1983; 1985; 1995; 2001; 2003), for example, has used critical discourse analysis to expose how news media reports reproduce the racist views of social elites against ethnic minorities in news reports and that prejudices
expressed in news reports are also present in “conversation, everyday stories…textbooks, parliamentary debates, corporate discourse and scholarly text and talk” (van Dijk, 2003, p. 361). In contrast, Fairclough (1993), who argued that language is “socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or constitutive” (1993, p. 134), has focused attention on “relationships between sociocultural change and discursive change” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 264). His analysis of university promotional materials, for example, clearly illuminates how materials that were explicitly designed to “‘sell’ the university and its courses to potential applicants” (p. 156), produced fundamental changes in university and faculty identities and “a corresponding decline in the …authority of the institution over its applicants, potential students, and potential staff” (p. 157). Varying approaches to critical discourse analysis have also been used to address social problems related to gender (Lazar, 2000), anti-semitism (Wokak, 1991), and medical practice (Wodak, 1997).

Although a single, comprehensive method of critical discourse analysis does not exist, scholarly work using critical discourse analysis generally exhibits the following characteristics: i) a strong focus on theory; ii) an interdisciplinary theoretical approach; iii) an explicit focus on social justice and advocacy; iv) prioritization of language as a key unit of study tempered by the recognition that language cannot be divorced from the social context(s) in which it is embedded; and, v) the inclusion of historical and cultural context as a key component in analysis (Meyer, 2001). Given that critical discourse analysis theory originated in the field of linguistics (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000), many of its most prominent scholars, including Fairclough (1992), Wodak (2001), and van Dijk (2001), also insist that critical discourse analysis requires the application of at least some level of "linguistic expertise" (Meyer, 2001, p. 30) during the analytical process. However, after Kress (1993) and van Leeuwen (1993) extended the critical
discourse analysis notion of text (which Fairclough [1992] had initially used to refer primarily although not exclusively to spoken or written language,) to include and at times even to prioritize non-linguistic semiotic elements, researchers began to use critical discourse analysis methods to examine a much wider range of linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic components in a practice known as multimodal critical discourse analysis. Researchers have used multimodal critical discourse analysis, for example, to examine how photographs and other graphic elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Iedema, 2003), children's toys (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2009), political cartoons (Mazid, 2008), and even music (Thompson, 2002) are used by social actors to construct and contest dominant social meanings. By linking the key principles of critical discourse analysis with social semiotics theory, researchers outside the specialty field of linguistics now have a valuable theoretical and methodological tool to help them better understand how language and other types of semiotic signs are used together to construct, express, and challenge social power.

Rationale for the Selection of a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

I believe multimodal critical discourse analysis represents the most appropriate approach for my study of intercountry adoption discourse for three reasons. First, multimodal critical discourse analysis allows for a more complete and nuanced exploration of the multiplicity of written texts and non-linguistic elements that are superimposed upon and even embedded within one another in the increasingly media-rich environment of the World Wide Web (Scollon & Levine, 2004). The intercountry adoption industry websites that I analyze in this study, which are produced and maintained by a number of unrelated individuals working in a variety of government, non-profit, and for-profit organizations, offer up a mélange of language-based texts, photographs, videos, and other graphic elements to entice website visitors to consider adopting a child from a foreign country. A multimodal critical discourse analysis approach has enabled me
to unpack how these linguistic and visual elements work, individually and collectively, to construct orphaned children and the practice of intercountry adoption in website texts.

Second, multimodal critical discourse analysis is also an excellent method for the study of systematically distorted communication. Although it might be possible, for example, to use a quantitative method such as content analysis to accurately determine the number of times particular linguistic or semiotic signs are used in intercountry adoption websites, such an analysis would provide no opportunity to explore the relationships between these communicative elements and the social practices they may signify, reify, or challenge. Nor would a content analysis method enable me to adequately explain how language and other sign systems facilitate particular types of social action. Likewise, one could conduct a purely semiotic analysis of intercountry adoption websites in hopes of understanding how orphaned children are constructed through the particular set of sign systems that are commonly used in intercountry adoption websites. However, since the goal of semiotic analysis is to understand how the structure of language and other signs reflect social practice (Manning, 1987), and since Altheide (1996) further points out that Semioticians tend to focus on the examination of single documents rather than larger collections of material (1996), a purely semiotic analysis method would also prove inadequate to address the specific research questions I ask in this study. Such a semiotic approach would be appropriate if the research questions pertained to the development of a set of rules to account for the particular ways people use language and other semiotic signs to communicate about intercountry adoption or the particular ways adoptive families use language to communicate important ideas about adoption. However, these are not the goals of the present study. Instead, my purpose is to determine whether participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system use systematically distorted communication to discursively construct orphaned foreign
children and the practice of intercountry adoption in potentially damaging ways, and if so, to illuminate how these discursive constructions may be supporting capitalist ideology, social inequity, and governmental encroachment into the private lives of children and families.

This leads to the third reason for my contention that multimodal critical discourse analysis is the best methodological approach for this study. Critical discourse analysis, in general, takes as a common point of departure a particular social problem, the discursive roots of which are then analyzed in hopes of developing a better understanding of and possible solutions to problematic social practices (Wodak, 2001). In taking a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach, I will be able to honor my personal commitment to social justice and advocacy for all orphaned children. As a critical scholar, I identify strongly with this 'critical' component of multimodal critical discourse analysis; it is my goal in the present study not only to uncover hidden power relationships in intercountry adoption, but also to "derive results which are of practical relevance" (Meyer, 2001, p. 15). It is my hope that the results of this study will prove useful for those who are responsible for developing future U.S. intercountry adoption policy and thus for the children they have the potential to serve.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis Approach**

The greatest strength of the multimodal critical discourse analysis approach, in my opinion, is the opportunity it affords researchers to systematically explore how words work together with images and other non-verbal elements to create and challenge social meanings and structures. The turn to a multimodal focus in critical discourse analysis is essential at this particular moment in history, as

…our semiotic landscape is becoming more and more populated with complex social and cultural discourse practices. Here, the influence of electronic communication, the globalization of trade and commerce, and the increasingly political–cultural mix of the
countries in which we live mark important facets of this changing landscape (Iedema, 2003, p. 33).

In other words, multimodal critical discourse analysis may be thought of as a premier research methodology for the Internet Age. The complexities of postmodern society demand complex analysis; multimodal critical discourse analysis allows researchers to account for complexity in their analyses of social experience. Indeed, failure to address the roles of both verbal and non-verbal semiotic elements within the media-rich environment of the World Wide Web will be likely to result in the development of incomplete results, at best, and inaccurate conclusions, at worst. Since an important goal for the present study is to produce results that can be used by child advocates to influence local, national, and international adoption practice and policy, there is no room for partial or erroneous results--children's lives and welfare may be at stake!

Additional strengths of the multimodal critical discourse analysis approach derive from its grounding in the by-now well-established theoretical field of critical discourse analysis. A key benefit of critical discourse analysis, in general, is its theoretical flexibility: Although a hallmark of critical discourse analysis is its strong application of theory (Meyer, 2001), the focus is not on any one particular theory. Thus, critical discourse analysts have combined theoretical strands originating in the work of Foucault (1993/1972), Habermas (1984), Deetz (1992), and Stuart Hall (1985), among others, to explain relationships between discourse and social structure. A multimodal critical discourse analysis approach can easily accommodate Deetz' (1992) theory of systematically distorted communication in addition to Foucault's (1993/1972) theoretical notions of discourse and power, Appadurai's (1986) conceptualization of the commodity potential of things (and people) in society, and even Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, in which society at large is understood to consist of interlocking “intersocietal systems” (1984, p. 164) within which situated human beings “draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts” (p. 25)
to produce and reproduce social life through “interaction” (p. 28). Structuration theory is relevant to the present study since the intercountry adoption industry may likewise be conceptualized as a set of interlocking social systems including state, national, and foreign legal systems, child welfare systems, and nonprofit humanitarian aid systems, to name a few, within which human agents interact. Although structuration theory stipulates that human agents

…always know what they are doing on the level of discursive consciousness under some description, …what they do may be quite unfamiliar under other descriptions, and they may know little of the ramified consequences of the activities in which they engage (p. 26).

In short, due to its practical and theoretical grounding in critical discourse analysis, a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach is able to accommodate an eclectic admixture of theoretical perspectives. In this study, I also propose to add the theoretical perspectives of adoption studies scholars to the theoretical mix.

Another important strength of the critical discourse analysis approach is its claim that "all discourses are historical and can therefore only be understood with reference to their context" (Meyer, 2001, p. 15). Discourse does not simply occur or appear in a vacuum; it constructs and is constructed by individuals occupying different positions in the social structure at specific points in history. The historical roots of intercountry adoption reach into a number of deeply disturbing social practices including, for example, the Atlantic slave trade and the eugenics-inspired adoptions of Native American children into White families in the U.S. (Hübinette, 2006). They also call upon longstanding cultural stereotypes such as those that paint Chinese children as having "a reliable and contained kind of difference with which...parents...can...proudly identify and be identified" (Dorow, 2006, p. 44). Thus, no study of intercountry adoption discourse would be complete without considering such "extralinguistic factors" (Meyer, 2001, p. 15).
Although I have argued that a multimodal critical discourse analysis method is well-suited for the proposed study, the method does present three important challenges. The first challenge is associated with the "general fuzziness" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 455) of critical discourse analysis theory in general. Indeed, Widdowson (1995) has argued that key concepts in critical discourse analysis have been inadequately theorized; even the term discourse, he claims, is "something everybody is talking about but without knowing with any certainty just what it is: in vogue and vague" (1995, p. 158). Indeed, Fairclough (2001) refers to critical discourse analysis as both a method and a theory, while van Dijk (2001) has argued that critical discourse analysis "is not a method" (2001, p. 96) --in his contribution to an edited volume on critical discourse analysis methods! To address this challenge, I have endeavored here to clearly explicate how the terminology I use in my discussion of intercountry adoption discourse is informed by theory, while also describing, as clearly as possible, the process that I followed in conducting my study. In using the discourse-historical approach or method for analysis as outlined by Wodak (2001), I began by developing an understanding of the historical background of the social practice of intercountry adoption. Second, I identified general topics of public discourse surrounding intercountry adoption. I identified the Internet as a key location in which public discourse surrounding the practice of intercountry adoption occurs and found that three topics were repeatedly addressed in intercountry adoption industry websites: 1) the “problem” of orphaned children, 2) the practice of intercountry adoption as a solution to this problem, and 3) the steps in the adoption process. I formulated precise research questions to address the specific problem being investigated using the previously-specified theoretical position. Fourth, I began my analysis using the "linguistic categories" (2001, p. 93) of systematically distorted communication, which I "[applied] sequentially on to the text while using theoretical approaches
to interpret...meanings" (p. 93). I also created a diagram in which I graphically represented key relationships between the topics, context(s) and discourses under analysis. Finally, I developed an "extensive interpretation" (p. 93) of the discursive strategies by which orphaned children and the intercountry adoption industry were constructed via systematically distorted communication.

A second shortcoming of critical discourse analysis has also been raised by Widdowson (1995), who has argued that the explicit political orientation taken by critical discourse analysts may lead researchers to inappropriately "[converge] on a particular meaning as having some kind of privileged validity" (p. 159). A tendency toward ideological interpretation may lead to "questions about representation (can analysts speak for the average consumer of texts?), selectivity, partiality, and prejudice" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 455), as texts are assumed to have ideological meanings that are hidden from ordinary readers. The risk of potential bias rises dramatically when one considers that most critical discourse analysis research is based on what Meyer (2001) refers to as "typical texts" (2001, p. 18). Indeed, van Dijk (2001) argues that "complete discourse analysis of a large corpus of text or talk, is...totally out of the question" since "a 'full' analysis of [even] a short passage might take months and fill hundreds of pages" (2001, p. 99). The paradox is that "complete" analysis requires the selection of "representative passages" while the selection of "representative passages" may lead to charges of bias. Fortunately, Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach also offers a strategy for overcoming this problem. Following the discourse-historical approach, I was careful to collect a robust purposive sample of websites that represented the most frequently-accessed intercountry adoption websites available on the World Wide Web. Next, I searched my sample of websites to identify as many exemplars as possible of each of the eight categories of systematically distorted
communication, which served as the "linguistic categories" (Wodak, 2001, p. 93) to be analyzed. Finally, I conducted a detailed analysis of representative exemplars identified in each category.

My dual positions as adoptive parent and scholar have also afforded me a unique vantage point from which to address questions of representation and selectivity for this proposed study. I believe I can speak for prospective adoptive parents who read intercountry adoption website texts with limited critical appreciation of the social power structures that underlie the intercountry adoption industry, since thirteen years ago I was just such a parent. Today, however, I also have access to the analytical tools necessary to not only uncover the somewhat discomfiting ideological implications of intercountry adoption, but more importantly, to address the power imbalances that perpetuate social inequity in the U.S. and abroad.

Another charge against the critical discourse analysis approach has been leveled by scholars who question "the use of context in some CDA work as narrative and backgrounding and who [note] the 'uncritical' acceptance of particular representations of history and social reality as 'background facts' in analyses" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 456). Although Fairclough (1992) claimed to follow Foucault (1980) in using the word "context" to refer both to "the social situation in which [a statement] occurs" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 47) and to "[a statement's] position in relation to other statements which precede and follow it" (p. 47), Wodak (2001) concedes that since "the notion of 'context'...is often defined very broadly or very narrowly" (2001, p. 12), more work is needed to theorize how the term should be used. In the present study, I address the problem of context and contextualization (a) by incorporating only such representations of historical context as can be independently verified in my discussion of the larger socio-historical context of intercountry adoption; (b) by developing a clear characterization of the structural features of various types of intercountry adoption web sites; and
(c) by considering the proximity of non-linguistic (visual) and language-based elements of texts when conducting my analysis.

The final challenge to my selection of a multimodal critical discourse analysis method derives from general claims that qualitative research is neither scientifically rigorous nor objective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As a qualitative method, critical discourse analysis could indeed be subject to such claims. Fairclough and Wodak (1997), however, contend that

...[critical discourse analysis] is not an exception to the normal objectivity of social science: social science is inherently tied into politics and formulations of policy...this does not imply that CDA is less scholarly than other research: standards of careful, rigorous and systematic analysis apply with equal force to CDA as to other approaches (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 259).

In other words, Fairclough and Wodak claim that scholars who engage in critical discourse analysis are simply committed to discursive reflexivity: they make their political and social positions explicit rather than keeping them hidden. While discursive reflexivity is an important hallmark of critical discourse analysis, it does not substitute for scrupulous attention to detail and complete analysis. Therefore, I will now turn to the task of describing the specific procedures I used for data collection, operationalization, and analysis, and address steps I have taken to ensure the quality of my results.

Population and Sampling

In the sixteen years since representatives from 66 countries met in The Hague to draft the Hague Convention in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, the Internet and other forms of new media have become available to increasing numbers of prospective adoptive parents (Volkman, 2003). The Internet has also become a major means by which international adoption agencies promote their services and communicate with clients across the country (Quiroz, 2007). This is so for three primary reasons: First, the World Wide Web serves as a massive repository of all
kinds of knowledge and information, including information about intercountry adoption. A simple Google Search using the words "intercountry adoption," for example, yielded an estimated total of 175,000 web page results in early May, 2010, while a second search using the more general term "international adoption" yielded a staggering 9.8 million web page results or 'hits' on the same day. Even if only a very small portion of these websites is actually sponsored by intercountry adoption industry participants, one would be hard-pressed to find a greater number of documents referencing intercountry adoption in even the most extensive of traditional library holdings.

Second, although no studies exist that can substantiate the exact numbers of U.S. families and individuals that use the Internet to obtain information about intercountry adoption, Quiroz (2007) points out that "prior assessments of the population of Internet users suggest a correlation between adoptive parents in chat rooms and the larger adoptive parent population captured in traditional social science surveys: predominantly white, well-educated, and middle- to upper-middle class" (2007, p. 11). Finally, the rise in the total number of Internet users from less than 40 percent of the U.S. population in 1997 to nearly 75 percent of the population in 2010 (Rainie, 2010) mirrors the rise in total intercountry adoptions from a total of 7,093 in 1990 to a record 22,990 in 2004 (n.a., Total Adoptions to the United States, n.d.).

My personal search for adoption information appears, therefore, to have been fairly typical, as I obtained most of my information about the intercountry adoption process on the World Wide Web. Even back in 1997, when I first began to explore the option of adopting, the amount of adoption information available to me through Internet sources dwarfed the amount of information that was available through books, magazines, and other sources. My choice to sign a contract with an agency located some 3,000 miles away from my home rather than an agency in
a nearby city was also due to my agency’s ability to provide up-to-date adoption information, online document delivery, near-instantaneous e-mail communication, and an opportunity to connect with other parents through a private listserv group, all via the World Wide Web. As a result, I believe the World Wide Web's role as an important source of intercountry adoption information and services provides fair justification for my selection of intercountry adoption websites as the population for this study.

While random sampling is recognized as the most appropriate sampling method in most experimental research, random probability sampling is rarely used in qualitative research studies. Instead, qualitative researchers frequently use purposive sampling techniques to identify and then select a sample with a clearly specified set of theoretically-informed qualifications (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). One such type of purposive sampling technique is theoretical construct sampling, in which "persons, activities, events, or settings can be selected according to the criteria of key constructs" (2002, p. 126). Since my goal was to investigate the extent, if any, to which the U.S. intercountry adoption industry uses systematically distorted communication to discursively construct foreign orphans and the practice of intercountry adoption, and since literally millions of websites may exist that refer in some way to the practice of intercountry adoption, it was important to choose a sampling method that would allow me to identify and select a sample of websites that are likely to impact a sufficient number of individuals to have substantial ideological effects on society. I believe the most frequently visited websites are most likely to have the greatest potential to impact social understandings about intercountry adoption by virtue of the fact that these websites are the most likely to have been viewed by the greatest number of prospective adoptive parents.
I therefore employed the following purposive sampling strategy: I used the four most prominent Internet search engines, (Ask Jeeves, Google, Bing [formerly MSN search.] and Yahoo!) to identify the websites that were returned using the search terms adoption and intercountry; adoption and international; adoption and foreign, and adoption and transnational. I selected these search terms since they currently represent the most common ways of referring to the practice of adopting one or more children from a foreign country. Although the term 'transracial adoption' is also sometimes used to refer to the practice of adopting children of a different race who may have been born in a foreign country, I did not include this term in my search since the term is more often used to refer to cross-racial domestic adoption. My decision to use more than one search engine reflects scholarship that indicates a lack of overlap in Web search results such that a search using particular term in one search engine will tend to return different results than a search using the same term in another search engine (Spink, Jansen, Blakely, & Koshman, 2006). By using the Ask Jeeves, Google, Bing (formerly MSN Search) and Yahoo! search engines together, my results should be consistent with "89.3% of all Web searches conducted in the United States" (2006, p. 1381). I identified specific websites for my sample by visiting each of the four search engines in turn and then entering the search terms previously identified (adoption and intercountry; adoption and international; adoption and foreign, and adoption and transnational). Next, I made an electronic copy of all of the website addresses that appeared in the first two pages of search results provided by each search engine for each of my search terms. This plan was based on the results of experimental research by Jansen, Spink, and Koshman (2007), who found that 85 percent of participants in a study of Internet search behavior viewed only the first one or two pages of search engine results before they modified their search or ended their search session altogether. Although each of the search
engines also identified additional search terms that could be related to my topic, I did not include these links in my initial dataset because each of the excluded links redirected viewers to a new page of search results rather than to a specific web page associated with the suggested search term. I did, however, include advertiser-sponsored links since each of these links pointed directly to an intercountry adoption agency or advocacy organization-sponsored web page. My decision to limit the current study to individual web pages returned in the initial search, rather than to attempt to examine complete web sites, reflects both the difficulty of identifying website boundaries with exactitude (Crowston & Williams, 2000), and the fact that search engines such as Google “rank and display search results by taking into account the similarity of a web site’s content to the users’ query” (Dou, Lim, Su, Zhou, & Cui, 2010, p. 263), as well as the “absolute authority of the pages themselves” (Gori & Witten, 2005). Authority is measured by the number of relevant, “high-quality web sites” (Dou, Lim, Su, Zhou, & Cui, 2010, p. 263) that link to the page in question. Thus, by using simple, two-word search terms, I avoided imposing unnecessary limitations on potential search results, while at the same time identifying a sample of web pages that were also likely to be linked to a relatively large number of credible websites containing intercountry adoption-related information. This initial search yielded a total of 577 web page links.

After I compiled an initial list of web page addresses using the method explained above, I identified and eliminated 395 duplicate web page URLs, leaving 182 web page links for analysis. Next, I eliminated from consideration 26 links to web pages about intercountry adoptions in countries outside the U.S. I also eliminated eight web pages in the sample in which the search term ‘adoption’ was used in contexts unrelated to intercountry child adoption. Next, I eliminated links to 18 books, journal articles and abstracts that could only be accessed through subscription
or purchase. I also eliminated four links to web pages sponsored by researchers soliciting participants for statistical or academic studies and three links to web pages promoting academic conferences and events on intercountry adoption. I eliminated 16 media web pages that were not sponsored by mainstream media outlets. These included two articles in university-sponsored publications, nine private blog postings by adult adoptees, adoptive parents, or related family members, one Wikipedia post for which author and source information was unavailable, three articles in online-only e-zine websites, and one response to a Yahoo! Answers search. I eliminated nine additional links including one to a web page explaining adoption tax benefits where the focus was clearly on taxes rather than adoption; one to a web page soliciting donations to be used to benefit orphanages in Mexico; links to three law websites including one that explained post-adoption processes for readopting children, a second that outlined the citizenship status of foreign adoptees, and a third that described methods to obtain state birth certificates after adoptions have been completed in a foreign country; an Adoption.com forum post regarding the rules for adopting biological relatives; a link to a web page for an organization whose purpose is to facilitate networking opportunities for transnational transracial adoptees; links to two political advocacy website pages focusing on non-adoption topics in which adoption was only tangentially mentioned; and a link to an article published solely in French. Finally, I eliminated from consideration 27 web pages of agencies that offered both domestic and intercountry adoption services, on the basis that such agencies are likely to use different language and images than single-source agencies to describe orphaned children and that such agencies are likely to highlight services such as crisis pregnancy counseling and adoption placement for a potential audience that could consist of not only prospective adoptive parents, but birthparents, as well. I did, however, retain web pages sponsored by two intercountry
adoption service providers in my sample that did not solicit adoption placement or otherwise address birthparents in their web pages. These agencies (Adoption Advocates International and Children’s House International) offered limited domestic programs facilitating U.S. foster-adopt programs, in which parents receive financial assistance from states to adopt children in U.S. foster care programs.

Since search engines are designed to return "the most relevant results" (Spink, Jansen, Blakely, & Koshman, 2006) for any particular set of search terms, I believe that the procedure I followed has allowed me to identify and locate a sample of web pages that can reasonably be characterized as 1) most relevant to the present study and 2) most likely to be accessed by prospective adoptive parents during the period of time in which I collected my data. My final sample consisted of a total of 71 web pages.

After I identified the web pages to be included in my sample using the procedure described above, I used the following data collection procedure: First, upon entering each web page, I captured the content of the page by saving it in the form of a data metafile. I also made a copy of each web page in .html format in an attempt to preserve as much of the visual data as possible as it appeared on the day I collected my data. I used YouTube Downloader software to download and save copies of available video clips as well, thus preserving as much of the video content as possible in its original form. Next, I saved each of the web pages as a Microsoft Word file and uploaded each file into a single project file using the NVIVO data management software package. I also uploaded all of the photographic images as separate files and after converting video files into Windows Media Player-compatible format; I uploaded these files into NVIVO, as well. While security settings on some websites prevented me from uploading some images
and Flash objects, I made note of these web pages so that I could return, if necessary, to the "live" web pages during the analysis phase of my project.

Although my corpus includes only Internet-mediated texts, I believe that my final data set nevertheless represents a sufficiently rich repository of fields of action to enable me to analyze the "intertextual and interdiscursive relationships [between discourses appearing in] multiple genres and multiple public spaces" (Wodak, 2001, p. 70). For critical discourse analysts, the term 'genre' refers to "standardized forms of language, which, through repeated use, develop clearly recognizable features, whether they be at the level of subject matter, discourse structure, or linguistic forms and structures" (Flowerdew, 2004, p. 583). Intercountry adoption industry websites use a variety of language- and image-based genres, including narratives, parent testimonials, homecoming photos, family photos, maps, videos, navigation bars, and other elements that act individually and collectively to persuade viewers to adopt a child from abroad. I believe that my process of data collection has enabled me to incorporate this rich blend of genres into my analysis. Furthermore, as genres are understood to be interrelated to the extent that "meanings created through texts and their linguistic formulations depend upon the meanings of other texts current in the community" (Flowerdew, 2004, p. 583), the intercountry adoption industry can be understood and analyzed as an example of a genre system. This genre system includes a multiplicity of texts and text types produced by a wide range of intercountry adoption industry entities, including nonprofit adoption advocate organizations, government agencies, adoption service providers, and even purportedly neutral news media and marketing media companies. Many of these texts are produced with the express intent of influencing prospective parents in the U.S. to consider adopting a foreign child.

*Process of Data Analysis*
Once I completed the data collection process, I proceeded with the analysis using the
discourse-historical approach outlined earlier to address the problem of commodification in
intercountry adoption discourse using the theoretical framework of systematically distorted
communication. I used the same strategy that van Leeuwen (2007) applied to identify
legitimation discourses in his study of texts promoting compulsory education. In the study, van
Leeuwen began by identifying

…the clauses and parts of clauses that represented the actual activities of teachers,
parents, children, and other participants, the settings and timings of these activities, and
the tools and materials involved in them. That left in each case a ‘residue’ of elements
that could not be said to add anything to the description of what actually went on (2007,
p. 92).

When he evaluated this "residue," van Leeuwen concluded that discourses of legitimation can be
seen in the form of claims privileging social tradition, legal authority or institutional authority; in
claims of moral value; in general references to the rationality of social institutions; and in
narratives in which socially-sanctioned actions were rewarded or non-sanctioned behaviors were
punished.

I likewise identified and set aside those words, phrases, and images in my sample that
referred to specific actions typically taken by or required of prospective adoptive parents, social
workers, U.S. State Department personnel, and adoption agency personnel who are active
participants in the adoption process. Such actions included, for example, collecting,
authenticating and translating dossier documents, conducting home study visits, or completing
pre-adoption training courses. Once I identified and set aside these references, I evaluated the
"residue" that remained, using Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method to
identify thematic similarities in the ways language and images were used--or not used--in
website texts to describe orphaned children and intercountry adoption. Finally, I compared these
discursive themes to the eight processes of systematically distorted communication identified by Deetz (1992).

Assessing Quality of Research Results

As a qualitative researcher, I recognize the importance of ensuring the quality and trustworthiness of my results. Quantitative researchers typically assess quality by evaluating the reliability and validity of their research. Reliability measures address the question of whether a given research instrument is likely to yield similar results in subsequent uses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), while validity measures address "the extent to which relevant evidence supports [a given conclusion] as being true or correct" (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, p. 34). Researchers attempt to maximize validity by minimizing internal and external factors that impact the accuracy with which a research instrument measures the phenomenon it intended to measure (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Qualitative research, however, does not easily lend itself to such measures since data collection is often accomplished through individual interviews or ethnographic methods that cannot be replicated. Instead, qualitative researchers strive to ensure the credibility of their results by working to ensure that "findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at the same time [acknowledge that] the explanation is only one of many possible 'plausible' interpretations possible from data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 302). Likewise, the present study represents a snapshot, as it were—a brief moment in time—during which the “dynamic and ephemeral quality” (Mautner, 2005, p. 817) of the World Wide Web has been suspended. In other words, while I have taken careful steps to collect and preserve as much of the original content as possible during data collection, it will be impossible for another researcher to precisely replicate the results of this study, since adoption industry websites are continually
changing to reflect current social conditions. The best I can do is to strive to ensure that my results are as "intellectually challenging and rigorous and critical (Silverman, 1993, p. 144) as possible.

To ensure credibility of results, qualitative researchers are also frequently enjoined to use strategies to "triangulate data" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 240). This can be accomplished by collecting data from more than one source or at more than one point in time, for example, or by using more than one data collection method, or by including more than one researcher in a study design. Corbin and Strauss (2008) further suggest that researchers should strive for consistency in their methodological approach, using "all of the relevant procedures" (2008, p. 302) of the research methodology they are claiming to use in a particular study. Meyer (2001) notes that although critical discourse analysis scholars recognize the value of triangulation as a means of ensuring quality results, "strict 'objectivity' cannot be achieved by means of discourse analysis, for each 'technology' of research must itself be examined as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts and therefore prejudicing the analysis toward the analysts' preconceptions" (Meyer, 2001, p. 30). Despite this reflexive acknowledgment of the role of the researcher in critical discourse analysis, it is still important to consider the question of quality and, if possible, to incorporate triangulation strategies to minimize threats to credibility. Wodak (2001) suggests that triangulation occurs almost automatically in the discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis, since that approach incorporates relatively large text corpora, a variety of genres, and historical data from a variety of sources. Specifically, she theorizes that triangulation occurs on and between four contextual levels: the internal contexts of specific texts; the relationships between discourses that occur within and between texts in different documents and genres; the situational social contexts in which discourses occur; and the
larger historical contexts within which individual discourses are embedded. In addition, the multimodal critical discourse analysis approach provides for another form of triangulation, as it allows researchers to analyze not only written language, but also images, audio resources, moving images, and a host of other non-linguistic resources. Just as multimodality “provides the means to describe a practice or representation in all its semiotic complexity and richness” (Iedema, 2003, p. 39), it seems clear that multimodal critical discourse analysis, by definition, always provides multiple sources of data or information, even in a single document.

