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The “Perfect Parent” Campaign’s Failure: Applying a Job Market Model for Successful Foster Family

Recruitment and Retention

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Abstract

Since 2014, Washington state's Department of Child and Family Services (DSHS) has seen a dramatic drop in foster care providers. From 2005 to 2015, only 102 of 1,100 foster families licensed in 2005 were still providing care. As of 2015, the number of available homes has dropped to more than 1,000 below the normal level (at 4,600. homes.) Many issues are cited as contributing to these numbers, such as problematic administrative practice, unbearable social worker caseloads, and a sluggish system unresponsive to change. Other problems include an increase in behavioral problems amongst children coming into the system. This project seeks to suggest that one exacerbating force to the pre-existing problems, *ceteris parabis*, with foster care is the recruitment efforts employed by television advertisements. The specific ads implemented by Washington's area administration are pulled from the national AdoptUSKids organization, entitled "The Perfect Parent" campaign. These ads fail to recruit desired applicants and deter undesired applicants, because their depictions are mismatched with the realities of the job. As such, the campaign undermines itself by recruiting the wrong demographic. This then serves to create a negative conception of the foster parent job as current (unideal care providers) relay their experience to the ideal demographic of potential parents who would be better matched with the job. This, in the long-run, ultimately harms the agency's efforts to recruit and retain foster families.

Introduction

In 2017, AdoptUSKids televised new installments of their “Perfect Parent” (PP) campaign. The campaign in question features a number of lighthearted commercials and billboards depicting parents as heroes in day-to-day situations.¹ While many aspects of this campaign are problematic, the television ads represent one of the greatest failures of the Children’s Welfare agencies in their efforts to recruit foster families. The work conditions depicted are grossly mismatched from the work conditions in reality. Ultimately, the campaign serves to exacerbate and perpetuate the negative views of foster care today. It undermines its own agenda by creating a negative image for the agency’s most effective recruitment tool: foster families. Thereby, it destroys the Children’s Welfare “brand” and creates long-term problems for the agency in its recruitment efforts.

Because these advertisements are considered public service announcements (PSAs,) they appeal to the general public, rather than a specific demographic. This is different from conventional job advertisements, which necessarily seek a specific demographic, best equipped for a job. While this study is not intended to offer a juxtaposition between PSAs and job recruitment ads, there are some important differences between the purposes of both advertisement types that are necessary to outline. For one, PSAs are geared towards the general public: the goal is to suggest that *anyone* can contribute. PSAs are designed to raise public awareness and prospectively inspire a change of attitude or behavior to prevent collective action problems. Job ads (should) have both a target demographic that suits the job, and a deterrent

¹ See Figure 1.

demographic that is unsuited to the job. As such, they target a *specific* group within the population—because a general appeal can be counterproductive.

The creators of the PP ads formulated the ads according to a PSA structure. However, employing a PSA in an effort to recruit for a full-time job creates problems rooted in a mismatch of scope and scale. PSAs invoke *small* changes every person can make to their daily routine. These changes include termination of littering, smoking, or to receive certain medical exams. The expectations behind the PP campaigns, on the other hand, require major, life altering changes to a person's personal life. A PSA paradigm is ill-suited for explaining the work a family can expect to undertake when they involve themselves in foster care work. The campaign's goal is to recruit, or hire, foster families. This work equates to a full-time job, not in anyway comparable to making a habitual change like going in for regular cancer screenings.

This study, then, offers an analysis of the PP ads within a job marketing framework to illuminate how they represent an endemic failure for foster care recruitment efforts. They serve to undermine efforts at recruiting and retaining foster families, by targeting a general demographic for service opportunities. They appeal to a general demographic by painting a fictitious picture of what the job will look like. This can lead to negative perceptions of the job by past applicants. Their testimonies then serve as a deterrent for future agency recruitment efforts. As such, the demographic that is initially attracted by these ads is unsustainable (the agency does not retain them), and their negative employer evaluations lead to diminished recruitment numbers.

Significance

A 2016 article published by InvestigateWest in conjunction with KCTS9, showed that, “[Washington] state lost nearly one in five foster homes between 2008 and 2015 as families quit and potential recruits couldn’t be persuaded to sign up. Only 102 of the 1,100 homes that got licensed in 2005 were still accepting kids a decade later. The number of available homes plummeted to about 4,600 last year—more than 1,000 below the typical level.”² The lack of available homes causes numerous youths to bounce from location to location, resulting in low levels of stability amidst their already tumultuous lives. These moves have a collateral effect on the mental health of these kids—making permanency harder to achieve as these home changes exacerbate preexisting behavioral challenges.³ Such unstable environments have collateral damage in the lives of these kids, such as poor academic performance, an increase in social problems, and an increase in behavioral problems to name a few. Furthermore, this lack of stability for foster youths results in a statistically higher number of adults who struggle with substance abuse, experience incarceration, unintended pregnancy and a plethora of mental health struggles. Multiple studies suggest that one important step towards resolving these problems, both short and long term, is through the successful recruitment and retention of foster families.

It is therefore not only of value, but of pressing importance for the present and future well-being of abused and neglected children that analyses are conducted to determine why and how foster parents are motivated to open their homes, and why so many have been closing their doors as of late. Such analyses

² Ray, Suzanna & Allegra Abramo. (2016). *InvestiageWest*. “Washington’s Troubled Foster Care Program Struggles to Keep Foster Parents.” Retrieved from** para. 7.

³.KCTS9. (2016). “A System in Crisis: Foster Care Crisis.” Retrieved from <https://kcts9.org/programs/system-in-crisis/foster-care-crisis/> Accessed 2/2/18. Para 11

can serve as a catalyst for improving the lives of abused children in the present, as well as equipping them for a future as healthy, well-adjusted adults.

Methodology

There are numerous employment recruitment strategies in the job market today. One popular method is market-based recruitment strategies.⁴ Market-based recruitment is designed to establish an open job position as a superior product to the competition. Thus, it is structured in a way that attempts to highlight, or exaggerate, the best qualities of the employer. In many ways, this job marketing structure parallels PSA structures. However, this becomes problematic when applied to foster family recruitment. Foster care deals with child abuse and neglect. The work is difficult on technical and psychological levels. Thus, this strategy is inappropriate for offering a constructive analysis of these ads.

