Framing of Children in News Stories about U.S. Immigration from Latin America

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Abstract

As immigration to the United States from Latin America has grown more prevalent in recent years, U.S. journalists have reported on the effects of the influx of Latinos entering the country, often detailing the changes in demographics and government policies. This study is a framing analysis exploring how newspapers in Arizona and Texas portrayed this immigration process. It was hypothesized that U.S. journalists framed child migrants as victims of economic and political instability in their countries of origin. Articles in newspapers from within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border were analyzed using a coding technique to determine the framing of children.

I. Introduction

In recent years, immigration to the United States from Latin America has received national and international media attention. Specifically, U.S. journalists have reported on the effects of the influx of Latinos entering the country, such as changes in demographics and government policies. Journalists have also explained motivations for crossing the border, including committing criminal activities and escaping political or economic instability in Latin America. In states along the U.S.-Mexico border, regional newspapers have informed readers about the impacts of immigration in their communities. Thus, when a surge of people — including tens of thousands of children — crossed the border in 2014, several journalists in border states reported on the situation.

Between May and September 2014, more than 32,000 unaccompanied children crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, according to a U.S. Department of Homeland Security press release. Many of the children migrated from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras. The violence and poverty in those countries pushed people to come to the United States to search for economic opportunities, the press release stated. The department identified parts of the Arizona and Texas borders as “risk areas” where people are likely to cross the border (Department of Homeland Security). In Arizona and Texas, at least eight newspapers are within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. These newspapers published dozens of online articles about child migrants in 2014.

Communications researchers have analyzed media framing of immigration from Latin America, and some have concluded newspaper articles near the border associate immigrant groups with negative stereotypes, often characterizing them as criminals (Branton and Dunaway, “Slanted” 264; Branton and
Dunaway, “Spatial” 295). These studies did not focus on the framing of children, a demographic group prevalent in the most recent surge of immigration. Outside the academic realm, this topic has a general appeal because people who are Hispanic or Latino form more than 17 percent of the U.S. population, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates (“United States Quick Facts”). Some scholars argue media framing can influence public perceptions about groups of people, including immigrants from Latin America (Branton and Dunaway, “Slanted” 268; Soderlund 171, 175).

This paper analyzes how newspapers in Arizona and Texas portrayed the 2014 surge. The purpose of this study is to conduct a framing analysis of 10 newspaper articles published within 100 miles of the border with Mexico and find out how U.S. journalists represented children. This study aims to test the hypothesis that media coverage of immigration framed children from Latin America as victims of the economic and political instability of their countries of origin.

II. Literature Review

In the literature review, the author examined framing theory and how it was applied to immigration, child immigrants, and newspapers in border states.

**Framing Theory**

Framing theory is often used to understand how newspapers present themes. According to Entman, framing occurs when a communicator takes some aspects of an issue and makes them more noticeable for an audience. As he describes, communication frames explain problems, identify causes, and offer solutions (52). Some researchers believe media framing contributes to the way audiences perceive public policies, such as immigration law. But they also assert audiences tend to conform to their original views about topics. For example, Nelson, Oxley and Clawson studied university students’ reactions to the framing of social welfare policies. They discovered participants with previous knowledge about the policies were likely to maintain existing beliefs when confronted with frames (234-35). In her essay about media framing of U.S. immigration laws, Soderlund makes a similar conclusion (176).

**Framing of Immigration**

Some academics argue wording affects the depiction of immigrants in news stories. For example, some maintain the word “illegal” evokes an association between immigration and criminality while the words “undocumented” and “unauthorized” do not carry this connotation. In their analysis of stories about immigration in both left- and right-leaning U.S. newspapers from 2007-2011, Merolla, Ramakrishnan and Haynes found all newspapers used “illegal” more frequently than the other two adjectives (793-94). Similarly, a Brookings report analyzed thousands of news stories about the immigration debate from 1980-2007 and found the majority fit within the frame of illegality (A Report 24). The Associated Press Stylebook — a guidebook for journalists — advises reporters to use the term “illegal” as an adjective when describing the immigration debate (Christian et al. 125-126). But Soderlund argues presenting immigrants as “illegal” influences perceptions about which groups belong in society (171, 175). According to 2015 Pew Research Center data, half of U.S. adults say immigrants make crime in the country worse (Modern 57).

