

Reflecting on “Life, Liberty, and the Lack of Paid Parental Leave: Media Framing of Parental Leave in the United States”

By Marissa Baly

Sitting at the marble table of the Great Books Room in Payson Library, my junior self never could have anticipated that a paper on philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau would evolve into my political science senior thesis. The assignment was to write a paper discussing a modern issue of inequality, and I chose to write on unpaid maternity leave in the United States. This paper I wrote in Great Books III with Dr. Jane Rodeheffer inspired my senior thesis topic in the Political Science Honors Research Program: an analysis of media framing of parental leave in the United States. I think it is very appropriate that my studies in the Great Books Room in Payson Library, by the painting of “School of Athens,” have led me to my thesis and this application for the Library Research Award.

Under the advising of Dr. Brian Newman, I asked the following research questions in my study: how does the media frame parental leave in the United States? And how do those frames influence public opinion? Without the resources of the Pepperdine University Libraries and the databases they make available for student access, I would not have been able to examine media framing of maternity leave and answer these research questions.

To examine media framing of maternity leave, I conducted two components of my research design: a content analysis and a survey experiment. Using Lexis Nexis from the Pepperdine Libraries databases, I conducted a content analysis of the *New York Times*. My approach follows Chong and Druckman’s (2011) methods as closely as possible; I used their article “Identifying Frames in Political News” as an example for my research design, and I found this article via EBSCOhost from the Pepperdine Libraries databases. I selected the *New York Times* because it is a prestigious and popular paper, commonly referred to as “the paper of record.” Furthermore, the *New York Times* has the second-largest circulation in the United States

(Associated Press 2013), and its coverage typically sets the agenda for other news outlets, making it a reasonable proxy of coverage nationwide.

I examined articles from January 1, 2000, to the date I conducted my data research, October 31, 2015, because during this period, all four states and Washington, D.C. passed legislation for family leave programs. To identify appropriate *New York Times* articles, I searched: “BODY(maternity leave) AND SECTION(A) OR SECTION(B)” in the Lexis Nexis database. This search produced 261 results; I omitted blogs and letters to the editor in order to focus on news articles. This left 171 articles in the content analysis. Using Lexis Nexis for my content analysis methodology taught me a lot about content and coding. I altered my original search terms from “BODY(maternity leave) OR BODY(family leave),” because this gave me over 900 results and lots of articles were not pertinent to maternity leave policies and newborns (but childcare and sick leave). Thus, I substituted “OR BODY(family leave)” with “AND SECTION(A) OR SECTION (B).” By putting in my Lexis Nexis search terms that the article mentioning “maternity leave” must be from the news (A) or business sections (B), I received fewer opinion editorials, blog entries, letters to the editor, and other results that I would not use in my content analysis. By using the Pepperdine University Libraries resources, and experimenting with Lexis Nexis, I was able to aggregate more substantive and high-quality articles for my content analysis and paper’s research design.

My literature review also relied heavily on the Pepperdine University Libraries databases, specifically EBSCOhost and JSTOR. Prior to this study, I knew nothing about media framing or framing theory. I started reading about media politics and framing communication in literature; the peer-reviewed articles on EBSCOhost and JSTOR by Shanto Iyengar and Richard Perloff helped lay a foundation for my paper’s literature review. Because there is no literature on the

framing of maternity leave, I also was dependent on journal articles by Regina Lawrence, whose writings on framing of public health issues provided examples for my hypotheses and expectations on framing of maternity leave. I also was able to find articles by Dennis Chong and James Druckman, two important framing theorists, via the Pepperdine University Libraries databases. Not only did I use their 2011 article for my content analysis methodology, but I also compared their findings on the frame direction of news issues to my results from my content analysis (see Table 1 in my completed project). In addition, I used the results of my content analysis to write and frame the questions for my survey experiment (I had three experimental conditions and two treatment groups, and used 155 responses), so even my survey was dependent on the databases I used and references I found.

In result, the resources I used and the research design they helped me form produced some exciting findings for this paper:

1. Maternity leave is unique from many news issues, because its coverage is relatively balanced compared to most issues, and is often more positive.
2. Media coverage of maternity leave also is becoming more substantive over time, with more articles using economic frames and significantly fewer mere mentions.
3. Men and women tend to cover maternity leave similarly.
4. There is no evidence of framing effects on paid parental leave, but it could be the frames studied in this paper.
5. Women are more favorable towards parental leave than men.

As one of the more quantitative projects of this year's Political Science Honors Research Program, my paper would not have produced its findings without the incredible resources of the Pepperdine University Libraries databases. I was able to efficiently conduct my content analysis

with the filtered articles before me in Lexis Nexis, instead of combing through hard copies of periodicals or *New York Times* archives. Lastly, I believe that my findings in this study can teach policymakers and interest groups about public opinion of paid parental leave, and also provide avenues for future political research.