The golden rule of job marketing is “[T]o discourage candidates whose lack of desired qualifications, experience, and personality renders them unsuitable, a function that contributes significantly to reducing the risk of hiring wrong people, as well as the time and costs involved in the recruitment process[.]”⁵ An analysis of the realities of foster parent work in juxtaposition with the described/marketed job, will hopefully elucidate the barriers to effective family recruitment, retention, and the long-term social benefits derived from proper foster care providership.

⁴ Łącka-Badura, Jolanta. (2015.) Recruitment Advertising as an Instrument of Employer Branding : A Linguistic Perspective. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Accessed February 26, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵Ibid.

Now, there are distinctions between foster parenting and a conventional job, largely rooted in the nature of a foster parent's role as an unpaid volunteer of the state as opposed to an actual paid employee of a given organization. However, these differences are insignificant. In fact, the work of a foster care provider bears key similarities with Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs.) Both the foster care agencies and MSMEs are considered "disadvantaged" in their production of recruitment incentives. They both rely on alternative methods for attracting potential employees/volunteers by emphasizing the company's culture and appealing to applicants' sense of existential reward. These benefits are highlighted in an effort incentivize prospective applicants to work for the MSME over more material/practical benefits (such as compensation and health benefits.) The similarities between MSMEs and DSHS are essential for formulating an effective recruitment method.

The overarching purpose of ads is to deter unwanted applicants while attracting desired ones. In context of this purpose we will analyze these ads according to the Employee Value Proposition (EVP) and its Total Rewards Framework (TRF.)⁶ These methods are clear-cut and concise. The model was developed to provide a competitive edge for employers of MSMEs who are competing against bigger, more superficially appealing companies.⁷ Foster care service providers are likewise disadvantaged in their ability to attract candidates based on material compensation and benefits.⁸ Unlike other official government employment positions, foster care does not offer care providers medical or other benefits.

⁶ Bakshi, Subeer. (2010). Human Capital. "HR in MSME's." Retrieved from: www.humancapitalonline.com. Accessed 2/15/18.

⁷ For example, local, artisan soda provider versus *Coca Cola*.

⁸ The OIG recognizes that foster family "payment" is considered (insufficiently) compensatory.

Furthermore, there are no real promotional opportunities. Therefore, the ideal foster care provider would involve themselves based on altruistic motivations, as opposed to material ones.

The EVP model is defined as,

“[H]ow an organization articulates its identity, origins and values, and what it promises to deliver, to emotionally connect employees and prospective employees. It clearly articulates the employee experience—what is on offer, what to expect and why the organization is a different and a suitable place to work.”⁹

Its six-step matrix is outlined as such: 1) The company must advertise rational benefits. It must explain the employee’s ability to maintain work/life balance, such as whether the organization offers job security, promotional opportunities, etc. 2) It must advertise emotional benefits. It must explain how the organization creates an environment that allows that satisfaction be derived from the work. This is typically in the form of promotion or other existential reward. 3) It must offer an honest image of the organization. The ads must show whether the organization itself creates a unique, positive and supportive environment. 4) The ad must describe functional benefits such as what tangible payment or benefits exist for services rendered (Least important p. 24). 5) It must depict psychological benefits. It must show how the work leaves the employee feeling satisfied and valued as person. Finally, 6) it must pinpoint higher order benefits and brand values. This means it describes the bigger picture that the organization stand for other than the expected service (for example: creating a bright future for underprivileged children, ultimately resulting in a better future for everyone, etc.)

⁹ Subeer. (2010).

In analyzing the ads, we will first offer a description of the ads. Then we will follow up with a description of the job as suggested by respective agency publications in conjunction with actual foster family testimonials in an effort to present the job in reality. The underlying assumption here is that in order to attract the correct demographic, the ads should be as honest as possible about the work the job entails, thus ensuring that recruits are not, in effect, applying for a different job than was suggested. Then we will apply the EVP model to evaluate whether or not the ads offer an honest representation of the job—thus appealing to the ideal demographic equipped to deal with the job in reality.

We will also keep in mind certain general qualifications that apply to job marketing ads such as that, “[D]etailed, exhaustive descriptions of the job and organisation,[sic]...enhances the credibility of an ad.”¹⁰ For us, this means that some description of the job is imperative for a proper job advertisement. In her synthesis of the various job advertisement techniques at an employer’s disposal, Lacka-Badura outlines four criteria that are “obligatory” across all models. These are presentation of the organization (who is offering the job,) specifying responsibilities and requirements involved, offering benefits (whatever form those may take,) and instructing candidates how to apply.¹¹

The Ads

In 2017, AdoptUSKids released two major ads referred to as, “What to Expect When You’re Expecting...A Teen.” The AdCouncil, a nonprofit organization frequently consulted for PSA campaigns,

¹⁰ Lacka-Badura. (2015).

¹¹ Ibid. p. 8. See Table 1.

states that, “[T]he central idea behind the [Perfect Parent] campaign is that there is no single right answer when it comes to parenting...This year’s PSAs...spotlight the moments when older kids still rely on their parents for help and support.”¹²

The first one, entitled “Morning Time”¹³ opens with two Caucasian parents explaining to the viewer how they can arouse their resident teen in the morning. The ad takes a humorous approach as the parents try, and fail, in their attempts to wake the youth—first opening the curtains, then blowing a trumpet, vacuuming, placing a dog on him. They take a beleaguered look at the camera, before the scene moves to the parents cooking breakfast, discussing how they “Were sure *those* would work.” The kid comes down, drowsily rubs his eyes asking, “Is that bacon?” He then hugs the father, who offers a look of incredulity provoked by the boy’s expression of affection. It concludes as they excitedly revel over their discovery that the smell of bacon successfully aroused their teen.

The second video, entitled “What to Expect When You’re Expecting...A Teen: Teen Proofing”¹⁴ features a middle-class, African American family. The mother opens by explaining how to “teen proof your home.” She outlines steps from hiding car keys, “providing an outlet for creative expression,” and other similar benignities. Each suggestion is immediately followed by an “unexpected” turn of events,

¹²Awareness and Encourage Adoption of Older Children from Foster Care.” Retrieved from: <https://www.adcouncil.org/News-Events/Press-Releases/National-Adoption-Campaign-Launches-New-Perfect-Parent-PSAs-to-Raise-Awareness-and-Encourage-Adoption-of-Older-Children-from-Foster-Care>. Accessed 3/25/18.

¹³ AdoptUSKids. (2017, September 21). “What to Expect When You’re Expecting...A Teen: Morning Time”. [Video File]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0oSGGefdQs&t=1s&list=PLB8A8C172FE1640EF&index=1>.