In executing this study, I took several specific steps to ensure that my sampling procedure was robust and my findings trustworthy and believable. First, although my data were collected from a single ‘location,’ (the Internet,) each website that I collected represented a different “address” or source of information—one type of triangulation recommended by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). In addition, I worked to collect all of my data over a two-day period in an attempt to replicate, as much as possible, the experience that a prospective parent might have conducting a web-based search for intercountry adoption information at a single point in time. Moreover, I took pains to gather all data from each website at a single point in time to avoid theoretical difficulties that might arise due to changes that might be made to website content from one data collection point to the next. I did so because the Internet is dynamic—it is subject to continual change as website sponsors can, at any time, update their content. This strategy is in keeping with Mautner’s (2005) recommendation:

At present, the easiest (and frustratingly traditional) way out of this dilemma for the individual researcher is to ‘freeze’ at least core sections of one’s web data in paper-based or permanent electronic form (through screen shots, for example, or by saving html pages locally using the browser’s ‘save as’ facility). The ‘frozen’ version of the corpus, it must be said, is inevitably a distortion of the dynamic original (not least because its interactivity and substantial parts of its multimodality have been lost), but this is preferable to having no record at all, and in the worst case seeing one’s corpus virtually disintegrate (excuse the pun) before the analysis has been completed (2005, p. 818).
Likewise, although I was not able to use more than one data collection method, I saved my data in multiple formats in an attempt to preserve as much of the original content as possible and to provide a means of cross-referencing the website content I collected. I also collected material representing many different genres, including text, photos, videos, statistical charts and graphs, illustrations, and website navigation bars. In keeping with Corbin and Strauss’ (2008) suggestion that researchers should strive for consistency in their methodological approach, I used all of the steps of the discourse-historical approach, as outlined by Wodak (2001), which also provides for triangulation through the use of a relatively large corpora—in this case, a total of 71 websites, a variety of genres, and historical data from a variety of academic sources.

I believe that the research methodology and specific methods for data collection and analysis that I used have placed me in the best position possible to answer the four research questions that were put forward in chapter one of this dissertation. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that weaknesses remain in this approach. For example, I have analyzed fewer than 100 web pages out of the literally millions of web pages containing intercountry adoption content that were available when I collected my data. However, the deep analysis that is a requisite component of multimodal critical discourse analysis makes it impractical for me to analyze a larger corpus. At the same time, although I have limited the population for this study to Internet web pages, the ubiquitous and multifaceted nature of the World Wide Web makes it unreasonable for me to attempt to augment my sample with non-Internet sources. Finally, as noted earlier, the dynamic nature of the World Wide Web has also limited my ability to ensure that this study can be replicated at a future date (Mautner, 2005). Despite these shortcomings, however, I believe that data collection and analysis methods used in this study have enabled me to produce the high quality results that should be a hallmark of all scholarly work.
In the following sections, I describe the results of my analysis. First, I provide a brief description of the historical background of intercountry adoption. Next, I describe the genres of adoption content that appear in my sample. Third, I provide a detailed reading of specific discursive strategies that construct orphaned children and adoption industry professionals in particular ways. In the final chapter, I will discuss these results in detail.
Chapter 4: Results

A brief History of Child Adoption in the United States

Although the practice of child adoption is as old as human civilization itself (Della Cava, Phillips, & Engel, 2004), the modern practice of intercountry adoption can be connected to a number of historic movements of large numbers of children across various types of borders. Della Cava, Phillips, and Engel (2004) explain that adoption laws were codified in ancient Babylonian, Hindu, and Roman legal texts and adoption was also referenced in Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament writings. Perhaps as a result of its position in Judeo-Christian values, adoption was common in Europe and “wherever Europeans settled” (2004, p. 141). European settlers brought the practice with them to the New World; adoptions were recorded in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, for example, before the end of the 17th century (2004). The first formal adoption law, the 1851 Act to Provide for the Adoption of Children, was also passed in Massachusetts; this act set “important [legal] precedents that are still in place today” (Kahan, 2006, p. 53). Many of these earliest adoption laws were passed in response to a “large placing-out movement” (2006, p. 54) initiated by the Rev. Charles Loring Brace, a New York minister who founded the New York Children’s Aid Society to move children out of “crowded urban environments” (p. 55) and into “white Protestant families” (p. 56). Children’s Aid Society’s “orphan trains” (Hübinette, 2006, p. 141) delivered an estimated 150,000 to 250,000 indigent child laborers, many of them members of racial and ethnic minorities, from East Coast cities to rural Midwestern farms from 1854 until 1929 (Kahan, 2006). While all of these children were poor, Kahan (2006) estimates that only about half were true orphans. The remainder had been turned over to social workers by their parents, “recruited from orphanages, almshouses, asylums, and prisons” (p. 55), or “came in on their own, wanting to go West” (2006,
p. 55). Orphan train children performed unpaid labor in exchange for room and board in a system that shipped them hundreds or even thousands of miles from their homes and birth families. The system was simple: The Children’s Aid Society would notify local populations along the route when an orphan train was scheduled to arrive. Each time an orphan train entered a station, its child passengers were led to the platform to be claimed by farmers in need of laborers. Those children who were not selected re-boarded the train and continued on until they were finally claimed—some by farmers as far away as Arizona (Hubinette T., 2006). Although “there were no legal ties between these children and the farmers who took them in” (Kahan, 2006, p. 55), some farmers did take steps to “legalize the addition of these children to their families for inheritance purposes” (p. 54). Significantly, orphan train children were imbued with increased social value—transformed from social encumbrances to social assets—as they were transferred from their economically disadvantaged birth families to serve rural Midwestern landowners.

Public backlash against the orphan trains spurred a series of U.S. child welfare reforms in the early 1900s. Many of these reforms were instituted following President Roosevelt’s White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children (Kahan, 2006). Conference attendees affirmed “government responsibility for child welfare” (2006, p. 57) and supported the establishment of a federal Children’s Bureau to support children’s interests. Programs were subsequently developed to preserve biological families with the result that adoption placements became the exception, rather than the rule, during the first two decades of the 1900s. The few U.S. domestic adoptions that were completed during this period were largely private adoptions facilitated by doctors or lawyers rather than social workers, although in some cases “birthparents advertised in newspapers, and commercial maternity homes and baby farms sold infants to childless couples” (p. 60).
By the late 1930s, however, adoptions were on the rise. Zelizer (1985) reports that by 1937, adoption had become something of an “American fad” (1985, p. 192). Indeed, the number of domestic adoptions tripled between 1937 and 1945, and then doubled again in the decade after World War II, with the burgeoning demand for adoptable children largely linked primarily to increases in marriage rates coupled with high illegitimate birth rates, particularly during the postwar period (Kahan, 2006). Kahan reports that the high demand for adoptable children during this period allowed social workers to become more actively involved in the adoption process—and more selective, as “agencies and their social workers [became] involved in actively shaping families” (2006, p. 61):

Social workers…worked to make adoption more acceptable by matching adoptive parents and adoptees according to physical, ethnic, racial, religious, and intellectual characteristics, creating adoptive families that resembled biological ones… As the demand for children was high, adoption workers were able to select the ‘best’ possible parent matches for adoptees (p. 61).

At the same time, prospective parents began to express a decided preference for newborn or very young infants, so that by 1951, a full 70 percent of all U.S. adoptions involved infant children (Kahan, 2006). Like other U.S. children during this period, these infant adoptees were not valued for their potential labor capacity as had the Orphan Train children in the previous century. Instead, infant adoptees became prized for their “sentimental value” (Zelizer, 1985, p. 3)—for their ability to provide childless couples with “a child to love” (p. 190). Despite warnings from professionals that children should not be adopted in an effort to meet emotional needs or to compensate for “unfulfilled ambitions” (p. 195), “the quest for a child to love turned into a glamorous and romanticized search as a number of well-known entertainment and political figures proudly and publicly joined the ranks of adoptive parents” (p. 190). It was during this
period that “the value of [orphaned children] became increasingly monetized and commercialized” (p. 195).

Beginning in the 1890s and continuing well into the 20th century, White U.S. families also began to adopt non-White children in increasing numbers. A significant number of Native American children, for example, were adopted into White families during this period under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Beginning in 1940, the Bureau of Indian Affairs developed adoption placement programs specifically designed to facilitate the assimilation of Native children into U.S. society by placing them in a “more ‘natural' familial arrangement” (Stark & Stark, 2006, p. 127) than the vocational boarding schools that many Native children had been forced to attend since the late 1800s. As a result of these programs, as many as one third of all Native American children in the U.S. were forcibly “removed from their homes and placed in orphanages, white foster homes, and white adoptive families” (White Hawk S. , 2006, p. 298) until the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 prohibited Native children from being placed into White adoptive families. Similar to other so-called “civilizing project[s]” (Hubinette, 2006, p. 141) in Europe and Australia, U.S. programs for Native assimilation transported children far away from their homes and birth families and into adoptive families, who, it was hoped, would help them “integrate into American society” (Stark & Stark, 2006, p. 127). In cases of successful assimilation, the social value of adopted Native children was expected to increase as children were expected to leave their Native cultural identity behind and take on the identity of their White adoptive parents.

Between 1961 and 1972, as the number of white infants available for adoption declined due to the advent of reliable birth control and the legalization of abortion, non-white children and children with disabilities were increasingly accepted as viable candidates for adoption by white
adoptive families. During this period, “minority youngsters were adopted [by White parents] in record numbers” (Kahan, 2006, p. 66). However, after the National Association of Black Social Workers condemned transracial adoption in 1972, calling it “racial and cultural genocide” (Quiroz, 2007, p. 3), the placement of black children in white adoptive families slowed dramatically until the passage of the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act in 1994 and the Inter-Ethnic Placement Act in 1996 “denied consideration of race in adoption placement” (2007, p. 18). It was during this period that intercountry adoption also began to grow in popularity.

Worldwide, large-scale movements of children have often been undertaken during times of armed conflict; hundreds of thousands of children of war have moved across national boundaries in the past century alone (Hübinette, 2006). Likewise, a significant number of foreign children have been adopted into U.S. families following periods of “American military intervention, presence or occupation” (2006, p. 15) in foreign countries. Indeed, U.S. American families first began to adopt children from abroad in significant numbers after World War II in a humanitarian response to the thousands of children left orphaned by the war in parts of Asia and Europe (Evan B. Donaldson, n.d.). Following the Korean War, sizeable numbers of U.S. families once again rallied to adopt war orphans, with the result that “for the first time in history, relatively large numbers of Western couples … were adopting children who were…culturally different from themselves” (Altstein & Simon, 1990, p. 3). Although the number of U.S. domestic adoptions peaked in 1970, when the “[number] of white American infants available for adoption began to decline” (Kahan, 2006), the number of foreign adoptees in the United States rose steadily over the next several decades, beginning with South Korea, which started processing foreign adoptions in the 1950s (Hubinette T., 2006). The ranks of U.S. adoptees from war zones swelled again in 1975, as a U.S. government humanitarian program dubbed
“Operation Babylift” (Choy & Choy, 2006, p. 224) transferred approximately 2,000 Vietnamese and mixed-race children to the U.S. for adoption during the final days of the Vietnam conflict. Smaller numbers of children have also been adopted by U.S. families following U.S. military interventions in Cambodia, Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Columbia, Haiti, El Salvador, and Guatemala, among others (Hübinette, 2006).

By the early 1990s, as the Cold War was drawing to an end, increasing numbers of U.S. Americans began adopting children from overseas—this time at “an astonishing rate” (Volkman T. A., 2005, p. 1)—as China and Russia entered the international adoption arena (Dorow S., 2006). The number of foreign-born children adopted each year by U.S. parents skyrocketed from fewer than 7,000 in 1992 to more than 22,800 in 2004 (Evan B. Donaldson, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Nearly a third of these children came from Russia or from the former Soviet-Bloc countries of Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Belarus, Georgia, or Moldova (n.d.). During the same period, adoptions from China also increased, from just 242 in 1992 to more than 5,000 in the year 2000. Dorow (2006) attributes the popularity of Chinese adoption programs, in particular, to “a matching of supply and demand” (2006, p. 58), as China offered “relatively healthy young infants, free of ties to birth families, less-restrictive requirements and [a] fairly straightforward process” (p. 58), compared to other programs. Russian adoptions were also fairly straightforward, but Dorow (2006) also notes that the popularity of Russian adoption is also partly attributable to the fact that many children in Russia and other former Soviet satellite states are white.

As the number intercountry adoptions increased, so did reports of adoption fraud. Adoption advocates attempted to address “abuses includ[ing] the sale and abduction of children, coercion of parents, and bribery” (UNICEF’s position on Inter-country adoption) with the
passage of the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoptions (n.a., 1993). The Hague Convention, which was ratified by the U.S. Senate in 2008, established “international standards of [practice] for intercountry adoptions” (Understanding the Hague Convention, n.d.), which require Hague Convention signatories to ensure legal protection for adoptees, birthparents and adoptive families and ensure financial transparency in the adoption process. Although the Convention “applies [only] to adoptions between the United States and the other countries that have joined it” (Understanding the Hague Convention, n.d.), the Convention does not prevent countries from allowing adoptions of children from non-signatory countries or from countries that have not yet ratified the Convention. As a result, of the top five countries sending children to the U.S. for adoption, only one (China) currently complies with Hague Convention standards. O’Keefe (2007) points out that “the circumstances that make it difficult for these countries to support their children also make the burden of complying with the Convention overwhelming” (2007, p. 1637). Without implementation of the Convention, she continues, “there is no authority ensuring the valid adoptability of children, no restrictions on exorbitant fees for intercountry adoptions, and nothing to prevent the same tragic practices that have been rampant in intercountry adoption in the past” (p. 1637-1638). Although scholars have not determined the exact reasons why intercountry adoptions peaked in 2004, when a total of 22,991 children received adoption visas before dropping by nearly one-half to 11,058 by 2010 (Total Adoptions to the United States, n.d.), skyrocketing adoption costs and the increasing complexity of intercountry adoption processes may be contributing factors.

Historically, large-scale movements of children such as those described above have taken place as a result of profound power imbalances – between nations, between members of different
social classes and between members of different cultural groups. In adoption, the movement of children from one location to another changes their social value, as well. Children, who are in most cases considered burdensome wards of the state in their countries of birth, become priceless objects of love in their new adoptive families (Zelizer, 1985). Furthermore, although Anagnost (2004) argues that it is an “incontrovertible fact that as the child moves from one site of nurture to another, money has to change hands; agencies are established; ‘baby flights’ are chartered; tour packages are assembled” (Anagnost, 2004, p. 147, italics added), this is not completely accurate. Many parents make their own travel arrangements using commercial airlines, precluding the need for adoption travel and tour packages and chartered flights. Furthermore, in a handful of countries, parents may still choose to have their child escorted to the U.S. (Intercountry Adoption Country Overview, n.d.) rather than travel to a foreign country, although the vast majority of countries now require parents to travel at least once before an adoption can be completed (How to Adopt, n.d.). The high social value of international adoptees is also reflected in skyrocketing adoption fees:

The heightened demand for adoptable babies has sent adoption fees, which should theoretically be untouched by laws of supply and demand, soaring, and desire for the children is so high, prospective parents are willing to pay the price…in 2000, the adoption industry generated $1.5 billion in adoption spending. Transnational adoptions range from $15,000 to $50,000, up from around $1000 in the early 1970s (Park Nelson, 2006, p. 94)

This is the essence of commodification. Children’s bodies develop "exchange values" (Appadurai, 1986, p. 15) as they move from their places of birth into adoptive homes in the United States and other Western nations. Indeed, children in the intercountry adoption system fit Appadurai’s (1986) definition of luxury goods: their perceived value is linked to their ability to fulfill the emotional and social role of the “priceless child” (Zelizer, 1985, p. 198); the high price of intercountry adoption restricts the practice to parents who have the financial resources to do
so; the complexity of the practice is unrelated to the large numbers of orphaned children extant in the developing world; complex social messages accompany intercountry adoption, particularly when white parents adopt children of color; adoptive parents are required to complete parent training courses to learn 'appropriate' techniques for parenting post-institutionalized children while biological parents are not required to attend similar courses to parent biological children; and, in adoption, parents’ and children’s bodies become very tightly linked in the family relationship (Appadurai, 1986, p. 38). While some families complete independent adoptions, by “either hiring a local attorney to find an adoptable child or using their own contacts in the country” (Freivalds, n.d.), the vast majority of families utilize the services of one or more intercountry adoption service providers to manage the adoption process, both in the U.S. and abroad.

Genre Analysis

The intercountry adoption industry can be understood as an example of a genre system in which a variety of texts and text types are produced and placed in the websites of organizations representing a variety of intercountry adoption-related interests. Critical discourse analysts understand the term 'genre' to refer to "standardized forms of language” (Flowerdew, 2004, p. 583) that “develop clearly recognizable features” (p. 583) as they are used in specific ways. van Dijk (2003), for example, has suggested that “advertising, film…textbooks…political discourse, scholarly discourse, everyday conversations, service encounters, [and even] talk shows” (2003, p. 361) are all examples of genres. Crowston and Williams (2000) argue that website home pages and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) pages represent two new types of web-mediated genres. They also note that traditional genres, such as advertisements, news bulletins, or policy
statements, may also be embedded within organizational web pages, thus creating new genre forms.

While all of the web pages in my sample could be described as exemplars of a general web page genre, closer analysis revealed subtle similarities and differences in the various web-based and traditional genres that were embedded within intercountry adoption industry web pages. Further analysis of these genres reveals the underlying relationships between the different types of organizations that posted intercountry adoption content to the web. Table 1 lists the genres that appeared in the web pages in the sample:
Table 1.

Genre Types in Intercountry Adoption Industry Web Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Advocacy</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>News Media</th>
<th>Mktg. Media</th>
<th>Academic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome Quotations</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Quotations</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Quotations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legal text</td>
<td>Legal text</td>
<td>Articles</td>
<td>Legal text</td>
<td>Articles</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Statements</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>FAQ Pages</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
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<td>Statistics</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testimonial</td>
<td>Topical links</td>
<td>Topical links</td>
<td>Testimonial</td>
<td>Topical links</td>
<td>Parent bio</td>
<td>Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Solicitation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Photos (children)</td>
<td>Photos</td>
<td>Photos</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Logo(s)</td>
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<td>Logo(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patriotic symbols</td>
<td>Patriotic symbols</td>
<td>Patriotic symbols</td>
<td>Illustrations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Illustrations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Charts/ Graphs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Video</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charitable Donation</td>
<td>Charitable Donation</td>
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<td>News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event Announcement</td>
<td>Banner Ads</td>
<td>Banner Ads</td>
<td>Banner Ads</td>
<td>Banner Ads</td>
<td>Hyperlink Ads</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hyperlink Ads</td>
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<td>Hyperlink Ads</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In general, the web pages produced by each of the seven types of sponsoring organizations utilized a common set of genres, or genre repertoire (Crowston & Williams, 2000), although some genres crossed the boundaries between different organization types, as well. Since “the…genre repertoire of a collection of web pages [is] the result of interactions among communities” (Crowston & Williams, 2000, p. 204), a closer analysis of the genre repertoires in my sample was warranted to illuminate important interrelationships between the different types of organizations that together comprise the intercountry adoption industry.

**Intercountry Adoption Agency Web Page Genres**

Initial analysis of intercountry adoption website data revealed seven general sources of intercountry adoption-related content on the web: intercountry adoption agencies, national and international adoption advocacy organizations, legal services organizations, scholarly sources, government agencies, print and broadcast news sources, and marketing media organizations. Each of these sources produced web pages that utilized a number of web-based and traditional genres. Intercountry adoption agency web pages, for example, all included a “welcome message” (Dillon & Gushrowski, 2000, p. 203) on their web pages. These welcome messages focused on one of two topics: 1) the problems faced by orphaned children, or 2) the agency’s experience in facilitating intercountry adoptions. Welcome messages were often, although not always, accompanied by photographic images of children, ranging from grainy snapshots of difficult-to
place children (euphemistically referred to as “waiting children,”) (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d.; Chinese Children Charities, n.d.), to snapshots of previously-adopted children (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.), to professional photos of children with their new families (Christian World Adoption, n.d.). In addition to these common genre features, agency web pages also deployed several other types of language- and image-based texts. Some web pages (e.g. International Family Services, n.d.; Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.), for example, offered updated information about changes in adoption law or program offerings, characterizing such information as ‘news.’ Other web pages (Children’s Hope International, n.d.; European Adoption Consultants, n.d.) used event announcements to highlight upcoming informational meetings, social events, seminars, webinars, or other educational offerings (Holt International, n.d.; Christian World Adoption, n.d.). Many agencies, including Chinese Children Charities (n.d.), Children’s House International Adoption (n.d.), and Dillon International (n.d.), also included solicitations for charitable donations, often through agency-affiliated charitable foundations. Other traditional genres embedded in agency websites included quotations from famous individuals; parent testimonials in text or video form; illustrations of flags to represent the foreign countries in which agencies operated; and logos representing government organizations, adoption advocacy organizations, charity organizations, social media websites, or other types of organizations with which the agency was affiliated. All of the agencies also employed standard web-navigation toolbars to allow visitors to further explore within their agency websites.

*Intercountry Adoption Advocacy Organization Web Page Genres*

Like adoption agency web pages, adoption advocacy organization web pages featured a blend of traditional and web-specific genres that addressed the topic of intercountry adoption in
unique ways. Specifically, two web pages sponsored by the National Council for Adoption (n.a., Advocating for a culture of adoption, n.d.) were returned in the initial search. Neither link pointed directly to the Council’s home page. Instead, one link pointed to the intercountry adoption policy subpage within the council’s parent website, and the second link pointed to a subpage promoting the organization’s Hague-compliant online training program for prospective adoptive parents. Like adoption agency-sponsored websites, both of these sub-pages featured welcome narratives that highlighted the organization’s orphan advocacy role, and both pages featured web-navigation toolbars with links to additional pages within the parent site. The policy subpage also featured a large graphic illustration announcing the organization’s annual adoption conference and a second graphic featuring the logos of three conference sponsors. Two of the sponsoring organizations were adoption agencies and the third was an insurance brokerage organization that provides specialized services to child welfare organizations. The policy page also contained links to the organization’s Facebook and Twitter social networking sites and to the organization’s blog. Both of the web pages sponsored by the National Council for Adoption also featured large title banners with images of adults and children posed in ways that suggested that the subjects may have been parents interacting with their adopted children. In the online training page, the welcome message was embedded in a slide show containing similarly posed photos of adults and children. The training page also included two additional photos: one of a globe with a finger pointing toward South Korea, and another of a man and woman sitting side by side before a table and looking at a laptop computer screen. These images all appeared to have been professionally produced.

A third adoption advocacy web page was sponsored by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA.) Once again, the search engine link led directly to a subpage on the
organization’s website, rather than to the website home page. This subpage, however, did not feature a welcome message. Instead, a large block of text appeared on the page under the title, “CWLA Testimony Submitted to the House International Relations Committee for the Hearing on the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption” (1999, n.p.). In addition to the policy paper, the CWLA page also featured a web-navigation toolbar with links to other portions of the website. Notably, the CWLA web page contained no photographs.

Another adoption advocacy web page was sponsored by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (n.d.). Once again, search engine results linked directly to the organization’s Intercountry Adoption Facts subpage, rather than to the website home page. This page also contained no welcome message. Instead, a paragraph of text describing the history of foreign adoptions appeared at the top of the page under the heading, “International Adoption Facts” (n.d.). This text was followed by statistical data describing demographic characteristics of adopted foreign children, sending countries, and adoptive parents for U.S. intercountry adoptions completed between 1991 and 2001. Statistical information was presented using a combination of item headings, short paragraphs of text, charts, and graphs. Items were annotated with extensive footnotes that were, in turn, hyperlinked to a detailed source list that appeared at the bottom of the web page. Once again, navigation links on the side of the web page pointed to other portions of the website.

The final adoption advocacy page, Rainbow Kids, is sponsored by a consortium of 60 intercountry and domestic adoption agencies (n.a., About Us, 2011). The Rainbow Kids web page utilized a unique blend of the genres favored by adoption agencies and by adoption advocacy organizations, in addition to a handful of unique genres that were not seen in any other advocacy web pages. Specifically, the Rainbow Kids web page differed from other advocacy
web pages in four important ways: First, the page contained relatively little text compared to other advocacy web pages. Indeed, the Rainbow Kids web page represents a web-based genre known as a topical links page (Crowston & Williams, 2000), since its primary function was to provide links to additional adoption pages within the Rainbow Kids website. Topical links were presented as a list of titles of adoption-related articles, followed by the first few words of each article. The titles were hyperlinked to the pages within the Rainbow Kids website where the articles could be read in full. To the right of the article links, rows of stars were placed and highlighted to indicate how previous website visitors had ranked the articles—most articles had earned four and a half to five red stars out of five. Second, unlike other advocacy organization pages, the Rainbow Kids page was dominated by photographs of children—11 photographs in all. Third, the Rainbow Kids web page contained advertising, including a banner ad that featured a photo of a young Chinese girl with an older adult woman who could have been the child’s adoptive mother, and hyperlinked text ads followed by brief descriptions of ad sponsors, which appeared near the bottom of the page. Finally, the Rainbow Kids web page contained three other genres not found in other advocacy websites. These included a link to a “contact wizard” through which one could identify agencies working in a specific country, a link to a video entitled, “When you come home,” and a link to an e-mail marketing firm that encouraged website visitors to sign up to receive Rainbow Kids newsletters.

All five of the advocacy organizations solicited charitable contributions. These solicitations were different from the charitable donation links found in agency web pages, however, because they invited website visitors to support the work of the organization rather than directly supporting the needs of orphaned children. In addition, the National Council for Adoption (n.d.) and CWLA web pages also featured another genre that can best be characterized
as a membership solicitation. The National Council for Adoption, for example, invited website visitors to “Become an Adoption Ally” (n.d.), while the CWLA navigation bar featured a “membership” link that pointed to information describing memberships available to public and private non-profit child welfare service agencies and other advocacy organizations.

*Legal Service Provider Web Page Genres*

Three of the web pages in the sample represented a category of adoption service providers that I characterize as legal service firms. These web pages were very different from those sponsored by adoption agencies and adoption advocacy organizations. None of the pages, for example, featured a welcome message, nor did any of the pages directly address the problems or needs of orphaned children. Instead, these web pages addressed specific legal questions that can arise in the process of intercountry adoption. The first web page was sponsored by Zhang & Associates, a legal service firm specializing in immigration law. This page contained a bulleted list of detailed questions about U.S. adoption and immigration law and answers to those questions under the general heading, “Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about Adoption and Immigration” (n.d.). In addition to the FAQ genre, this page contained three other genre types: an image of the Statue of Liberty, a quotation from management expert Peter Drucker, and navigation aids including a navigation bar on the left side of the page, navigation buttons in English and Chinese at the top of the page, and hyperlinked text pointing to additional pages in the Zhang & Associates website.

The second legal services web page was sponsored by Lawyers.com, a marketing media website for lawyers operated by Lexis-Nexis (Turn Online Prospects into Lifelong Clients, n.d.). Like the Zhang & Associates web page, the Lawyers.com web page contained a large amount of text that explained key legal aspects of intercountry adoption. Unlike Zhang & Associates,
however, the Lawyers.com page did not directly address the topic of immigration. Instead, information was presented in four sections; one section described the two major types of foreign adoptions, the next section described eligibility requirements for adoption, the third section explained the process of re-adopting foreign children, and the final section outlined major provisions of the Hague Convention. In addition to the written text, the Lawyers.com page contained a number of additional web-and traditional genre types. These included a navigation bar across the top of the web page and two internal website search boxes—one to search the website for legal forms and another to search for a local lawyer, plus a banner ad that pointed visitors to a second Lawyers.com-affiliated website offering a variety of personal legal services. The ad also contained the sole photograph on the web page, a picture of two adult women helping a young boy look through a pair of binoculars. The web page also included seven logos: the Lawyers.com logo, the Lexis-Nexis logo, logos representing three website design organizations, and logos that linked to the Lawyers.com Facebook and Twitter social media sites.

The final legal services web page was sponsored by U.S. Immigration Support (n.a., Adoption of Foreign Children by United States Citizens, n.d.), a company that publishes do-it-yourself immigration guidebooks. At first glance, the U.S. Immigration Support web page appeared to be a government-sponsored web page, as the title banner contained images of an American flag and a circular seal with the Statue of Liberty on a royal blue background. The primary text on the Immigration Support web page was a three paragraph, 678-word article describing the roles that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the U.S. Department of State play in intercountry adoptions. The article also described the two major types of foreign adoptions. The web page contained a navigation bar across the top of the page and a search box on the right side of the title banner. On the right side of the page, a narrow column contained text
boxes with links to additional immigration content located elsewhere within the website, a small paragraph describing the services available through U.S. Immigration Support, and a box in which website visitors could enter an e-mail address to sign up to receive e-mail newsletters. Unlike the lawyers.com web page, the U.S. Immigration Support web page did not contain advertising. It did, however, contain tiny replicas of five consumer protection agency logos and (even smaller) Facebook and Twitter logos at the bottom of the page, where links to additional information on U.S. citizenship, green cards, visas, and passports could also be found.