Other research indicates the media put immigration in economic frames. In one analysis, researchers discovered newspapers and television news transcripts most often mentioned a troubled economy in Latin America as a cause for undocumented immigration. But the media rarely offered aiding the economy in Latin America as a solution for the situation (Kim et al. 307-08). Some academics reason that reports about people migrating for work perpetuate the sense of competition for U.S. jobs between people born inside and outside the country (Branton and Dunaway "Slanted" 268, Soderlund 175). Pew Research Center results also show 74 percent of survey respondents thought immigrants came to the United States for economic opportunities (Modern 59).

**Framing of Children**

Although communications researchers have analyzed both illegal and economic frames, they have not studied the media’s framing of child migrants. But in a similar analysis, researchers examined media
frames of childhood obesity and found newspapers did not frame stories around societal-level factors that contributed to the problem. Instead, they framed childhood obesity as the responsibility of children and their families (Hawkins and Linvill 714). Another study garnered different results about media framing of children. In that study, researchers asked student participants to share their thoughts about social welfare policies after reading newspaper articles on them. Participants were less likely to support the policies when they were framed as threats to children (Nelson and Oxley 1052, 1055). According to Chavez, immigrant children receive some national attention in debates about citizenship. He contends these debates tend to focus on two groups: people who were brought to the United States as children and people born to undocumented parents (181). In 2013, children constituted nearly 20 percent of newly-arrived immigrants (Modern 41).

Newspapers in Border States

To analyze the results of media framing of immigration in border states, some researchers conducted framing analyses of U.S. newspapers near the Mexican border. For instance, Branton and Dunaway examined California newspapers within a one-year period. They found newspapers closer to Mexico were more likely to publish negative news and opinion pieces about immigration. They concluded media slanted stories to reflect the political climate near the border (“Slanted” 264). In a separate study of California newspapers, Branton and Dunaway discovered news outlets closer to the border published more articles about immigration and were more likely to cover immigration negatively. They concluded that newspapers near Mexico had economic motivations to deliver audiences local news that sensationalized crime (“Spatial” 295). Similarly, Kim et al. compared border-state newspaper articles with ones from other states. The researchers found a greater proportion of newspapers near the border mentioned negative consequences of undocumented immigration (306).

Hypotheses

This study analyzes newspaper articles written near the U.S.-Mexico border to determine how journalists framed children in stories about immigration. The literature review results in the following hypotheses:

H1: Newspaper articles framed children as victims.

H2: Newspaper articles referred to economic and political instability in Latin America to construct the victim frame.

III. Method

Sample

To test the framing of children in newspapers near the U.S.-Mexico border, the researcher first selected articles to analyze. Using the Access World News search engine, the researcher looked for online newspaper articles about children who migrated from Latin America. The researcher looked for online newspaper articles about children who migrated from Latin America. The researcher selected articles published between June 1 and June 30, 2014, because June was a peak month for unaccompanied children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The results were narrowed to newspapers in Arizona and Texas, two states with “risk areas” for border crossings (Department of Homeland Security). Newspapers published more than 100 miles from the border were eliminated from the sample pool. In addition, stories published in Spanish were removed to create consistency for the analysis. All articles in the sample were news stories with local datelines. The headlines of the articles referenced immigration and children in some form.

After narrowing the sample criteria, the researcher selected 10 newspaper articles from five newspapers to analyze. Six of the articles were published in Arizona, and four were published in Texas. The Arizona newspapers were The Arizona Daily Star (Tucson) and Nogales International. The Texas newspapers were The Brownsville Herald, El Paso Times, and The (McAllen) Monitor.
Coding

To conduct the framing analysis, the researcher coded articles to specify framing of children. The coding categories for this study were created after reviewing research about the framing of immigrants and children in the press. In this study, the coding method was adapted from Kim et al., who analyzed the definition, cause, and solution frames of immigration in the media (294, 302). The Kim et al. derived their categories from Entman’s definition of framing, three out of the four categories. According to Entman, framing requires people “to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (52). First the following information was noted: name of article, the name of newspaper, the location of publication; the distance from Mexican border, and the date of publication (Refer to Appendix: Coding Sheet).