¹⁴ AdoptUSKids. (2017, September 21). “What to Expect When You’re Expecting...A Teen: Teen Proofing”. [Video From File]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE-mbfnTiIE&index=2&list=PLB8A8C172FE1640EF>

such as the teen finding the keys or playing music poorly. It then shows the mom as she stumbles upon her daughter in her room with friends performing a “mannequin” challenge (which is a viral video challenge wherein people stand like mannequins for the duration of the video), which the parent is shown as having confused with requiring an actual mannequin. It concludes with the mom posing for her daughter with friends. They laugh and enjoy the pictures as the company fills the screen.

Both of these videos conclude with the aphorism, “You don’t have to know it all to be a perfect parent. Thousands of teens in foster care will love you just the same.” The ad creators claim that, “The humorous lighthearted scenarios they depict aim to reassure prospective parents that even if they are not ‘perfect,’ they can provide the stability and security that older youth in foster care need and desire. [The ads we built trying to suggest that] Opening your home and heart to a child or teen changes both of your lives for the better...we hope that this new work will help show prospective parents that adopting an older child does not mean missing out on the precious milestones of parenting.”¹⁵ Such idealistic prospects are nice, and suggest that the ads’ creators had good intentions in mind. However, unless the job actually offers the above benefits, they are, in effect, causing far more harm than good.

As we will see, the creators’ claims about trying to convey the rewarding nature of foster care are misaligned from both the reality of the job. The ads are an inappropriate and ineffective method for recruiting prospective families. Given the seemingly homogenous nature of the homes depicted, neither of these offer an explicit suggestion that these children are adopted or in foster care until the name of the

¹⁵ Ad Council. (2016). Quoting Lisa Sherman, president and CEO of the Ad Council.

AdoptUSKids program fills the screen at the end. The ads are designed to highlight the *necessarily* fulfilling and positive results from providing care. Viewers are offered the implication that they may find existential fulfillment and personal happiness in opening their homes to a teenager—with some mild bumps in the road along the way.

If the job in question is as inevitably rewarding as the ads are designed to suggest, then we should see an increase in recruitment and retention as families everywhere scramble to attain these inevitable benefits. Given that most care providers cite current and past care providers' recommendations as the primary motivating force behind their decision to foster,¹⁶ then we should see an exponential increase in both recruitment and retention because the job is depicted as rewarding in all facets. The fact that there is actually a rapid decline in both foster family recruitment and retention leads us to infer that there is a mismatch between the job's reality and the job as depicted by the advertisements.

Foster Family Motivations

These ads reaffirm many families' motivations for involving themselves in foster care, namely, adoption prospects. The Office of Inspector General outlines several different reasons that foster families undergo the licensing process. "[R]easons included their inability to have children, the loss of a biological child, the desire for more children, [kinship care], or because they knew and admired someone...who had been a foster parent...The encouragement from an existing foster parent can be instrumental in choosing

¹⁶ Office of Inspector General. (2002). Rehnquist, Janet. (2002). Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General "Recruiting Foster Parents." p. 7

to become a foster parent.”¹⁷ Amanda M. Keys (et al.) further confirms that foster families’, “[P]rimary motivation to foster [were] ‘desire to help those in need’ (57%). The second highest motivational factor was ‘infertility’ (20%).”¹⁸ The majority of cited reasons are aligned with the substance of the PP ads: parents foster with a desire to expand their family. However, this becomes problematic when we account for federal and state goals in determining the outcome of foster children’s cases.

Federal and state goals run counterproductive to foster family motivations for involvement. First and foremost, the agency seeks to keep children in their homes. Second, they want to serve and support the children *during the time they are in out-of-home care*. Third, they seek to return the child home as safely and quickly as possible. Fourth, they support children in homes of fit and willing relatives. This is referred to as “next of kin.” This includes “fictive kin” (people the biological family views as “kin”) as well as any expansion of blood relatives. In the case of Native American cases, this can mean anyone within the given tribe. Finally, they will secure permanent families for the children who cannot return home safely.¹⁹ Once the agency exhausts all efforts at finding alternative kin, *then* adoption is considered a viable option. In other words, these ads promise personal fulfillment in adoption, and uses this desire as the primary motivating force behind recruitment—in spite of the fact that they will exhaust all other efforts to return the children home or with family. The ads suggest that these children will find their “forever

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Keys, Amanda M. Todd Daniel, Mary Ann Jennings, Tiffany Havli, Regina Russell & Rose Korang-Okrah (2017).. *Social Work & Christianity*. Vol. 44, No. 4. “Who are Christian Foster Parents? Exploring the Motivations and Personality Characteristics Associated with Fostering Intentions.” p. 75.

¹⁹ Children’s Administration Department of Social and Health Services. *Washington State Child and Family Services Plan 2015-2019 Report*. June 30, 2014.

Retrieved from <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/CA/pub/documents/cfsp2015-2019.pdf>. Accessed 8/24/18. p. 6.

homes” with prospective families—largely families incentivized to join with adoption prospects. Yet this goal is the agency’s *last resort*, which means it is unlikely to happen in a large number of cases.

One further problem with this outline of priorities is DSHS’s newfound emphasis on “cultural sensitivity,” which in practice translates into creating one more step before adoption is considered a viable option. “Cultural sensitivity” suggests that a minority child is best raised in a homogenous home that can cultivate an understanding and respect for their culture. This has led some judges to deem it in the child’s best interest to remove the child from one foster home to another on the basis of ethnicity—further distancing families from viable adoption. While this is officially a priority outlined by Washington state in their Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), it varies in execution. It is worth mentioning, however, because it adds another barrier to the viability of adoption.

General Foster Family Experiences

As we see with the Ad Council, the survey synthesis suggests that foster parent perspectives/experiences are positive and fulfilling. And again, if experiences were as positive as these agency publications suggest, we would not likely see the dramatic drop in foster care providers that statistics present.

Congress requires that every state publish foster family surveys, indicating areas of success or areas in need of improvement. The 2016 Washington Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) survey outlines significant foster family perspectives, such as whether they feel supported, whether they have seen improvements, how they feel in respect to specific state worker’s performance, etc. Overall, the

study found that the agency had shown remarkable improvement, and left most families feeling satisfied and supported.

This, however, is quite different from the picture painted by foster families through personal testimonial. InvestigateWest found that,

“Caregivers say they’re treated like ‘glorified babysitters’ instead of team members. If they complain, they say the state opens trivial investigations or threatens to move the kids.

