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## Decision-making as Communicated Narrative Sense-Making: Resilient Experiences of Mormon Adoptive Parents

### Cover Page Footnote

Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University— which is settled on the ancestral homelands of the Akimel O'otham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa) people.

# Decision-Making as Communicated Narrative Sense-Making: Resilient Experience of Mormon Adoptive Parents

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*Adopting a child is a consequential decision with many effects on the wellbeing of individuals and families which is no less true within Mormon contexts. As such, scholarship within decision-making around adoption continues to focus on empirical, rational and other modernist frameworks to account for these vital decisions. In order to more fully account for a wholistic framework of how these decisions are made, this study proposes a narrative approach to decision-making to uncover the lived decision-making experience of Mormon adoptive parents holistically. Mormon adoptive parents were interviewed to understand their decision-making experience as process of communicated narrative sense-making (Koneig-Kellas, 2018). I argue using this emergent data, adoptive parents experience constitutes resilient decision-making as a form of resilient narrative sense-making. In adopting CNSM and constitutive approaches to resilience (Buzzanell, 2010; Afifi, 2018) this qualitative study seeks to explain decision-making as a narrative constitutive process of resilience: decision making becomes an ongoing ontological process of decision-making narrated through time. Future researchers of decision-making can understand the experience of adoptive parents within the larger narrative framework of their historical contexts as a means of understanding the interpellation of hegemonic narratives in ongoing decision making.*

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Keywords: narrative, decision-making, adoption, Communicated Narrative Sense-Making

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The decision to adopt is widespread in the United States, with 7%

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of all adopted children (around 1,527,020 children) currently living in U.S. households (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Adoption is a widespread decision with a variety of consequential effects. 1 in 10 U.S. adults report knowing someone who was adopted, which makes the decision-making around adoption “increased significantly,” since 2007 (Smith, 2007, p. 20). No member of society is more affected by adoption than the parents and children who in part create the adoption triad themselves (i.e., adoptive parent, birthmother, and adopted child; Baxter et al., 2012), whose lives change as a result of this decision. The life changes resulting from the decision to adopt are evident in the many well-being effects on all members of the adoption triad, whose family experiences are shaped by the historical and cultural power relations of a given context—Mormon cultures<sup>1</sup> in this case’s study. The decision to adopt is of fundamental importance, yet the experience of these decision-making communicative processes receives little attention, much less the cultural hegemonic forces that shape the lived experiences of moving through this decision-making process in particular contexts. This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of adoptive decision-making in particular Mormon cultural contexts, given the theological and historical influence on the material conditions of Utah and U.S. adoption processes (Brown, 2011; Irving, 1974; Stapley, 2011), particularly the role of adoption in the Mormon settler violence against Indigenous sovereignties (Bennion, 2012). This study lays the first step in understanding the role of narrative in decision-making process as a first step in uncovering the larger socio-historic and ideological contexts that constitute the material conditions of adopting a child.

At the individual level, adopted children may experience numerous health impacts throughout their lifetime. These include experiences of ambiguous loss and grief, which may negatively impact the adopted child’s health (Powell & Afifi, 2005), as well as lower self-esteem compared to non-adopted individuals (Borders et al., 2000; Sharma et al., 1996). Adoptive parents may experience post-adoption depression (Foli, 2010; Senecky et al., 2009) and parenting challenges, which may include questioning whether they love their child enough, challenges to their identity as parents, feeling a lack of support from others, and difficulty managing emotions (U.S. Department of Health, 2015). Birth mothers may experience trauma and various phases of grief (Romanchik, 1999), which can be exacerbated by the associated stigma surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Mormon Culture in this context refers beyond simple membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and thus necessitates the full range of contexts with the subjectivity which initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (See Park, 2023).

“giving up a child” (U.S. Department of Health, 2013), ambiguous loss (Powell & Afifi, 2005), and difficulties forming new relationships with others (Smith, 2007). Given these negative effects on adoption triads resulting from decisions to adopt, scholars should concern themselves with how decision-making affects the well-being of the adoptive triad. Scholars have argued that the well-being of individuals should be understood in consideration of the total lived experience of the individual (Greenhalgh, 1999). As such, I intend to understand the lived experience of adoptive parents in their decision-making processes regarding whom to adopt.

Although the range of health effects on the adoption triad is particularly well-documented, much less has been written about the historical contexts that shape decision-making—let alone how these contexts are integrated into theoretical frameworks that ontologically situate adoption decision-making. Much future research is needed to fully understand the larger grand narratives (Boje, 2001) that interpellate ideologically laden decision-making processes (Eagleton, 1991, 2014), including those of adoptive parents. Given the limited research on both the larger historical contexts of Mormon adoption and the limitations of studies that investigate the decision-making experiences of parents, this study seeks first to theorize a framework through which to understand the experience of decision-making.