Based on the Kim et al.’s study, additional information was included on the coding sheet to analyze the framing of children in the articles. Coding categories for defining immigration included victim and criminal. Coding categories for causes of immigration included economic instability in Latin America, political instability in Latin America and illegal activity. Coding categories for solutions included changing the economic system in Latin America, changing the political system in Latin America, and increasing border control. Additionally, each of the three sections on the coding sheet included an “other” category for the coder to add more frames found within the articles.

The researcher examined previous academic studies about coding to avoid bias in the coding process. Upon reading each story, the researcher identified frames by comparing the words of the article with the frames on the coding sheet. The researcher recorded results on separate coding sheets. The coder marked the presence of frames in each category and had the ability to mark more than one category for each section. The coding sheet also allowed the researcher to make notes about why articles fit into the selected categories.

IV. Results

For the definition of child migrants in all newspapers, 80 percent (8 out of 10 articles) included victim frames, whereas 70 percent included criminal frames in relation to immigration of children. More specifically, only the victim frame was observed in three articles; only the criminal frame in two articles; and both victim and criminal frames in five articles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 divides the results for framing of immigration by the distance of publications from the closest Mexican city. Four newspapers within 20 miles of a Mexican city presented definitions of immigration with the following frequencies: one article included the victim frame; another article included the criminal frame; and five articles included both the victim and criminal frames. One newspaper located more than 20 miles away from a city in Mexico presented three articles: two articles with only the victim frame and one article with only the criminal frame. All five publications were an average of 26.9 miles from the nearest city in Mexico. The closest publication, Nogales International, was located 3 miles from Nogales, Mexico. On the other hand, The Arizona Daily Star, located in Tucson, was the furthest city from the border—73 miles from the city of Nogales, Mexico.
### Table 1. Newspapers and their contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper name</th>
<th>State of publication</th>
<th>Distance from border</th>
<th>Article number</th>
<th>Framing</th>
<th>Causes of immigration</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>El Paso Times</em></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>less than 20 miles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>victim, criminal</td>
<td>political, economic, illegal activity</td>
<td>border security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>victim, criminal</td>
<td>political, economic, illegal activity</td>
<td>border security, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Brownsville Herald</em></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>less than 20 miles</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>victim, criminal</td>
<td>illegal activity</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Monitor</em></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>less than 20 miles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>victim, criminal</td>
<td>illegal activity</td>
<td>border security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nogales International</em></td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>less than 20 miles</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>victim, criminal</td>
<td>illegal activity</td>
<td>border security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>victim</td>
<td>political, economic, illegal activity</td>
<td>political, economic, border security, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>criminal</td>
<td>illegal activity</td>
<td>border security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Arizona Daily Star</em></td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>more than 20 miles</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>victim</td>
<td>political, economic</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>criminal</td>
<td>political, illegal activity</td>
<td>border security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>victim</td>
<td>political, economic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 shows, Arizona and Texas newspaper articles differed in framing of immigration. In all, six of the articles in the study were published in Arizona, and four were published in Texas. For Arizona newspapers, three articles used the victim frame, two articles had the criminal frame and one article included both frames. In contrast, all of the Texas articles included both victim and criminal frames to define immigration of children.

Five articles presented economic instability in Latin America; six articles presented political instability in Latin America; and eight articles presented illegal activity. Thus, illegal activity was the most common cause, and economic instability was the least common. In addition, the framing categories about circumstances in Latin America were correlated. In all instances except one, an economic instability frame was included within the same article as a political one.