Many also cite feeling powerless because they have no standing at hearings where judges decide what happens to the kids in their care. The state, in its interpretation of federal directives, prioritizes biological ties above a child’s emotional attachment.

Foster parents also aren’t given enough training to cope with the increasingly more troubled children entering the system who might flip over beds or break windows...Treatment for mental health problems [is] unavailable or inadequate. And the disarray—and lack of child care options—makes it hard for working parents to manage their careers.”²⁰

These problems have been examined by the Office of Inspector General in 2002, which showed that children entering foster care have increasingly higher needs, that foster parents feel unappreciated as they receive “limited agency recognition” and are financially strained.²¹ They feel that caseworkers are not reasonably accessible. There is a limit of services and information of services to help them raise these children—including, but not limited to, babysitting, respite care, mental health services, dental, etc. They are frequently met with false abuse allegations made by both the biological parents and older foster children—which takes an existential toll on the care providers as they are placed under severe state

²⁰ Abramo, Allegra. *InvestigateWest*. “New Report Highlights Foster Care’s Failings as Legislators Debate Funding.” Apr. 7, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.invw.org/2017/04/07/new-report-highlights-foster-cares-failings-as-legislators-debate-funding/#>. Accessed 8/30/17. para. 9-11

²¹ Rehnquist. (2002). p. 5

scrutiny for allegations they could have avoided by never volunteering in the first place. This instills a fear of losing their own biological children (if applicable.)

In terms of incentives, families are incentivized to become care providers with the promise of adoption, while the agency is incentivized by congressional goals to ensure the children are *not* adopted. Because families are rational to some extent, when they realize that agency promises are unlikely consummate, they will then be disincentivized to provide care.

Families foster with the hope of expanding their family; yet, the agency goals suggest that the child is not expected to fulfill the role of a new family member or to replace a lost child as many parents are expecting when they become licensed. The agency will exhaust all efforts recruiting any other biological family member to take the child into their care. In effect, we have a clear prioritization of biology that is quite distinct from the reality depicted by the ads. From the outset, then, we can see potential for conflict. The agency suggests that families can foster with the prospects (often) of adoption, or otherwise expanding their family long-term, while simultaneously failing to equip families for the probability that the child will not be adoptable. The problem then, is that the PP ads exploit family's desire to adopt by advertising the foster care position as a viable, and superior means to that end.

The OIG study states, “Many of the reasons [families choose to no longer foster] are not new and little has changed over the years. What has changed are family dynamics and the increased needs of foster children, greatly intensifying the challenges faced by foster parents.”²² It would seem that nothing has

²² Ibid. p. 8.

changed since the 2002 study as well. Though this study was conducted fourteen years before the InvestigateWest publication, it still reflects the same problems faced by foster care providers on a regular basis.

One means of explaining the discrepancy between agency claims and family recruitment and retention rates is a description of a “Positive” response according to the agency. This publishing recognizes that in questions such as, “[D]id you get adequate support for your roles and responsibilities as a foster parent?” a “somewhat” response is counted as a positive response.²³ This leads them to conclude that 79% of responders reflected a positive view of the system. This is misleading, however, because of that 79%, 52% reflected that it was “somewhat adequate.”²⁴ The disparity, then, can be explained based on problems in framing. It is unclear what “somewhat” can mean to each individual taking a survey, especially given personal experiences with the system. If a foster family has seen some minor performance improvements, it may amplify the nature of the improvements subjectively. Thus, in one of numerous scenarios, “somewhat” can merely be referring to the fact that the agency is performing only slightly better than in past years of this one family’s involvement. It should in no way suggest that the agency is performing well. We can thus infer that “Somewhat” implies a far less positive experience than the study is interpreting it to mean.

Specific Foster Family Experience: Teenagers

²³ Department of Social Health Services. (2017). 2016 Foster Parent Survey. Retrieved from: <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/SESA/rda/documents/research-11-239.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 10

The only rational reason for families to consider continuing to provide care would be if providing the job was of greater benefit than the costs accrued from undertaking the work. In other words, if the job was easy, below an average threshold of how difficult the job could be, then perhaps parents would consider continuing to offer care services. But as the OIG has found, children coming into care actually exhibit increased behavior problems and are more difficult to work with than in the past.

The content of these ads, while marketed to families in general, is specifically geared towards families willing to accept teenagers into their homes. In its 2002 study, the OIG recommended recruitment methods geared towards families willing to receive teenagers (as there are a surplus of families willing to take in young babies, and who will not accept other age groups into their homes.) The PP ads appear to align with this goal. However, the depiction of teenage foster children is once again problematic in its failure to align with reality.

Adoption.com, a database offering support services for current foster families and information for prospective caregivers, offers some insight into the lives of families that accept teenagers. One article states,

“All foster children are affected by the separation from their family. Sometimes this stress and worry shows up in their behavior. Some children have not experienced the usual routines of family life and need extra understanding and patience... children or youth who have faced trauma sometimes have learned behaviors to keep themselves safe, or to meet their needs in other ways.”²⁵

It then goes on to shatter illusions about the fostering experience. Specifically, the parents discuss the problems with having idealistic expectations about providing a safe home for these children. Most of

²⁵ Skousen, Rachel. “The Realities of Foster Care and Foster Adoption: What it’s really like: the good, the bad, and the beautiful.” Jan. 3, 2014. Retrieved from <https://adoption.com/the-realities-of-foster-care-and-foster-adoption>. 2/8/18

the time, the teenagers who came into this family's home were resentful of their predicaments—viewing their time in care as a burden, and treating their care providers as such. The parents express that they still feel rewarded for having done a job that contributed to society, but that the positivity of their experience was more coincidental, and far distanced from a sense of reward as derived from having a teenager love them as their true family.

In fact, teens are empirically more difficult to deal with in the home given their propensity to externalize trauma and the significant degree to which they exhibit these externalities. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) indicates that,

“[T]he great majority of young people in foster care have experienced trauma in some form as a result of maltreatment...The foster care experience itself may cumulatively add to the impact of these traumatic events by further traumatizing young people: as they are removed from family, school, and community, these multiple moves contribute to the loss of important relationships and bonds. Many of these losses are ambiguous losses...[which] freezes the grief process, prevents closure, and adds to young people's feelings of insecurity and confusion.”²⁶

A teenager, thus, has initial traumatic behaviors rooted in abuse, which is then exacerbated by their removal from a perceived stable environment into a new and unfamiliar one. This is consummated in an overwhelming sense of social and personal insecurity, which further augments the preexisting behavioral problems. These behavioral issues show an upward trajectory across ages, increasing in probability with age increases. In the age 13-16 demographic, 80% of foster youths exhibit evidence of trauma, almost 70% experience mental health issues, and over 25% exhibit both trauma and mental health issues. In ages

²⁶ Annie E. Casey Foundation. Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. “Trauma Informed Practice with Young People in Foster Care.” Issue brief #5. May 28, 2012. Retrieved from: <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/jcyoi-IssueBrief5TraumaInformedPractice-2012.pdf>. Accessed 2/18/18. p. 9.