**Academic Web Page Genres**

In contrast to the agency, advocacy, and legal services web pages described above, the web pages sponsored by academic sources were almost extraordinarily plain. Three of the five academic web pages consisted of nothing more than .pdf reproductions of academic papers that appeared to have been previously published in academic journals; another document was a reproduction of a chapter that had been previously published in an edited book. The web pages upon which documents appeared contained no navigation tools or links. The first page contained an academic journal article by demographer Peter Selman (2002), which was formatted in traditional academic journal style. The article was posted on a website hosted by the Intercountry Adoption Centre, located in Great Britain. However, because the search engine link opened the .pdf document as a new web page that did not (outside of the website URL,) reference the sponsoring organization in any way, it was not immediately clear that the article originated outside of the United States. Two of the academic items were authored by feminist scholar Laura Briggs (2003; 2007; 2009). Both were hosted on academic servers and featured .edu URL suffixes. The first of these items was a copy of a chapter from an edited book on U.S. empire-building (Briggs L. , 2007). Formatting was limited to the chapter title, the author’s byline, four
section subtitles, and four pages of footnotes, which appeared at the end of the document. Page numbers in the .pdf document corresponded to the pages in which the chapter appeared in the printed book. The second item, a journal article, appeared in a web journal published tri-annually by a consortium of feminist scholars. While this article was formatted in a more relaxed style, written from a first-person point of view and utilizing a colorful, newsletter-style masthead, the article itself featured many of the elements commonly found in peer-reviewed academic journals, including an opening abstract and copious in-text citations linked to detailed endnotes containing full reference citations. The final text-based academic source was a student-authored article from the Wisconsin International Law Journal, a publication of the University of Wisconsin Law School. This article was formatted in the style of a formal law review journal, with wide margins and with footnotes appearing on the same page upon which they had been referenced. In addition to these text-based academic sources, search engines also returned a link to one audiovisual file of an academic conference panel presentation by David L. Eng, a Professor of English, comparative literature, and Asian American studies at the University of Pennsylvania (David L. Eng, n.d.). Entitled "The Psychic Effects of Transnational Adoption," the video was posted to YouTube.com by the Barnard Center for Research on Women at Columbia University. This file had all the earmarks of an academic paper presentation. Dr. Eng wore a conservative suit and a name tag, stood before a podium, and read extensively from a manuscript.

*Government Agency Web Page Genres*

Two government agencies, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and two Non-Governmental Organizations, the Hague Conference on Private International Law and the United Nations; sponsored a total of six web pages in the sample. Of the two web pages sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the web page
sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Syria, was most easily identified as a U.S.
government source, as the title banner at the top of the website featured a stylized image of the
U.S. flag with a reproduction of the obverse side of the Great Seal of the United States (The
Great Seal of the United States, 1996) alongside the words, “Embassy of the United States,
Damascus, Syria” (n.a., Adoption, n.d., p. n.p.). With the exception of a navigation toolbar on the
left-hand side of the page, these were the only graphic elements on the page, which appeared to
be the sole web page devoted to intercountry adoption within the Embassy website. Text was
limited to a single-paragraph policy statement that explained that adoptions are not possible from
Syria because “Syria, as a Shari'ah law country, does not recognize or provide for adoptions of
Muslim children” (n.a., Adoption, n.d.). This rather terse statement was clearly not intended to
serve the same purpose as the welcome statements on the adoption agency and advocacy
websites. The second search engine result pointed to another web page sponsored by the U.S.
Department of State. This web page was the entry page for the agency’s Intercountry Adoption
section. Like the U.S. Embassy page, this web page also featured an image of the Great Seal of
the United States on the upper left-hand side of the title banner, next to the words, “Intercountry
Adoption, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.).
A navigation bar appeared immediately below the title banner, and below the navigation bar, a
large box framed a quotation taken from the preamble to the Hague Convention, which was
placed above three smaller boxes, arranged side-by-side. The smaller boxes were entitled,
calendar icons; next to each icon, a short hyperlinked phrase identified the type of information
that could be accessed by clicking on the link. The “Alerts & Notices” box contained small
graphic symbols to help readers quickly differentiate alerts from notices, which were also
identified by short phrases such as “Cambodia Adoption Notice” or “Kyrgyzstan Adoption Alert.” The “Statistics” box contained a stylized image of a bar graph. Beneath the large box, the web page was divided into three columns. The left-hand column contained a welcome message. The middle column contained additional navigation aids in the form of a series of hyperlinked phrases, and the right-hand column contained a search box under the heading “Learn about a country.” Below the search box, an image of alphabet letters appeared under the heading “Intercountry Adoptions from A to Z.” At the bottom of the page, a footer contained links to other websites sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, along with links to social media sites including Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, and Dipnote, the official blog of the U.S. Department of State.

The second set of U.S. government-sponsored web pages were two pages from the Child Welfare Information Gateway website, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Unlike the State Department-sponsored web pages in my sample, the information gateway web pages did not include images of the Great Seal of the United States or any other images that immediately identified the pages as part of a government-sponsored website. Both pages did, however, utilize a multi-section title banner at the top of the page. At the top of the banner, a small blue horizontal strip contained the words, “U.S. Department of Health & Human Services” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). Below this strip, a second, lighter blue strip contained the words, “Administration for Children and Families.” Below this strip, a much larger horizontal strip contained an illustration of a house alongside the words, “Child Welfare Information Gateway.” Next to this textual content appeared a slideshow containing images of men, women, and children. Unlike other government-sponsored web pages, the Child Welfare Information Gateway web pages each contained an e-commerce icon in the upper right-hand
portion of the page, although the link to the e-commerce portion of the site was not active. Both Child Welfare Information Gateway pages contained navigation bars linking to other portions of the extensive site, which addressed topics affecting children and families such as child abuse and neglect, foster care, and family support and preservation. Like some of the agency and advocacy sites described earlier, the Child Welfare Information Gateway contained content that addressed not only prospective parents, but also child welfare system professionals and administrators.

One organizational web page was sponsored by the Hague Conference on Private International Law. While the Hague Conference does not represent any single government, its membership includes 71 national governments (including the U.S. government) plus the European Union. The organization “develops and services multilateral legal instruments, which respond to global needs” (Overview, n.d., p. n.p.) (sic). One such legal instrument is the “The Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption” (1993). The Hague Convention is introduced with a brief welcome message in the Hague Conference web page (n.d.). Interestingly, while this web page included a welcome message, in this case, the message introduced the Hague Convention document rather than the Hague Conference organization. Below the welcome message appeared a list of links to Hague Convention documents available on the Hague Conference website. These documents were organized into groups and included translations of the Hague Convention treaty, documents explaining provisions of the Convention, documents containing information on participating states and implementation requirements, documents related to a series of special commissions that had been convened after the signing of the treaty, documents containing statistical information about intercountry adoption, and other documents related to intercountry adoption. Like the other governmental websites in the sample, the web page included only a few small
images and no photographs. Images included the logo of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, the logo of the United Nations Children’s Fund, a small image of a globe that appeared next to a navigation link entitled, “Other Languages” and a reproduction of the illustrated cover of a published informational booklet entitled, “The Implementation and Operation of the 1993 Intercountry Adoption Convention: Guide to Good Practice” (Welcome to the Intercountry Adoption Section, n.d.).

The final international government organization web page contained the text of a position paper designed for use by the news media. Entitled, “UNICEF's position on Inter-country adoption” (), this policy statement appeared in the “Press Centre” section of the United Nations website. The web page upon which the paper appeared was relatively sparse, although the page did contain navigation links to other pages within the United National website as well as links to additional children’s issue and press web pages. The only image to be found on the web page was the United Nations logo. The web page also included a search box and RSS news feed link. Links to social media were launched from a small box at the bottom of the web page in which the words, “Social Media” were printed in white on a red rectangular background.

Print and Broadcast News Web Page Genres

Seven web pages in the sample were sponsored by print or broadcast news outlets. These included three national media outlets (CBS News, CNN, and People Magazine,) three specialized media outlets (Adoptive Families Magazine, VietNam Bridge, and Russia Today,) and a UNICEF web page containing text from a press release on intercountry adoption. Two of the web pages—one sponsored by People.com and another sponsored by CNN.com—contained feature stories highlighting celebrity Jillian Michaels’ plans to adopt a child from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Fogle, 2011). Both of these feature stories were accompanied by large
photographic images of the actress and embedded in web pages that also contained a variety of traditional celebrity news media genres including banner advertisements and celebrity photos. More than half of the content on each of the pages was unrelated to the topic of intercountry adoption. Although both web pages were identified as blogs, each appeared under a large title banner in which the parent company logo was prominently displayed. The CNN blog also allowed readers to post comments at the conclusion of the story; 183 comments had been posted to this story by the time I collected my website data. Both of the Jillian Michaels stories were relatively brief—the CNN story was just 191 words in length, while the People story was slightly longer at 326 words—so both stories were much shorter than traditional print-based feature stories. Interestingly, the story content appeared to have been embedded into both web pages in such a way that the story was surrounded with links to up-to-date stories, advertisements, and news photos, no matter when the web page was accessed. Likewise, a 314-word CBSNews.com story entitled “Study Disputes Adoption Myths” (Lagorio, 2009) dated February, 2009, appeared to have been embedded into the CBSNews.com website so that current event story links, advertisements, and news photos appeared whenever an individual visits the web page. Once again, a majority of the content, outside of a grainy news photo of a lone white child alongside the story text, was unrelated to the topic of intercountry adoption. The CBSNews story was written in traditional “inverted pyramid” news style; the web page also utilized banner advertising and news photo genres.

The two remaining print news-based web pages appeared in Adoptive Families Magazine and in VietNamNet Bridge, an English-language online newspaper published in South Vietnam (n.a., About Us, n.d.). The VietNamNet Bridge news story reported on a recently-concluded government workshop designed to promote the adoption of special needs children from Vietnam
Like its U.S. news organization counterparts, the VietNamNet Bridge story utilized traditional advertising and news photo genres and was embedded in the parent news site in such a way that current news events and advertisements appeared whenever the story was accessed. All of the website content on VietNamNet Bridge was presented in English, with the exception of a single banner ad in the upper right-hand corner of the page, which contained text written in Vietnamese. Although the VietNamNet Bridge website layout and story structure identified the web page as belonging to the news genre, the website also contained one non-news item suggestive of a more promotional purpose. In this case, the title banner featured a slide show in which the words, “Reflecting a changing Vietnam” were superimposed over photos of Vietnamese people, water buffalo, religious buildings, and other rural scenery.

Adoptive Families Magazine utilized a unique combination of the genres found in other adoption industry websites, plus some new items. Unlike most of the news media web pages described thus far, the Adoptive Families story was not embedded within a current events news page. Instead, the story appeared under the Adoptive Families masthead and was flanked by navigation tools and hyperlinked text describing adoption-related issues. Although the story appeared in a magazine, it lacked a strong lead sentence. Although subsequent sentences were clear and concise, paragraphs were relatively long, with six or more sentences in each. In fact, the entire story was long—almost twice as long as the other news or feature stories in the sample—at 768 words. The web page featured two banner ads: one was an advertisement for a company promoting “long weekend trips to Moscow” (Freivalds, n.d.), and the other offered a free downloadable issue of Adoptive Families Magazine with a one-year subscription to the print magazine. Near the top of the page was a referral box with links to international and domestic
adoption agencies, lawyers, doctors, events, support groups, and other adoption specialists. The Adoptive Families web page also allowed visitors to post comments, but unlike the CBS News page, Adoptive Families had collected only six comments since the article was written, and no comments had been posted in the four month period before I collected my data in June, 2011. This web page did feature a limited number of images. Three of the images were photographs of the print magazine; a fourth was an image of an adoption guide produced by the magazine publisher. Additional images included links to social media websites and three logos: Parent’s Choice Foundation, Family Web Guide, and the Magazine Publishers of America.

My web engine search returned just one link to a broadcast news story. The story was posted on the Russia Today YouTube Channel. Unlike print news stories that typically appeared on web pages hosted by the parent news organization, the Russia Today report appeared on YouTube. As a result, the search results column listing related videos included a wide variety of video clips about Russian politics, immigration, and other topics unrelated to adoption, in addition to videos both praising and denigrating intercountry adoption and particularly adoptions from Russia. In this way, the Russia Today report was similar to major news sites in that it contained a wide variety of content, although there was no indication of the relative timeliness of other videos appearing on the page. The Russia Today report was dated April 29, 2010 and featured many of the elements one would expect to see in a broadcast newsmagazine segment. The segment was introduced by a female news anchor, who sat behind a desk, looked directly at the camera and spoke clear, accent-free English. The anchor introduced the upcoming story and then introduced an adoption researcher and author whom she proceeded to interview for the next five minutes. During the interview, images of Russian children, Russian orphanages, and the cover of a book authored by the expert punctuated periods during which the interviewee
appeared either on screen alone or beside the anchor in a split screen configuration. Throughout the interview, two lines of type appeared at the bottom of the screen: the top line of text was stationary and included the time at which the broadcast initially aired, the Russia Today logo, and the title of the segment, “Parental Prosecution” (Russia Today, 2010). The second line of type scrolled along the bottom of the page, featuring general news headlines from April 29, 2010. As in the previously-described blogs, viewers of the Russia Today video had the opportunity to submit comments; the video garnered a total of 18 viewer comments between April, 2010 and January, 2011.

*Marketing Media Web Page Genres*

The final category of web pages in my sample were produced and hosted by individuals or organizations that supported adoption information websites through advertising, or by marketing media companies that used the topic of intercountry adoption to draw traffic to their websites. The first category of websites consisted of websites solely dedicated to the topic of adoption. Two web pages in my sample appeared to be sponsored by private entities, as neither of these pages provided any information identifying a sponsoring organization. Both pages displayed hyperlink-style advertisements in a text box centered near the top of the web page. A tiny icon on each page identified the advertising links as a part of a Google advertising program called AdLinks, which allows private web page sponsors to earn advertising revenue when website visitors click on ad links embedded in their websites by Google (n.a., AdSense Help, n.d.). In addition to the advertiser links in the center of the page, the International Adoption Stories web page also contained Google ads at the top of the left navigation column. The remainder of the site was arranged as a topical links page, with hyperlinked titles and short descriptions of adoption stories listed in the center column of the page. Additional topical links
appeared in a smaller column on the right side of the web page, along with two large banners labeled, “China Adoption Stories” and “Russian Adoption Stories.” The background of the Russian adoption stories banner was a stylized image of the familiar onion domes of a Russian Orthodox Church building, while the background for the China adoption stories banner contained an image resembling a Buddhist temple. Some of the topical links appeared to refer to stories that had appeared in traditional mass media formats. One of these stories was clearly labeled as a “news” story, while other story titles were suggestive of newspaper headlines. Not all stories were news stories, however. Some links pointed to parent testimonials, and at least one link pointed to an adoptee testimonial. The Adoption Stories website contained only one photographic image of the intertwined fingers of an infant and an adult. This image was part of the web page title banner.

The second private web page, Child Adoption Matters, contained advertisements for a wide range of adoption-related products, including adoption announcements, party invitations, dolls, photo frames, and other gifts, in addition to Google ads similar to those mentioned above. Primary content on this page was presented in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format. The web page contained four small, poor-quality images of children of mixed ethnicities in the title banner. It also utilized a quotation from a Texas-based motivational speaker and a Facebook plugin that allowed website visitors to post a comment directly into their personal Facebook pages from the Child Adoption Matters page. The final item on the page was a legal disclaimer that urged website visitors to “consult the services of a recommended lawyer or agency” (Foreign Child Adoption FAQs, n.d.) to receive accurate and relevant information about intercountry adoption.
Adoption Media, LLC, sponsored 17 web pages in my final sample. Adoption Media LLC is the owner of the Adoption.org, Adoption.com, and InternationalAdoption.com websites. Adoption Media LLC describes its group of websites as “the world's most popular adoption information destination, delivering more than 10 million pages of content a month, with more than 1.5 million total monthly visits to its Web sites” (n.a., About Adoption.com, Adoption Media, Nathan Gwilliam, Dale Gwilliam, n.d.). Although the adoption.com and adoption.org websites are not immediately recognizable as belonging to the same parent organization, the sole InternationalAdoption.com web page in my sample was similar in layout to the Adoption.com web pages in my sample. The InternationalAdoption.com page also contained banner and hyperlink advertisements sponsored by many of the same companies that advertised on Adoption.com. Two of the Adoption.org pages contained short articles about adoption topics; the remaining five pages were topical links pages that pointed to additional Adoption.org content. Unlike the intercountry adoption agency web pages in my sample, Adoption.com web page content included references to both intercountry and domestic adoption and also contained links to material of interest to birthparents and adoptees. Along with the articles or topical links, Adoption.com web pages also contained a significant amount of advertising. Other genres referenced or used in the Adoption.com web pages included links to “news” items, links to an e-magazine produced by Adoption Media and hosted on the Adoption.com website, photos and biographical sketches posted by parents seeking to adopt domestically, and photolists of children awaiting domestic adoption in the U.S. A search box near the top of each Adoption.org web page invited visitors to “search over 2 million adoption web pages” (n.a., Adoption, n.d.).

Nine web pages in the final sample were pages from the Adoption.com website. All of the Adoption.com web pages contained brief one- to four-paragraph articles on intercountry
adoption topics. Many of these articles used bulleted lists to highlight important elements. Each article wrapped around a large adoption agency advertisement. Banner ads appeared at the top of each web page, while brightly-colored ads for a variety of domestic and international adoption agencies surrounded articles on both sides of the page. Most of these advertisements contained photographic images of babies or very young children. Articles bore simple titles corresponding to web page names (i.e. “International Adoption” or “Pros & Cons.”) Adoption.com websites also contained search boxes, news links, links to additional content, parent profile links, and photo listings of American children awaiting domestic adoption. Unlike Adoption.org web pages, Adoption.com web pages also included logos hyperlinked to Facebook and Twitter social media sites and to Digg and Delicious content sharing sites.

All of the web pages sponsored by Adoption Media LLC could have been categorized as advocacy organization web pages. However, close analysis revealed that all of the sites used genres that were less consistent with genres used by advocacy organizations and more consistent with the genres appearing on the marketing media websites that I will describe next.

Among the marketing media-hosted sites, eHow.com and Livestrong.com were both sponsored by Demand Media, a marketing media company that uses proprietary information on consumer motivation and behavior to sell space to companies who want to reach online consumers with targeted messages. Demand Media sells advertising space on e-How web pages to marketers whose products are likely matches for e-How topics. The company promotes their e-How web page product with the claim that “more than 2 million thoughtfully researched solutions are provided in an easy-to-read manner by professional writers and topical experts” (Trusted Advice for the Curious Life, n.d.). Both Demand Media websites included pages featuring informative articles about intercountry adoption. The two e-How web pages in my
sample both appeared in the “e-How Family” section of the website. The first page contained an article briefly outlining key requirements that must be met before an intercountry adoption can be completed. Advertisements for Safeway supermarkets, Enfamil infant formula and Charmin brand tissue appeared alongside ads for law firms specializing in immigration law and child custody cases, domestic and intercountry adoption agencies, and one adoption records search firm. All of this content was, in turn, overlaid on a background graphic promoting a sweepstakes contest linked to an e-How Food web page. In addition to the topical content, the page also contained links to other pages in the e-How website addressing adoption-related topics, including, notably, the topic, “How to reverse a foreign adoption.” The second e-How web page in my sample was a topical links page containing links to additional adoption content available within the e-How website. The links were also surrounded by advertisements for businesses and services, including a number of adoption agencies and legal services firms as well as a cord blood bank seeking private clients and donors. Along with the text and advertisements described above, both of the e-How web pages contained a large number of photographic images positioned next to hyperlinked text introducing additional topics also available on e-How pages.

Demand Media also sponsored two of the web pages in my sample on its Livestrong.com website. However, because Livestrong.com targets individuals who are interested in “health, fitness and lifestyle” (n.a., About Livestrong.com, n.d.), these web pages included advertisements for fitness, health and beauty aid items such as fitness videos, vitamin water, facial cleanser, and nail polish. Livestrong.com web pages also contained advertisements for domestic adoption agencies, intercountry adoption agencies, and adoption records search firms. Like the e-How web pages, Livestrong.com web pages featured navigation tools linking to other parts of the Livestrong.com website. Livestrong.com pages featured prominent links at the top of
the web page pointing to four categories of information labeled, “Eat Healthy,” “Get Fit,” “Be Inspired,” and “Start Tracking” (Foreign adoption vs. US Adoption, n.d.). Livestrong.com web pages also included links to a photo gallery featuring slideshows about such topics as the “20 Best Muscle-Building Foods,” “Best Post-Workout Foods,” and “Easy Ways to Burn 100 Calories” (Foreign adoption vs. US Adoption, n.d.). Livestrong.com pages also contained links to “Living Well Tools,” which enabled visitors to do such things as calculate body mass index or heart rate. Significantly, some of the content on the Livestrong.com pages was inconsistent with the topical information presented elsewhere on the page. For example, both Livestrong.com web pages contained links to a video on managing teen pregnancy. Not only was this topic unrelated to the topic of intercountry adoption, it could be a difficult topic for an infertile woman to encounter on a web page about adoption. Finally, Livestrong.com offered members the option of posting comments, although no comments had yet been posted when I collected my data.

Another marketing media company, About.com, is a division of the New York Times Company (Media Kit, n.d.). The About.com intercountry adoption web page in my sample was a subpage in the “Parenting and Family” section of About.com. Like the web pages sponsored by Demand Media, the About.com page that appeared in my sample was a topical links page. Although traditional advertising graphics were used to promote Charmin tissue, a consumer product search engine, and a job search engine, the About.com page also used hyperlinked text to direct website visitors to some advertiser web pages. Outside of the three product ads and the About.com logo, there were no other graphic elements on the About.com page. The page also contained four links to non-adoption content; the four links were presented in two boxes near the bottom of the page under the heading, “About.com Special Features.”
A third marketing media company, Network Media, sponsors Families.com, a website that targets consumers who are interested in family relationships and parenting issues. My sample included one Families.com web page. This page featured an article on the criteria that different countries use to assess prospective adoptive parents. Although other marketing media pages did not identify the authors of their articles, the author of this article was clearly identified by name, photograph, and a short biographical sketch in which she was described as both a journalist and a blogger. Ten of the twelve advertisements appearing on this page were presented as hyperlinks; the remaining two ads were banner ads. A text box on the lower right side of the page contained a hyperlinked list of additional adoption content available on Families.com. Above this list was a large box containing recent posts to the Families.com Facebook page. Below the feature article was a list of user comments that had been posted on other Families.com pages, followed by a comment box in which users could post comments about the story on the current page.

The Intercountry Adoption Industry as a Genre System

As the preceding analysis shows, each of the different types of web page sponsors tended, in most cases, to use common genre repertoires. For example, each of the adoption agency web pages contained a welcome message to introduce the agency and to describe its services to prospective clients. Advocacy organization-sponsored pages replaced welcome messages with other genres, such as policy statements, statistical narratives, or topical links pages, while legal services web pages used FAQ or informative article genres. Furthermore, even when different types of web page sponsors used the same genres, they often used them in slightly different ways. For example, adoption agencies and advocacy organizations both solicited charitable donations from website visitors, but each type of organization solicited money for a different
Many of the news media-sponsored web pages were significantly different in both structure and form from other web pages in my sample, and they were also different in several important ways from traditional print news genre stories. Online news stories, for example, were shorter than standard print news stories, and some also failed to use the traditional inverted pyramid style of newswriting. Most importantly, the information in many news media web pages was not particularly new. A story about Jillian Michaels’ adoption plans, for example, had been posted to the CNN blog on May 11, 2011, but was still available nearly a month later. Likewise, a pair of two-year-old reports on a six-year-old research study on adoptee adjustment was found on the CBS News website. More interesting was the fact that the stories in most news media web pages were embedded within a page framework in which current news stories were also displayed. Thus, a two-year-old story might appear to web page visitors to be much timelier than it really was. At the same time, although news web pages were typically filled with images and links to other news stories, few of these images and links had anything to do with adoption. For this reason, I do not characterize news media as members of the intercountry adoption industry. However, since many news stories quoted prospective parents, adoption industry professionals, government representatives, or academic researchers studying adoption, news media content contains intercountry adoption industry discourse, even though it is not directly produced by intercountry adoption industry members.

News media web pages were not the only types of pages that utilized some variation of the news genre, however. Adoption agencies and government organizations also presented some information under the guise of adoption news, although once again, the information presented
varied by sponsoring organization. Traditional news media web pages contained reportage on bona fide news items including pending court cases, government policy meetings, celebrity announcements, and research study findings, while adoption industry media pages provided less timely information about more general topics related to the adoption process. In addition, although most government web pages eschewed the ‘news’ label when providing information, the U.S. Department of State web page used a box to highlight links to “the latest news” about State Department actions and changes in U.S. adoption policy. Adoption agencies also used news headings to promote agency programs or to announce agency-sponsored events. In characterizing program changes as news, adoption agency web pages reflected the same type of “mixing of the discourse practices of information-giving and advertising” that Fairclough found in his study of university marketing materials, in which “a proliferation of text types…combine[d] features of advertising with features of other genres” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 210).

Advertising in my sample of web pages was used in one of two ways. News and marketing media organizations used product, adoption agency, or services advertising to support or earn income from their web pages, while agencies, advocacy organizations and legal services organizations used their web pages as advertisements to support the organizations themselves. As a result, the advertising genre was adapted so that the use and appearance of ads varied, depending on the source. Advertisements for a wide range of products and services were prominently featured on many news and marketing media web pages. Some of these were banner ads; others were simply areas of hyperlinked text. Adoption agencies, however, typically did not include ads in their web pages. Instead, agency web pages served as agency advertisements. Indeed, some agencies placed banner ads in marketing media websites like Adoption.com so that consumers who clicked on these ads would be redirected to the agency’s website. In addition,
agencies, advocacy organizations, legal services organizations, marketing media, print and broadcast news, and even government agencies used Facebook, Twitter, or other social media to promote their organizations and drive additional traffic to organizational websites.

Although different sources used different genres in different ways, the use of social media is an excellent example of crossover of genre use between different types of organizations. For example, although Rainbow Kids described itself as an adoption advocacy organization (n.a., About Us, 2011), its web page used the topical links genre more commonly seen in marketing media web pages. Likewise, the Lawyers.com web page provided the same type of legal information that appeared in other legal services web pages, but it also contained advertisements and social media links such as those found on marketing media pages. Furthermore, the Immigration Support web page employed imagery and colors common to many government-sponsored web pages, including images of the U.S. flag and a an image of the Statue of Liberty, a prominent U.S. symbol, while the Adoption Matters web page used a legal disclaimer genre that employed language reminiscent of that found on legal services web pages. Finally, although the Adoptive Families web page prominently displayed subscription information for their print magazine that clearly identified the web page as belonging to the news media genre, the page layout and content was more similar to the layout and content of the marketing media pages in my sample than it was to other news media pages.

Although each of the different types of web page sponsors used a distinct genre repertoire, some genre crossover did occur between different sources. At the same time, many genres such as memos, letters, or annual reports, for example, were not found in the sample. Thus, the particular set of genres used in intercountry adoption industry web pages can be understood to comprise a unique genre system. This supports the claim that those organizations
that post intercountry adoption content to the web also represent a system, which I refer to as the intercountry adoption system. This system is “self-referential” (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 182) insofar as different types of organizations within the system enact “their own internal signifying system [such that] the identity of the subject and world arise imaginarily in a chain of signifiers” (1992, p. 182). According to Deetz (1992), “[Organizations]…recreate and maintain their imaginary identity by projecting themselves outward, by producing a boundary between themselves and an environment, and monitoring that environment for things that reflect their interests and concerns” (p. 182). Adoption agencies, advocacy organizations, service providers, and government and NGO organizations “project themselves outward” by producing and maintaining websites that describe orphaned children and the process of intercountry adoption in specific ways. Members of these organizations interact with one another as changes in adoption policy at the national and international level are communicated to adoption professionals working at the local level and as challenges at the local level are communicated to policy makers at the national and international levels. Moreover, adoption agency professionals, legal professionals, government administrators, and adoption advocates actively monitor adoption policy information, news, and scholarly research, all of which is posted online. Finally, many adoption agencies and legal services firms place advertising in adoption media or marketing media websites, while others sponsor advocacy organization events. All of these organizations benefit, individually, corporately, directly, or indirectly, from the practice of intercountry adoption. As a result, it is in the best interest of industry members to use any tools at their disposal, including organizational websites, to recreate and maintain their identities as powerful advocates for orphaned children and families. In the following sections, I will discuss the specific ways in
which systematically distorted communication was used in intercountry adoption industry websites.

Discursive Construction of Children in Intercountry Adoption System Discourse

The first two research questions asked how orphaned children are constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse and how discursive constructions of orphaned children functioned to reinforce capitalist ideology. Detailed analysis of the language and images in intercountry adoption industry web pages shows that orphaned children are constructed in industry web pages as parentless, destitute exemplars of exotic difference who anxiously await the arrival of U.S. American parent-rescuers. Web pages used systematically distorted communication in the form of naturalization, neutralization, pacification, and subjectification of experience to (re)produce the intercountry adoption system by constructing the bodies of children as a legitimate medium of exchange while supporting the notion that commerce represents a viable solution for conditions of social inequity.

Naturalization: Children Need Families

In processes of naturalization, socially constructed notions of reality are treated as if they are “transparent renderings of the external world” (Deetz, 1992, p. 190) with the result that “one view of the subject matter is frozen as the way the thing is” (p. 190). Intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample used language and images that naturalized the role of adoptive families in the lives of orphaned children using a particular reading of the family in which family relationships are romanticized, family composition is heteronormative, and adoptive family membership supplants any previous relationships between children and their birth families.

