How can behavioral science be used to recruit foster and adoptive families?

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In 2017, almost 700,000 children experienced foster care, with over 400,000 in the system on any given day. Every child deserves a secure and stable placement if they must be removed from their family; placement in a family setting, especially with relatives, reduces trauma of this transition. Recruiting candidates is a challenge faced by agencies across the country, especially given the range of children's needs. Behavioral science offers a rich and growing body of evidence that shows how we recruit determines who we recruit. The following insights can inform how to improve the foster and adoptive parent recruitment process.

Change the message to attract new applicants

Although fostering is unlike most positions one might apply to, the underlying motivations of prospective foster parents may be shared by those in other professional positions, especially public safety or education. Research on public service motivation — especially on what works to attract the best candidates in these settings — may have application to foster care. Such research shows that when recruiting teachers and police officers, the way in which a job or role is framed in advertising influences whether prospective applicants go on to express interest.

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Specifically, job advertisements that emphasize the social benefits of a role — e.g., helping children when targeting teachers — can attract fewer applicants than those that emphasize other dimensions of the job, such as the fact that it is challenging.[1] Apart from the overall impact of these nontraditional messages, **placing emphasis on less obvious aspects of the role has proven especially attractive to candidates from more diverse backgrounds** than the typical applicant pool. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, advertisements telling prospective police officers that the work is challenging and that law enforcement provides a long-term career solicited three times as many applications from women and people of color, when compared to messages that emphasized the public service dimension of the job.[2] For foster care, using the built-in testing features of online ad platforms could be a fruitful way to understand which version of a recruitment advertisement is most attractive and to whom, boosting the number of applications and the diversity of applicants without breaking the budget.

Use technology to target more effectively

Technological advances have created new opportunities to target and test advertisements in increasingly specific ways. According to behavioral science, one of the most powerful antidotes to the brain's propensity to filter out nonurgent environmental stimuli is to personalize calls to action that may otherwise be ignored. For example, simply adding the recipient's name in a text message inviting clients of an unemployment center to a recruitment event increased the likelihood they would attend by 40%.[3] While it may not always be possible to personalize advertisements on social media by name, the option to target advertising — e.g., displaying ads only to individuals who identify as LGBTQIA, or individuals whose professional history indicates that they have worked with children extensively — can provide a different way to tailor messages so they resonate the most. This is consistent with market segmentation approaches, an increasingly common feature of agency planning. In one project with the city of Los Angeles, the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) found that targeting based on ZIP code has proven to be an effective way to attract African American candidates to policing jobs. Geo-mapping can help identify foster parent shortages by county, and geo-targeted social media advertisements can help find people right where you really need them. In adoption, recent work has gone a step further, using micro-targeting on social media to share advertisements for specific children with adults who may be more likely to adopt them.

Such platforms may also hold the key to getting those with a latent interest in adoption or fostering to apply sooner. Internal research by one of our agency partners revealed that adopters typically start considering the process two years before they make a formal application. Even with this lag time, they often find they still need to do preparatory work to ensure they are eligible to apply. Behavioral science suggests that we may be able to get those individuals who will eventually apply ready faster. In many different settings, a method known as the "foot-in-the-door" technique proves that making a small request of someone that is easy for them to accept increases the likelihood that they will comply with a much larger request later. For example, getting someone to sign a petition for a cause makes them more likely to agree to donate to that cause later.[4] Likewise, getting people who may see adoption or foster parenting in their future to take a small step, such as liking a Facebook group for those interested in updates from the local child welfare agency, may accelerate their path to application while giving them useful information on how to prepare in the meantime. These individuals could be provided advertisements based on demographic information or using search history, such as cookies from a Heart Gallery site.

Use social networks to recruit high caliber applicants

Beyond cold solicitations of interest, we can look to network science for some powerful lessons on recruitment. Many studies show that the messenger matters at least as much as the message itself,[5] meaning we must think carefully about who is best positioned to make a request. In the U.K., low income high school students with strong exam grades were 23% more likely to apply to a top-tier university if they received a letter of encouragement from a current undergraduate with a background like theirs.[6] This translated into around 322 students accepting places at top universities who would never have done so otherwise. Similarly, research shows that those we know are far more persuasive than official figures. For example, investment bank workers were six times more likely to donate to charity if asked by a champion of the cause in their immediate team compared to those who received a similar request from Corporate Citizenship.[7] This idea that we are more readily influenced by and trusting of those we know or identify with could be put to work in foster parent recruitment by asking existing foster parents to invite friends of friends to a less formal informational session. Faith-based organizations, such as The Call in Arkansas, mobilize church members to provide homes to children in foster care. Aside from this sense of social trust and safety, friends of friends may also be more likely to have values and traits similar to the foster family that invited them.