17+ in foster care, over 80% experience symptoms of trauma, 70% experience mental health problems, and over 35% exhibit both trauma and mental health issues.²⁷

In other words, the majority of teenagers, particularly those as advanced in their adolescence as those depicted by the ads, would be highly likely to externalize mental health issues and trauma. Thus, the older the youths become, the more difficult effective care provision becomes.

Overall, the experiences presented by care provider testimonials is quite displaced from the job as depicted by the agency. Thus, we can expect that any ad that aligns with the agency's conception of the job will be marketed ineffectively.

A Few Considerations

A few considerations before applying the EVP model: first, the ad does not indicate whether these children are adopted or in foster care. It only suggests that you *can* adopt children through foster care—that it is a viable and preferable adoption route. As such, we will be analyzing these ads as recruiting *foster* families, not adoptive families, and analyzing them in conjunction with the realities that coincide with fostering. We will not be analyzing the ads in reference to adoption alone, because the ads are designed to encourage a specific path towards adoption.

Second, we need to address objections about the impact of televised ads in a foster care context. The OIG found that while PSAs are recognized as less effective recruitment methods than word-of-mouth, agencies recognize that they still significantly impact foster care recruitment. They are considered a less

²⁷ Ibid. See Figure 2.

economical method, but with notably substantial impact. Specifically, in the case of PSAs, the OIG reports that,

14 [of 41] foster care program managers said they use television and public service announcements. Foster care program managers in 8 of these 14 States said they believe television is one of the most successful recruitment methods, and 7 said television advertisements had proven to be the most successful recruitment method for the dollars expended. However, the eight States in which the program managers said television was the most successful recruitment tool had not developed benchmarks or performance indicators to measure the success of their recruitment efforts.²⁸

Thus, though televised ads are less cost effective, they have a notable effect. 34% of the surveyed managers suggest it is *the* most effective tool at their disposal. Though there are a lack of benchmarks to determine the validity of some of these claims, it is fair to assert that not only do televised ads do *something*, but that they in fact contribute in major ways towards foster family recruitment and retention.

Evaluation

First, we will look at how the ads line up with general job advertisement requisites, then we will move on to the specifics behind the EVP model.

The first general requirement is that the organization is presented. The AdoptUSKids logo is presented at the opening and closing of the advertisement. The AdoptUSKids website states, “[We] are a project of the US Children’s Bureau that provides tools and technical assistance to help child welfare systems connect children in foster care with families.”²⁹ Thus, it provides information for parents seeking involvement in foster care, and does not provide the actual licensing services. The organization advertised

²⁸ Rehnquist. (2002). p. 8.

²⁹ AdoptUSKids. “Who we are.” <https://www.adoptuskids.org/about-us/who-we-are>. Accessed 3/19/18

connects potential parents with their area administration and respective licensing agencies. It lines up with this requisite in that it offers a means for families to reach respective agencies.

The next requisite states that job advertisements should include a description of the job expectations, responsibilities and requirements. The ads depict parents responding to certain parental responsibilities. However, these are implicit and misaligned with reality. Furthermore, they do not specify responsibilities within the licensing process. Before qualifying for the job, a potential family must go through vigorous trainings (36 hours to start,³⁰ as well as CPR/First Aid training. They must have sufficient income (to be discussed further in a later section.) Once licensed, families are expected to provide “appropriate supervision.” They are expected to provide daily, unique care for each child; to work in partnership with Children’s Administration as part of the child’s team; and to be aware of the many laws, regulations, and appointments (such as doctors visits, in home evaluations, and family visitations to name a few) in order that they be executed accordingly.³¹ So in this respect, the ad falls short in describing the nature of the work.

Next, the ad should make presentation of the benefits. DSHS outlines the benefits (or “personal rewards”) of foster care as, 1) Protecting children from harm; 2) Making a difference in a child's life; 3) Helping children feel good about themselves; and 4) Learning and using new skills.³² In this respect, the ad aligns with agency claims. This is because the cited “benefits” are either obvious or ethereal in all

³⁰ DSHS. “Licensing Requirements.” <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/CA/fos/becoming-a-foster-parent> Accessed 3/30/18.

³¹ Ibid. “Introduction.” & “Licensing Requirements.”

³² Ibid. “What to expect.”

cases. The problem with these “benefits” is that they are simultaneously ambiguous and, once again, misaligned with reality. They fail to account for the potential for and frequency of profound disappointment in offering care as reflected by foster family testimonials. As we will see shortly, a narrow description of the benefits, without providing some expectation of challenges, can contribute to a failure in efforts to attract/dissuade the corresponding demographics.

Finally, the ads must offer sufficient information for candidates to apply. In short, though the ads do not go into explicit detail about how to apply for the position, they do offer enough information (i.e. the AdoptUSKids website) to point parents in the right direction.

The EVP/TRF Model Analysis

The EVP model’s first requirement is that the ads should present rational benefits. Rational benefits include the ability for personal advancement within an organization and an ability to balance work/home lives. Under this criterion, the ads are honest in the sense that they never depict the parents outside of their homes. It does not encapsulate the inherent difficulties in balancing work, life and fostering. There *are* benefits depicted by these ads; but they are mostly ethereal—and these ethereal benefits are, in reality, often disappointments. There is no overt dishonesty present within the ads. There may be no advancement or promotional opportunities; but the parents’ positive attitudes and overall light-hearted tonality of the ads suggest that being part of a family will prove existentially rewarding. They do not indicate a balance between the agency work and home life because they coincide.