To better account for the familial and socio-historical conditions that create decision-making, I review decision-making literature, which has historically been situated within empirical paradigms that ontologically orient scholars toward decision-making in particular logical theoretical frameworks, rather than embracing the whole person and socio-historical conditions influencing the decision (Bradley, 1991; Ford & Richardson, 1994; Schrodt et al., 2008; Steptoe-Warren et al., 2011; Wallace, 2015). To better account for the individual and societal conditions that situate choice, I adopt a narrative paradigm. This enables the sense-making processes of the individual to be accounted for, as well as the larger socio-historical narratives that convey the lived conditions, to establish an epistemological framework of choice and decision-making (Fisher, 1985; Koenig Kellas, 2018). These areas of literature are reviewed as follows: decision-making and adoption literature, the narrative paradigm, and theories of choice and adoption, followed by the theoretical framework that accounts for the individual and socio-historical conditions that contextually produce decisions—in this case, Mormon parents’ decision to adopt. In doing so, decision-making as a narrative process will help reshape scholarship and praxis around decisions.

## Onto-Epistemological Frameworks for Situating Adoptive Decision-Making

Most scholars understand decision-making in adoption through theoretical frameworks that center on rationality (Downing et al., 2009). These rational paradigms align with the larger empirical frameworks and paradigms of modernism that frame choice and decision-making (Schrodt et al., 2008). Choice and decision-making are central to modernist paradigmatic frameworks, as well as to the wide-ranging postmodern epistemological reactions and intellectual projects that question the very existence of agency and all related phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Eagleton, 1983). Western academia has been locked into a dichotomous movement between modern and postmodern debates around agency, which have continually been critiqued by paradigms that instead embrace the pre-modern intellectual history of Indigenous knowledges and other historically marginalized epistemologies (Watson & Huntington, 2008; Blackhawk, 2023). These intellectual histories have been violently opposed as part of the larger project within Western academia, beginning with the foundation of contemporary academic models in the 14th century and their subsequent iterations through the material conditions to the present (Robinson, 2020). From these early iterations of Western academe's epistemological violence (Robinson, 2020) to contemporary settler colonial contexts that constitute Western academe's epistemological foundations and material realities (la Paperson, 2017; Grande, 2015)—particularly in Utah adoption (Bennion, 2012)—agency and decision-making have centered on partial notions of what constitutes human agency (Wynter, 2003). For example, mind-body dualisms frame decision-making models as a battle between the rational, passions, body, and material exigencies. Many of these frameworks have subsequently adopted Hegel's spirit/material dialectic as a means of situating so-called trash-can models of decision-making and other frameworks that dualistically conclude decisions are often immaterial—or a black box between the spiritual and the material (Cohen et al., 1972).

While scholars in modern times have begun to adopt ecological models of decision-making that attempt to account for a wide range of variables, these so-called ecological models (e.g., Newell & Bröder, 2008) continue to utilize frameworks of rationalism and empiricism that undermine non-Western experiences (Grande, 2015). These frameworks have also been applied within adoption decision-making scholarship with similar results. For example, Downing et al. (2009) framed rationalist understandings of decision-making within an ecological systems perspective, positioning decision-making in adoption as a result of “a bidirectionality of effect” (p. 248) between the individual and their

environment. This epistemology creates a division between individuals and their environments within an immaterial, idealistic Western framework that erases the experiences of non-Western subjects (Schrag, 2003). For example, Downing et al. (2009) reviewed extensive literature on the common factors influencing adoptive parents' decision to adopt and found dozens of scholars who used the same cause-effect theoretical framework to understand the decision to adopt. This framework limits the ability to understand decision-making as a fully interconnected experience by focusing on single factors. Indeed, many scholars across disciplines understand decisions as influenced by many factors, thus missing the lived experience of decision-making and adoption's broader ecology (Downing et al., 2009). These bidirectional frameworks aim to predict and anticipate decisions as a means of generating scientific models for decisions—an approach that has largely influenced scholarship frameworks for medical decision-making.

Scholars have also argued for an interpretive approach to decision-making to understand the lived experience of decisions constituted by countless factors as a means of narrating decision-making, mostly through interpretive and postmodern paradigmatic commitments (e.g., Boje, 2001). Within these paradigms, choice and decisions are not predictable; in fact, the historical value of contingency largely undergirds these frameworks (see Eagleton, 1983). As such, these paradigms eschew the aforementioned models of decision-making aimed at prediction, instead adopting frameworks focused on the complex embodied experience of decision-making, the larger power relations that limit decision-making, or even questioning the very existence of choice (see Eagleton, 2004). These frameworks, for example, have been adopted within medical decision-making to great success. Greenhalgh (1999) demonstrated how medical decision-making should be an interpretive act wherein the clinician draws upon narrative analyses to integrate stories told by the patient, test results, and the experiences of the patient and clinician. Indeed, medical experts have come to acknowledge how interpretive the decision-making judgments of doctors are, given the triage medical models. Interpretivism in these medical instances combines the rational empirical models of decision modeling with the interpretive prowess of doctors, making decision-making fundamentally distinct from purely rational or purely interpretive approaches. The middle ground between modern interpretive, postmodern, and premodern approaches, however, embraces a level of narrative constitutive ground (Boje, 2001), which I will argue in the next section can serve as an alternative paradigmatic framework for scholars seeking to affirm non-Western subjectivities, agency, and experiences in understanding decision-making.