Design the application process to reduce attrition

Once candidates apply, the screening process should be designed to ensure they do not unnecessarily drop out. It can be tempting to assume that those who do not complete the process lack the resilience needed to take on challenging work. In reality, there are many reasons great applicants may get turned off during the recruitment processes. **Reviewing recruitment requirements in light of candidate needs can go a long way** (e.g., scheduling training on weekends, delivering training in the home via tablet, etc). When the process cannot be flexible, there are some simple strategies that can help keep quality candidates engaged. In the U.K., a series of day-in-the-life emails from an active officer to candidates for the Army Reserves doubled the number of applicants completing their application with no other changes to the process.[8]
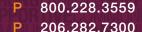
When it comes to fostering and adoption, the application process can be daunting, or even re-traumatizing depending on the circumstances of the applicant. Kinship caregivers may find certain sections of the application irrelevant or especially difficult. Their ability to relate to the child and his/her experiences may be precisely the thing that makes them the best caregiver, even as it threatens to compromise their success in the application process. Often a simple intervention may help: when lower income families were offered eight minutes of assistance in completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form,[9] there was an increase in the receipt of financial aid and in the value of that aid, as well as enrollment in college. Similar supports might be helpful for those completing the necessarily bureaucratic elements of foster or adoptive home applications.

Beyond simply dropping out of the process, vulnerable populations can perform worse on certain kinds of assessment if they feel they are less likely to succeed or do not belong. Simple changes to the conditions of the assessment and the framing of the task can overcome this

issue, enabling everyone to perform to the best of their abilities. For example, in working with a police force in the U.K., BIT found that some simple changes to the email that preceded an assessment task — using a more welcoming tone and asking applicants to think about what becoming a police officer would mean to them and their community — eradicated an attainment gap between white candidates and those from under-represented ethnic groups.[10] Ensuring the link between the paperwork and the end goal — a better home for the children — may go a long way to overcoming barriers that prospective caregivers might experience on tasks like these. For example, difficult forms could be prefaced by a handwritten note from a child in the system to drive a sense of purpose. Aside from moving the focus to emphasize the larger goal and providing assistance completing the forms, reordering the paperwork to place triggering questions later,[11] removing unnecessary triggers,[12] and breaking the process into more manageable chunks[13] may help improve the application experience for prospective foster or adoptive families.

1   O'Reilly, F., Chande, R., Groot, B., Sanders, M., & Soon, Z. (2017) Behavioural Insights for Education, London: Pearson.

2   Linos, E. (2017). More Than Public Service: A Field Experiment on Job Advertisements and Diversity in the Police. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 28*(1), 67-85.

3   Sanders, M, Kirkman, E, (2014). *I've booked you a place. Good luck: A field experiment applying behavioural science to improve attendance at high-impact recruitment events*. The Centre for Market and Public Organisation Working Paper Series, 14/334

4   Sternthal, B., Scott, C. A., & Dholakia, R. R. (1976). Self-perception as a means of personal influence: the foot-in-the-door technique. *ACR North American Advances*.

5   E.g. Lieber, E. M., & Skimmyhorn, W. (2018). Peer Effects in Financial Decision-Making. *Journal of Public Economics, 163*, 37-59.

6   Sanders, M., Chande, R., & Selley, E. (2017). *Encouraging People into University*. Behavioural Insights Team.

7   Sanders, M.m et al. (2014). *"Network Nudges: Second and Third Order Social Effects in Charitable Giving Field Experiments"* (Working Paper). Presented at 2014 Science of Philanthropy (SPI) Conference, University of Chicago.

8   Team, B. I., & Britain, G. (2015). *Update Report 2013-2015*. Behavioural Insights Limited.

9   Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2009). *The role of simplification and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment* (No. w15361). National Bureau of Economic Research.

10   Linos, E., Reinhard, J., & Ruda, S. (2017). Levelling the playing field in police recruitment: Evidence from a field experiment on test performance. *Public Administration, 95*(4), 943-956.

11   Shih, M., Pittinsky, T. L., & Ambady, N. (1999). Stereotype susceptibility: Identity salience and shifts in quantitative performance. *Psychological science, 10*(1), 80-83.

12   For example, one agency we spent time with asked prospective adopters to draw a genogram that included miscarriages and stillbirths; the format of the submission requested that these be represented using a box with a thick black "X" written inside it.

13   Gobet, F., Lane, P., Croker, S., Cheng, P., Jones, G., Oliver, I. & Pine, J. (2001). Chunking mechanisms in human learning. *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences, 5*(6), 236-243

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