Many web pages in my sample contained language that functioned to discursively sever children from their birth families, thereby creating the conditions under which adoptive parents
might more easily be imagined stepping in to parent an orphaned child. The following text, for example, appeared in the e-How foreign adoption requirements page: “Millions of children around the world have no family, making adoption of a child from a foreign country a growing option for parents who want to expand their families” (Wiki, n.d., emphasis added). This text discursively disconnects children from birth family and extended relatives by suggesting that these people simply do not exist, even though the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (2001) lists a number of conditions under which U.S. citizens may adopt foreign children with one or more living family members from Hague Convention states:

Under this new section of law, the adopted child's two living natural parents must be incapable of providing proper care for the child. In addition, they must freely give their written irrevocable consent to terminate their legal relationship with the child, and to allow the child to be adopted and to emigrate. The written irrevocable consent also may be given by a single parent when the child has one sole or surviving parent because of the death, disappearance, abandonment or desertion by the other parent, by previous adoptive parents, or by other persons or institutions that retain legal custody of the child (The Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000, 2001).

Clearly, children who qualify for adoption under these standards will have, if nothing else, a legal relationship with at least one biological parent. To suggest that all children in the intercountry adoption system have no family is to effectively deny the natal relationships of these children, thus “[signaling] a freestanding child, ready to be made anew” (Dorow S., 2006, p. 19).

Other web pages in the sample naturalized children’s separation from their birth families in similar ways. For example, by posting a testimonial video under the title, “Reel Families” (Children’s House International Adoptions, n.d.) Children’s House Adoptions used a play on words that called up the film-based antecedents of the video genre while also implying that the adoptive family featured in the video was somehow a more authentic or genuine family than the child’s birth family. In the same way, Adoption Options, Inc. (n.d.) used only a portion of a
famous line from a William Shakespeare play (“There was a star danced, and under that I was born”) (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 198), rather than the entire line, (“No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born”) (p. 198, emphasis added) in its web page header, thereby obscuring the reality that birth mothers alone labor to give life to their children, a crucial point conveyed in the complete line but absent in the web page text.

Language in yet another web page claimed that “children languishing in orphanages around the world deserve loving homes, too” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). In this case, the language separates children from their families of origin by implying that children come from orphanages rather than from birth parents.

More than 75 percent (n=54) of the web pages in my sample used the word ‘family’ to refer exclusively to prospective adopters, thereby rendering children’s birth families all but invisible. Referring to prospective adoptive parents rather than birth parents or other relatives as family discursively erases children’s personal histories so the children can be re-imagined as full members of U.S. families (Dorow S., 2006). This discursive strategy was visually reinforced in web pages that used images of unaccompanied children alongside written texts describing children’s need for adoptive families. On the eHow web page, for example, a series of images appeared in a vertical row on the right side of the page adjacent to text describing children without families. Two of the five images on this page were photos of very young children. One child was seated in a nondescript rattan chair and another was posed against a stark black background that offered no indication as to the child’s location. Neither of the children appeared to be attended by a parent or other caretaker. As a result, the images mirrored the implied claim that children awaiting adoption in the intercountry adoption system are alone and adrift—in other words, ready to be assimilated into new adoptive families. A third image on the same page
depicted a smiling man and woman, each carrying a young child in their arms. The group stood together in front of the crumbling ruins of an unidentified ancient structure. While there was no explicit statement indicating that this image represented an adoptive family, the image illustrated and accompanied hyperlinked text that read, “Adoption guidelines for foreign children.” The contrast between images of unaccompanied children and of smiling parents with children clearly communicated the notion that adoptive parents can satisfy orphans’ need for families.

Although a handful of adoption advocacy, mass media, and academic-sponsored web pages in my sample did make mention of birth families, these references were few and far between and did little to counter the prevailing discourse that naturalized the adoptive family as the “real” family. Indeed, the “Reel Families” web page did reference a “birth mom,” but the ten-second reference did not appear until two minutes and forty-five seconds into the nearly six-minute long video. Furthermore, as I will explain later, the segment functioned primarily to support the notion that this birth mom was not a suitable caretaker for the child she had by this time already relinquished. Another web page (n.a., Foreign Adoption of Special Needs Kids Promoted, 2011) likewise mentioned birth families, but only in the context of children’s abandonment. In addition, a story on the CBS News website included a statement that adopted children “come from broken families” (Study Disputes Adoption Myths, 2009), while a scholarly article used a hypothetical Guatemalan birthmother and her hypothetical Guatemalan child to introduce the topic of “globalization and its paradoxical effects on the "private" space of the family” (Briggs L., 2009, p. 1)—a topic that did little to address the more immediate concerns of prospective parents seeking information about intercountry adoption. In short, these few references to birth families did little to counterbalance the many references to children in the vast
majority of intercountry adoption industry web pages who were described as seeking “a home and family [to] call their very own” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.).

Many of the web pages in the sample also contained text that constructed adoptive homes as safe, love-filled places and adoptive family relationships as “permanent” relationships. International Family Services, for example, described their services this way: “We are committed to bridging the gap between the orphan child in need of a mother and father, and prospective parents who can provide a home where children can grow in peace, security and love” (n.a., Home, n.d.). Other adoption industry web pages used similar terms to construct adoptive families in comparable ways. The U.S. State Department web page, for example, noted that adoption “…is a wonderful way for many children to find a loving, permanent home” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), while Adoption Options, Inc. claimed to specialize in “finding stable homes and loving families for children” (There was a star danced, and under that I was born, n.d.). Such constructions fail to account for the dozen or more intercountry adoptions that are dissolved or disrupted every year (FY 2010 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions, 2010).

Finally, intercountry adoption industry discourse in my sample of web pages also used language and images to naturalize heteronormative family construction. Web page texts, for example, that suggested adoptive families provide orphaned children “with a real Mom and Dad” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.) called upon socially constructed notions of the nuclear family that hearken back to the previous century (Allan, Hawker, S., & Crow, 2001). Furthermore, none of the agency web pages in my sample used images that clearly depicted children together with two adults of the same sex. Children were either shown alone or in groupings containing one man with a child, one woman with a child, or a man and woman together with one or more children. In the same way, adoption agency texts never explicitly
addressed non-heterosexual families, although one announcement that read, “Doors have opened to qualified single applicants in CHINA!!”) (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d., emphasis in original) may have been written to appeal to non-heterosexual couples seeking to obtain a child by arranging for just one member of the couple to adopt the child as a single adult. In fact, only 11 percent \((n = 9)\) of all adoption industry web pages in my sample contained references to non-heterosexual couples. Five of these references were found in media marketing web pages in the form of links to information about “lesbian adoption” or “gay adoption.” These links were always embedded within text boxes that also contained a large number of other words denoting popular adoption topics. The remaining four references were found 1) on the U.S. State Department web page in the form of a hyperlink to a page entitled, “Adoption by a GLBT parent,” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), 2) on one academic web page, and 3) in two news media web pages containing stories about Jillian Michaels’ plans to adopt a child from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In both of these news web pages, references to homosexuality were found in the comment sections appended to the news articles; the articles themselves did not explicitly address the sexual orientation of Michaels, a single woman. As a result, while it was possible to find references to non-heterosexual couples in the web pages in my sample, these references were generally placed in locations that made them difficult to find.

One non-agency web page did contain an image that could have represented a non-heterosexual couple. This image, which appeared on a marketing media page as a part of an advertisement for an insurance agency, depicted two adults together with a child. However, the image offered ambiguous signals that made it difficult to determine how the picture should be interpreted. One of the two adults in the picture was obviously female. She wore a low-cut V-neck sweater and her hair was gathered into a short, casual ponytail. She appeared to be
relatively young—perhaps 25 or 30 years of age. The second individual, who appeared to be at least 20 years older than the first, was heavier and had gray, close-cropped hair. This individual wore a t-shirt/over shirt combination of the type commonly worn by both males and females. Absent additional cues, it was impossible to determine whether or not the older adult was male or female. Furthermore, even if a viewer were to conclude that the second adult was female, the apparent age disparity between the two suggested that the older woman could easily represent the child’s grandparent. As the image appeared in an advertisement for a legal services firm, the accompanying text, which asked, “Have you looked into your legal coverage lately?” provided little additional information could be used to interpret the image. Thus, whether or not this particular image did, in fact, picture a non-heterosexual couple, the visual and textual cues in this advertisement were so ambiguous that the photo could not be definitively interpreted as representing any particular type of family relationship.

In sum, an overwhelming majority of the intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample used text and images that naturalized heteronormative family construction, that described unrealistically positive post-adoption family relationships, and that naturalized the processes by which children are legally disconnected from their birth families in order to be legally connected to an adoptive family. This discourse denigrated and in some cases denied the very existence of children’s birth parents and extended families while simultaneously romanticizing a particular reading of adoptive families so that prospective parents—married, heterosexual ones, anyway—could begin to imagine themselves filling the role of loving, permanent parents for an orphaned child.

Neutralization: Orphans Need Rescue
Neutralization, “the process by which value positions become hidden and value-laden activities are treated as if they were value-free” (Deetz, 1992, p. 191), was also evident in intercountry adoption in adoption industry web pages in the form of Orientalist imagery and tropes that were used to describe orphaned children and the practice of adopting children from foreign countries. These “judgments disguised as descriptions” (Deetz, 1992, p. 192) painted American prospective parents in the familiar trope of benevolent rescuers of frail and needy yet flexible foreign children. Such characterizations were particularly apparent in descriptions and images of children, in references to foreign countries, and in language and images that characterized adoptive parents as on a heroic expedition to locate and retrieve their children from distant lands.

Foreign orphans were depicted in intercountry adoption web industry pages in two ways: as desperately needy waifs or as exotic exemplars of their birth cultures. Indeed, many adoption agency web pages described children using terms such as “weak and frail” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.), “vulnerable” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.; When You Come Home), “suffering” (n.a., Foreign Adoption of Special Needs Kids Promoted, 2011) or “abandoned” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.; Lagorio, 2009). Such language plays upon paternalistic notions of Western superiority by implying that foreign families and, by extension, foreign countries are incapable of providing proper (i.e. Western-style, professionalized) care for children. “Third World” (Foreign Country Adoption Process, n.d.) children who have “lost their parents” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.), may therefore never have the opportunity to “reach their potential” (Welcome, n.d.)—unless someone (from the morally-superior, resource-rich West) responds to “their cry for a chance in life” (International Family Services, n.d.).
Web pages also used images to reinforce the notion that foreign children are in desperate need of rescue. In the years since Cartwright (2003) buttressed claims that parents “shopped” for orphaned children by looking at photos on adoption agency websites (Park Nelson, 2006), most agencies have, at the behest of sending countries, stopped posting images of specific children and infants awaiting adoption on agency home pages. Nevertheless, most agency web pages in my sample did use multiple images of children and infants to represent children who might be in need of adoption. The vast majority of the images in my sample depicted children who appeared to be under the age of five. Holt International (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.), for example, used 45 images of children in its three-minute sponsorship video; 30 of these images pictured very young children and of those, eight were infants. Only one child in the video appeared to suffer from a possible disability. The same pattern was seen in a second Holt International video (Get to Know Holt). Once again, the majority of children appeared to be younger than age five. Three images in this second video also depicted White adoptive parents with children; in all of these images, parents were pictured with young toddlers, rather than with older children or children suffering obvious health problems.

Web page images also presented foreign children as “authentic objects of culture” (Park Nelson, 2006) by presenting children as exemplars of the particular culture into which they had been born. The Get to Know Holt video, for example, contained two images of young children dressed in red brocade pajamas with traditional Chinese-style mandarin collars (Get to Know Holt). Another agency, Chinese Children International, likewise used pictures of smiling toddlers, both dressed in red, on its agency home page (Chinese Children Charities, n.d.). Although neither of the children on this web page wore traditional Chinese-style clothing, the image of one child was superimposed over a large red banner background containing images of
the Great Wall of China, a pagoda-like structure, (untranslated) Chinese lettering, and the agency logo (which incorporated a map of China and a line drawing representing a child.) Images of young children in traditional red costumes or wearing red clothing calls up “a belief in China that when a child is born, an ‘invisible red thread’ connects the child's soul to all the people -- past, present and future -- who will play a part in that child's life (Lindbergh, 2010). In short, these examples show that images of children dressed in traditional costumes or children dressed in red alongside images of famous Chinese structures, Chinese letters, and written texts work together to depict Chinese children as exotic exemplars of Chinese culture.

While web page images and texts called upon Orientalist notions of Otherness to objectify children’s bodies as desperately needy and children’s birth cultures as sources of “fantasy, novelty and mystery” (Lalvani, 1995, p. 274), they also used images to suggest that such children are fully capable of fitting into their new American families after adoption. The web page of Wasatch International Adoptions, for example, featured a photo of a smiling Chinese child, dressed in a white tee shirt emblazoned with an American flag, sitting in a little red wagon before a background resembling a waving American flag (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.). The Chinese Children International web page (Chinese Children Charities, n.d.) likewise included a small snapshot of a young Chinese girl, once again wearing a red dress but this time also wearing a large red Santa Claus hat, while the Families Thru International Adoption web page (Families Thru International Adoption, n.d.) featured a photo of a smiling Chinese girl wearing a red and gold princess costume, complete with tiara, and carrying a plastic pumpkin. These images and others (including one of a toddler dressed in a spotted puppy dog costume and another of a young girl wearing silly pumpkin eyeglasses) resignified adoptees as fully American by suggesting that such children can could easily slip the cultural bonds of their
birth countries and assimilate seamlessly into American culture, where they will enjoy celebrating cherished holidays like Halloween and Christmas. More ominously, perhaps, such images also suggest that adopted children can easily take on new roles, including those of son, daughter, sister, brother, and of course, citizen.

While Chinese children were most frequently pictured in ways that called up Orientalist notions of exotic difference, children from Africa were also pictured in some adoption agency web pages. In contrast to clean, often-smiling Chinese children, who were typically pictured individually, dark-skinned children were often pictured in groups, wearing ill-fitting or dirty clothing and standing on dirt floors or along dirt roads. Children’s House International Adoption, for example, used such an image to accompany a donation solicitation. In addition to calling up Orientalist notions of Third-world poverty, this image also included a young adult male who appeared to be an orphanage worker or director, holding a fly whisk of the sort used by members of royalty for traditional ceremonial purposes in parts of Africa (Blier, 1998). Another image showed five dark-skinned barefoot children, standing on a grassy bank above a caption that read, “The Orphans of Zambia” (Welcome to Faithful Adoption, n.d.). Little Miracles (Welcome, n.d.) used 12 small images of fair-skinned children in its collage-style banner image, but saved a larger image of a single dark-skinned girl sitting on a wooden chair placed on a patch of dirt and grass to accompany a hyperlinked caption that read, “This child needs a home.”

Although the adoption agency web pages in the sample used language and images that constructed foreign children as the Other, only one non-agency web page in my sample used such an image to call up Orientalist notions of difference. This web page, sponsored by Adoption.com (Types of International Adoption, n.d.) featured a banner advertisement for European Adoption Consultants, Inc. The advertisement pictured a young, blonde-haired, blue-
eyed boy of perhaps five or six years of age, smiling and looking directly at the camera. The background image consisted of a set of spires from a Russian Orthodox Church building. By juxtaposing images of a Russian Orthodox building and a White child, this ad likewise constructed Russian children as both exotically different and as compliant enough to be easily assimilated into a White adoptive family.

Since adoption agencies use their web pages to promote their services to prospective parents (Quiroz P. A., 2007), it was not surprising to find that all of the agency web pages in my sample made some reference to the countries with which the agency worked or, more generally, to agency “programs.” Half of the agencies, however, highlighted the international nature of their practice by listing the particular countries in which they worked directly on their agency home pages. Of these, several used language or images in ways that also called upon Orientalist notions of Western superiority or exotic difference. Adoption Options, Inc., for example, listed the countries in which it works as “our countries” as if to imply ownership of the countries themselves, which included Russia, Mexico, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. The agency also included the following statement on its web page: “Adoption Options is an International and Overseas adoptions firm that specializes in Russian adoption as well as other countries: Russia, Kazakhstan (sic), Kyrgyzstan, and Mexico” (There was a star danced, and under that I was born, n.d.). In identifying the agency as both an international and an overseas firm, the text discursively separated the agency’s position in the West from the distant overseas locations from which the agency provides children to adoptive parents. Furthermore, in misspelling the word ‘Kazakhstan,’ the text simultaneously discounted the importance of the former Soviet state (since it was not necessary to spell the name correctly,) and proclaimed its incomprehensible foreignness by suggesting that the name was too difficult to spell correctly.
Three agencies, Dillon International (n.d.), European Adoption Consultants (n.d.), and Families Thru International Adoption (n.d.), used national flags as proxies for the names of the countries in which they worked. Of these, Dillon International and Families Thru International Adoption labeled each flag with the name of the country it represented. However, European Adoption Consultants, Inc. used small images of ten different flags in its web page header without identifying the specific countries represented by each flag. Elsewhere on the page, the agency identified the countries in which it worked with a hyperlinked list of country names adjacent to small thumbnail-size images of children. Each image appeared to represent a child from the country named in the hyperlinked text below. Closer examination revealed that the flags on this web page header did not directly correspond with the countries in which the agency worked. In this case, then, the flags served to signify national difference rather than to identify the particular countries in which the agency worked.

A third manner in which the web pages in my sample used neutralization to describe children in terms that both revealed and concealed Orientalist notions of difference was through the use of “typical encapsulations: the journey, the history, the fable, the stereotype, the polemical confrontation… [as] lenses through which the Orient is experienced” (Said, 1979, p. 58). Agency (e.g. Children’s Hope International, n.d.), government (e.g. Intercountry Adoption, n.d.) and marketing media pages (e.g. International, n.d.) offered detailed information about the adoption process in “adoption guide” booklets, pamphlets, or hyperlinks. In characterizing these informational publications as ‘guides,’ web pages invoked Orientalist imagery of a Native guide escorting a caravan of Western adventurers through a dangerous landscape. Likewise, adoption agency web pages often used words like “journey” (Welcome to the Intercountry Adoption Journey, n.d.) or “quest” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.) to describe the adoption
process. European Adoption Consultants, for example, invited web page visitors to “Click here to begin your adoption journey!” (European Adoption Consultants, n.d.). Some pages characterized the journey as “amazing” (Sharing Adoption Stories and Information), although one page also noted it could be “complicated” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). Holt International suggested it could serve as “a guide who will walk with you through this important life journey, who will be there every step of the way” (Get to Know Holt).

Nowhere was this journey or “adoption adventure” (There was a star danced, and under that I was born, n.d.) more evident than in the “Reel Families” (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d.) video on the Children’s House International web page with the caption, “Experience the joy of one of our family’s (sic) adoption journey” (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d.). The film, which documented a trip taken by two parents to adopt a child from Ethiopia, used superimposed titles as narration. The film began with the words, “Ethiopia Bound, March 25, 2010. Lots of security checks, lots of coffee. Dubai, Saudi Arabia.” These words set the stage in true Orientalist fashion, by making it clear that the parents are embarking on a long journey to a distant land. As powerful Westerners, they are able to face down potential dangers and hardships with security checks and coffee. Images of clouds and an airplane engine frame the next title, which reads, “Our first sights of ET (now forever in our hearts.)” The two capital letters ‘ET,’ in this title and elsewhere in the video, were used to signify Ethiopia. However, for some, the letters might be reminiscent of another film, entitled, *ET: The Extraterrestrial*. For those viewers, the letters might provide an added connotative message that this couple was traveling to a place so foreign that it might as well be in outer space. The next series of snapshots and video clips appeared to have been taken from inside a car as it traveled along a dirt road past decrepit buildings and groups of unsupervised street children. This series of
images stood in stark contrast to the type of street scenes common in the West, similarly highlighting the alien-ness of the developing world. This construction, however, was complicated in the next caption, which read, “Our neighbors.” This caption appeared over more images of goats, donkeys, and people in ethnic dress. Here, through the use of the personal pronoun ‘our,’ the caption brought the exotic difference of Ethiopia into close proximity with the adoptive family.

After establishing the great distance the parents traveled to reach Ethiopia, the video turned to images that showed the parents arriving at an orphanage, where they were greeted by a group of toddlers, all holding bouquets of roses wrapped in cellophane similar to the kind used in U.S. American grocery stores and florist shops. One child, in particular, was highlighted in these images; shortly thereafter, this child was shown in the arms of his new adoptive parents. After more images of the boy with his new parents under the title, “Gotcha Day,” the film turned to focus on the boy’s orphanage with the caption, “His life at the Thomas Center...His nannies...his bed.” Here, a succession of images depicted Native women in spotless white uniforms tending to children eating large bowls of gruel, the boy standing in a crib, and a clothesline laden with clothing and bedding. Such images suggested that although the child had been well cared for in his orphanage, the orphanage environment lacked the personal warmth and the technical capacity for care that the new parents could provide.

The next series of images was entitled, “His life beginning with us.” Here, a photo of the boy in a bathtub was followed by several more images of the boy posing and playing with his adoptive parents, posing with an African man, eating, and playing ball. The next caption, “Embassy Day,” was superimposed over a picture of the boy in a long-sleeved shirt, this time being held by both parents. In this section, the boy’s life in the orphanage was not only
contrasted against his new life with his new parents, the language and images used in the video also discursively negated his previous life by suggesting that his life really ‘began’ with his adoption. The first (and perhaps most important) activity in this series of images was the bath, in which the parents washed away both the physical dirt of Ethiopia and the psychic dirt of his disadvantaged beginnings. Soon thereafter, the boy was pictured in clean new Western-style clothing, also symbolic of his new American life.

This video was unique among all other items in my sample, because it included a section dedicated specifically to the child’s birth family. This segment was entitled, “Meeting his Birth Mom, Sophia from Assela, ET.” The image that accompanied this text showed the adoptive parents posing with a small African woman who held what appeared to be a framed photograph. After this one brief image, a photo of a rough wooden shack appeared above the words, “A street house (like where he lived with his birthmom.)” The first image did acknowledge the birth mother, but because it did not include the boy, the boy’s possible relationship with his birth mother remained shrouded. Likewise, there was no indication as to the whereabouts of the boy’s birth father. Any consideration of possible ties between the birth mother and her son were further quelled by the second image of a very tattered shack, patched with plastic garbage sacks. Although this was not, in fact, the birth mother’s home, but only one “like” the place the boy had once lived, the image suggested that the boy had lived in desperate poverty and would therefore benefit through adoption into an American family.

After paying this ten-second homage to the boy’s origins, the video turned to a 35-second-long video taken during “His Goodbye Party at the Thomas Center.” These images contrasted sharply with the poverty of the previous images while reinforcing the child’s cultural difference by highlighting distinctives of Ethiopian culture. During the party, for example, the
boy wore a white African-style robe with a red, yellow, and green sash with lettering in a foreign language. In another photo, the sash had been tied around the top of the boy’s head like a scarf. In this image, the adoptive parents also wore white clothing. Next, an image of hands being ceremonially washed with a bowl and pitcher and another of a large platter containing what appeared to be ceremonial foods was followed by video of costumed young adults dancing. This series of images appeared to have been taken at a restaurant or other entertainment venue.

Following the party scenes, another series of images appeared, this time under the caption, “Ethiopia Countryside.” Water buffalo, donkeys, grass-thatched circular huts, and men on horseback gave way to images of the boy being carried on the shoulders of a black man along a path toward what appeared to be the ruins of an ancient bridge. Once again, these pictures highlighted the backwardness and potential dangers of Ethiopia, in which animals take the place of technology and as men, some carrying flags and shields, peered inside the automobile in which the parent-videographer was sitting as they swarmed past on horseback. Finally, the video drew to a close, beginning with the caption, “Saying goodbye to our precious friends.” Images of the parents standing with agency staff members, drivers, and translators were replaced by another image of clouds and sky behind the caption, “Going home: 30+ hours ahead.” This caption once again emphasized the vast distance between Ethiopia and the U.S., which was, in fact, home to the parents but never before seen by the child. This caption dissolved into a short series of photographs in which the boy was pictured standing in an airport and then eating a McDonald’s meal. In these images, the video began the work of re-writing the child as fully American—riding in airplanes (instead of on donkeys) and eating a meal produced by a company that represents the quintessence of American cultural imperialism. These images, finally,
dissolved into one final photograph of people waiting at an airport for a flight to arrive before the video faded into a final image of clouds and sky.

The sound track that accompanied this video presentation was a song entitled, “O Praise Him (All this for a King)” (2003) by the Christian recording group The David Crowder Band. The lyrics to this song, which undergirds the video presentation described above, invoke a rescue theme that is mimicked in the language and images in the video:

Oh the sound of salvation come,
The sound of rescued ones,
And all this for our king,
Angels join to sing, all for Christ our King…
…How infinite and sweet,
This love so rescuing,
Oh how infinitely sweet,
This great love that has redeemed (O Praise Him (All This For a King), 2003).

Lyrics such as these conflate the parents’ religious belief in salvation from death with their own adoption journey, constructed in this video as a mission of mercy to bring a different type of salvation to a needy foreign child.

In summary, texts and images on intercountry adoption industry web pages constructed foreign children as victims in desperate need of help who are nonetheless suitable subjects for adoption, fully capable of slipping the cultural bonds of their birth countries and assimilating seamlessly into American culture. Web page texts constructed American prospective parents as heroic rescuers of these frail and needy foreign children, who are exotic enough to be interesting but not so different as to represent a threat to “the illusion of cohesive kinship and national belonging” (Dorow S., 2006) that adoptive parents seek to reproduce. To accomplish all of these tasks, intercountry adoption web pages used Orientalist discourses of Otherness in language and images describing orphaned foreign children, in images and references to foreign countries and cultures, and in tales of rescue that can best be summed up in a quote taken from a mass media
page in my sample in which television celebrity and prospective parent Jillian Michaels told CNN reporter Mark Marino: “… when you rescue something, it's like rescuing a part of yourself” (Marino, 2011).

*Pacification: Children need Protection*

Web pages also used language and images to sidestep questions about the ways in which intercountry adoption may contribute to, rather than solve, problems associated with child abduction and child trafficking in parts of the developing world. A type of systematically distorted communication known as pacification (Deetz S. A., 1992), discourse that acknowledges areas of conflict while leaving underlying problems unaddressed, has historically been used to silence members of powerless groups in society (Deetz, 1992). In the intercountry adoption industry, pacification functions to reproduce the power and authority of the intercountry adoption system by precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amount of money flowing through the system functions to commodify children. This is accomplished in discourse that presents the Hague Convention as a safeguard against child trafficking, in language that normalizes the high cost of adoptions, and in charitable contribution solicitations to assuage prospective and adoptive parents’ concerns about children left behind.

Although child trafficking continues to be a serious concern (Smolin, 2006), the topic of child trafficking appeared in just eight web pages in my sample. In each case, trafficking was discussed within the context of information about protections afforded to children and families through the Hague Convention. None of the texts suggested that child trafficking is an ongoing problem. One text, for example, read as follows:

The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (the Convention) is a multilateral treaty between the United States and approximately 75 other countries. The Convention provides safeguards to protect children and families involved in adoptions between participating countries. The
Convention also works to prevent the abduction, sale, or trafficking of children (Intercountry adoption: Where do I start?, 2009).

Another web page described the Hague Convention as follows:

According to the United States Office of Children’s Issues, inter-country adoptions that involve (sic) American parents are safeguarded by the Hague Adoption Convention. More than 75 countries are a part of the convention. The Hague Adoption Convention was created to ensure that international adoptions were always in the best interests of the child. The Hague Convention was also designed to prevent the exploitation, trafficking or sale of children (Wiki, n.d.).

In these passages, the Hague Convention was described as either a source of protection for "children and families” or (incorrectly) as a treaty designed primarily to protect the interests of American parents. The goal of preventing child trafficking appears only at the end of each paragraph; in both cases, the prevention of child trafficking and exploitation is presented as an ancillary objective of the Convention rather than as the primary goal of the treaty (Parra-Aranguren, 1993).

The Hague Convention home page, another web page in my sample, described the goal of the Convention in slightly different terms:

The Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention) protects children and their families against the risks of illegal, irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad. This Convention, which also operates through a system of national Central Authorities, reinforces the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 21) and seeks to ensure that intercountry adoptions are made in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights, and to prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993).

Although this passage also relegates the words “traffic in children” to the final sentence of the paragraph, in this case, the phrase is used to support the claim that the Convention protects the best interests of children and families by explaining how the Convention does so. However, this passage is also ambiguous as it suggests that the Convention protects “children and their families” without specifying which families are protected by the Convention. Since “illegal,
irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad” present risks to adoptive families who risk losing significant amounts of time, money, or other resources due to the illegal actions of unethical adoption service providers as well as to birth families who may lose a child due to abduction or coercion or to children who may lose access to their own birth families through child abduction, prospective adoptive parents may understand these texts to mean simply that the Hague Convention will protect them from becoming targets of illegal or unethical adoption schemes. More importantly, like the other web page texts in my sample that described the role of the Hague Convention in the prevention of child trafficking, all three of these texts failed to explain why child trafficking is even a concern in intercountry adoption. Thus, language that presents the Hague Convention as a safeguard against child trafficking allows the intercountry adoption industry to reinforce the status quo by suggesting that child trafficking has been addressed by the Hague Convention and is therefore no longer a matter for concern.