## **Narrative Paradigm as constitutive ground of decision-making**

The narrative paradigms were initially theorized by Fisher (1985), who began to narrate human beings as “homo-narran” and has since given rise to an ontology embraced by literary critics, rhetoricians, and postmodern philosophers orienting toward narrative as the constitutive fabric of social life (Eagleton, 1991). These core assumptions center epistemology as narrated, relative, sense-making, interpreted, relational, and shaped by power. While a narrative paradigm in its most universalist sense, like the one proposed by Fisher (1985), reifies Western notions of reality as narrative and universal, less universalist paradigms instead situate narrative as a fundamental part of diverse social life, which aligns with many Indigenous epistemologies (de la Garza, 2018). These broader assumptions of narrative, however, are often relegated in favor of the rhetorical goals of narrative that have shaped the scholarship of decision-making. For example, medical scholars have studied how patients’ health decisions are influenced by stories (Betsch et al., 2016; Green, 2006; Houston et al., 2011; Winterbottom et al., 2008). Indeed, much of the research relating to narrative and decision-making conceptualizes decisions as a product of narrative information rather than as the lived experience of a person (Betsch et al., 2011; Betsch et al., 2016; Green, 2006; Winterbottom et al., 2008). This textual understanding of narrative would guide us to once again understand decision-making as a series of textual factors that influence decisions, rather than understanding narratives as the embodied experience of the adoptive parent in decision-making. Within a narrative paradigm, decision-making becomes less about prediction and more about sense-making (Koenig Kellas, 2018), reframing (White, 2007), and the embodiment of narrative (Stone, 2004), which are aspects of the constitution of decision-making. Thus, to examine the ontological decision-making experience of adoptive parents, a different conception of narrative is needed—one that goes beyond the positioning of narrative as a series of textual influences on a decision.

Within scholarship on adoption decisions, narrative scholars within family communication conceptualize narrative as “ontology, or way of being in the world; as an epistemology, or way of knowing the world; as an individual construction; or as a relational process” (Baxter et al., 2012; Koenig Kellas, 2008). From these philosophical positions, narrative experience is an embodied movement that becomes narrated in epistemological fragments of communication that never quite capture the embodiment of the decision. As such, ontological narrative frameworks tend to also adopt epistemological positions, and thus textual implications. Rhetorical frameworks of narrative epistemology are also intermingled as the narrative fragments are represented through



narratives. Given my study's need for ontological and epistemological frameworks to understand how adoptive parents experience decision-making, Koenig Kellas' (2008) conceptualization of narrative as a way of knowing the world positions decision-making as a form of sense-making in a lived experience. Thus, when seeking to understand how adoptive parents experience decision-making, we are asking a question of how adoptive parents make sense of their world. Koenig Kellas (2018) further theorized that narrative is squarely centered within communication expressed through storytelling and that narrative is connected to the well-being of individuals.

The main goal of Koenig Kellas' (2018) communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theory is to investigate the content, process, and outcomes of narratives. CNSM is used to investigate narrative in three ways: retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling (Koenig Kellas, 2018) as a means of accessing the ontological through the epistemological. These three axioms have different purposes to uncover how narrative is connected to well-being. Since we are seeking to understand the past experience of adoptive parents in decision-making, retrospective storytelling is the best axiom to operate under. Koenig Kellas (2018) theorizes that retrospective stories, which "we hear and tell are linked in significant and meaningful ways" to sense-making and well-being (p. 56).

### **Communication, CNSM, and Adoption**

Communication within the adoption narrative processes is critical for identity construction, relational closeness, and coping with transitions, and has been particularly theorized within the research guided by the communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) theoretical framework. CNSM posits that families construct adoption meaning through narratives, storytelling, and other communicative devices to make sense of their experiences (Hays et al., 2016; Nelson & Horstman, 2017). This framework has been instrumental in uncovering how adoptive and foster parents use entrance and exit narratives to negotiate family identity, address relational uncertainty, and manage complex familial bonds. For example, Hays and colleagues (2016) explored adoption entrance narratives (AENs) and identified several emergent themes—such as birth parents as family, chosen parents, and rescue—which indicate how adoptive parents conceptualize and communicate the adoption process to their children, shaping the child's sense of belonging and identity within the family unit (Hays et al., 2016).