However, these ads, by process of omission, still create problems for the agency in efforts to attract the ideal candidates. In the experience of foster families, there are no technical advancements in foster

care because the job is strictly that of a parent. In other words, there is no ladder of parenthood which families climb in recognition of how well they executed their work. There are no seniority advantages or anything of the sort. The children's administration faces problems in trying to retain parents precisely *because* it is difficult to balance life and work. In the OIG 2002 report,

“In four States, foster parents expressed frustration with insufficient or non-existent respite and child care services. Foster parents portray these services as paramount in the retention of families because they allow foster parents to work, complete other necessary activities (e.g., taking other children to medical appointments and attending school conferences), and provide opportunities for foster parents to take a break from the physical and emotional stress that accompanies fostering.”³³

The inability for families to balance work and home life is one of the greatest problems facing foster families today. Becoming a foster parent requires the time and effort of being a parent, frequently dealing with high-needs children. It requires the effort of a full-time job. The job *is* their life. Any other income sources (which we will later see are necessary in order to sustain a career as a foster parent) must come from alternative sources. This leaves families in a position wherein they work two full-time jobs. Along with having to provide for normal services required of a family (such as those depicted in the ads, like meals, social activities, clothes, etc.) families must also be available for the numerous meetings and appointments required for foster children. This means they are not only performing the role of a parent as arbiter of a child's life and social activities, but they are performing the role of a parent with added demands created by the agency. Thus, the ads do not line up with the first requisite.

³³ Rehnquist. (2002). p. 8.

The EVP model defines the next requisite for effective ads as honest presentation of emotional benefits. This qualification is particularly important, because it is what sets an otherwise undesirable job apart from alternatives.

The ads suggest that raising a teen, at all, is an overall enjoyable, amiable experience. Yet this is grossly mismatched with reality. The OIG states, “[C]hildren coming into foster care today need more assistance than foster children of the past, and therefore are more difficult to place...[C]hildren entering the foster care system are older and often have more mental, behavioral, and emotional challenges than in the past...Virtually all survey respondents indicate that it is difficult to place troubled adolescents and teens.”³⁴ The ads fail to accurately depict the emotional benefits of foster care are possibly the most counterproductive efforts on the agency’s part towards successful family recruitment and retention.

This is particularly problematic given the ads’ focus on foster teens. Most of these kids will experience severe behavioral problems, and depending on the extent and type of abuse, the teens will externalize these problems in overt and unexpected ways. There are resources for aiding a youth in working through these problems, but these programs are not designed to protect the foster family from sharing some very uncomfortable experiences these teenagers may be dealing with. If the second ad had featured a teen who had been sex trafficked, they may have walked in on her taking nude photos and posting them on dangerous websites. The son who is sleeping late may be suffering from depression. Either of these scenarios is far more realistic than the fictions depicted by the ads. Foster care is far from

³⁴Rehnquist. (2002). p. 5

light-hearted or fun. Child abuse is not an easy thing to work through or get past. Loss of a biological parent always leaves scars.

Now, there are certainly cases of positive teen adoption experiences; however, these are vastly outnumbered by problematic ones. They will more likely result in disappointment from both the agency's priority of biological family needs and the necessarily difficult nature of the work. Positive experiences like those depicted by the ad, if they exist at all, are the exception to the rule.

Given the disparity between the story depicted by the ads and reality, the ads seem designed to "trick" families into the job with promises of a happy-go-lucky experience. As such, the ads may lead to short-term successful recruitment, but they are appealing to a demographic of families that expect a blissful experience far distanced from the realities of care. This demographic, then, will be grossly disappointed when they get involved in care and find themselves ill-suited to the job. Therefore, the ads also fail to align with the second requisite.

Next, the EVP model requires that ads present the employer image. The PP ads do not speak to the employer specifically, but that is less problematic when we account for the fact that this is a national ad campaign designed to point prospective parents in the direction of a local agency. The ads are designed as tools to insert within a given provider's area as needed. Agencies are both public and privately operated, and the ads are geared to recruit families interested in serving under either type of agency. The corresponding organizations vary from region to region in name and type. Thus, this criterion is inapplicable because there is no specific employer to present an image of.

The fourth requisite for effective job advertisement is presentation of functional benefits. This largely refers to compensation. In foster care providership, this is openly limited. Family's must prove they *already have sufficient income* for license consideration. They must be able to “[S]upport themselves without relying on foster care payments.”³⁵ Parents are compensated, but this compensation is incapable of sustaining their needs. Foster care compensation is synonymous with “Reimbursement.”³⁶ However, the ad does not indicate the existence of and quality of compensation. Instead, it appeals to more ethereal forms of payment.

The OIG found that in all the locations surveyed, “[F]oster parents reported contemplating no longer fostering because of the additional financial strain it puts on them.” The problem with this, however, is less about the lack of compensation, and more about the failure of the ad to elucidate applicant expectations. Failure to provide sufficient compensation may be harmful, but honesty about expectations can potentially attract more altruistically inclined families. Thus, the ads are still a failure under the fourth criterion.

The fifth requisite is that ads must provide for psychological benefits. This means families should feel that they are making an impact in the world. In this respect, the ads appear superficial in their depiction of the existential rewards derived from fostering. Game nights, hugs, a general sense of cheerfulness are the gist of what these ads depict. As such, they are a gross failure because they fail to utilize the one

³⁵ DSHS. “Becoming a foster parent.” <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/CA/fos/becoming-a-foster-parent>. Accessed 3/18/18.

³⁶ Rehnquist. 2002. p. 6

potentially good thing about foster care. This reality would attract the right parents, and they more or less ignore it.

Amanda Keys (et al.) observes that the majority of surveys indicate that families join with a desire to make a difference in children's lives. However, as we can see from several of the above investigations, many parents find it impossible to see the fruits of their labors as the state works against their adoption goals. This is the primary reason families get involved in foster care. The above survey that parents seek to fulfill a sense of duty to the less fortunate by providing a safe home for abused and neglected children. However, they face a rude awakening when the child is sent back home, or otherwise is not compliant towards reforming their behavior. It's not impossible for parents to have fulfilling experiences, just difficult. As such, an effective ad should appeal to the demographic that would expect the more likely psychological benefits.

That said, even if we ignore the mismatch between state and federal reunification goals and foster family adoption goals, the many endemic problems with the agency lead to feelings of loss, disappointment, and futility. Thus, as long as the agency fails to create a satisfactory environment wherein families experience tangible improvements as the result of their efforts (most importantly, growth and changes for the children in their care,) the ads are still a mismatch of reality. Any satisfaction families derive from this work will be extremely specific.

Finally, the EVP model requires that an ad must show how the corporation stands for a bigger picture than itself. The picture within the ads is that of changing the world by providing a child with a safe home; which again, is only accurate insofar as families are able to actually attain this.