A second way in which intercountry adoption industry web pages employed pacification to gloss over the topic of commodification was through the use of language that normalized the high cost of intercountry adoption. More than 52 percent ($n=37$) web pages (including 14 of the 19 adoption agency pages in the sample) addressed the topic of money in some way. In some web pages, the high cost of adoption was acknowledged but then immediately mitigated with an offer of financial aid for families interested in adoption. Dillon International, for example, addressed the high cost of adoption in this way: “Affording an adoption doesn't have to ‘break the bank.’ More resources are available to families than ever before” (Dillon International, n.d.). This statement appeared in a text box adjacent to an illustration of a child’s piggy bank. By using a piggy bank instead of a 401k statement or a mortgage note (either of which would be a more accurate representation of the financial resources required to complete an intercountry adoption.)
Dillon International visually and discursively trivialized the significant amounts of money that change hands in intercountry adoption. Other web pages offered “financial assistance” (Welcome to Adoption Avenues Agency, n.d.), in the form of grants or scholarships (A home for every child, n.d.) or “low interest adoption loans” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.) to help prospective parents manage the significant costs of adoption. The high price of intercountry adoptions was also alleviated in offers for free or discounted information (Children's Hope International, n.d.) or services, such as free registration, for new clients (Children of All Nations, n.d.). By implying that agencies shared prospective parents’ interest in moderating the admittedly high costs of adoption, intercountry adoption industry members masked the financial benefits they would receive if a prospective parent decided to use their services. One legal services page, for example, suggested that parents could use their legal support service to save money on legal fees by submitting their own adoption applications “without the assistance of an immigration lawyer” (n.a., Adoption of Foreign Children by United States Citizens, n.d.).

Marketing media web pages also addressed the high cost of adoptions in a variety of ways. Several marketing media pages contained general information about intercountry adoption costs. Two of these pages estimated costs to range between $15,000 and $30,000, while the third page suggested the costs could go as high as $40,000. Another page, eHow.com, provided a lower cost estimate than other web pages by separating out some adoption expenses, including “the cost of a visa and mandatory visits to and from the foreign country” (Foreign adoption vs. US Adoption, n.d.). Another page contained a link to an article describing factors to consider, including, among other things, the “cost involved with the particular country” (International, n.d.), followed by two additional links to pages that explained the provisions of the Hague Convention and then a link to an advertisement for “discounted airfare for adoption travel.” A
total of 12 web pages, including seven marketing media pages, also contained links to pages with information about the $13,170 in U.S. tax credits per eligible child (Adoption Tax Credit, n.d.) currently available to families who adopt internationally (e.g. (European Adoption Consultants, n.d.; Children of All Nations, n.d.; Christian World Adoption, n.d.).

While nearly half of the web pages in my sample included language that acknowledged the significant costs associated with intercountry adoption, agencies always expressed these costs as “country” costs (International, n.d.), “adoption” costs (Intercountry adoption statistics, n.d.), or “program” costs (Christian World Adoption, n.d.), rather than as “child” costs. Furthermore, none of the web pages in my sample contained either language or images that suggested parents pay for anything other than adoption services, despite the fact that such services are only performed with the understanding that parents expect to conclude the transaction with the adoption of a child from a foreign country. In short, web page texts discursively blurred the linkages between agency fees and agency products (i.e. adoptable children) by focusing on agency services and downplaying exorbitant adoption costs.

A third way in which intercountry adoption industry web pages masked the commodification of children was through the use of charitable contribution solicitations. Eight of the agency web pages in my sample contained donation solicitations in the form of plain buttons or banners containing phrases like “donate to orphans” e.g. (Adoption ARK, n.d.) or “make a donation” (Chinese Children Charities, n.d.). Some web pages also used logos for charitable organizations such as Children’s Charities of America (Christian World Adoption, n.d.) or Independent Charities of America (Families Thru International Adoption, n.d.), accrediting bodies such as the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (Children's Hope International, n.d.) or nonprofit certifying organizations such as Interaction (Holt International,
n.d.) to demonstrate financial integrity in their fundraising efforts. Holt International, for example, posted logos for InterAction and the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability on its homepage, which also contained a link directing visitors to a 3-1/2 minute slideshow that described the agency’s extensive child sponsorship plan. The slideshow, which featured multiple images of children of color in Third-world settings, was set to a sound track of an instrumental version of the Grammy-Winning song “Viva la Vida” (Martin & Berryman, 2009). The slideshow used written narration in the form of brief phrases and short sentences to describe Holt’s program and encourage viewers to participate in “sponsor-funded programs [to help]…build better lives for sponsored children and the children around them” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.). A careful review, however, revealed that the Holt sponsorship plan funds an extensive system of orphanages, clinics, and child care facilities that the organization uses to identify children for its intercountry adoption programs. The narration begins,

Holt International finds families for children
The children Holt serves have lost their parents or are in danger of losing their families
Holt's overseas staff identifies these homeless, abandoned and vulnerable children.

This portion of the narration uses discourses of neutralization and naturalization to construct children as rescuable Others who have lost or who will soon lose their birth families and will therefore be available to join the adoptive families that Holt International will find for them. The images on these slides, meanwhile, show a succession of children, alone, in settings that can easily be interpreted as locations in the developing world. Young children of color with dirty hair and unkempt clothing stand alone on dirt paths, behind makeshift fences, or in small groups. Next, the narration describes why the children need help: “The children often come into Holt's care weak and frail, due to illness or poverty.” Here, the image dissolves into a photo of a medical care facility in which tightly swaddled infant children sleep in state-of-the-art incubators.
with digital monitors. Although the video never explains the mechanisms by which children “come into Holt's care,” the contrast between the two sets of images is striking.

Next, the narration acknowledges Hague Convention provisions that intercountry adoption should be a measure of last resort with the words, “Holt serves children and families by helping them to remain or be returned to their birth families.” The slide here shows a young Asian child in the arms of an Asian woman. “If that's not possible,” the narration continues, “we look for in-country adoption, and finally, international adoption.” Here, the slide dissolves into another image of a child alone. Next, the narration uses a discourse of legitimation in noting that “Holt always does what is best for the children, developing plans to find the best temporary and permanent solution for each child.” This text accompanies an image of an Asian baby, this time being held by an Asian woman in surgical scrubs. Finally, the narration returns to the charitable donation appeal with the words, “Child sponsorship is part of the plan.” Once again, the accompanying image connotes Third world poverty with two young children standing in the dirt near a dirt-walled structure. Adults in the picture face away from the children and are themselves faceless as only their lower torsos and legs are visible.

The slideshow narration continues with several slides that describe the nature of the Holt program in familiar terms. Sponsors are described as “people who care about children and the people in children's lives.” The narration explains that “sponsors provide “direct aid to children in need of food, shelter, clothing and medical care” and that sponsorship “is a way of raising financial resources for children.” The images that accompany these texts show children eating and standing together in lines, suggesting that their needs for food, care, and perhaps discipline were being met through the Holt program. Next, the narrative explains that sponsorship provides sponsors with “…a rich, rewarding experience...” Here, the image once again calls upon
Orientalist tropes of rescue by picturing a dark-skinned adult woman wearing a traditional-style robe and four young children posing together in front of a wooden shack with a thatched roof, alongside a White woman and a dark-skinned man dressed in Western-style clothing. Here, the White woman seems to be enjoying a “rich rewarding experience” indeed, as she smiles broadly at the camera, sunglasses perched jauntily atop her head.

After several more slides explaining details of the program, the narration turns to a key point: “Holt strives to maintain a low cost of operation so that a high percentage of sponsorship revenue goes to programs that directly benefit children.” Such a claim reinforces Smolin’s (2006) claim that “…market-driven agencies may hide their true nature by boasting of their assistance to orphans or other humanitarian work—assistance which will cost them very little given the low cost of legitimate humanitarian work in developing nations.” (Smolin D. M., 2006, p. 181). Indeed, the “true nature” of Holt’s plan is revealed in the very next slide as the words, “…Most of the children will be united with families. This is a time for celebration...they have found their family!” appear, superimposed over an image of a White couple holding a dark-skinned child between them. Clearly, this child has not been reunited with his or her birth family. Instead the child has been united with a new family—an adoptive family—“their” family. Significantly, the narration concedes that this is, in fact, what happens with most children in the Holt program.

The video continued with an explanation that soon as a child is adopted, “Holt Sponsors are automatically reassigned a new child to sponsor.” Thus, the agency carefully separates the roles of sponsor families from the roles of adoptive families. Indeed, the narration notes that “Many Sponsors stay with Holt for years, helping dozens of children find families!” In this statement, Holt constructs children’s bodies as easily exchangeable, as Sponsors can facilitate the
adoptions of “dozens of children” as the children move through the system as through an assembly line. Next, the video returns to the interests of adoptive families with the statement, “We strive to provide children in sponsorship with the highest level of care.” This statement, coupled with earlier images of children enjoying the benefits of care in Holt facilities, offers additional reassurance to prospective parents who seek to adopt healthy infants and children.

Finally, as the slideshow draws to a close, the narrative uses a discourse of legitimation with the words, “Holt's child sponsorship program allows Holt and Sponsors to give children the opportunity to grow up in the most appropriate, permanent family...where they will find belonging and achieve their potential.” These words are divided between two slides. Both slides once again picture lone children. This time, however, the children appear to be happy. In the first image, a baby lies smiling in a bassinet. In the second, a young girl with hair styled in neat cornrows looks directly at the camera and smiles shyly, hands held together in front of her face in a gesture of thanks. This image slowly dissolves into a final slide containing the agency website address beneath the words, “Holt International: Finding families for children” over a black screen.

Although the topic of this slideshow was Holt International’s child sponsorship program, the slideshow also explicitly linked the sponsorship program to Holt’s primary mission: to find adoptable children for its client families in the West. It also developed discursive linkages between charitable giving and intercountry adoption. Both, in this video, are presented as altruistic acts that benefit children. Indeed, more than any other item in my sample, Holt International articulated a strong level of concern about the deleterious effects of childhood poverty in the developing world. Yet, the solution presented in this video clearly fails to solve this problem on a significant scale. Instead, the organization’s charitable solution is much more
closely aligned with the interests of adoptive parents than it is with meeting the immediate needs of large numbers of impoverished children. In short, the Holt International sponsorship program uses pacification by acknowledging that many children in developing nations could benefit from additional financial support and then by offering a donation opportunity that supports the agency’s adoption mission while leaving underlying problems unaddressed.

In summation, intercountry adoption industry uses pacification to gloss over the fact that the large amount of money that flows through the intercountry adoption system commodifies children by constructing children’s bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange in discourse that presents the Hague Convention as a safeguard against child trafficking, in language that normalizes the high cost of adoptions, and in charitable contribution solicitations to assuage concerns about children left behind.

Subjectification of Experience: The “Right Choice” for You

By privileging the needs, interests, and perspectives of prospective adoptive parents over the interests of other parties, the intercountry adoption industry also used a type of systematically distorted communication known as subjectification of experience to limit constructive dialogue about the ways in which intercountry adoption may contribute to, rather than solve, problematic social and global inequities that negatively impact thousands, if not millions, of children each year (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Children’s Fund, and the United States Agency for International Development, 2004). According to Deetz (1992), organizational systems may preserve the status quo by attributing alternative views to individual difference rather than to problems within the systems themselves. By framing moral judgments as “expressions of attitude, preference or feeling” (Karreman & Alvesson, 2010, p. 62) rather than as legitimate topics for discussion and dialogue, contradictions within systems can be
discursively eliminated. Subjectification of experience was evident in web pages that highlighted the importance of parental choice in intercountry adoption. Although the wording varied from one web page to the next, the theme was unmistakable: Prospective parents can answer any challenge to their decision to adopt a child of any particular age, gender, race, nationality, or disability status by claiming that their decision was the right one for their family.

Once prospective parents decide that they wish to adopt a child, they must determine whether or not they wish to consider intercountry adoption as a means of family formation. A web page text, then, that advised prospective adoptive parents suffering from infertility that “foreign adoption may be the right choice for you” (Foreign Adoption, n.d.) limited any discussion (on this web page, at least,) about other options available to prospective parents, such as in vitro fertilization, transracial domestic or foster adoption, or even continued childlessness. Once parents decide that “intercountry adoption is right for their family” (Intercountry adoption: Where do I start?, n.d.), web page texts counsel them to explore the “steps to international adoption” (n.a., International Adoption, n.d.), which include selecting “the right country” (n.p.) and the “right agency” (Dillon International, n.d.; Welcome to Faithful Adoption, n.d.) or the “right professional” (International Adoption, n.d.) to help them select “the perfect addition to [their] family” (Children of All Nations, n.d.).

Sometimes, as in the final example above, web page texts used synonyms such as ‘best’ or ‘perfect’ in lieu of the word ‘right.’ For example, instead of telling prospective parents to “choose the right agency,” Dillon International Adoptions advised parents to “make sure you select the agency that is the best match for your family” (Dillon International, n.d.). Likewise, instead of choosing the ‘right country,’ International Adoption Stories featured an article entitled, “Choosing the Best Country for You: Which Country Should You Adopt From?” (Sharing
Adoption Stories and Information, n.d.). Although all of these texts used words such as “right” or “best” to refer to a superlative moral judgment, none stipulated the specific conditions under which a prospective parent could claim that they had, indeed, made a superlative choice. Instead, Adoption.org noted, “[Decisions] will basically all depend on you, the adopting family and what your preference is” (Pros and Cons of Foreign Adoption, n.d.). When parents choose an agency, they are, in effect, indicating the nationality or the race of the children they are willing to adopt (Dorow S., 2006). Web page texts such as these that highlighted choices available to prospective parents insinuate that although an overwhelming majority of all intercountry adoptions in the past ten years have involved mostly healthy, white or light-skinned infants (Quiroz P. A., 2007), the reason that so many light-skinned children are adopted is largely a matter of individual difference. In this way, the intercountry adoption system masks the ways in which the practice of intercountry adoption (re)produces conditions of inequality that may negatively impact children of color, particularly in economically-disadvantaged developing nations.

To conclude, I found discourses of naturalization, neutralization, pacification, and subjectification of experience in intercountry adoption industry web pages. These discourses functioned to (re)produce the power and influence of the intercountry adoption system while constructing the bodies of children and the roles of adoptive parents in potentially damaging ways. Web page discourses naturalized the processes by which children are legally disconnected from their birth families so they can be legally connected to an adoptive family, neutralized global inequities by employing Orientalist tropes to construct orphaned children as parentless, desperate Others who await rescue by U.S. American parents, pacified criticism that the large sums of money that flow through the system commodify children by presenting the Hague Convention as a safeguard against child trafficking while normalizing the high cost of adoptions,
and defused questions of racial inequity by constructing the choices prospective parents make about their future child’s race, gender, and potential disability status as a matter of individual preference. With these discursive strategies, the intercountry adoption system glosses over the unpalatable yet incontrovertible fact that the system’s primary purpose is to produce (exotically different, yet flexible) bodies of children that can be exchanged for large sums of money in the intercountry adoption “marketplace” (Park Nelson, 2006, p. 103). In the process, intercountry adoption industry discourse supports capitalist ideology and social inequity even as it supports the notion that commerce can represent a viable solution for social problems.

**Discursive Construction of the Intercountry Adoption System**

The second two research questions asked how government and adoption industry professionals were constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse and whether these discourses functioned to obscure an imperialist encroachment by government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats into the private lives of families and children around the world. The detailed analysis of intercountry adoption industry web pages that follows shows that web page texts legitimated the practice of intercountry adoption in references to state, national, and international law that purports to protect “the best interests of children” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), disqualified some categories of non-professionals from participating in discourse production, avoided questions about the industry’s role in producing orphans by discursively constructing adoption as a method for family building, and discussed parental qualifications in a way that maintained plausible deniability that U.S. American parents are uniquely qualified, by virtue of their privileged position in global society, to parent the children of foreigners.

**Legitimation: “The Best Interests of the Child”**
The intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample discursively legitimated the practice of intercountry adoption in two primary ways: First, language and images referencing international, national, and state laws; agency licensure or accreditation; and citizenship worked together to discursively legitimate the practice of intercountry adoption by invoking the authority of national and international law, and, by extension, the “authority of conformity” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 96). Secondly, intercountry adoption was also legitimated through a discourse that constructed the practice as one that protected “the best interests of children” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). Both types of legitimization strategies also functioned to legitimize the role of government as arbiter of family structure and composition while concealing troubling parallels between adoption and child trafficking.

A total of 36 web pages in the sample displayed images or text addressing the topic of the Hague Convention or alluding to having met specific accreditation or licensure requirements. Of these, eight were marketing media pages containing links to general information about Hague adoption procedures or containing text explaining specific adoption rules and regulations. One page contained the entire text of the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000, 2000), the legislation that enabled the Hague Convention to be implemented in the United States. Three of the five adoption advocacy web pages in my sample referenced legal requirements for adoption, as did four of the five government-sponsored pages. In addition, the Hague web page contained the text of the Hague Convention in its entirety (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993). Two legal services web pages also contained detailed explanations of national or international adoption laws.
A majority of the adoption agency web pages in my sample also contained references to the Hague Convention, licensure, accreditation, or the law. Specifically, thirteen of the 19 adoption agency web pages in my sample contained images or text to indicate that the agency was accredited to process Hague adoptions. Eight of these pages displayed the logo of the Council on Accreditation to indicate that they were authorized to facilitate Hague adoptions. The COA logo is shaped like a shield. It features a dark blue background upon which the letters “COA” appear in large white letters outlined in red. Below the large letters, the words “Council on Accreditation” is spread across two lines in a smaller typeface. A pair of branch-like images with blue and red “leaves” extend along the opposite sides of the shield beginning just above the words, “Founded 1977,” which appear below the seal and continue to a point just below the tops of the large letters on the shield. The COA logo was placed in various locations on the web pages in the sample. One agency placed the seal in the center of the web page header. On other pages, the seal appeared in navigation bars along the left side of the page or at the bottom of page, adjacent to logos for other organizations with which the agency was also affiliated. Five of the eight agencies also used language that indicated that the agency was “a Hague accredited agency” (e.g. Christian World Adoption, n.d.). Four of the thirteen web pages used words without seals or other graphic images to indicate their accredited status.

In many cases, agencies that used words to indicate their Hague accreditation also provided additional details about additional licensure or organizational affiliations. For example, the footer of the European Adoption Consultants web page contained the following text:

An International Adoption Agency with over 7,500 adoptions since 1991, European Adoption Consultants Inc. is one of the top international adoption agencies in the world. European Adoption Consultants offers child adoption services and adoption information for international adoptions through Russia, China, Serbia, India, Bulgaria, Colombia, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Panama and Ukraine. European Adoption Consultants will soon be offering Moldova adoptions and Japan adoptions. European Adoption
Consultants is a non-profit 501(c)(3) licensed adoption agency. Hague and COA Accredited, Russia Accredited, and Licensed by CCAA to complete adoption in China, including Special Needs. European Adoption Consultants serves the citizens of the United States of America (European Adoption Consultants, n.d.).

A careful examination of this statement shows that the agency is licensed (presumably to work in the U.S. state in which it is located, although this is not explicitly stated.) The agency is also accredited to facilitate adoptions in Hague Convention countries, and has met additional accreditation or licensing standards for China, a Convention country, and Russia, a non-Convention country. The text also specifies that the agency serves (only) U.S. citizens. Despite multiple references to accreditation and licensure in this paragraph, however, the text does not address the legal basis of the agency’s work in Serbia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, three non-Convention countries, nor does it explain the agency’s work in Nepal and Guatemala. This is significant because Guatemala has not accepted new adoption applications from U.S. citizens since January 1, 2008 (Whitbeck & Arce, 2007), while the U.S. government suspended adoptions from Nepal in August, 2010 (Notice: Update on adoptions in Nepal, 2011). In both cases, the suspensions were due to allegations of child abductions and trafficking. In short, although the agency claimed to hold multiple licenses and accreditations, the agency also processed adoptions in a number of countries that do not require agency accreditation. More importantly, this text also implied that the agency did work in countries in which child trafficking may have occurred (Whitbeck & Arce, 2007; Notice: Update on adoptions in Nepal, 2011).

The Hague Conference on Private International Law took up the question of intercountry adoption in 1988 on the basis that existing international laws had proven “insufficient” (Parra-Aranguren, 1993, p. 3) to “prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children” (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993). The Convention was initially signed by eight countries including Brazil,
Colombia, Costa Rica, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, Romania, and Uruguay (Parra-Aranguren, 1993). To date, 81 countries have ratified the Hague Convention, which became international law on May 1, 1995 (Status Table, 2011). The Hague Convention treaty begins with the following Preamble, which appeared on one web page in my sample:

The States signatory to the present Convention,

Recognising that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding,

Recalling that each State should take, as a matter of priority, appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the care of his or her family of origin,

Recognising that intercountry adoption may offer the advantage of a permanent family to a child for whom a suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin,

Convinced of the necessity to take measures to ensure that intercountry adoptions are made in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights, and to prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children...have agreed upon the following provisions...” (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993)

In this Preamble, the Convention used the language from another international treaty, the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (n.a., 1990), to invoke the “impersonal authority” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 96) of the United Nations. International treaties may be understood to legitimate State intervention in the lives of individuals by using a type of discourse that van Leeuwen (2007) calls the “authority of conformity” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 96), in which “the implicit message is, ‘Everybody else is doing it, and so should you’ or ‘Most people are doing it, and so should you’” (p. 97). States intervene in the private affairs of citizens by passing laws and designating institutions to make and enforce rules that impact the private lives of individuals (Stoler, 2006). The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular, specifically stipulates that “…actions concerning children [may be] undertaken by public or private social
welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies” (n.a., Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990).

Not only does the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child legitimize the role of the State in the lives of children, the Convention also specifies that in all cases, “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (n.a., Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). Although neither the U.N. Convention nor the Hague Convention defines the precise meaning of the “best interests of the child,” both documents prescribe specific actions that should be taken to protect children’s interests. The U.N. Convention, for example, orders that children who cannot live with their birth families are to receive “special protection and assistance” (n.a., Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990) (article 20). The State is designated as the responsible party for guaranteeing “alternative care” (Article 20.2) in the form of “foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or if necessary placement in suitable institutions” (article 20.3). In such cases, the “desirability of continuity in a child’s upbringing and… the child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background” (Article 20.3) are to be of paramount importance. Adoptions are understood to protect the “best interests of the child” (Article 21) when they are conducted by “competent authorities” (Article 21.a) who obtain “informed consent” (Article 21.a) from “parents, relatives and legal guardians” (Article 21.a) before they offer the child for adoption within his or her country of origin. Intercountry adoption, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is conceptualized as an alternative form of placement to be used only “if the child cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family or cannot in any suitable manner be cared for in the child’s country of origin (Article 21.b).

The Hague Convention, like the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, stipulates that children should be raised in a “family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and
understanding” (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993). However, the third clause of the Preamble to the Hague Convention contains language that does not appear in the U.N. Convention:

Recognising that intercountry adoption may offer the advantage of a permanent family to a child for whom a suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin… (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993), (emphasis added)

In this clause, the opportunity to have “a permanent family” elevates intercountry adoption from an option of last resort for children who “cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family or cannot in any suitable manner be cared for in the child’s country of origin” (n.a., Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990) to an advantage that is only available to those children “for whom a suitable family cannot be found in his or her State of origin” (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993). State agents are thereby placed in a position in which they may more easily justify intercountry adoption as the best means of protecting the interests of the children under their care.

Not only does The Hague Convention preamble legitimize the government’s role in intercountry adoption and the practice of intercountry adoption by constructing intercountry adoption as an advantage for orphaned children, it also legitimizes the role of the State in the private lives of citizens by making adoption professionals responsible for protecting children’s interests. These strategies of legitimation were seen throughout the sample. Indeed, a total of 16 web pages in the sample, (including the Hague Convention webpage and three academic articles) quoted portions of the Preamble to the Hague Convention (using the words, “best interests of the child” or “permanent family”) verbatim. Interestingly, one other web page in the sample suggested that the “best interests of the child” might very well be met if the child remained in his or her birth country. This language was found in UNICEF’s position paper on intercountry
adoption. This statement, which outlines UNICEF’s general opposition to intercountry adoption except as a last resort, includes the following language:

… families needing assistance to care for their children have a right to receive it. When, despite this assistance, a child’s family is unavailable, unable or unwilling to care for her/him, then appropriate and stable family-based solutions should be sought to enable the child to grow up in a loving, caring and supportive environment (UNICEF’s position on Inter-country adoption).

This statement raises issues that are not seen elsewhere in the adoption pages in my sample: namely, that more children could remain with their birth families if sufficient assistance were available to birth families to enable them to continue to care for their children. However, in this case, the statement does not focus attention on how this can be accomplished. Instead, it, too, reinforces discourse elsewhere in the sample that legitimizes intercountry adoption as a means of providing children an opportunity “to grow up in a loving, caring and supportive environment.”

References to licensure and accreditation, coupled with graphic images featuring the familiar colors and symbols of U.S. American citizenship assure prospective parents that the adoptions they contemplate will be sanctioned by the U.S. government and sustained by the force of international law. At the same time, however, these discursive strategies also served to legitimate the notion that government agents should have the final say over who is “qualified” to adopt and who is not. Thus, references to the Hague Convention in intercountry adoption industry web pages legitimate both the practice of intercountry adoption and the role of government in adoption as a guardian of “the best interests of children” while obscuring troubling linkages between intercountry adoption and child trafficking.

Disqualification: Orphaned Children, Distant Birthparents

Although orphaned children were often the topic of written texts and images in the intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample, the children themselves, their birth
parents, and other relatives were almost completely excluded from discourse production. Critical scholarly perspectives and even the perspectives of adoptive parents were likewise relegated to the margins of the discursive field. This is a prime example of a type of systematically distorted communication known as disqualification (Deetz S. A., 1992), a practice in which the perspectives of some individuals are excluded from discourse production on the basis of a perceived lack of professional qualification or other factors. When disqualification occurs, individual perspectives are either discounted or totally excluded from consideration, regardless of the validity of the claims being made. The web pages in my sample often contained informative details about the adoption process, including the steps in the adoption process, the costs of adoption, key provisions of international adoption law, and details about specific requirements for adopting children from specific countries. However, many web pages also used persuasive language and evocative images to promote or defend the practice of intercountry adoption or to encourage web site visitors to consider adopting a foreign child themselves. These persuasive texts often invoked the needs and feelings of orphaned children without actually using the words of orphaned children or of other adults in orphaned children’s lives.

Adoption agency web pages frequently presented general information about the practice of intercountry adoption and about agency services in web page welcome messages. These messages typically presented the qualifications, experience, and professionalism of agency staff by referring to such factors as licensing or accreditation \((n=7)\), the number of years the agency had been in operation \((n=7)\), the number of adoptions facilitated by the agency \((n=6)\), the agency’s experience facilitating adoptions in particular countries \((n=3)\), or the agency’s size (for example, by describing the agency as “one of the largest international adoption agencies in the United States”) (Christian World Adoption, n.d.). However, welcome messages often used
emotive language and compelling images to characterize adoptive parents and orphaned children in particular ways. For example, the welcome message on the Adoption Avenues web page opens with the following words:

We feel that we can offer a personal and unique adoption experience and can help the adoptive parents through their life's greatest adventure on the adoption avenue. Some of our staff members are adoptive parents that can share their wonderful experience and desire to help many other waiting children to find their forever families (Welcome to Adoption Avenues Agency, n.d.).

In beginning with the pronoun ‘we,’ this welcome message, like the vast majority of adoption agency web page welcome messages, presents but also privileges the perspectives and roles of agency personnel, some of whom in this case are also adoptive parent-professionals. Adoption, in this paragraph, is described as an experience that benefits two groups: prospective parents, who benefit from the opportunity to enjoy a great adventure, and agency staff, who gain an opportunity to help children find families. After establishing the interests of agency staff and prospective parents, the text continues,

We all, here at Adoption Avenues, have seen the beautiful faces, looked in the eyes and experienced the happiness of a loving hug of so many orphan children we worked with, and these children are the reason for which we created our agency (n.d., n.p.).

This narrative, like many adoption agency welcome messages in my sample, describes orphan children. Since the word ‘orphan’ is not defined in this paragraph or elsewhere on the page, web page visitors may or may not understand that this term is used in a particular way in intercountry adoption to refer both to children whose parents have died and to children who have one or more living relatives who have been determined “incapable of providing proper care for the child” (Who Can Be Adopted, n.d.). Indeed, the only parents mentioned in this passage are the adoptive parents on the agency’s staff and the prospective parents to whom the passage is addressed. The images on this web page likewise reinforce the idea that orphans lack access to parental care in
images of unattended children presented in a slideshow posted to the upper right side of the page. Thus, by using language that constructs children in the intercountry adoption system as children whose parents are no longer alive (Erlich, Flexner, Carruth, & Hawkins, 1980, p. 630), by invoking only one type of family, the adoptive “forever” family, and by using images that show young children without adult caretakers, this web page makes birth families all but invisible to prospective parents.

Indeed, birth families were only explicitly mentioned in two adoption agency web pages in my sample. The first web page, Children’s House International Adoptions (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d.), contained a link to a blog post entitled “Why Would a Mother Place Her Child for Adoption?” Such a title could be interpreted as either an honest question or as a condemnation of birthmothers by an incredulous critic. Absent images or other contextual cues, this question was therefore ambiguous, subject to a variety of possible interpretations. The second web page that mentioned birth families also included the only material on any web page in the sample that was explicitly identified as having been written by an adult adoptee. The textual material was presented as an article on the Dillon International web page containing a series of questions and answers under the title, “How to Select the Right Agency for Your Family” (Enrico, n.d.). The author, “Dottie Enrico, a Korean adoptee and adoptive mom” (Enrico, n.d.), was identified at the beginning of the article, which was posted near the bottom of the page. After introducing herself as a Korean adoptee and as the mother of an adopted Korean child, Enrico answered a series of questions that she suggested prospective adoptive parents should consider before selecting an agency. The first question addressed the issue of how to select an agency that will allow adoptive parents to meet a child’s foster parents and/or birthparents. She answered the question this way:
U.S. adoption agencies who work with Eastern Social Welfare Society (ESWS) and Social Welfare Society (SWS) in South Korea will often allow adoptive parents, who have traveled to receive their child, to visit the foster mother's home so that they can see where their child lived during the first few months of his life. Although it is rare, SWS will sometimes even try to arrange a face-to-face, non-identifying meeting with your child's birthparents when you travel to pick him up. Many agencies, however, do not provide this service to traveling families (Enrico, n.d.).