According to distance from the border, all of the articles published by papers within 20 miles from Mexico included the illegal activity frame as a cause of immigration of children from Latin America. On the other hand, one article published by a paper located beyond 20 miles from the border included this frame. By state, all Texas articles included the frame of illegal activity, while four of the six Arizona articles included that frame. In the coder’s notes on the causes of immigration in all articles, some common words and phrases within each category included “poverty” and “economic crisis” for economic instability in Latin America; “gangs,” “drugs,” and “violence” for political instability in Latin America; and “crossing the border illegally” for illegal activity.

Finally, for the solutions to immigration, changing border security was the most popular frame, appearing in seven articles. One newspaper article did not include solution frames, and only one article
offered the frames of changing the economic and political system in Latin America as solutions. In addition, the “other” category covered “changing information about border security,” which included revising punishments for entering the country without documentation, adding law enforcement officials at the border, and stopping the spread of misinformation about the lack of consequences for unaccompanied immigrant children entering the United States.

V. Discussion

A framing analysis of newspaper articles published within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border found these media framed child migrants as both victims and criminals. So the first hypothesis was partially supported. The results also revealed the categories of economic and political instability in Latin America were presented less frequently as causes for immigration than illegal activity. Thus, the second hypothesis was rejected.

Frames

This analysis revealed newspaper articles framed children as both victims and criminals in stories about immigration from Latin America. The framing of children as victims makes sense because children are commonly viewed as more vulnerable than adults. But the results of this study also show newspapers defined immigrants as criminals, a frame present in many stories about adult immigrants (Merolla, Ramakrishnan and Haynes 793-4, A Report 24). Thus, the portrayal of children as criminals reveals it is difficult for journalists to write outside this frame when covering immigrants who are children. In this framing analysis, the content of the articles could have also influenced the framing results. All articles were news pieces, so many of them informed readers about changes in border patrol operations, including surveillance of the border and detention facilities for unaccompanied children. In contrast, articles in features sections might have included more victim frames due to their narrative structures. Another explanation of the use of the criminal frame could be adherence to The Associated Press guidelines. The 2014 guidebook advises journalists how to use the term “illegal” when describing immigrants in their articles, and it is likely journalists in newspapers near the U.S.-Mexico border referred to this entry (Christian 125-26).

The results also indicate the frame of illegal activity was the most common cause for immigration in the articles. But the economic and political instability frames were in at least half of articles. The social climate about immigration in the border region likely influenced journalists’ framing of child migrants, as Branton and Dunaway found in their “Slanted” study (264). Another possible explanation for the lack of economic and political instability frames is because the articles covered unaccompanied children. Although the children might have crossed the border alone, adults in Latin America probably pushed them to migrate. Thus, the causes for immigration in their countries of origin might not be as obvious for the U.S. journalists who frame the issue.

The solution category helps explain the causes of immigration. Although several articles framed the causes of immigration around economic and political instability in Latin America, only one of the articles in the sample offered changing political and economic circumstances as a solution for immigration of children. These results mirror the conclusions of researchers who found newspapers did not include related solutions for issues (Kim et al. 307-08). Additionally, the coder’s notes about solutions for immigration might help to explain the results. The terms used to create the political frame referenced both gang and drug violence in Latin America. It is possible that journalists continued to associate children from the region with violence even after they migrated to the United States. In addition, the framing analysis revealed the presence of an additional frame — changing information about border security. This frame imposed on media sources in Latin America the responsibility of informing children in their countries about the realities of the U.S. immigration system.

Location

The results suggest the location of publication is associated with the framing of children in newspaper articles. The majority of articles published within 20 miles of a Mexican city framed children as both victims and criminals. But the majority of articles in the newspaper farther from the border — The Arizona Daily Star
framed children as victims. These results reflect the studies of Branton and Dunaway and Kim et al., who found media outlets closer to the U.S.-Mexico border were likely to cover immigration negatively (Branton and Dunaway “Spatial” 295; Kim et al. 306).