The CNSM framework has also been applied to examine memorable messages and metaphors used by adoptive parents to manage their children's past trauma and family transitions (Hackenburg et al., 2022;

Helder et al., 2024). Hackenburg et al. (2022) found that metaphors like “adoption as a journey” serve as powerful communicative tools that help adoptive parents make sense of and articulate their experiences throughout the adoption process. Additionally, studies such as those by Nelson and Horstman (2017) and Helder et al. (2024) have extended CNSM research to include the role of memorable messages related to religion and foster care exit conversations. These studies reveal that religiously motivated adoption messages, such as framing the adoption as part of a divine plan, can have both positive and negative implications for adoptees’ identity development (Helder et al., 2024; Nelson & Horstman, 2017). Overall, the body of research utilizing the CNSM framework in adoptive and foster family contexts demonstrates the essential role of communication in navigating complex family dynamics and fostering resilience among adoptees and foster children (Nelson et al., 2024; Hays et al., 2016). As such, adoption is well researched within the CNSM and makes for productive theoretical literature to engage in the adoption decision-making paradigm I’ve theorized above. Thus, adoptive parents’ sense-making, as manifest in stories, may be a fertile place to research the well-being of adoptive parents experientially to begin to understand a narrative paradigm of decision-making. I use the following research question to guide my inquiry.

**RQ:** How do adoptive parents narrate their decision to adopt a child retroactively and in their interactions with the interviewer?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In order to answer my research question, I interviewed eight Mormon-affiliated adoptive parents about their adoption decision-making experiences. I selected Mormon adoptive parents to begin to situate the next phase of this research project—the socio-historical analysis of narratives that interpellate (Eagleton, 2014) the narratives of Mormon adoptive parents. Unfortunately, that phase of the project is beyond the scope of this qualitative study. The conceptual definition used in this study for adoptive parent is an adult over 18 years of age who identifies as having adopted a child and as being affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon culturally identified).

This study involved five adoptive mothers and three adoptive fathers. Six of the participants were partnered and were interviewed separately to understand their individual decision-making experiences. A total of 10 children were adopted among all interviewed parents. Of the 10 children, one child was adopted from foster care, three were

adopted internationally, and six were adopted through open-infant adoptions. Six of the adoptions were interracial, involving three adoptive parents. One adoptive parent identified as Korean American and had themselves been adopted as an infant. One adoptive parent identified as Indian American and had also been adopted as an infant. One adoptive parent identified as a “White” mother. All parents disclosed their current locales as follows: Western United States (2), Midwestern United States (2), and Eastern United States (4). Five adoptive parents expressed a specific religious affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. One of the adoptive parents expressed limited involvement with the Mormon church. Two others expressed affiliation more broadly as Christian individuals who had used an adoption agency previously affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Recruitment of participants began when I emailed four major adoption agencies in the United States and two regional adoption agencies. Three of the agencies cordially responded with a denial of my request. Two agencies never responded. One national nonprofit agency referred my request to one of their adoption caseworkers. The adoption caseworker sent a mass email to recent adoptive couples who had worked with adoptive services on my behalf. I was referred to the email contacts of nine adoptive couples who had expressed interest in being interviewed for my project. Of these nine couples, four individuals arranged their schedules to be interviewed. Second, a snowball sampling technique was employed given the “elusive, hard-to-recruit” nature of adoptive parents (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 114). Acquaintances from my university referred me to four adoptive parents who scheduled interviews. I also publicized recruitment material through my personal social media accounts.

## **Procedure**

Because participants were in different regions of the United States, I arranged video calls with each of them in an attempt to better engage participant responses. Two of the interviews were conducted via video call, while six participants requested phone calls instead, to which I complied. Following verbal approval for audio recording, I interviewed each participant using a respondent interview approach. The purpose of the respondent interview approach is to elicit open-ended responses intended to understand a respondent’s experience through their “subjective standpoint” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 179). This experience-focused approach is well suited to understanding the decision-making experiences of adoptive parents. To enact the respondent interview approach, I asked questions in a semi-structured manner following an interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews are

often used to gather narrative data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) a central feature of my inquiry. To clarify aspects of the participant's experience, probing questions were asked to elicit rich, detailed decision-making experiences. Participant interviews ranged from 30 to 49 minutes. All interviews were transcribed for data analysis and edited for punctuation and readability while taking care to not alter meanings.