In this passage, Enrico refers to three sets of parents. First, she names adoptive parents, who, she suggests, can choose agencies that will allow them to see where their child lived prior to his or her adoption or even meet their adopted child’s birthparents. By addressing the interests of prospective parents first, the passage prioritizes the interests of adoptive families who may wish to learn as much as possible about their adopted child’s past. However, the passage also constructs adoptive parents, foster parents and birth parents in ways that privilege the adoptive relationship over other relationships. Adoptive parents, for example, “receive” or “pick up” their children. Foster parents, in contrast, provide only temporary places for children to live, rather than nurturing environments in which children may be cared for or even loved. Birth parents are distanced from their children by this intervening relationship and are further distanced in Enrico’s description of rare, agency-arranged, “non-identifying” meetings that occur only after adoptive parents have traveled to Korea to receive custody of a particular child. This passage also highlights the structural privileges available to adoption agencies and adoptive parents that are unavailable to foster parents, birth parents, and children. Agencies determine whether or not to allow adoptive parents to visit foster homes or to meet birth parents, but adoptive parents can choose to work with an agency that will permit such meetings. Foster families and birth families, on the other hand, meet adoptive parents only upon an adoptive parent’s request and only when agencies have determined that it is appropriate for such meetings to take place. While foster parents and birth parents do retain some level of agency in that they may or may not agree to
participate in such meetings, the children themselves as they are constructed as completely passive subjects in this passage, even though they are the common factor in all of these relationships.

Dillon International was also the only adoption agency web page of the 19 agencies in my sample to allow foreign birth mothers an opportunity to speak for themselves. This opportunity was presented in the form of a black and white image of a kneeling woman with her head bowed and hands clasped together as if in prayer. Although the woman’s face is hidden, her short, straight, dark hair suggests she might be Asian. The image appears next to the words, “‘From an Ocean of Tears to an Ocean of Love,’ a Birthmothers Workshop now online” (Dillon International, n.d.). While the ambiguity of the text leaves the reader to wonder whether the workshop is for or about birthmothers, the link points to a page that explains that two Korean birthmothers had “traveled to the United States to share their compelling stories with adoptive parents, adoptees, and professionals” (From an ocean of tears to an ocean of love: A birthmothers workshop, n.d.). The identities of the birth mothers were not disclosed on the web page, although both were described as having lived in a “maternity home for single pregnant women” (From an ocean of tears to an ocean of love: A birthmothers workshop, n.d.), operated by a major child welfare agency in South Korea. In short, although these two women did have the opportunity to participate in the discourse, their identities were masked and their perspectives hidden while the evocative title of the workshop functioned to suggest that the pain a birthmother may initially experience when she relinquishes a child for adoption can eventually be replaced with an equally powerful sense of satisfaction.

Birth parents and birth families were also mentioned in web pages sponsored by non-agency organizations in my sample. Three of the five news media pages, for example, included
stories containing quotations by adoption professionals or government agents that described birth parents. However, all of these stories described parents who had abandoned their children. In one story, for example, a child welfare worker was quoted to say that it is costly and time consuming for child welfare agencies to find the parents of abandoned children, whose original families sometimes “failed to register their birth” (n.a., Foreign Adoption of Special Needs Kids Promoted, 2011). Likewise, the CBS News web page in my sample contained a quotation from a research study in which researchers argued, “Before adoption, most international adoptees experience insufficient medical care, malnutrition, maternal separation, and neglect and abuse in orphanages” (Lagorio, 2009). These news stories quoted adoption industry child welfare experts and academic researchers who characterized birth parents as people who had abandoned or deserted their children, in some cases leaving them without even so much as a birth certificate to prove their identity.

Marketing media web pages, in particular, did provide links to additional websites containing content specifically addressed to birth parents. These links were typically presented in short phrases such as ‘birth parents,’ or ‘birth families’ and appeared in navigation bars adjacent to links to topics such as unplanned pregnancy. None of these links, however, led to pages addressed to parents of children in foreign countries. Thus, in marketing media web pages, the term, “birth parent” referred only to U.S. American citizens who were considering the possibility of relinquishing their children for adoption or who had already relinquished their children for adoption by other U.S. American citizens. Only one marketing media web page included a reference to foreign birth families. This page, which described the pros and cons of intercountry adoption, included the declarative statement, “The birthmother will not change her mind” (Pros & Cons, n.d.). In using the definite article to refer to the birthmother in this sentence, the writer
implies that the sentence refers to a “specific individual whose identity is known to the reader” (Hacker, 2003, p. 212). While prospective parents may, at some point, adopt a child whose birthmother may, in fact, be known, it is impossible for the writer to know ahead of time whether, if, how many, or which birthmothers may, in fact, change their minds after signing relinquishment papers. Indeed, this statement implies that those birthmothers who do sign relinquishment documents agreeing to allow their children to be adopted by U.S. parents will never reconsider their decisions—an implication that is inconsistent with the experience of U.S. American birthmothers, who have been shown to suffer debilitating physical and psychological effects long after they have relinquished their children for adoption (Hollingsworth L. D., 2005). Once again, in speaking for the birthmother, this statement discursively disqualifies any birth parent who has come to regret their decision to permit their child to be adopted by U.S. American parents.

Not only did intercountry adoption industry web pages use language that effectively silenced birth parents, many web pages also contained language or images that implied children were uniformly eager to be adopted into new families. However, none of these pages contained the actual words of the children themselves. The welcome message on the International Family Services web page argued, for example, that orphan children “cry for a chance in life, a life that includes family” (Home, n.d.). Precious.org, an intercountry adoption “photolisting service” (n.a., A home for every child, n.d.) likewise claimed orphans “[wait] to become a son or a daughter through adoption” (n.a., n.d.). Not only do web page texts suggest children hope to be adopted, they also describe intense relationships between newly adopted parents and children. The Children of All Nations (n.d.) web page, for example, contained the following post:
Congratulations to our family who will arrive home from Rwanda with their new baby girl tomorrow!! This little one is loving her new parents, and they are loving her too! (n.a., Children of All Nations News, 2011).

This example describes an adopted infant’s purported love for her new parents, discursively positioning the child as the initiating agent in a reciprocating cycle. However, such a romanticized notion of love between parents and child fails to take into account research that shows that while infants may orient themselves to adult emotional cues to determine how to behave (Tronick, 1989), very young children lack the ability to understand and express highly complex emotions (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990). Thus, not only is it unlikely that the child will have come to share their new parents’ feelings of love by the time they all get off the plane from Africa, it is also highly unlikely that the child would be the initiating agent in this relationship. As a result, this text, which once again speaks for the child, offers a representation of the child’s emotional state that is highly improbable, particularly given that the child is an infant.

While web page discourse generally excluded the words and perspectives of foreign children and birth families, it often acted to privilege the interests of adoption professionals, government agents, and others involved in intercountry adoption practice. UNICEF, for example, published its “position on inter-country adoption” (UNICEF’s position on Inter-country adoption, n.d.) to argue against the practice of intercountry adoption except in certain narrowly defined cases. The statement contains the following:

Since the 1960s, there has been an increase in the number of inter-country adoptions. Concurrent with this trend, there have been growing international efforts to ensure that adoptions are carried out in a transparent, non-exploitative, legal manner to the benefit of the children and families concerned. In some cases, however, adoptions have not been carried out in ways that served the best interest of the children -- when the requirements and procedures in place were insufficient to prevent unethical practices. Systemic weaknesses persist and enable the sale and abduction of children, coercion or
manipulation of birth parents, falsification of documents and bribery (UNICEF’s position on Inter-country adoption, n.d., n.p.).

Although Park Nelson (2006) has cogently argued that child trafficking is directly related to the high demand for adoptable children and the large amount of money that changes hands in both legal and illegal adoption procedures, this paragraph, like the paragraphs that follow, is written in passive voice sentence construction, which effectively masks who should be held accountable for such problems as child abduction and trafficking. Instead, the text functions to (re)produce UNICEF’s institutional authority by first constructing the best interests of children as overriding the interests of all other parties, including both birth parents and adoptive parents, and then by arguing that “competent [i.e. government or government-sanctioned] authorities” (UNICEF’s position on Inter-country adoption) should determine which adoptions should be authorized and which should not. The websites of government agencies including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), the U.S. Department of State (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), and the Hague Conference on Private International Law (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, 1993) likewise contained language that suggested that all adoptions should be governed only by “authorized” adoption service professionals.

As these examples show, many web pages in the sample distorted the perspectives of both orphaned children and their birth families. Furthermore, those texts in my sample that did refer to orphaned children or to the children’s birth parents frequently did so by making claims on behalf of children or birthparents that were sentimental, at best, and disingenuous, at worst. Certainly, infants and young children, particularly those from foreign countries, may be unable to speak for themselves due to their young age or lack of language skills, while the parents of older children may wish to preserve their children’s privacy. However, in the sample, even adult
adoptees, who, in many cases, might have been qualified to speak (at least on their own behalf,) were only included in discourse production when they also used language that disqualified birth family perspectives. In short, by disqualifying orphaned children and birth families from discourse production, government authorities, agency staff, and prospective adoptive parents reproduced their power over orphaned children and birth parents in web page discourse.

*Topical Avoidance: Building Families*

While disqualification prevents certain *individuals* from participating in discourse production, topical avoidance limits which *topics* can be fully discussed (Deetz S. A., 1992). Taboo topics are often associated with “humanly experienced emotions” (1992, p. 193); topical avoidance limits conflict by precluding potentially painful or difficult discussions about how individuals feel about organizational norms. Since it is impossible to analyze what is *not* present in discourse, one must instead look for shadows or traces of taboo topics by examining the specific ways in which interactions are “structured to go around and leave out” (p. 193) certain topics. Topical avoidance was evidenced in intercountry adoption industry web pages in language and images that circumvented potentially difficult questions about the origins of orphaned children by discursively constructing adoption as a method for building or creating (new) families without acknowledging that adoption only becomes possible after a child’s birth family structure has been demolished.

The vast majority of parents who adopt children from foreign countries are married, between the ages of 30 and 40, and “well educated with relatively high incomes” (Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2008, p. 187), although increasing numbers of single adults and non-heterosexual couples are also adopting children (Fisher, 2003). For singles or non-heterosexual couples as well as for couples struggling with infertility, intercountry adoption offers a viable
method for overcoming the “potentially stigmatizing status” (Miall, 1986, p. 268) of childlessness. According to Fisher (2003), “Infertility is clearly the most common reason that adoptive parents have given for deciding to adopt” (2003, p. 338), although “a substantial minority of adoptive parents are [also] motivated by altruism” (p. 338). In fact, when asked, prospective parents offer a variety of reasons for adopting overseas. Besides infertility and humanitarian motivations, parents in one study most often reported that they “just wanted to adopt” (p. 187) or that they had “concerns about birth parent issues associated with domestic adoption” (p. 187). Indeed,

In the United States, a motive beyond demography is the notion that international adoption is somehow “safer”—more predictable and more likely to end in success—than many domestic adoptions, where there’s an outsized fear of a birth mother’s last-minute change of heart. Add an ocean of distance, and the idea that needy children abound in poor countries, and that risk seems to disappear (Graff, 2008, p. 61).

Although the fear that birth parents may somehow come to reclaim their children is mitigated to some extent by geographical barriers in intercountry adoption, it is further alleviated in discourse that constructs families as kinship forms that are built or created rather than as kinship relations into which children are born; and by referring to the U.S., rather than to children’s birth countries, as ‘home.’

Several web pages in my sample used a building metaphor to describe the process of intercountry adoption. In this metaphor, parents are the builders, and children represent the raw materials from which the new family unit is constructed. Intercountry adoption was presented as a “wonderful way to build forever families” (Welcome, n.d.) in adoption agency, advocacy, and marketing media web pages in the sample. The Child Welfare League of America noted in its welcome message, “Increasingly, families in the United States are choosing to build their families by adopting children from abroad” (Child Welfare League of America, 1999). Adoption
agency Dillon International likewise welcomed visitors who were interested in “international adoption as a means to build [their] family” (Dillon International, n.d.) with the assurance, “Working together we can create families and provide hope for the children of the world (Dillon International, n.d.). Like Dillon International, many agencies presented themselves as resources for builder-parents (e.g. “Discover why more parents continue to choose Christian World Adoption to help them build their families”) (Christian World Adoption, n.d.), while others took on the role of general contractor (e.g. “Building families through international adoption”) (Foreign Child Adoption, n.d.). Adoption.com discursively constructed international adoption as a superior method for family-building with these words:

International Adoption is just one of several ways to build your family. In most cases, international adoptions are finalized in the country of origin, so once you come home with your child, he or she is already legally yours (Getting started with international adoption, n.d.).

In this example, the writer mollifies prospective parents’ fears about birth parent interference by suggesting that all adoptions are completed within foreign countries, although this is not always the case. This writer also uses the possessive pronouns ‘your’ and ‘yours’ to discursively construct the child as if the child were (already) the possession of the parent.

Indeed, many web pages used possessive pronouns to refer to adoptees or prospective adoptees as parental possessions. One web page, for example, suggested that a benefit of intercountry adoption was that parents would “know about how long it will be before you have your child in your arms” (Pros & Cons, n.d.). Another described the process by which parents actually take possession of a child:

Depending on the country's requirements for adoption, you may need to spend a small amount of time in that country while paperwork is being finalized to bring the child home. There will be a meeting where you will meet your adopted child for the first time, and subsequent meetings to make the transition easier. Once you are cleared to go, you are free to take your child home (Ireland, 2011).
In this passage, the transition from unattached child to possession occurs upon the completion of paperwork, so that by the time the prospective parent(s) meet their child for the first time, the child is already their possession. Another web page constructed children as belonging to parents who had not yet committed themselves to adoption when they encouraged prospective parents to “learn more about these children to see if your child is waiting for you!” (Children of All Nations, n.d.).

Many texts in my sample, including the example above, also used the word ‘home’ to refer not to the child’s place of origin, but to the adoptive parents’ place of origin—a distinction complicated by the fact that for children to go ‘home’ in this manner, they must leave their countries of origin and travel to a foreign place thousands of miles away from their birthplaces. This discursive move was used in “welcome home” messages on two adoption agency web pages in my sample. “We are home from China!” proclaimed one web page banner that also contained five small snapshots of smiling Asian toddlers (European Adoption Consultants, n.d.). “Look who's home from China!” (International Family Services, n.d.) exclaimed another, in hyperlinked text that directed viewers to a page containing snapshot-style photos of four Asian children. Wasatch International Adoptions (n.d.) likewise privileged the role of U.S. families in its agency motto, “A Child’s Way Home” (n.d., n.p.), while the welcome message on the Hand in Hand Adoptions web page was entitled, “Every Child Deserves a Home” (Every Child Deserves a Home, n.d.). Precious.org superimposed the words, “A home for every child” (n.a., A home for every child, n.d.) over an image of a preteen boy brushing his teeth (suggesting perhaps that tooth brushing happens only after children arrive “home” in the West.)

RainbowKids, an adoption advocacy organization, featured a video presentation on its web page entitled, “When you come home.” The subject of this sentence, which was also the title
of a ten-minute video promoting the Dillon International adoption agency, is an indeterminate
pronoun, making it impossible for the reader to determine which “you”—parent or child—is
meant. Since the viewer would most likely be a prospective parent, one might decide the
pronoun was meant to refer to a parent coming home. However, such an assumption is quickly
quelled with the first words of the video, presented in the form of a song:

I dream of you our little one, though I don’t know your name,
How big you are or where you sleep, but I love you just the same.
The Father’s grown you in our hearts, though in another’s care,
I pray that you are safe and warm, and know we’ll soon be there.
When you come home… (n.a., About Us, 2011)

These words clarify the meaning of the video title: the child, not the parent, is the one who is
“coming home.” Like other texts in the sample, these lyrics begin with parents taking ownership
of a child they have never met (“our little one.”) The opening words also function to preclude
any discussion about the child’s origins, this time with the suggestion that the child has been
“grown” —in the same way one might grow a tree or a flower, albeit while “in another’s care.”
Later, the video narration explains that the unnamed caregiver would likely not be a birth
mother: “Many of the children that Dillon International places come from foster care settings,
where they have been nurtured in a family-like environment, which makes the bonding process
easier for the child and the adoptive parents” (2011, n.p.). As in all of the examples previously
cited, children were discursively disconnected from their birth families so that they could more
easily be connected to prospective adoptive parents through language that suggested prospective
parents construct (bonded) families, as well as in language that constructed the U.S. family as
“home.”

Web page images reinforced language that overtly supported the notion that orphaned
children “belong” to their adoptive parents. Most notably, none of the web pages in my sample

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used images of orphaned children with birth parents or other birth family members. Most of the web pages in my sample, however, used one or more photos of previously-adopted children; some also included snapshot-style photos of completed families. Two pages—an Adoption.com marketing media page and the entry page for the National Council for Adoption’s Hague-compliant online training program, featured similar images of adoptive parents standing side-by-side, kissing an infant or young toddler who is held between them. (Transracial/Transcultural Adoption, n.d.; Welcome to the Intercountry Adoption Journey, n.d.). Interestingly, the Hague Adoption training page was the only web page that included images of childless parents. One such image was used to illustrate a link to information about online training opportunities and another illustrated a link to parent testimonials promoting the online training program. In contrast to these images, most web pages used images of children whose parents had “successfully” completed adoptions or of completed families.

Interestingly, seven of the web pages in my sample did refer to children as having been ‘born.’ However, in each case, the word was used to link a child to a particular country rather than to a particular birth parent or family. In noting that parents must “[select] the country your child will come from” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), the Child Welfare Information Gateway, like many other web pages, linked children to a country rather than to a birth parent, as if the country had given birth to the child instead of a person. In a similar manner, children were described as having been “born in poverty and civil strife” (Lagorio, 2009), as having been “born prematurely” (Korea Adoption Overview, n.d.) or as “foreign-born” (n.a., Adoption of Foreign Children by United States Citizens, n.d.). In all of these examples, the conditions under which children were said to have been born were constructed as highly disadvantageous to the children. Under such conditions, it would be easy for prospective parents to imagine themselves offering
children a significant advantage—a golden opportunity to rise above their humble beginnings by joining new families created to accomplish just such a purpose. Thus, by using topical avoidance to eliminate any trace of children’s previous relationships and to construct adoptive families as children’s (only) families, intercountry adoption industry web pages sidestep potentially difficult questions about children’s origins while making it easier for prospective parents to envision adoption as a positive solution for the problems of orphaned children.

**Meaning Denial: “Qualified” Parents**

Another way in which language and images were used to (re)produce the social power of the intercountry adoption system without addressing the ways in which the system may mask social and global inequities was through *meaning denial*, a form of discursive closure that occurs “when one possible interpretation of a statement is both placed in the interaction and denied as meant” (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 194). Meaning denial was evident in web pages that used the words “qualified parents” to simultaneously deliver two messages: 1) that the intercountry adoption system carefully evaluates the “intimate domains” (Stoler, 2006, p. 23) of the family prior to each adoption to ensure that the best interests of children are met in adoption, and 2) that U.S. Americans, by virtue of their privileged location in the global social hierarchy, will qualify to parent the children of foreigners.

Twenty-one out of the 77 web pages in my sample used words or phrases such as “qualified parents” (Children's Hope International, n.d.; Dillon International, n.d.), “U.S. approved family,” (Children's House International Adoptions, n.d.), or “eligible” (Christian World Adoption, n.d.), to indicate that prospective parents must be found “suited to adopt” (Child Welfare League of America, 1999) by the United States government as well as by the government of the country from which they plan to adopt before an adoption can be completed.
Eligibility determinations are made in the United States by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “the agency of the U.S. government principally responsible in matters dealing with aliens in the United States (Frequently Asked Questions and Answers about Adoption and Immigration, n.d.).

After they file the appropriate application form (and pay the $720 filing fee,) (I-800A, Application for Determination of Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country, n.d.), prospective parents are subject to rigorous scrutiny in the form of a home study. During the home study process, all household members are interviewed in the home by a licensed social worker, who also assesses such factors as the size and cleanliness of the home, including the condition of household appliances, furnishings, plumbing, and other fixtures. Parents must provide detailed information about personal finances and authorize social workers to conduct background checks with local, state, and national law enforcement agencies to determine whether the prospective parents have any history of substance or child abuse, sexual misconduct, or domestic violence (Home Study Requirements, n.d.). After the home study has been approved by USCIS, prospective U.S. parents submit a copy of their approval documents along with a copy of their completed home study to the country from which they hope to adopt as part of a dossier that may also include additional required documentation such as reports from medical or mental health care providers, documents proving that prospective parents are legally married, school records for children already living in the home, and other items. Only after prospective parents have been approved by both the U.S. government and the government of the country from which they want to adopt will the foreign government identify a specific child to refer for adoption to the prospective parents.
Although the home study is the heart of the process by which prospective parents gain eligibility, eligibility requirements vary from country to country. Thus, nearly a third of the web pages in my sample contained detailed information about parent eligibility, processes, and requirements that reinforced the idea that “foreign adoptions require a lot of legal steps and potentially confusing paperwork” (Foreign Adoptions, n.d.). Perhaps not surprisingly, given its designation as the central adoption authority for the United States, the U.S. Department of State web page contained four links to eligibility information: one link pointed to information about “who can adopt,” another explained “eligibility to adopt,” a third link provided specific information about “adoption by a GLBT parent,” and a fourth link explained “adoption by non-U.S. Citizens living in the U.S.” Each of these links pointed to pages that described specific requirements for particular categories of prospective parents. While all of these pages contained emphasized that prospective parents must comply with the laws of three separate entities, including the state in which they reside, the U.S. federal government, and government in the country from which they plan to adopt. However, the GLBT parent link and the eligibility link added cautions that many foreign countries prohibit individuals in U.S. protected classes (including non-heterosexuals and persons with some disibilities) from adopting. In these situations, prospective parents were urged to “do your research” (Adoption by a GLBT Parent, n.d.) to identify specific countries and conditions under which they might be allowed to adopt.

Nine web pages in the sample, including both of the legal services pages, the U.S. State Department adoption page, and the Child Welfare Information Gateway page (among others,) also provided detailed descriptions of the home study process and USCIS requirements. Government pages and legal services web page texts also revealed the powerful link between eligibility and citizenship. Two links on the U.S. State Department page pointed to separate
pages containing additional information explaining how parents could obtain U.S. Visas and acquire U.S. citizenship for their adopted children (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). On these additional pages, readers learn that it is possible, in some countries, for a U.S. citizen to adopt a child without having received prior U.S. government approval. However, prospective parents are cautioned that children adopted in such a manner will not be allowed to enter the United States or receive automatic citizenship since the U.S. government did not approve the adoption beforehand. Indeed, even when a parent has been approved by the U.S. government and adopted a child according to the laws of a foreign country, the U.S. government retains the right to withhold citizenship if it determines the child was not an eligible orphan under U.S. law.

In addition to the nine web pages that explained requirements for parent eligibility under U.S. law, five web pages contained detailed information about specific parent eligibility requirements in different countries. One of the more detailed of these descriptions highlighted countries with “unusual requirements” (Ashe, n.d.):

… Every country has requirements that prospective adoptive parents must meet, usually regarding age, income, number of existing children in the home, some indicator of marital stability (number of divorces, years married) and, in the case of single applicants, gender. And some countries have a few more unusual requirements. For example: If you want to adopt from Korea, you cannot weigh more than 30% over the normal weight for your height when you work with certain agencies…If you want to adopt from Indonesia, a two year in-country residency before an application will be considered, and a belief in God are required… (Ashe, n.d.).

In highlighting the “unusual” nature of these requirements, this web page challenged some of these more rigorous or peculiar foreign country eligibility requirements, but it did not challenge the roles that national and international governments play in determining whether or not an individual is capable of providing care for a child. Instead, the same article explained that some parents choose intercountry adoption specifically to bypass U.S. state regulations that prohibit U.S. domestic adoptions by older individuals:
One of the reasons many choose international adoption is that some countries have liberal age limits. Older persons, who may find domestic adoption presents too many hurdles due to the age factor, often turn to countries like Mexico, Russia, or Greece where the upper age limit is 60 (Ashe, n.d.).

In fact, several web pages in the sample contained text that suggested intercountry adoption is appealing to “nontraditional adopters” (Foreign Adoption, n.d.) who find it difficult to qualify to adopt U.S. children under U.S. state law. Some texts, (for example, on the Hand In Hand Adoptions page,) noted that prospective parents who have difficulty meeting the guidelines to adopt from one country can simply choose to adopt from a country with regulations they can more easily meet. The agency explained that it facilitates adoptions by prospective parents in a wide range of situations by offering adoption programs in multiple countries: “We currently have programs in several countries to offer a wide range of choices for childless couples, singles, older individuals, and families with children” (Every Child Deserves a Home, n.d.). Likewise, some texts noted that prospective parents who do not qualify to adopt a healthy infant in their country of choice may still qualify to adopt less desirable children. One marketing media web page, for example, explained, “Many countries with stringent requirements for those applying to adopt healthy children have more flexible requirements for special needs adoptions” (Ashe, n.d.), while another marketing media page contained the following text: “It should be noted that many countries will grant waivers for children classified as having "special needs". (sic) Some of these needs may be quite minor or correctable, such as a heart murmur or a cleft lip” (Connell, 2006). Texts that refer to conditions under which some ostensibly ‘unqualified’ parents may still adopt foreign children offer an alternate interpretation for texts that claim parents must meet a rigorous set of standards to be declared “eligible” to parent children from foreign countries.

Meaning denial was thus evident in intercountry adoption industry web page text that described the terms under which parents may qualify to adopt. Web page messages explicitly
explained how the “intimate domains” (Stoler, 2006, p. 23) of the family are closely examined to ensure that the best interests of children are being met in intercountry adoptions. However, these messages also imply that U.S. Americans, by virtue of their privileged location in the social hierarchy, may, in fact, be found qualified to parent the children of foreigners even if they cannot qualify to adopt U.S. American children. At the same time, texts that suggested “nontraditional” parents might also be found eligible to adopt, even if limited to special needs programs by foreign government agents who prefer to send the “best” children to parents who most closely resemble the “ideal” heteronormative American family, also imply that simply being “American” is enough to qualify many individuals to adopt children from foreign countries.

To conclude, I also found discourses of legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial in the intercountry adoption industry web pages in the sample. These discourses functioned to obscure the imperialist encroachment by government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats into the private lives of families and children. Specifically, the intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample discursively legitimated the practice of intercountry adoption itself by employing the “authority of conformity” (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 96) in multiple references to international, national, and state laws; agency licensure or accreditation; and citizenship. Intercountry adoption was also legitimated through a discourse that constructed the practice as one that protects “the best interests of children” (n.a., Intercountry Adoption, n.d.). Web page texts likewise used strategies of disqualification to privilege the perspectives and interests of adoption technocrats while preventing other parties from participating in discourse production, and topical avoidance to bypass potentially troubling questions about the family origins of orphaned children. Lastly, web page texts used the topic of “qualified parents” to deliver two messages at once: First, that the intimate domain of the family is a proper subject of
government rule, and second, that most U.S. Americans qualify to parent the children of foreigners by virtue of their privileged position in the global social hierarchy. In short, the systematically distorted discursive strategies of legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial worked together in intercountry adoption web pages to mask problematic social and global inequities both in the U.S. and abroad.
Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

In this chapter, I discuss how the discursive constructions of orphaned children and of adoption professionals in a sample of intercountry adoption industry web pages functioned to commodify children while obscuring government encroachment into the private lives of families and children. I will begin by briefly summarizing the study and reviewing the major findings. Next, I will draw conclusions based on these findings and discuss the implications of my conclusions for the future of the intercountry adoption industry. Finally, I will offer suggested directions for future research.

Summary of the study

This study addresses the question of whether participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system discursively construct orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption itself in ways that support the interests of social elites at the expense of members of marginalized social groups. This question is important because a growing number of scholars have begun to argue that the practice of intercountry adoption does little to alleviate the suffering of the world's neediest orphans and that it may, in fact, contribute to needless suffering for disadvantaged children and families in the U.S. and abroad (Hollingsworth L. D., 2003; Hubinette T., 2006; Herrmann & Kasper, 1992; Park Nelson, 2006; Briggs L., 2007). Many of these scholars claim that intercountry adoption is, at its core, a colonialist project in which infants and children from far-off lands are literally and figuratively produced for consumption by members of elite social groups in the West (Hubinette T., 2006; Park Nelson, 2006). Even though these researchers generally agree that the intercountry adoption system commodifies orphaned children, none have explicitly addressed the relationship between the social inequities that permit children to be transformed into objects of trade and the discursive constructions that facilitate such
transformations. This study fills this gap and provides insight into a specific communication mechanism by which the intercountry adoption system continues to reproduce itself, at the expense of the very children and families it claims to serve.

To determine the extent, if any, to which participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system contribute to social inequities by discursively constructing orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption in ways that support the interests of social elites at the expense of members of marginalized social groups, I asked the following four research questions:

RQ 1: How are orphaned children constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse?