Similarly, newspapers in Arizona and Texas differed in their framing of immigrant children. The two states are “risk areas” for border crossings, but many of the unaccompanied children in the 2014 surge crossed the border in South Texas (Department of Homeland Security). The proximity to the surge may explain why Texas newspapers included illegal activity as a frame. But it is important to note that only two of the Texas articles — the ones from The Brownsville Herald and The Monitor — were in the area with the greatest influx of immigrants. As Branton and Dunaway explain in their analysis, media members write negatively about immigration due to the political climate near the border and the economic motivation to sensationalize stories. In a similar way, newspapers within 20 miles of the border and in South Texas likely realized covering a polarized local topic might increase readership.

VI. Conclusion

This study aimed to study the framing of immigrant children coming to the United States from Latin America. The research focused on newspapers published within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. Based on previous literature, articles presented immigrants from Latin America as victims or criminals. The researcher hypothesized that newspaper articles framed children as victims, and newspaper articles referred to economic and political instability in Latin America to construct the victim frame. The researcher conducted a framing analysis of 10 newspaper articles from Arizona and Texas to find out how they represented child migrants. The findings partly supported the first hypotheses because they indicated articles presented children as both victims and criminals. The second hypothesis was rejected because articles did frame illegal activity as a cause for immigration more often than the causes of economic or political instability in Latin America.

Implications

The results of this study have implications within the communications field. As some researchers point out, the framing of immigrants as criminals can have negative consequences, including exclusion of groups from some aspects of society (Soderlund 171-175). Thus, the results indicate some of the frames used to represent child migrants may evoke negative stereotypes about the group. These findings are important because many professional codes of ethics encourage journalists to report stories without bias. Thus, journalists should be aware of preexisting prejudices when they report on polemic topics, including immigration to the United States from Latin America. This implication especially affects journalists in border states, where the topic of immigration appears in news outlets more frequently than it does in other areas of the country.

In addition to media producers and consumers in border states, people in other parts of the country should care about the results of the study. According to the findings, most articles presented changing border security as a solution for immigration of children from Latin America. This frame might have nationwide repercussions because it can influence the national conversation about immigration policies. The results of immigration reform have the potential to reverberate throughout the country because immigrants contribute to multiple sectors of the economy. The study also may affect people who identify as Hispanic in the United States. As this population has grown, more non-Hispanics have interacted with people from that demographic group. Thus, as a result of the criminal frame, it is possible dominant social groups will push migrants and others with Latin American ancestry to the margins of society.

Limitations

There are notable limitations in this study. One limitation is only one researcher coded the articles, therefore it is possible that other coders might not have labeled the newspaper articles in similar categories. Future studies might include a more objective method for studying newspaper articles. Also, the study used a small sample size. The U.S.-Mexico border is nearly 2,000 miles long, and the 2014 surge happened for more than a month. So, it is possible that the results do not represent the frames of all newspaper articles published
in the southwestern United States during that surge. An analysis of more articles could have yielded results that more accurately reflected the framing of child migrants from Latin America in the press.

There is room to expand upon this study. In general, researchers can modify the study to encompass other immigrant groups. Moreover, it is possible to extend the method to analyze the framing of other polemic issues in various geographic locations. Also, during the 2014 surge, several newspaper opinion articles were published near the U.S.-Mexico border. In the future, researchers may be interested analyzing how editorials and letters to the editor represented children during that time period. In addition, a future study could compare the framing of both children and adults in newspaper articles about immigration from Latin America. An expanded study could also ask readers’ perceptions about the two groups after reading newspaper articles to determine effects of article reading on framing.

Acknowledgements

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Bibliography


Appendix: Coding Sheet

**Article information**

Name of article: 
Name of newspaper: 
Location of publication: 
Distance from Mexican border: 
Date of publication: 

**Framing information**

**Definitions**

 Victim:  
Criminal:  
Other:  

**Causes**

 Economic instability in Latin America:  
Political instability in Latin America:  
Illegal activity:  
Other:  

**Solutions**

 Changing the economic system in Latin America:  
Changing the political system in Latin America:  
Changing border security:  
Other:  