## **Data Analysis**

A thematic narrative analysis was conducted to uncover narrative themes in the data. Riessman (2008) explains that thematic narrative analysis has been used by researchers to “uncover and categorize” (p. 53) the experiences of individuals through an exclusive focus on their narrative content. I selected this approach for two reasons: (1) Koenig Kellas' (2018) retrospective storytelling axiom is most concerned with the content of interviews—the exact purpose of thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008); and (2) my research question guides me to examine the whole experience of adoptive parents. Thematic narrative analysis guides researchers approaching narrative data to look at narrative experiences holistically (Riessman, 2008). I combined this narrative analysis with other thematic analysis approaches, including the phronetic-iterative approach (Tracy, 2020) and Scharp and Steuber's (2014) approach to analysis, namely: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating coding categories or subthemes, (c) generating themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) locating exemplars.

First, I read and re-read the transcriptions to familiarize myself with the data. After becoming familiar with the data, I began to read the transcriptions line by line, looking for common narrative threads. I paid special attention to coherent stories embedded within the lines because they are often key markers in understanding sense-making processes (Baxter et al., 2012). In reading the coherent stories of different participants' decision-making experiences, I was able to identify story sub-themes. The sub-themes embedded in coherent stories enabled me to identify threads of the same sub-themes within the less coherent narrative processes that participants used to understand their own decisions. After generating these sub-themes, I reviewed them to determine which sub-themes were similar to one another. In the process of finding similarities, I generated themes that I understood as heuristics of sense-making. I then named and defined these three sense-making heuristics. After defining the emergent heuristics of sense-making, I went back to the data and CNSM theories and ultimately added a review of resilience literature to make sense of the data. I will embed this literature into the results as a means of demonstrating how phronetically

iterative this process was. Corbin and Strauss (2008) argue that data should be collected to a point of saturation (i.e., the point where no new data emerges). In seeking this level of saturation, where no new themes emerge, I found a common phenomenon across all of the decision/sense-making processes I had encountered. I reached saturation with this phenomenon called narrative decision-making (NDM) by the third interview.

### **Findings: Narrative Decision-Making**

Within each of the three sense-making heuristics, this expressed iterative process can be readily seen. First, I will present the results of the three sense-making heuristics: spiritual sense-making, risk-reward sense-making, and consumer-influenced sense-making. These three sense-making heuristics were iteratively expressed by all eight participants. For each sense-making heuristic, I have prepared either a coherent or incoherent decision/sense-making narrative in the form of extended exemplary quotations. These quotations represent one segmentation of the iterative process but mirror the iterative process embedded throughout the transcription of participant narrative-interviews. The exemplars also serve as heuristics representing the decision-making process embedded in all participant interviews.

### **Spiritual Narrative Decision-Making**

The spiritual narrative decision-making heuristic is best understood as participant narratives in which the participants claim spiritual communication with God led to their decision to adopt. This heuristic is expressed iteratively by participants. As other narratives are expressed, they are combined with the spiritual narratives of parents' adoption decisions, becoming a spiritual narrative decision retrospectively, relationally, and translationally. The spiritual narrative decision then creates a new narrative that reifies existing beliefs and identity (Koenig Kellas, 2018) and constitutes a resilience of faith in communication with their God. This decision-making can be identified in the following extended narrative exemplar. This adoptive mother responds to a question about how she came to adopt her child. Initially, the adoptive mother describes the fear and trepidation that created the oppositional force necessary for resilient communication in the face of setbacks.

The cautions that we got from people were you might have to deal with all of these things ... and you're gonna have these kids who might become drug addicts, or they might become physically or sexually abusive toward you or your family members, or they won't accept your beliefs, or they won't be able to integrate themselves

into your family properly where it's a loving relationship. And my husband and I looked at all of that information ... and we determined that since *we felt so inspired* [emphasis added] by God, that these were our children that we could not expect ... we didn't want to outline what success was going to look like. We didn't want to say if we adopt these kids and they join our church and they love us and they are happy and healthy and have a good career and a healthy marriage, and they bring us beautiful ground babies, or we didn't want to outline what success looks like. Instead, we recognized that success for us was going to simply be nothing other than giving them a chance at something better. (Parent # 1)

The mother expresses the caution she received from people, which were brief, coherent statements containing narratives of fear. She then looked at these narratives. This verb *looked* expresses how the mother combined the narratives she received over time with her experience of “feeling so inspired by God that these were our kids” to create a narrative decision . The inspiration the mother talks about is a divine inspiration from God, which she elaborated on throughout the interview as “just knowing” and as feelings of confidence. The mother then used this spiritual narrative decision and pivoted from her narrative decision-making to a newly expressed narrative of “we didn’t want to outline what success was going to look like.” The newly expressed narrative captures both the narrative information and the mother’s spiritual decision to adopt, creating a new redefining success story and thus completing the resilience process. As the mother narratively redefines success for herself—a fundamental aspect constituting resilience (Buzzanell, 2010)—she also reifies her values and beliefs in God. Taken holistically, the mother’s narrative decision story demonstrates Koenig Kellas’ (2018) assertion of retrospective storytelling by revealing values and beliefs constituted through resilient narratives over time.