The Perfect Parent ad campaign seems to be aligned with this goal, as outlined by the OIG in a 2002 study, that,

“State foster care program managers should collaborate with national organizations focused on the welfare of children to promote more positive media coverage of foster care. These positive depictions can be augmented through local foster care program postings, newsletters, and partnerships with community based organizations, businesses, churches, and civic groups.”

However, a more positive depiction does not find its solution in the formulation of an outright fiction. Exchanging one fiction, that of the cruel foster parents extorting the government for funds (such as with Ms. Hannigan from the 2014 iteration of *Annie*) for another will not lead to successful job recruitment and retention.

A Few Further Considerations

Lacka-Badura offers further insight into problems with this ad apart from a pure EVP model approach. For example, its use of humor is highly problematic.

“Having admitted that job announcements increasingly resemble ‘mainstream’ advertisements, it would nevertheless be very surprising (although probably possible) to find a job advert in the form of a poem, confession, or song, mechanisms that audiences are well familiar with in commercials. Similarly, techniques such as celebrity endorsement, or exploiting humour to enhance the persuasive appeal, very popular in non-recruitment advertising, are probably rarely employed in job ads.”³⁷

PSAs, or regular commercials, may utilize these artistic tools, but they are ill-executed in a job recruitment ad. Foster care providership does not fall under the canopy of potential exceptions to this rule because the job is extremely difficult and the work is painful. A humorous tone would necessarily be misrepresentative of the nature of the job. Any exception to the “no humor” rule would be incredibly ad

³⁷ Lacka-Badura. (2015).

hoc (i.e. advertising for a comedy night club, or something else in which humor would not be far from appropriate.)

Now there is evidence that alongside empathy and flexibility, one of the primary personality traits in successful foster families is a sense of humor.³⁸ Perhaps the humorous tone employed is strategic—seeking to eliminate families who lack this core trait. However, the traits discussed are incidental—they are not motivating forces, but are rather reflexive. Amanda Keys (et al.) found, “results indicated empathy and cognitive flexibility were significant predictors of a [family’s] desire to remain a foster parent, but humor was not.”³⁹ They then goes on to elaborate that, “[F]oster parent’s humor could help make for an initial successful placement, but might not contribute to foster parents’ overall desire to remain fostering.”⁴⁰ In other words, appeals to humor may lead to successful recruitment, but recruitment is a short-term variable and is virtually meaningless without retention. Furthermore, humor is general to humanity—thus it is not helpful in company efforts to disincentivize potential candidates ill-suited to the job.

The OIG further recognizes that advertisements represent the most expensive recruitment method. As such, the administration should ensure that returns on the ads are equal to or are more effective than if the funding had been allocated elsewhere. For the ads to undermine the efforts of the agency, as this study

³⁸ Keys et al. (2017). p. 71.

³⁹ Ibid. 76

⁴⁰ Ibid. 78

seeks to show, is a gross failure, not only in efforts to provide for the welfare of abused children; but also as a poor allocation of already limited resources.

Synthesis

Paramount for successful job recruitments is honesty. Honesty is what allows an ad to appeal to its appropriate demographic and deter the inappropriate candidates. This is perhaps the most prescient problem with these ads. Lacka-Badura notes that, “[A] job advertisement [that] appears attractive to the unsuitable candidates could be interpreted as indicating that the most valuable applicants may not have found it worth considering.”⁴¹ So, an advertisement that appeals to the wrong demographic will not only burden the employer with ill-suited workers who will not stick around, but will also fail to attract proper candidates.

The greatest number of families cite a desire to “help those in need”⁴² as their primary motivation to foster. Yet the lighthearted tones of the ads in combination with the narrative don’t reflect that these youths experience needs at all. Certainly, families could rely on their own premonitions about the needs of youths in care; but that the ad formulators should not expect their audience to know what a job entails—otherwise there would be no need for the job advertisement at all. When recruitment is as high stakes as with foster youths, it is important that the correct demographic is appealed to effectively.

⁴¹ Lacka-Badura. (2015).

⁴² Keys et al. (2017). p. 75

Secondly, they exploit the desires of the other significant candidates whose “infertility” prompted them towards foster care when the agency suggests that foster care is a viable means towards adoption.⁴³ Albeit the ads do cater to the demographic seeking to adopt teens—but only implicitly. The name of the organization suggests, and does not deny, that there is potential for adopting any age. This is in sharp contrast with Congressional and DSHS goals, which explicitly and adamantly highlight reunification with the biological family as their primary goal. As such, DSHS is incentivized to return children home at the expense of foster family sentiments.

Such agency appeals to a demographic compelled to join with different prospects than exist in practice will further hurt the agency “brand” by disappointing their employees. The OIG asserts that,

“States are underutilizing the recruitment method foster parents and child welfare staff said was most effective—foster parents. In every focus group interview conducted, both child welfare staff and foster parents said that it was not the billboards, television advertisements, [etc.] that inspired people to become foster parents. Both said that foster parents themselves are a highly effective and valuable tool in encouraging others to pursue fosterings.”⁴⁴

If foster parents are disappointed by their experience, because it fails to align with their expectations, they will hardly describe the job or agency in a positive light. If honesty fails as a recruitment strategy, then it is time for the agency to realize their shortcomings and reform accordingly.

These problems could explain why the number of foster families are at an all-time-low in Washington state. In spite of increased efforts on the agency’s part to recruit families—the agency’s efforts have actually been undermining its own goals.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Rehnquist. p. 7

These ads are problematic because they follow a PSA formula. Such a format is imprecise, and as such, allows the creator to take much artistic liberty. PSAs are also designed to raise *general public awareness*, they are *not* designed to appeal to a specific demographic—let alone encourage viewers to undergo a full-time job. The ads cater to a general demographic in a situation that demands specificity is for retention of an appropriate candidate basis. “Unlike product or service ads, inadequately designed recruitment messages may entice the *wrong* candidates who, even if rejected in the course of the selection process, nevertheless constitute a cost to the organization.”⁴⁵ In other words, the agency, in an attempt to fulfill the goals outlined by the OIG for providing a positive media image of foster care, use the wrong platform—ultimately hurting the agency’s recruitment efforts.

The actions of the ads are driven by humor, which job recruitments should stay away from. There are many good reasons for this, but in the case of foster family recruitment the realities are harsh. Dealing with kids who have been neglected or abused is very serious and comes with a lot of heartbreak. Even if a teenager does not resent the foster parent, the collateral effects of abuse and neglect are severe. Certainly, some families may have a more cheerful experience, but it will be far from perfect. Thus, the tonality of the ad is completely misleading.