RQ2: Do these discursive constructions of orphaned children function to reinforce capitalist ideology and if so, how?

RQ3: How are government and adoption industry professionals constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse?

RQ4: How do these discourses function to obscure encroachment into the private lives of families and children around the world?

To answer these questions, I collected a purposive sample of intercountry adoption industry web pages and conducted a detailed multimodal critical discourse analysis of the written texts, images, and video presentations contained in these web pages. I chose to study web page texts because the Internet is a major means by which intercountry adoption agencies promote their services to prospective clients across the country and an important source of information for prospective adoptive parents (Quiroz, 2007; Volkman, 2005). My final sample included texts and images that appeared in intercountry adoption agency web pages and on the web pages of legal service providers, U.S. government and adoption advocacy organizations, traditional mass media
outlets, marketing media firms, and academic websites, which together can be understood to represent a single "control-oriented, self-referential system" (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 182). I used Wodak’s (2001) discourse-historical approach to conduct a multimodal critical discourse analysis (Iedema, 2003) of the texts on these web pages because such an approach is well-suited to illuminate the "social meanings" of texts on the World Wide Web (Mautner, 2005).

This study brings together a number of theoretical strands, all of which originate in critical theory, which is based upon the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1845-46/1968/2007). Specifically, I used Stanley Deetz’ (1992) extension of Jürgen Habermas’ (1981/1984) conceptualization of "systematically distorted communication" (1981/1984, p. 332), in which he argued that social systems exert control over individuals by using one or more of eight specific processes of “discursive closure” (p. 187) to suppress conflict in such a way that problematic power relationships are reproduced, both within the systems and within society as a whole. These practices include naturalization, in which socially constructed notions of reality are treated as if they are in fact “transparent renderings of the external world” (Deetz, 1992, p. 190); neutralization, a process in which “judgments disguised as descriptions…block the open construction of the ‘facts’” (p. 191); pacification, a process in which conflicts are discursively acknowledged while underlying problems remain unaddressed; subjectification of experience, in which the experiences of some individuals are privileged over the experiences of others; topical avoidance, a discursive strategy in which certain topics are taboo in certain social settings; legitimation, in which one or more claims are privileged over others on the basis of assumed rather than actual superior value; disqualification, which excludes individuals from active participation in discourse production; and meaning denial which “happens when one possible interpretation of a statement is both placed in the interaction and denied as meant”
(1992, p. 194). After a detailed review of the historical antecedents of modern intercountry adoption, I conducted a genre analysis in which I reviewed the specific types of genres used in the adoption industry web pages in my sample. Next, I used Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparative method to identify thematic similarities in the ways language and images were used—or not used—in these web pages to describe orphaned children and intercountry adoption. Then, I compared these discursive themes to the eight processes of systematically distorted communication identified by Deetz (1992).

Findings

Web page genres support intercountry adoption industry characterization.

The initial genre analysis revealed that the intercountry adoption industry can be understood as an example of a genre system in which a variety of texts and text types are produced and placed in the websites of organizations representing a variety of intercountry adoption-related interests. I identified seven general sources of intercountry adoption-related content on the web: intercountry adoption agencies, national and international adoption advocacy organizations, legal services organizations, scholarly sources, government agencies, print and broadcast news sources, and marketing media organizations. While all of the web pages in my sample could be simply described as exemplars of a general web page genre, my analysis revealed that the web pages produced by each of seven different types of sponsoring organizations did, in fact, produce web pages that utilized common sets of web-based and traditional genres, or genre repertoires (Crowston & Williams, 2000). However, since many genres were used by more than one organization type, and since “the…genre repertoire of a collection of web pages [is] the result of interactions among communities” (Crowston & Williams, 2000, p. 204), I concluded that the web pages in my sample did, in fact, represent the
interests of a single "control-oriented, self-referential system" (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 182), which I have referred to as the intercountry adoption system. Since theory suggests that organizations and systems employ systematically distorted communication to reproduce themselves (Deetz, 1992), I next conducted a systematic analysis of language-based text and images on each of these pages. After I set aside those texts that described specific actions typically taken by or required of prospective adoptive parents, social workers, U.S. State Department personnel, and adoption agency personnel, used Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method to identify thematic similarities in the ways language and images were used--or not used--in website texts to describe orphaned children and intercountry adoption. I compared these discursive themes to the eight processes of systematically distorted communication identified by Deetz (1992) and found eight specific types of discursive moves that were (re)produced in written texts, images, and videos on a wide range of web pages in the sample. Each of these discursive moves corresponded to one of Deetz’ (1992) processes of systematically distorted communication.

*Naturalization, neutralization, subjectification of experience, and pacification are present in intercountry adoption industry discourse.*

My analysis revealed four specific discursive strategies that functioned in tandem to construct children's bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange in intercountry adoption industry web pages. These strategies included naturalization, neutralization, subjectification of experience, and pacification. First, intercountry adoption industry web pages in my sample used language and images to naturalize the role of adoptive families in the lives of orphaned children. Web pages in the sample contained language and images that functioned to discursively sever children from their birth families. Specifically, more than 75 percent (n=54) of the web pages in my sample used the word ‘family’ to refer *exclusively* to prospective adopters, thereby rendering
children’s birth families invisible. Texts that suggested that children in the intercountry adoption system have “no family” (Wiki, n.d., emphasis added) discursively disconnected children from birth family and extended relatives, while those few web pages that used the word ‘family’ to describe children’s birth families did so only in the context of descriptions of children who had been abandoned. Not only did web page texts suggest that adoptive family membership supplants any previous relationships between children and their birth families, they also used a particular reading of adoptive families in which relationships were highly romanticized and family composition was assumed to be heteronormative. These readings were constructed in language that suggested adoptive homes are safe, love-filled places and adoptive family relationships are “permanent” relationships. Words like “loving,” “secure,” “permanent,” and “forever” were repeatedly used to construct adoptive homes and families as enduring “places of rest, emotion and intimacy” (Beck & Bech-Gernsheim, 2004, p. 509), although constructions such as these contradict statistical evidence that a small number of families disrupt or dissolve adoptions each year and challenge media reports that some adoptive parents have physically abused or even murdered their adopted children. Finally, web page texts that suggested adoptive families provide orphaned children “with a real Mom and Dad” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.) naturalized heteronormative family construction. All of these discursive strategies were visually reinforced as web pages frequently used images of unaccompanied children alongside written texts that described children’s purported need for adoptive families or images of children in traditional families with one male and one female parent. By treating particular social constructions of the family as if they were “transparent renderings of the external world” (Deetz, 1992, p. 190), these texts naturalized the processes by which children are legally disconnected from their birth families in order to be legally connected to an adoptive
family. Naturalization, in this case, blocked any discussion of the socio-historical underpinnings of intercountry adoption that might reveal, for example, its colonialist roots or that might lead readers to conclude that orphaned children should not be removed from their birth countries to satisfy the desires of Western elites.

The second strategy of systematically distorted communication found in web page texts was neutralization, as orphaned children and the practice of intercountry adoption itself was described using Orientalist tropes and imagery to paint U.S. American adoptive parents as benevolent rescuers of frail and needy foreign children. These descriptions concealed the power imbalances that allow Western elites to rationalize a practice in which children are removed from their birth countries and/or birth families and joined with new families. Neutralization was particularly evident in web page images and descriptions of orphaned children as desperately needy waifs who were also exotic exemplars of particular birth cultures, often through the use of language and stereotyped images that explicitly linked children to a particular country or culture of origin. Web pages also used images of previously-adopted children to suggest that foreign children will be fully capable of fitting into their new American families after adoption. Images of costumed children, in particular, suggested that foreign adoptees can easily take on new roles, including those of a son, daughter, sister, brother, or citizen. Finally, adoption agency web pages, in particular, used words like “journey” (Welcome to the Intercountry Adoption Journey, n.d.), or “quest” (Wasatch International Adoptions, n.d.), to characterize the adoption process. In these “judgments disguised as descriptions” (Deetz, 1992, p. 192) intercountry adoption industry web pages painted American parents as benevolent rescuers of frail and needy foreign children while concealing the power imbalances that perpetuate social inequity in the U.S. and abroad and mask
the conditions under which some orphaned children are rendered desirable subjects for adoption while most are not.

Web pages also used pacification to sidestep questions about the ways in which intercountry adoption may actually contribute to, rather than solve, child abduction and child trafficking in the developing world. Pacification functioned to reproduce the power and authority of the U.S. intercountry system by precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amount of money flowing through the system commodifies children by constructing children’s bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange. Web page texts never suggested that child trafficking is an ongoing problem. Instead, trafficking was only discussed within the context of Hague Convention protections, suggesting that the problem of child trafficking has been or is being addressed and is therefore not a matter for concern. More than 52 percent (n=37) of the web pages in my sample (including 14 of the 19 adoption agency pages in the sample) addressed the topic of money in some way. In this way, intercountry adoption industry web page texts acknowledged the large sums of money that are exchanged for children’s bodies while leaving the underlying problems of commodification, child trafficking, and social inequality unaddressed. Likewise, in offering opportunities for web page visitors to make charitable donations to support orphans, intercountry adoption agency web pages established their role as powerful advocates for orphans without substantively addressing the social inequities that orphan thousands of children each year.

Finally, intercountry adoption industry web pages used language that highlighted the choices available to parents who decide to adopt a foreign child. Using a discourse of the ‘right choice,’ the intercountry adoption system maintained the status quo by masking the fact that more than three-quarters of all intercountry adoptions reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in the
year 2000 involved white families who had adopted either white children from Russian and other former Soviet satellite nations or “honorary white” (Quiroz, 2007, p. 5) children from China, Korea, or other Asian countries (Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, & Stevens, 2006). Thus, web page discourse that encouraged prospective parents to choose “the right country” (n.p.), the “right agency” (Dillon International, n.d.; Welcome to Faithful Adoption, n.d.) concealed the possibility that unexamined assumptions about race, gender, class, or other factors may lead prospective parents to choose intercountry adoption over other available options including adopting children from the U.S. foster care system, particularly if choosing intercountry adoption will allow them to create a racially homogeneous family (Jennings, 2006). Thus, in privileging prospective parents’ right to choose which agency and which “country program will work best” (Getting Started, n.d.) for them, intercountry adoption industry web pages bypassed potentially problematic questions about the ways intercountry adoption may operate to (re)produce problematic social inequities, particularly those associated with race, class, and gender, by which some children lose the opportunity to be raised by birth parent(s) or other family members.

*Legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial are present in intercountry adoption industry discourse.*

My analysis further revealed four specific discursive strategies that functioned together to legitimate government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats as arbiters of family structure and composition and of children's "best interests," thereby concealing the ways in which the system itself invades the private lives of children and families. These strategies included legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial. Web pages frequently referred to such topics as licensure, accreditation, and citizenship or used graphic illustrations featuring the familiar colors and symbols of U.S. American citizenship, for example, to legitimate intercountry
adoption by suggesting the practice is both sanctioned by the U.S. government and sustained by the force of international law. However, these discursive strategies also served to legitimate the notion that government agents and adoption technocrats are properly situated to determine who is “qualified” to adopt and who is not. References to the Hague Convention, in particular, legitimated both the practice of intercountry adoption and role of the State in the lives of children by suggesting that the Hague Convention protects the best interests of children and it also legitimized the role of adoption professionals by assigning them direct responsibility for protecting children’s interests by determining what constitutes a “suitable family.”

Intercountry adoption industry web pages also excluded some parties, namely orphaned children and birth families, from participating in discourse production, while the perspectives of adoption studies scholars and adoptive parents were also relegated to the margins of the discursive field. Web pages used the systematically distorted communication strategy of disqualification (Deetz S. A., 1992) by invoking the needs and feelings of orphaned children on the children’s behalf without actually citing orphaned children or other adults in their lives. Adoption agency web pages, for example, frequently used welcome messages that contained language or images that implied children were uniformly eager to be adopted into new families. Claims that orphans “[wait] to become a son or a daughter through adoption” (n.a., n.d., n.p.) and descriptions of intense emotional relationships between newly adopted children and their adoptive parents stood in stark contrast with texts that privileged the purportedly dispassionate interests of adoption professionals, government agents, and others involved in intercountry adoption practice. These texts (re)produced the institutional authority of government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats by first constructing the best interests of children as overriding the interests of all other parties, including both birth parents and adoptive parents, and then by
including only the voices of “authorized” adoption service professionals. In short, by disqualifying orphaned children, birth families, and even adoptive parents from direct participation in discourse production, government authorities and adoption agency staff (re)produced their institutional power over intercountry adoption practice.

Web pages also used topical avoidance to limit conflict by circumventing potentially difficult questions about the origins of orphaned children. This was accomplished in discourses that constructed the practice of intercountry adoption as a method for building or creating (new) families without acknowledging that adoption only becomes possible after a child’s birth family structure has been destroyed. Web page discourse evaded questions about the processes by which children become available for adoption by using a building metaphor to construct families as kinship forms that are built or created rather than as kinship relations into which children are born and by using possessive pronouns to refer to adoptees or prospective adoptees as if they were adoptive parents’ possessions. Web pages also referred to the U.S., rather than to children’s birth countries, as ‘home. Web pages likewise used images of previously-orphaned children with their completed families and never with birth families. Thus, web pages used topical avoidance to eliminate any trace of children’s previous relationships and to construct adoptive families as children’s (only) families, sidestepping potentially difficult questions about children’s origins while making it easier for prospective parents to envision adoption as a positive solution for the problems of orphaned children.

The final type of systematically distorted communication found in the sample was meaning denial, which was evident in the use of the words “qualified parents” to simultaneously deliver two generally incompatible messages: First, that the intercountry adoption system, which carefully evaluates the “intimate domains” (Stoler, 2006, p. 23) of the family prior to each
adoption, is best suited to ensure the best interests of children in intercountry adoption, and second, that U.S. Americans, by virtue of their privileged location in the global social hierarchy, will, in fact, be found “qualified” to parent the children of foreigners.

Almost a third of the web pages in my sample used words or phrases such as “qualified parents” (Children's Hope International, n.d.; Dillon International, n.d.) to indicate that both the United States government and the foreign government from which prospective parents plan to adoption must find the parents to be “suited to adopt” (Child Welfare League of America, 1999) before an adoption can be completed. However, many of these pages also contained information that suggested intercountry adoption may be a viable option for “nontraditional adopters” (Foreign Adoption, n.d.)—those who do not qualify to adopt U.S. children under U.S. state law. Other web pages likewise noted that prospective parents who have difficulty meeting the guidelines to adopt from one country can simply choose to adopt from a country with regulations they can more easily meet. These claims, taken together, suggest that while the intercountry adoption industry claims to protect the best interests of children by prequalifying parents, U.S. American parents can take advantage of their privileged position in the global social hierarchy to adopt a foreign child, even if they cannot qualify to adopt a U.S. child. Furthermore, texts that suggested “nontraditional” (i.e. non-heterosexual, single, disabled, or older) parents may also be found eligible to adopt, even if limited to special needs programs by foreign government agents who prefer to send the “best” children to parents who most closely resemble the “ideal” heteronormative American family, reinforce the message that simply being “American” may be enough to qualify individuals to acquire a child to adopt from a foreign country.

Conclusions

Orphaned children are commodified in intercountry adoption industry discourse.
My first research question asked how orphaned children are constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse. As the detailed analysis in chapter 4 and the discussion in the previous section demonstrate, intercountry adoption industry web pages used discourses of neutralization that summoned up Orientalist notions of difference in text and images that constructed orphaned children as desperately needy, abandoned waifs awaiting rescue by U.S. American parents. These texts and images objectified orphaned children as exemplars of Third World destitution whose bodies nevertheless offered prospective parents an exciting and relatively safe opportunity to “embrace” (Freivalds, n.d.) a new and exotic culture (Dorow S., 2006). Images on intercountry adoption industry web pages highlighted ancient Chinese culture and the “red thread” narrative (Lindbergh, 2010), African novelty in the form of fly whisks and exotic gestures, and the enduring tradition of Russian Orthodoxy to construct children’s bodies as sources of “fantasy, novelty and mystery” (Lalvani, 1995, p. 274) while written texts depicted children “languishing in orphanages” (CWA.org, n.d.) as “homeless, abandoned and vulnerable” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.)

In fact, many orphaned children do suffer extreme privation that is often associated with the death of one or both birth parents (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the United States Agency for International Development, 2004). Furthermore, as the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute notes, intercountry adoptions, particularly between 1981 and 2001, has often followed periods of social unrest in parts of the developing world:

Desperate poverty and social upheaval have been critical factors in the adoption of children from Latin America, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe over the last twenty years. In China, government population control policies contributed to abandonment of infant girls and overcrowded orphanages, factors in the government's decision to facilitate international adoptions (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, n.d.).
However, in the past ten years, only about one percent of children adopted by U.S. families have come from countries that have experienced recent, widespread military or social upheaval (Statistics, n.d.). Thus, Graff (2008) argues,

Westerners have been sold the myth of a world orphan crisis. We are told that millions of children are waiting for their "forever families" to rescue them from lives of abandonment and abuse. But many of the infants and toddlers being adopted by Western parents today are not orphans at all. Yes, hundreds of thousands of children around the world do need loving homes. But more often than not, the neediest children are sick, disabled, traumatized, or older than 5 (Graff, 2008).

Indeed, according to the U.S. Department of State, nearly 85 percent of children adopted by U.S. Americans between 1999 and 2010 were under the age of five. While some of these children may certainly have been sick, traumatized, or disabled upon their arrival in the United States, it is impossible to determine just how many may have arrived in less than perfect health since the State Department does not report on adoptee health or disability status. Nor does the State Department report the numbers of foreign adoptees with living birth family members. However, if my personal experience is any indicator, then Graff may be correct: All of the foreign adoptees that I personally know, including both of my children, did, in fact, have living family members at the time of their adoptions and immigration to the United States.

While an “orphan crisis” (Graff, 2008) was discursively constructed in intercountry adoption industry web page descriptions of abandoned children who yearned for a “forever family” (International Adoption, n.d.), web page texts also naturalized the role of adoptive families in children’s lives by referring to prospective adoptive parents, rather than birth parents or other relatives as family. Certainly, calls to provide children with “a caring and nurturing environment [to] stimulate [their] intellectual, physical and spiritual growth” (Home, n.d.) are appealing, particularly to those individuals who value children and who wish to champion
children’s “dignity and worth” (n.a., Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990). However, Naryan (1995) notes that such “care discourse” (1995, p. 136) may be used by powerful individuals and groups to support ideological goals:

While aspects of care discourse have the potential virtue of calling attention to vulnerabilities that mark relationships between differently situated persons, care discourse also runs the risk of being used to ideological ends where these "differences" are defined in self-serving ways by the dominant and powerful. Notions of differences in vulnerabilities and capabilities should be recognized as contested terrain, requiring critical attention to who defines these differences as well as their practical implications (1995, p. 136).

Certainly, web page texts that contrasted children’s vulnerability against the relative capabilities of prospective U.S. adoptive parents naturalized the role of adoptive families in the lives of children. Words like “loving” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), “permanent” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), and “forever” (Welcome, n.d.) were frequently used to construct adoptive homes and families as enduring “places of rest, emotion and intimacy” (Beck & Bech-Gernsheim, 2004, p. 509). However, feminist scholars who study the sociology of the family argue that families may be better understood as places of “conflict, violence, and unequally distributed work” (Thorne, 1982, p. 2). Although Miller, Chan, Reece, Tirella, and Pertman (2007) note that “parents who adopt internationally are generally recognized as an extremely devoted and committed group, who literally ‘go to the ends of the earth’ to form their families” (2007, p. 278), there is no guarantee that any adoptive family will turn out be as loving, as caring, or as permanent as the discourse suggests. Indeed, despite stringent home study processes designed, in part, to identify and eliminate from consideration prospective parents with histories of child abuse or criminal activity (The Adoption Home Study Process, n.d.), 18 adopted children died between 1996 and 2007 at the hands of their adoptive parents due to “suspected or proven cases of abuse and/or neglect” (Miller, Chan, Reece, Tirella, & Pertman, 2007, p. 378). Moreover,
“Nearly one third of these children died within 6 months of their adoptive placements, and more than one half of these deaths occurred within the 1st (sic) year after adoption” (p. 379).


Furthermore, adoptive families suffer many of the same challenges that biological families do. A Colorado longitudinal post-adoption study found that although “adoptive families were significantly less likely to divorce or separate than were biological families” (O’Connor, Caspi, DeFries, & Plomin, 2000, p. 432), as many as 13 percent of post-adoptive families in the study did divorce within 12 years of adopting. Although researchers have not yet managed to definitively link post-adoption dissolution, divorce, and other family challenges to specific disabilities, behaviors, or other factors, Barth and Miller (2000) note that domestic adoptions of older children are more likely to be disrupted than adoptions of infants, and that younger and more educated adoptive parents are also more likely to disrupt adoptions—particularly those involving children with behavior challenges. Taken together, these findings indicate that although intercountry adoption may indeed provide many children with “a nurturing, permanent family” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), intercountry adoption industry discourse paints post-adoption family life in terms that may be difficult, if not impossible, for some families to maintain, especially over the long term.

Not only did intercountry adoption industry web pages naturalize the roles of adoptive families in the lives of children and employ Orientalist notions of difference to contrast children’s vulnerability against the relative capabilities of prospective U.S. adoptive parents, web
Page discourse also suppressed discussion of the ways in which orphaned children, prospective parents, and birth families are equally entrapped by the ideological and financial imperatives of the system. My second research question asked if discursive constructions of orphaned children on intercountry adoption industry web pages functioned to reinforce capitalist ideology and if so, how they did so. I found that intercountry adoption industry web pages used discourses of pacification and subjectification of experience to construct children’s bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange. Specifically, web pages used language and images to normalize the high cost of adoptions and to present the Hague Convention as a safeguard against child trafficking, thereby precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amounts of money that flow through the intercountry adoption system function to commodify children.

In her story outlining the basics of intercountry adoption on the Adoptive Families web page, Frievalds (n.d.) attributed differences in adoption costs to differences between the cost to adopt from a country that requires parents to travel and the cost to adopt from a country that does not require parents to travel, but differing travel costs is only a very small part of the story. In fact, intercountry adoption agencies charge widely divergent fees to facilitate adoptions from different foreign countries. The U.S. State Department reported that adoption service providers charged fees ranging between

…zero dollars and $62,875 for Convention adoption services, with half charging less than $26,200. These fees are exclusive of foreign program fees and fees for travel, translation, care of the child, and other country-specific services, which vary significantly by country of origin (FY 2010 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions, 2010).

One of the web pages in my sample, for example, estimated the total cost to adopt a child from Haiti to range between $17,304 and $20,055, including $400 in estimated airfare costs (Outreach Guide, 2010). The “Foreign Adoption Program Fee” (2010, p. 39) for this program was estimated at $2,000, plus an additional $4,475 for “government and in-country legal processing”
(p. 39), bringing the total fees to $6,475, just over one third of the total estimated cost for a Haiti adoption. However, the same agency indicated that it charges a $20,500 program fee to facilitate the adoption of a child from Russia (p. 63). This program fee alone is more than the total cost for a Haiti adoption and represents just under half of the estimated $42,080 to $44,880 in total Russia program costs, which included $1500 in estimated airfare. Smolin (2006) has explained that agency program fees cover “expenses necessary to the adoption process and fees paid for services” (2006, p. 177) and that these fees vary depending upon “customary” (p. 177) costs, which, in turn, vary depending upon the popularity of specific programs, the relative difficulty of completing adoptions in the country, and the race, age and health of available children. By discursively constructing the costs of intercountry adoption as ‘program’ costs rather than as ‘child’ costs, web page discourse in my sample implied that parents pay only for adoption services despite the fact that the only possible reason a prospective parent would seek such services would be to obtain a child—a commodity—from a foreign country.

Indeed, exorbitant adoption costs are not simply an indication that Western society holds foreign children in high regard. In fact, adoption fees serve as markers for the differential values that Western elites ascribe to children of different races (Quiroz P. A., 2007). Web page discourse that linked adoption choice to personal preference bypassed any possible consideration of the ways in which intercountry adoption functions to mask global social inequities associated with race, class, and gender. In fact, while Federal anti-discrimination laws “[prohibit] discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin” (Fair Housing Laws and Presidential Executive Orders, n.d.) and protect the interests of persons with disabilities, and while the 1994 Multiethnic Placement Act removed “race as [a] consideration in the placement of foster and [domestic] adoptive children” (Jennings, 2006, p. 561), none of these laws applies
in intercountry adoption. As a result, although “[prospective parents] weigh a constellation of factors…when adopting a child of the same or different race from abroad” (Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo, & Stevens, 2006), race, like gender, is at once visible and invisible to prospective parents who must consider the racialized bodies of the children they adopt but who rarely consider their own positions of privilege (Dorow, 2006; Quiroz, 2008).

Indeed, race, class and gender are at the heart of commodification in intercountry adoption, as

…the international availability of children lays bare the axes of power in the forms of choice, entitlement, class, and racial privileges located in the global North and West—and those of the powerlessness stemming from massive economic disadvantage, inhospitable political and cultural environments for women, and the effects of human rights abuses from foreign and civil wars in the global south and east (George, 2006).

These power disparities between East and West and between North and South are reflected in adoption fees that are often “so disproportionately large for the child’s home country that they encourage corruption” (Graff, 2008) in the form of baby abductions and other forms of child trafficking. In fact, as many as 1.2 million children are subject to child trafficking each year (Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse, n.d.), and some of these children have been found to have been adopted by U.S. American families (Briggs L., 2007). The United Nations Children’s Fund, for example, reports that as many as “1,000 to 1,500 Guatemalan babies and children are trafficked each year for adoption by couples in North America and Europe” (UNICEF, n.d.). Briggs (2007) likewise notes that legislators in Mexico estimate that up to 20,000 children disappear from Mexico City each year and that a portion of those children are sold into “illegal adoptions” (2007, p. 616). Outside of Latin America, child trafficking has been particularly problematic in Cambodia (Thompson N. S., 2004), Nepal (Orphaned or Stolen? The U.S. State Department investigates adoption from Nepal, 2006-2008, 2011), and China (China,
In the first nine months of 2011, the U.S. State Department posted notices cautioning that child trafficking for the purpose of intercountry adoption had occurred in Pakistan (Pakistan, 2011) and Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyzstan, 2011), and that U.S. Embassy staff in Addis Ababa had found “evidence of unethical recruitment of children from birth relatives and cases involving known birth parents from whom parental rights have not been severed by the Ethiopian courts” (Ethiopia, 2011). Graff (2008) argues that the strong demand for healthy, adoptable infants, coupled with the large amounts of money that changes hands in intercountry adoption, inevitably leads to corruption:

As international adoptions have flourished, so has evidence that babies in many countries are being systematically bought, coerced, and stolen away from their birth families. Nearly half the 40 countries listed by the U.S. State Department as the top sources for international adoption over the past 15 years—places such as Belarus, Brazil, Ethiopia, Honduras, Peru, and Romania—have at least temporarily halted adoptions or been prevented from sending children to the United States because of serious concerns about corruption and kidnapping. And yet when a country is closed due to corruption, many adoption agencies simply transfer their clients’ hopes to the next “hot” country. That country abruptly experiences a spike in infants and toddlers adopted overseas—until it too is forced to shut its doors… The pattern suggests that the supply of adoptable babies rises to meet foreign demand—and disappears when Western cash is no longer available (2008, pp. 60 & 63).

Web page texts defused the threat of child trafficking by presenting the Hague Convention’s goal of preventing child trafficking as if the goal was an accomplished fact. As a result, intercountry adoption industry web page discourse not only negated the potential for child trafficking, even though child trafficking continues to be a major problem in many countries, it also eliminated discussion about the ways in which child commodification and child trafficking are interrelated. In this way, intercountry adoption industry web page discourse commodified orphaned children at the same time that it denied that commodification could be a problem.

Hasenfeld’s (1992) claim that human service organizations can become so deeply entrenched in the capitalist framework upon which American society is built that these
organizations sometimes end up causing harm to the very people they claim to serve is likewise supported in my analysis. Indeed, although intercountry adoption advocacy organizations, adoption agencies, government agencies, and other web page sponsors in my sample claimed that their primary purpose was to defend the interests of orphans in the developing world, the presence of systematically distorted communication on industry web pages suggests that members of the “self-referential” (Deetz, 1992, p. 182) intercountry adoption industry may, in fact, be more motivated to reproduce the system than they are to address the problems of the world’s orphaned children. Certainly, the earliest participants in the intercountry adoption industry were initially motivated by altruistic motives to provide aid to foreign orphans (When You Come Home). Today, however, it is clear that most intercountry adoption industry participants are also motivated to meet a strong demand for adoptable, healthy babies. As a result, “many international adoption agencies work not to find homes for needy children but to find children for Western homes” (Graff, 2008, p. 1). Success in this endeavor also translates directly into increased revenues for so-called “non-profit” agencies, whose executives sometimes pocket salaries of up to one-third of their agency’s budgets (Judd, 2010, n.p.) and who often spend more on administrative costs than they do on “direct services for children” (2010, n.p., ¶4).

My conclusion that intercountry adoption industry discourse reinforces capitalist ideology by constructing orphaned children as commodities is consistent with the claims of adoption studies scholars who argue that intercountry adoption commodifies infants and children in the developing world for the benefit of Western elites (Park Nelson, 2006; Hubinette T., 2006). However, my analysis of intercountry adoption industry web pages demonstrates that commodification occurs in four specific discursive moves. Specifically, web pages used discourses of neutralization, naturalization, pacification and subjectification of experience to
construct children’s bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange while precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amounts of money that flow through the system contribute to, rather than solve, the problems of orphaned children.