Another mother was told by God that she shouldn’t adopt, which also initiated the spiritual sense-making embedded in the narratives seeking affirmation.

I always wanted to adopt a child... I prayed should I, can I adopt? Is this the time I should adopt? And I had a definite no from God ... So fourteen years went by and I truly thought that I would never adopt because I felt so strongly from that answer to prayer. But then Calvin came into our lives and it was so simple. It just felt so right. And I knew the Lord had blessed us to find a person at the right time to come into our lives. (Parent # 3)

This mother begins by expressing the narrative information that she “always wanted to adopt.” This narrative information is then combined with the spiritual decision not to adopt, as expressed by “a definite no,” thus creating a narrative decision. The resilience of persisting desire for

14 years was remarkable, demonstrating resilience in the commitment to adopt as this mother continued cultivating this desire despite a strong “no from God.” The mother’s pivot in the narrative to highlight the change when she met Calvin marked another transition in the resilience of her desire. The narrative decision then created a new narrative of faith: “I knew the Lord had blessed us to find a person at the right time.” This moment of testimony was quite prevalent among the Mormon mothers and demonstrated the active faith they use in these narratives as moments of continued resilience through the ebbs and flows of care work. In this moment of testimony, the mother persists in resilient faith despite the contradictions in desires and being told “no.” Taken as a whole narrative interview, the spiritual decision-making can be seen as a sense-making process, as these two mothers combined narrative information in the creation of their ongoing resilient decision constituted through a narrative relationally with the interviewer.

### **Risk-Reward Narrative Decision-Making**

The risk-reward narrative decision-making heuristic is best understood as discursive narrative information (framed by participants as risk versus reward) that is embedded into one narrative, creating a risk-reward narrative decision. The risk-reward narrative decision then creates a new narrative that constitutes resilience in existing beliefs and identity (Buzzanell, 2010; Koenig Kellas, 2018). In this extended narrative exemplar, an adoptive father responds to my question of how he came to adopt his child.

Um, I think that, you know, considering all the potential risks and issues that we might run into and the challenges, um, we looked at those and weighed them against the potential good that could come. And we felt it was worth that. You know, there's always risk in anything you try. Yeah. Uh huh. So we didn't feel like the risks outweighed the benefits to him and to us, you know, just to have another member of the family and so I guess we, you know, just I came to the conclusion that it was something we wanted to do.  
(Parent # 2)

The father begins this narrative by expressing how he took the potential risks and challenges and weighed them against the potential good. These risks and challenges are narrative information, as evidenced by further excerpts where he discloses some of the risks, including “[child’s] emotional problems,” “other interested couples,” and “our family circumstances.” The father then weighed these narrative-imbued risks and challenges against the potential good, which he described as “improved behavior,” “increased familial bonds,” and “lending a hand up.” The narrative rewards that the father expressed were then embedded

with the narrative risks, thus creating one cohesive narrative decision . This narrative decision created a new narrative of weighed risks and rewards. The shift from past to present tense creates a new narrative where the father reifies his values of having “an additional member of the family.” Upon further questioning, this adoptive father also expressed the value of being “rational,” which is also embedded within this exemplar as he repeatedly seemed to weigh risks and rewards. Taken holistically, the exemplar representing this heuristic is simultaneously decision-making and sense-making, further supporting the claim that decision-making is a form of sense-making.

Similarly, another adoptive father expressed his decision making as “not even a question,” highlighting the ways in which some risks weren’t even considered given a strong desire and identity toward adoption.

Generally speaking, we never really talked about, like, family planning like some people. You know! We didn’t have it all planned out, like okay “We’ll get married, and then we’ll get pregnant,” you know, all that. We kind of just lived life and what not. And I think you probably know my wife is adopted as well. So I guess in the back of our minds, it was always kind of something that we both just understood and knew how, like, cool it was— if that’s the right term—or beneficial! So we finally got to a point that we wanted to start a family. And adoption was always, like, one of our first options, you know? I mean, it wasn’t even a question! (Parent # 5)

Parent # 5 begins by describing the unplanned nature of family planning at the beginning of his marriage relationship with his wife, expressing how future children was, “not something we talked about.” This first comes love, then comes marriage ideology was clearly evident as a common narrative in this father’s expressed decision-making process. Once narrating this master narrative, he quickly pivots to describing the ways that adoption was in the back of their minds as a central plan. The father struggled for the right word to describe how central adoption was in his logic and arrived at the label “beneficial.” This highlighted the ways in which no thought was expressed around any risks associated with adoption, only rewards or benefits. As such, this lack of thinking represents some ways in which parents expressed only the positive benefits, and didn’t think about the costs. Though the risk-reward framework seems like one at which this father struggled to arrive, it nonetheless represents the ways in which risk-reward thinking is implanted into many of the meaning-making narrative processes.

## **Consumer Decision-Making**

The consumer decision-making heuristic is best understood as the narrative process in which an adoptive parent expresses being influenced



by advertisements or other consumer-based narratives that helped shape the decision. Together, the combination of consumer-motivated narratives and other narrative expressions combine to create the narrative decision, which is subsequently expressed as a new narrative that reifies existing beliefs and identity (Koenig Kellas, 2018). In this extended narrative exemplar, the adoptive mother responds to a question of how she came to adopt her child by expressing the iterative process in a holistic narrative.

Um, I think as a young person. I... you know ... I remember *Wednesday's Child* when I grew up. They always had this little picture of this little child who was between eight to twelve. It was called Wednesday's Child, and it was an adoption advertisement. It was a way to try to help people look at, you know, broadcast these needs for these children and see if they could get people to adopt them. And I remember, as a child myself feeling like, oh, wow, I hope someday I can help somebody like that. So that was just in my makeup. Like I said, my parents were the type of people that constantly helped people, so that is a very big part of who I am. I think it was kind of a latent expression of things that I wanted to do in my life. (Parent # 3)

This adoptive mother begins the narrative by recalling a memory of being a child and seeing an advertisement aimed at promoting the adoption of children in early adolescence. This narrative information, the mother admits, was trying to “get people to adopt” the children. This consumer-based ad was combined with a narrative expressing the mother’s identity as influenced by her own parents. The mother describes this intergenerational identity of being a “helper” as part of her character. She then combined the advertisement with her own identity, as expressed through narrative, to make sense of why she had hoped to adopt one day—a persistent and resilient desire. This expression of hope, which emerged as a result of the combination of narrative identity and intended persuasion, created this mother’s narrative decision-making process. This admittedly persuaded mother later used this narrative decision-making process to reify her values and identity as a resilient aspect of her character. The mother later expressed in the interview, “It was kind of a latent expression of things I wanted to do in my life.” This latent (and value-laden) decision-making experience came to fruition when she actually adopted a child as an adult. The decision-making experience coming to fruition is also the new narrative emerging, which reifies the identity and values of this adoptive mother (Koenig Kellas, 2018).

Similarly, another parent expresses some of the pressures she faced from the agency when selecting a child—which shaped her expressed narrative experience retroactively.

I guess the decision is binary, like either it's yes or it's no, but it has definitely made us more, I guess it's caused us to ask more questions. So when we were being shown a, what do they call them, the files? So for example if we were shown a file with a pregnant mom who chose to place her child for adoption, we learned to ask a lot more questions. Like how involved is the birth father? Because there are some ethical questions about how adoption agencies handle that situation. Like asking if some agencies, whether they try to pressure dads into kind of signing the rights to their child away, or they may not know the baby. Or [the agency] might not even not really try to notify the dad. Or maybe the agency tried to hurry the adoption along so that the dad doesn't really have time to make a decision or get his information. And I think it's just made us ask more questions about each situation. So we're not, yeah, so we're not, so that we're not taking advantage of, that we're not hurting someone else, right? Cause with [the agency], we didn't want to be like, the decision was kind of buying [child's name]. (Parent # 7)

She begins by describing how the yes or no decision can become complicated when a parent starts asking questions. She continues through this complicating process by referencing an adoptive father. It wasn't clear whether this was a single example; instead, the mother seemed to imply that her story was a composite of many experiences she had engaged with throughout the decision-making process about which baby to adopt. Ultimately, the mother describes how she felt that some adoption agencies seemed to be marketing these children, expressing significant anxiety during the interview as she struggled to articulate her feelings about the babies' adoptions being treated like a transaction. Once the mother was able to express the agency's pressure through the metaphor of buying, there was a release of tension. She then went on to describe the questions she posed to the agencies on "ethical grounds." This juxtaposition between the pressure to choose a baby and ethical concerns makes sense when the mother frames the child's life as a commodity being sold by an agency, which she then vehemently questions on ethical grounds. In total, the mother's values are laid bare as she resists this commodification of adoption during the process of the agencies materializing this capitalist logic in their pressure-filled interactions.

## Discussion

Based on the empirical evidence expressed as three emergent sense-making heuristics, I argue that decision-making is a form of sense-making that occurs retroactively, relationally, and translationally simultaneously (Koenig Kellas, 2018). As a form of retrospective sense-

making, narrative decision-making (NDM) is a narrative process expressed by adoptive parents iteratively, whereby adoptive parents' narratives create accounts of retrospective decisions made, which also act as a constitutive process of relationally affirming the ongoing decision and attempting to translate the narrative experience of decision-making to the listener. Resilience within a communication framework has been studied as an individual trait, as a communicated process, and most recently as a relational process constituted in communication (Afifi, 2018; Buzzanell, 2010; Kim et al., 2024). Resilience in this study is understood as constituted in relational story sharing, which acts in the moment of story sharing as a means of reifying the original decision and thus building resilience.