*Discursive construction of intercountry adoption industry legitimates government role in lives of children and families.*

My third and fourth research questions asked how government and adoption industry professionals are constructed in intercountry adoption system discourse and whether these discourses function to obscure encroachment into the private lives of families and children around the world. I found that intercountry adoption industry web pages used discourses of legitimation to establish the role of government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats as authorities who were best suited to protect the “best interests of the child” (n.a., 1993).

Specifically, web pages invoked the Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, commonly referred to as the Hague Convention, to legitimate government intervention in the lives of children and their families. Howell (2007) argues that national and international adoption laws and treaties such as the Hague Convention reflect a particular form of governmentality that she refers to as “benevolent control” (2007, p. 137). Governmentality is a Foucaultian concept that describes

> “the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of [a] very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security” (Foucault, 1978/1994, p. 102).

Certainly, intercountry adoption involves a transfer, in this case, of children from the developing world to the West. These transfers are accomplished through an exchange of children’s bodies for large sums of money. Furthermore, as Briggs (2007) and Hübinette (2006) have both
explained, the practice of intercountry adoption offers significant economic and foreign policy benefits to sending countries and receiving countries alike. To protect their national interests, U.S. and foreign governments control the adoption process by passing legislation that stipulates who is qualified to adopt, who is eligible to be adopted, and who is authorized to facilitate the processes by which children are transferred from one country to another.

Before they can facilitate intercountry adoptions from Hague Convention countries, adoption service providers must be accredited (n.a., Agency Accreditation, n.d.). The Council on Accreditation (COA) is the agency responsible for accrediting U.S. adoption service providers to facilitate Convention adoptions (n.a., About COA, n.d.). To become accredited, adoption service providers must be licensed in the U.S. State(s) in which they operate; adhere to strict financial management and insurance requirements; use licensed supervisory employees who hold a postgraduate degree in social work or another human service-related field; maintain extensive records subject to regular review by COA or State Department administrators; and disclose information about agency policies, practices, and fees to prospective parents (Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, n.d.). An agency’s accreditation must be renewed every four years but can be suspended at any time if the COA determines that the agency has failed to maintain compliance with accreditation requirements.

Although the Hague Convention governs adoptions between Hague signatory states, the Convention does not prohibit signatory states from processing adoptions of children from non-Convention countries. Nor does it prevent Hague-accredited agencies from facilitating adoptions in non-Convention countries. A Hague-accredited agency may, therefore, process adoptions from both Hague Convention and non-Convention countries. Because the Hague accreditation process is costly and time-consuming (Thompson N. S., 2004), many U.S. agencies facilitate only non-
Convention adoptions. To make matters even more confusing, some non-Convention countries, such as Russia and Ethiopia, have established separate accreditation processes for agencies that facilitate adoptions in those countries. In short, although Hague accreditation is required before an agency can process adoptions from a Convention country, agencies do not have to be Hague accredited to process adoptions from non-Convention countries, although they may be required to meet separate accreditation standards to work in certain non-Convention countries. Thus, Hague accreditation is simply one type of authorization, among many, that adoption agencies use to legitimize the practice of intercountry adoption and to sell their services to prospective parents. More importantly, because Hague Convention signatories are not prohibited from processing non-Hague adoptions, the United States currently allows U.S. citizens to adopt from non-Hague countries. In such cases, Hague Convention protections that shield children, birth families, and adoptive families from child trafficking are not guaranteed. This is significant, since only one of the top five countries that sent children to the U.S. for adoption in 2010 was a Hague Convention country (n.a., About Us, n.d.). As a result, multiple references to the Hague Convention in both text and images and repeated references to Hague accreditation and other types of licensure functioned primarily to legitimize the role of government in intercountry adoption, since Hague accreditation is only necessary for individuals who wish to adopt from a Hague signatory country.

In addition to discursively legitimating the roles of international, national, and state bureaucrats in determining what constitutes “the best interests of children” (Intercountry Adoption, n.d.), web page texts also disqualified orphaned children and their birthparents from participating in discourse production. Instead, intercountry adoption industry texts presented the perspectives of the adoption industry couched in terms that suggested these texts represented the
perspectives of orphaned children. Although adoption industry web page sponsors may not have intended to deliberately exclude orphan and birth parent voices, Dorow (2006) notes that the Western “ideology of exclusive kinship” (2006, p. 196) makes it difficult to “[accommodate] two mothers” (p. 196). She noted, however, that this “…does not mean that parents [do] not wrestle with the imbalance in fortunes (financial and otherwise) that brought their children to them, especially as it was equally an act of separation from birth mother and culture” (2006, p. 189).

Anagnost (2000) likewise argues that prospective parents are not oblivious to the fact that someone, somewhere, had to have given birth to the child they will one day adopt. Nevertheless, Anagnost notes that although prospective parents are sensitive to the plight of birth parents, prospective parents typically assume that they are powerless to do anything besides adopt the children, who in any case are already wards of the state. Indeed, she writes,

…the severing of the child from its birth parents is a violence already enacted by the impersonal power of the state, calming the anxiety that the transfer of the child to one’s care might have incurred an affective loss to another—the damage has, in a sense, already been done (p. 400).

In other words, although prospective parents understand that their gain is another mother’s loss, they take comfort in believing that they were not the direct cause of that loss. Intercountry adoption industry web pages preserved this sense of comfort by alluding, at times, to the thoughts and feelings orphaned children and even to their (distant) birthparents, but never explicitly including them in discourse production. Troubling questions about the origins of orphaned children were likewise quelled in topical avoidance as intercountry adoption was constructed as a method for building or creating (new) families without any reference to the circumstances that remove children from their birth families prior to their entry into the intercountry adoption system. Finally, web page texts used meaning denial in the form of multiple references to “qualified parents” that reinforced the message that the family is a proper
subject of government rule while also implying that U.S. Americans, by virtue of their privileged positions in the global hierarchy, are particularly qualified to parent the children of foreigners.

The topic of parental qualification is complicated by the fact that state, federal and foreign governments all impose limitations on who can adopt. Non-heterosexuals, in particular, were challenged by web page texts and images that constructed adoptive families as heteronormative families. However,

Notions such as family and household can no longer be understood in as simple a manner as they once were. The whole question of who is a family member now raises substantial issues that were of minor consequence two generations ago” (Allan, Hawker, S., & Crow, 2001, p. 824).

Indeed, one significant change in U.S. family and household composition is reflected in the increasing numbers of “non-heterosexuals, both men and women, [who] are involved in parenting in one way or another” (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2004, p. 348). The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law estimates that “approximately 65,500 adopted children are being raised by lesbian or gay parents, accounting for more than four percent of all adopted children in the United States” (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). Not only are non-heterosexual couples adopting children in increasing numbers, many of these couples have been represented by agencies that facilitate intercountry adoption (Brodzinsky, n.d.). However,

…the situation for agencies focusing on intercountry adoption is more complicated. No sending nation has a policy specifically allowing the placement of children with lesbians and gays. In fact, many either specifically prohibit such placements or have regulations that indirectly impede such placements (e.g., requiring that the adoptive parents be married) or are silent on the issue (Brodzinsky, n.d., p. 36).

For prospective parents, parental qualification discourse on intercountry adoption industry web pages can be interpreted in many different ways. Certainly, older prospective parents may be delighted to learn that they may qualify to adopt internationally, even though they may have been found ineligible to adopt a child under U.S. state law. Other prospective parents may chafe under
foreign government regulations that require prospective parents to be married, for example, or to be childless—or under regulations that will allow them to adopt only less-desirable older or special needs children. In any case, discourses of qualification serve to further legitimate U.S. intervention in the “intimate domains” (Stoler, 2006, p. 23) of the family, particularly in texts that challenge specific adoption regulations in some foreign countries. At the same time, however, references to parental qualifications in intercountry adoption industry web pages not only highlight the qualifications adoptive parents must meet to be found “suitable” to adopt, they also conceal the possibility that many if not all U.S. American prospective parents will, in fact, be found qualified to parent the child of foreigners by virtue of their privileged location in the global social hierarchy. As Briggs (2007) notes, “raising the ‘orphans’ of colonized people is a very familiar practice” (Briggs L., 2007, p. 613). In short, texts that suggest so-called “nontraditional” parents can also adopt, even if limited to particular countries or to special needs programs by foreign governments who prefer to send their best children to parents who more closely resemble the ideal heteronormative American family, suggest that simply being “American” may be enough to qualify to adopt a foreign child.

My conclusion that intercountry adoption industry web page texts and images legitimate and obscure government encroachment into the private realm of the family is consistent with colonial studies scholars who claim that governments invade the private realm of the family to maintain control over populations (Stoler, 2006) and with adoption studies scholars who argue that intercountry adoption is, itself, a colonialist project (Hubinette T., 2006; Briggs L., 2007). However, as I will explain in the following section, government may, in fact, have an appropriate role in intercountry adoption if the practice is redefined not as a way of “making ‘American’
families” (Briggs L., 2007), but instead as a means of challenging social inequity in the U.S. and abroad.

**Implications**

In this study, I have demonstrated that text and images in intercountry adoption industry web pages use systematically distorted communication to discursively construct orphaned foreign children as commodities, to naturalize global structural inequalities, and to privilege the interests of social elites at the expense of marginalized social groups both inside and outside of the United States. In so doing, I have demonstrated that it is possible for a very loosely aligned group of public- and private-sector organizations and individuals together to comprise a single self-referential system that uses systematically distorted communication to reproduce itself. Interestingly, I also found that all eight types of systematically distorted communication may operate together to reproduce the power in larger organizational systems and within society as a whole. As a result, critical organizational communication theorists may wish to study whether other seemingly disparate sets of individuals and organizations, inside and outside of the human services sector, use systematically distorted communication to strategically reflect and reproduce their social power, hegemony, or colonial aspirations.

I have also identified a key mechanism that enables infants and children in the developing world to be commodified for the benefit of Western elites in intercountry adoption. Specifically, in deconstructing intercountry adoption system web page discourse, I have shown that adoption industry members use language and images to construct orphaned children, birth families, adoptive families, and the practice of intercountry adoption itself in a way that masks the social inequities that are (re)produced in and by the system. However, as both a critical scholar and as
an adoptive parent, I am not content to end my discussion here, as I too am interested in ensuring that children’s “best interests” are protected.

As this study has shown, even the most well-intentioned efforts undertaken on the behalf of orphaned children by highly powerful international political bodies has failed to put an end to child trafficking. In fact, web page texts that carefully avoid the elephant in the room by describing “country costs” or “program costs” rather than “child costs” fail precisely because these discursive moves seek to deny the incontrovertible fact that the foundation of the entire intercountry adoption system is the capitalist notion of commodity exchange. Before the Hague Convention was fully implemented in the United States, Smolin (2006) and other scholars argued that Hague provisions requiring financial transparency, agency licensing, and closer monitoring of intercountry adoption practice would put an end to “child laundering” (2006, p. 1):

Abusive profiteering and commodification of children would exist within the intercountry adoption system even if children were obtained properly from their birth parents, given the lax regulation of money within the intercountry adoption system. Once profiteering and commodification of children become normative and permissible in otherwise legitimate adoptions, the next step toward obtaining children illicitly is almost inevitable. Once the profit motive is unleashed in the intercountry adoption system, it becomes very difficult to safeguard children and families from illicit child laundering. Therefore, child laundering can only be eliminated from the intercountry adoption system through limitations, accountability, and transparency of monetary transactions (2006, p. 30).

The implementation of Hague Convention accountability and transparency provisions have, however, failed to end child trafficking, sometimes with tragic consequences. Most often, trafficking occurs in adoptions from countries that have not signed or have not yet implemented the Hague Convention. Briggs (2007), for example, reported that some parents who adopted children from Mexico learned, too late, that their adopted children had been abducted from their birthmothers or purchased on false promises that the arrangement would be temporary. Similar stories of child abductions caused the U.S. government to halt adoptions from places like
Guatemala (Graff, 2008), Cambodia (Thompson N. S., 2004), and most recently, Nepal (Left in limbo: Nepalese adoptions halted , 2011), when federal agents were not able to establish the authenticity of relinquishment documentation. Graff (2008) notes, however, that

Many adoption agencies and adoptive parents passionately insist that crooked practices are not systemic, but tragic, isolated cases. Arrest the bad guys, they say, but let the "good" adoptions continue. However, remove cash from the adoption chain, and, outside of China, the number of healthy babies needing Western homes all but disappears. Nigel Cantwell, a Geneva-based consultant on child protection policy, has seen the dangerous influence of money on adoptions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where he has helped reform corrupt adoption systems. In these regions, healthy children age 3 and younger can easily be adopted in their own countries, he says. I asked him how many healthy babies in those regions would be available for international adoption if money never exchanged hands. "I would hazard a guess at zero," he replied (Graff, 2008).

Although Anagnost (2000) has argued that “money has to change hands” (2000, p. 398) whenever “children are moved from one site of nurture to another” (p. 398), I argue that this is a gross oversimplification of the issue. Certainly, some adoption costs, such as, for example, the cost of airfare to transfer a child from one location to another, may be inescapable. Other costs, however, particularly the per-child fees charged in conjunction with children’s age, race and health or disability status, are not. Therefore, I support Graff’s (2008) and Smolin’s (2006) proposals that the U.S. government should simply remove the “profit motive” (Smolin, 2006, p. 30) from intercountry adoption by prohibiting and criminalizing the payment of per-child program fees by U.S. Americans. Not only would such a prohibition remove the profit motive that has caused some countries, like South Korea, to offer the nation’s “‘impure’ and ‘disposable’ outcasts” (Hubinette T. , 2006, p. 147) for adoption as a method for offsetting social welfare costs, a ban on payments of per-child fees would also eliminate the financial incentive that underpins child trafficking that is rampant in some parts of the system. Moreover, since roughly half of all children in the intercountry adoption system are adopted by U.S. American parents (Graff, 2008), such a move would immediately reduce the strong demand for
adoptable infants that has led unethical practitioners in places like Nepal to falsify documents to
suggest that children are orphans when in reality, they are not (Orphaned or Stolen? The U.S.
reports that adoption advocates have long understood that corruption in the intercountry adoption
system is directly related to the large amounts of money that flow through the system:

    Unless you control the money, you won’t control the corruption," says Thomas DiFilipo,
    president of the Joint Council on International Children's Services, which represents more
    than 200 international adoption organizations. "If we have the greatest laws and the
    greatest regulations but are still sending $20,000 anywhere—well, you can bypass any
    system with enough cash (Graff, 2008, n.p.)

While a ban on the payment of per-child fees also has the potential to increase business for
intercountry adoption agencies by reducing the cost of intercountry adoption to a level that
would allow more single adults and families with fewer financial resources to consider adoption,
I expect that this proposal will nevertheless be met by fierce resistance from adoption industry
practitioners who, in some cases, have invested significant effort into developing extensive
networks in foreign countries to locate babies for adoption by U.S. American parents. Removal
of the profit motive might very well relegate these agencies, and the U.S. American parents
whom they serve, to the back of the line, particularly in those countries that are participating in
intercountry adoption for financial rather than humanitarian reasons. Still, it seems clear that the
best way, if not the only way, to ensure that children are no longer commodified in intercountry
adoption is to simply remove economic incentives from the table.

    This study also revealed that intercountry adoption industry web page discourse
legitimizes the role of state, national and international government agents as arbiters of family
structure and composition and of children's "best interests." Although a morally-noble desire to
protect children from exploitation was clearly the impetus behind the development of the Hague
Convention and the passage of national laws to implement the treaty, implementation of some Hague Convention provisions has also expanded the role of government in determining the nature and composition of “suitable families.” Indeed, if the only possible purpose for intercountry adoption were to provide prospective parents with a viable method for overcoming the “potentially stigmatizing status” (Miall, 1986, p. 268) of childlessness or to meet the “emphatic demand that citizens be parents” (Briggs L., 2007), then the deep intrusion by social welfare workers into prospective parents’ homes, finances, and health records is difficult to justify, particularly since parents submit to no such scrutiny before giving birth to their biological children. If, however, intercountry adoption were transformed into a practice that reflected something other than a social imperative to create “as-if-begotten” (Schachter, 2009, p. 61) (i.e. racially-homogenous, heteronormative) families, then a more rigorous inspection of accessible resources, more stringent parental training requirements such as those mandated by the Hague Convention, and more post-adoption follow-up may, in fact, be warranted.

It should come as no surprise that the very conditions that produce children for adoption can also be highly detrimental to children’s healthy development (Gray, 2002). At the very least, intercountry adoptees lose the opportunity to maintain connections with birth parents and other family members. Furthermore, children who have been institutionalized for any length of time often suffer post-institutional delays or from behavior problems (Gunnar, van Dulmen, & International Adoption Project Team, 2007) language delays (Schoenbrodt, Carran, & Preis, 2007), and other challenges (Rutter, et al., 2009; Wilson S. L., 2003). Significantly, researchers in Sweden found that adolescent and adult intercountry adoptees were

…three to four times more likely to have serious mental health problems such as suicide, suicide attempts, and psychiatric admissions; five times more likely to be addicted to drugs; and two to three times more likely to commit crimes or abuse alcohol than other
children in Swedish society living in similar socioeconomic circumstances (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002).

Web page texts that avoid discussing the ways in which early childhood trauma affects children and parents tend to focus exclusively on the moment when children are “united with families” (Holt How Sponsorship Works, n.d.). However joyous this moment may be, however, it is all too often replaced by hard work—lots of it—as adoptive parents struggle to meet the needs of children who have already suffered the unspeakable loss and tragedy of separation from birth family but who must also navigate a new culture, new language, and most importantly, develop healthy interpersonal relationships, often for the first time. Post-adoption assistance is, however, much less readily available to adoptive parents than pre-adoption support. Although some foreign countries require parents to submit regular post-adoption reports (Post Adoption, n.d.) to provide updates on the child’s health and development and the family’s adjustment, these reports do not necessarily reflect the concerns of parents who may feel considerable social pressure to demonstrate their parenting success (Altstein & Simon, 1990; Barth & Miller, 2000). Indeed, although no foreign government has yet attempted to dissolve an adoption on the basis of a negative post-placement report, the Russian government recently won new concessions in an agreement with the U.S. government that will allow Russia “new powers to set conditions for U.S. agencies in how they handle their follow-up monitoring of adoptions from Russia (Clapper & Crary, 2011) following a widely publicized incident in which a woman returned her seven-year-old adopted son to Russia, claiming the boy had exhibited “violent and psychotic behavior” (Duke, 2010). In this case, “the agency responsible for conducting home visits before and after the boy’s adoption [claimed] the [family] did not notify their social worker that there was a problem. [Instead,] social workers found Justin was adjusting to his new home enthusiastically” (Adams, 2010). In fact, adoptive parents and experts alike argue that parents and children facing
post-adoptive challenges ranging from mild speech or learning disabilities to extremely violent or even self-damaging behavior often find that few resources are available or that such resources are prohibitively expensive (Montgomery, 2010). As a result, parents who have already spent huge sums of money to adopt a child from a foreign country may struggle to invest hundreds or even thousands of dollars a month into specialized treatment programs—if they can find them.

Once again, my own experience suggests adoption industry personnel may simply fail to realize just how many families continue to struggle with post-adoption challenges for months and even years after their adoptions have been completed. Indeed, the lack of post-placement monitoring in the U.S. means no one really knows how many of the more than 200,000 children adopted from foreign countries over the past ten years have arrived with diagnosed or undiagnosed physical or mental maladies (Keeping the promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed, 2010). However, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (n.d.) has noted that adoptive parents who acknowledge the difference between parenting a biological child and parenting an adoptive child, without placing undue emphasis on these differences, tend to be more successful in “addressing the additional tasks and challenges that adoption brings to parenting and family life” (Keeping the promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed, 2010).

As the previous discussion shows, it is unrealistic, at best, and dangerous, at worst, to assume that adoptive families should expect to be “just the same” as biological families. Even parents who manage to adopt very young infants in an attempt to create an “as-if-begotten” (Schachter, 2009, p. 61) relationship are likely to experience challenges as they strive to help their children cope with the physical and emotional effects of trauma and loss. But what if
adoption was reconceptualized as a social commitment to serve disadvantaged women and families by serving their children? Certainly, all children do deserve the opportunity to grow up in a nurturing family environment. However, some children—true orphans, older children, and children with special needs, in particular—are particularly vulnerable. While these children may not satisfy U.S. American parents’ dreams of building a racially-homogenous, “as-if-begotten” (Schachter, 2009, p. 61) family relationship, such children can benefit greatly by being adopted. Their chances improve if their parents have developed a clear understanding of their roles in children’s lives—roles in which children’s care, rather than parents’ needs, take precedence.

I am not suggesting that the Hague Convention be annulled. Nor am I proposing to end the practice of intercountry adoption. Instead, I am arguing that U.S. intercountry adoption practice should shift from one in which prospective parents are pre-qualified to adopt and then sent on their merry way, to discover some time later that the “as-if-begotten” family they had dreamed of creating was, in fact, a myth; into a practice in which prospective parents receive training that will adequately prepare them to raise children with very real, very unrelenting, and often, very painful needs, and in which they continue to receive ongoing support until their adopted children reach adulthood.

This proposal will no doubt be difficult to implement. At present, intercountry adoption agencies have little incentive to follow up with families after post-placement reporting has been completed. Nor do most non-profit agencies have access to the full range of support services that families may potentially need. Although the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Foundation points out that the Hague Convention “requires participating countries to ‘promote the development of adoption counseling and post-adoption services in their States’” (Keeping the promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed, 2010), the
United States has failed to do so, beyond requiring agencies to provide post-placement reporting services, counseling referrals, disruptions and dissolutions management (Hague accreditation and approval standards, 2007). Therefore, I propose that federal law be amended to require agencies to offer even more comprehensive pre-adoptive training and access to a wide range of post-adoption services. These services should also be subsidized to ensure that families are able to access help before crisis conditions arise. Such services could be made available, for example, through a joint partnership between agencies and adoption advocacy organizations like the Joint Council on International Children’s Services and the National Council for Adoption, while funding to subsidize the costs of services could come from a variety of public and private sources.

I believe that this proposal offers three significant advantages. First, instead of assuming that adoptive families should be like biological families, it re-centers adoption as a service to children, rather than as a means by which Western elites overcome the stigma of childlessness by obtaining exotic children with which to create their families. Second, it offers the opportunity to redefine family in a much more inclusive way. If the goal is simply to provide safe, nurturing environments in which children can develop, then there is no longer any compelling reason to prohibit single adults and non-heterosexual couples from parenting. In fact, since non-traditional parents have long been limited to older child and special needs adoptions, they may offer valuable insights to parents in more traditional family formations adopting older or disabled children. Finally, I believe my proposal will also create the conditions under which it will become easier to conduct research into intercountry adoption outcomes in the United States.

Future research
Selman (2002) reports that researchers have long struggled to obtain accurate information about intercountry adoption in the United States. Although the U.S. State Department does report gross numbers of children adopted by state, by country, and by gender, the State Department does not provide information about such matters as adoptee health or disability status. Nor does it report the numbers of adopted children who may have living birth family members in their countries of origin. This lack of comprehensive information stands in stark contrast with the transparency of the Netherlands, for example, where a number of longitudinal studies have been conducted to determine how well adoptees are adjusting to their new environments (Keeping the promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed, 2010). Although the U.S. Census Bureau now collects information about adoptive families, this information is also limited. Researchers who wish to gain direct access to adoptive families are often limited to snowball sampling methods or relying on parents to volunteer to participate in studies (e.g. Glennen & Masters, 2002). Thus, I think it is reasonable to begin by suggesting that the federal government should collect and provide detailed information about intercountry adoptees to social science researchers who are qualified to study such topics as adoptee adjustment, birthparent search, and adoptee identity formation using more robust random sampling methods that can yield statistically significant results.

I, however, am not the correct candidate to conduct such research. As a critical scholar, I am more interested in illuminating connections between communication and social inequality. The discovery that all eight types of systematically distorted communication were used in intercountry adoption industry web pages was an unexpected result, since neither Deetz (1992) nor any other theorist has, to my knowledge, suggested that such a result should (or even could) be expected. It is possible that the large number of web pages in my final corpus provided a
sufficient quantity of texts to allow each of the eight types of systematically distorted communication to be easily identified. An alternate explanation is that the intercountry adoption industry may be a more tightly-knit system than I initially supposed, so that the discourses on intercountry adoption industry web pages were more uniform than I expected. Of course, the possibility also exists that my findings represented an anomaly and that they will not be replicated in any future studies. However, my findings in this study suggest that researchers should also attempt to determine whether systematically distorted communication is present in the discourse of other large, loosely-connected systems. One such system is the domestic adoption system, which shares some common features with intercountry adoption but which is also unique in that agency web pages must address the needs of both birth parents and prospective adoptive parents at once. Likewise, public domestic adoption programs, many of which still use images of so-called “waiting children,” may use systematically distorted communication to establish and preserve their power and authority to control socially disadvantaged families.

Summary

In this study, I addressed the question of whether participants in the U.S. intercountry adoption system discursively construct orphaned foreign children and the practice of intercountry adoption in ways that support the interests of social elites at the expense of members of marginalized social groups. Adoption studies scholars (e.g. Hübinette, 2006; Park Nelson, 2006; Anagnost, 2000) who claim that intercountry adoption is, at its core, a colonialist project in which infants and children from far-off lands are literally and figuratively produced for consumption by members of elite social groups in the West have not explicitly addressed the relationship between the social inequities that permit children to be transformed into objects of
trade and the discursive constructions that facilitate such transformations. This study fills this gap and provides insight into a specific communication mechanism by which the intercountry adoption system reproduces itself at the expense of the children and families it claims to serve. After my initial genre analysis revealed that the web pages produced by each of seven different types of sponsoring organizations did, in fact, represent the interests of a single "control-oriented, self-referential system" (Deetz S. A., 1992, p. 182), I conducted a close analysis of web page texts which revealed that the four discursive strategies of naturalization, neutralization, subjectification of experience, and pacification functioned together in intercountry adoption industry web pages to construct children's bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange. Web pages naturalized the role of adoptive families in the lives of orphaned children by using language and images to discursively separate children from their birth families, suggested adoptive family membership supplants any previous relationships between children and their birth families, and constructed adoptive family relationships using language and images that privileged heteronormative notions of the family. Web pages also used neutralization, in the form of Orientalist tropes and imagery, to paint U.S. American adoptive parents as benevolent rescuers of frail and needy foreign children. Web pages used pacification to preclude all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amount of money flowing through the system commodifies children by only addressing topics like child trafficking within the context of Hague Convention protections, suggesting that the problem is no longer a concern. In offering opportunities for web page visitors to make charitable donations to support orphans, intercountry adoption agency web pages, in particular, (re)established their role as powerful advocates for orphans without substantively addressing the social inequities that orphan thousands of children each year. Finally, intercountry adoption industry web pages used a discourse of the ‘right
choice’ to conceal the possibility that parents’ unexamined assumptions about race, gender, class, or other factors may influence their adoption decisions, thereby (re)producing problematic social inequities associated with race, class, and gender. I concluded that intercountry adoption industry discourse reinforces capitalist ideology by constructing orphaned children as commodities and that commodification occurs in four specific discursive moves. Specifically, web pages used discourses of neutralization, naturalization, pacification and subjectification of experience to construct children’s bodies as a legitimate medium of exchange while precluding all but token attempts to address the ways in which the large amounts of money that flow through the system contribute to, rather than solve, the problems of orphaned children. To interrupt the continuing cycle of commodification, I supported Smolin (2006) and Graff (2008), who have both suggested that the “profit motive” (Smolin, 2006, p. 30) could be eliminated if the payment of per-child program fees were outlawed.

My analysis further revealed four specific discursive strategies that functioned together to legitimate government bureaucrats and adoption technocrats as arbiters of family structure and composition and of children’s "best interests.” These strategies included legitimation, disqualification, topical avoidance, and meaning denial. Web pages used references to the Hague Convention to legitimate both the practice of intercountry adoption and role of the State in the lives of children by suggesting that the Hague Convention protects the best interests of children. Intercountry adoption industry web pages also excluded some parties, namely orphaned children and birth families, from participating in discourse production, and marginalized the perspectives of adoption studies scholars and adoptive parents by invoking the needs and feelings of orphaned children on the children’s behalf without actually citing children or birthparents. Web pages used topical avoidance to limit conflict using a building metaphor to construct families as kinship
forms that are *built* or *created* rather than as kinship relations into which children are born and by using possessive pronouns to refer to adoptees or prospective adoptees as if they were adoptive parents’ possessions. Web pages likewise used images of previously-orphaned children with their completed families and never with birth families. Finally, systematically distorted practices of meaning denial were evident in the use of the words, “qualified parents,” which function both to reinforce the notion that adoption system practitioners who carefully evaluate families prior to adoption are best suited to ensure the best interests of children, and to suggest that U.S. Americans, by virtue of their privileged location in the global social hierarchy, are uniquely “qualified” to parent the children of foreigners. I therefore concluded that intercountry adoption industry web pages used texts and images to legitimate and obscure government encroachment into the private realm of the family. Rather than eliminate the role of government in intercountry adoption, however, I proposed that federal law be amended to require agencies to offer even more comprehensive pre-adoptive training and access to a wide range of subsidized post-adoption services. I argued that government may, in fact, have an appropriate role in intercountry adoption if the practice is redefined not as a way of “making ‘American’ families” (Briggs L., 2007), but instead as a means of challenging social inequity in the U.S. and abroad.
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