The goal of this study was to examine the lived experience of adoptive parents in their decision-making processes of whom to adopt and how their narrative experiences act as a communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM) process, thus resituating narratives as a paradigmatic grounding of how decision-making happens. In the process of reviewing literature, priority was given to understanding the experience of adoptive parents' decision-making, leaving for future studies the historical narrative conditions that materialize the individual's experience to adopt. Throughout these themes, the historical influence of Mormon, American, racial, and other cultural conditions is readily seen, which will resituate the themes in larger cultural contexts. The narrative basis for situating decision-making as a process of CNSM constituted in resilience is evident in the themes of this qualitative study (Buzzanell, 2010; Koenig Kellas, 2018).

This study serves to complicate the decision-making literature by resituating decision-making as a process of resilient narrative sense-making in communication. An epistemological framework of decision-making, as a form of sense-making, was organized using an interpretive approach to decision-making (Greenhalgh, 1999), grounded in the epistemological understanding of narrative as sense-making (Baxter et al., 2012; Koenig Kellas, 2008; Koenig Kellas, 2018). These narratives also constituted resilience (Buzzanell, 2010) as these narrative decisions were cultivated through narratives over time and made sense of in the moment of interviews, which also reified the ongoing resilience of parenting adopted children. These moments were further articulated as moments of translational narratives, wherein the adoptive parents reified their decision/sense-making processes in the moment of sharing their stories.

As such, the research question "How do adoptive parents narrate their decision to adopt a child retroactively and in their interactions with the interviewer?" was answered by interviewing eight adoptive parents and analyzing the emergent data using a thematic narrative analysis

(Riessman, 2008) qualitative approach to develop three narrative decision-making heuristics. Spiritual, risk-reward, and consumer-influenced narrative decision-making emerged as three ways in which adoptive parents develop decision/sense-making narratives. These three themes function iteratively in the same way. Narratives are combined with other narratives in complementary, conflicting, and emotionally valenced ways to create a narrative decision expressed retroactively, relationally, and translated across experiences. The narrative decision, as expressed by adoptive parents, reveals values, beliefs, and identity constituted through resilient stories, thus supporting Koenig Kellas' (2018) retrospective proposition. Thus, narratives are also a means of constituting resilience, extending the resilience literature to engage with narratives (Afifi, 2018; Buzzanell, 2010). This similar iterative process among all three themes supports my claim that narrative decision-making is a form of narrative sense-making—establishing a basis for an interpretive paradigm to be further studied and situated.

### **Future Directions and Limitations**

Many future directions are possible given the commitment to resituating decision-making within the narrative paradigm. This study is situated within the narrative paradigm, rooted in the theory of communicated narrative sense-making (Koenig Kellas, 2018), which could be expanded upon by family communication scholars who often employ this theory. Decision-making literature can also account for alternative paradigms of decision-making not rooted in rationalism, empiricism, or modernist political goals and values. The most immediate future research possibility, as previously stated in the rationale, is the potential link between decision-making (as a form of sense-making) and resilient well-being. Within research on adoption decision-making experiences, researchers could understand the decision-making experiences of members of the adoptive triad relationally and individually. By using this interpretive approach to decision-making, scholars are able to ask questions about individuals' decision-making experiences as opposed to focusing on the factors that influence decision-making. Family communication scholars could understand other important decision-making experiences around family formation, including dating, marriage, divorce, end-of-life decisions, and estrangement. Legal scholars could explore the decision-making experiences of judges, district attorneys, policymakers, as well as those within the criminal justice system. Medical scholars could investigate decision-making experiences related to health and well-being. Indeed, any field of research focused on decision-making could benefit from understanding decision-making through the narrative paradigm.

However, when adopting any new paradigm, it is essential to address the limitations of the paradigm.

This study is not without limitations. First, the study is limited to the experiences of the participants. This highly contextual group of decision-makers is fundamental to the establishment of the themes. As such, the thematic interpretations are historically and contextually limited—important limitations in any qualitative study embracing a cultural approach to interpretation (Tracy, 2020). Additionally, situating this study within cultural contexts involves adopting a particular view of the paradigmatic commitments that stretch the limits of interpretivism and necessitate future work interrogating the power relations that shape the study.

Beyond these limitations, this study merely begins a conversation to understand decision-making beyond the existing literature and in practice through a narrative paradigm. The narrative paradigm, like any paradigm, is limited by its particular logics, ontological positions, and axiological goals. A deeper interrogation into the power relations of narrative is also warranted, given the racial demographics of the interracial adoption narratives. In future work, I will further explore the historical power relations that situate adoption within a complicated history involving racialization, family separation, and settler colonialism (Carp, 2009; Jacobs, 2009). I invite other scholars to join me in this endeavor.

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