Future studies

These ads represent an endemic failure on all counts within a job-marketing approach to recruitment. All the requisites outlined by the EVP model (with the exception of employer presentation)

⁴⁵Lack-Badura. (2015). 13.

are unfulfilled based on the ads' misrepresentation of reality. Thus, they will succeed in recruiting an unfit demographic. The campaign undermines the recruitment attempts of the agency by creating an internal population that actively dissuades families from signing on. Foster family testimonials are the most effective recruitment tool in the agency's hand, and it succeeds in making foster families resent their work and dissuade potential applicants from joining. Put another way, if the agency aired ads that made its services look as bad as foster parents make them out to be, and foster families spoke of the agency as positively as the ads represent, the agency would still see a greater number of recruits than they are currently seeing because the more important tool at their disposal is foster family testimonials.

In recruiting potential employees, professionalism and honesty go a long way. The "Perfect Parent" ads are a failure in all practical senses. They do not honestly represent the agency or the nature of the job, thereby they ignore their ideal demographic, and instead target members who will ruin their brand.

It is problematic, to say the least, that previous and sparse investigations have initiated virtually no change within the foster care system. Future studies could conduct cross state analyses comparing poorly performing state agencies with well performing state agencies and their respective recruitment strategies.

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Appendix

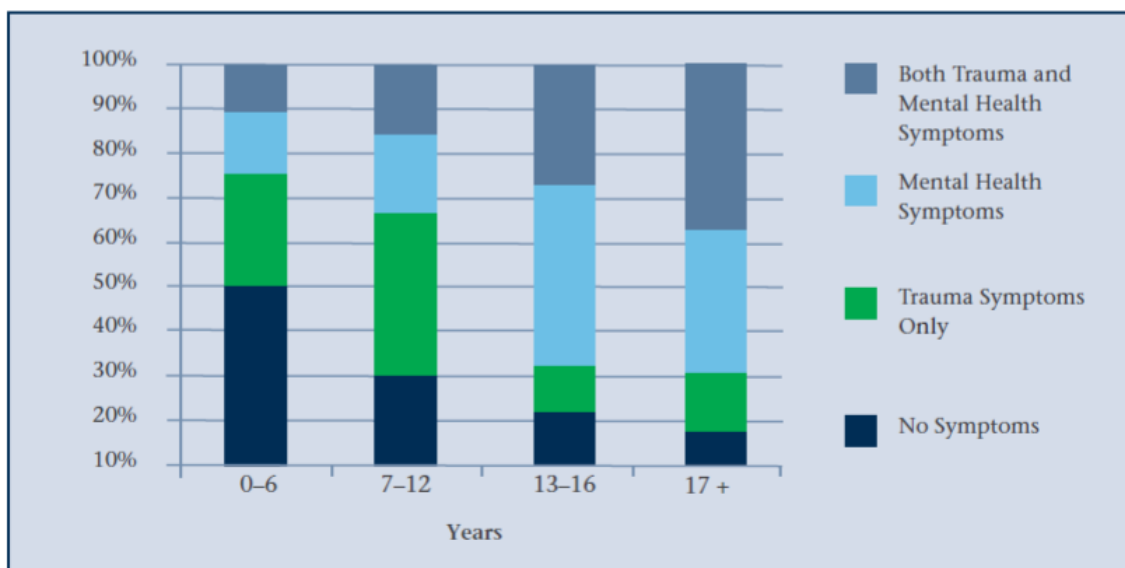


Figure 1: AdoptUSKids Perfect Parent Campaign Billboard

Job ad component	Status
job identification	optional
announcing availability of the position job title announcing the job opportunity (<i>We are looking for...</i>)	optional
presenting the organisation	obligatory (but <i>name</i> – optional)
specifying responsibilities and requirements involved	obligatory
offering benefits	obligatory
instructing candidates how to apply	obligatory

Table 1: Requisites for successful job marketing. Lacka-Badura

PRESENCE OF TRAUMA AND MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN FOSTER CARE BY AGE



Source: Samuels, 2011.

Table 2: Trauma by age group of youths in foster care

Statement of faith

“I won’t speak of grown-up people...besides being disgusting and unworthy of love, they have a compensation—they’ve eaten the apple and know good and evil, and they have become ‘like gods.’ They go on eating it still. But the children haven’t eaten anything, and are so far innocent...If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers’ sins, they must be punished for their fathers who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another’s sins, and especially such innocents,” ~Ivan Karamazov.

No quote from a work of literature has yet struck me as poignantly as this one from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. I spent the majority of my adolescence witnessing case after case of child abuse. The most formative years of my life were laid witness to newborns and one-year-olds going through methamphetamine and heroin withdrawals; three-year-olds beaten by their parents until they could not walk; babies with broken arms, legs, brain damage, starvation. Hearing tales about how a three-year-old was found wandering the streets to find himself food after his caregivers were in an opiate induced stupor for days. Young children growing up with their parent openly prostituting themselves in front of them. The list of abhorrent crimes committed against young children goes on and on. Even more appalling, in my experience, is that instead of incriminating their persecutors, the state gives them rights to continue seeing the victims, and further protects the persecutors from social sanctions to prevent repeat offenses. So when Ivan Karamazov offered his lament over the suffering of children—it struck a chord with me.

So, I developed a constant sense of injustice in the world. I felt that forgetting about the pain I witnessed would only perpetuate the injustices I had been exposed to. Thus, I was hyperconscious of the suffering of innocents at the hands of “those who have eaten the apple.” When I finally went to college, I was appalled by how frequently people were up in arms over what were comparatively benign issues. Full protests were initiated over perceived slights. Many were all too quick to resort to straw man and ad hominem arguments by calling each other fascist, misogynist, racist, and bigot. I was incredulous: Here are people mobilizing over issues as benign as a “sexist comment,” but there is nothing being done for innocent children whose lives are daily endangered (and in some cases, lost.) No one seemed to care.

Even more problematic was that a number of the forerunning political issues during my time in school, had adverse collateral effects on children’s welfare. Popular social movements spilt over into the world of foster care and wreaked havoc. To name a few examples, the administration moved to require flu shots for foster families (to the detriment of their biological children with autoimmune diseases), they moved to require advocacy for transgender movements under Chicago law (which led to a dramatic loss of homes who were unwilling/unable to compromise the religious beliefs that represented the foundation for their involvement to begin with), and the agency outlined an emphasis on “maintaining culture” (which has led to the removal of minority children from the homes they have acclimated to—homes in which they were loved, on a false precedence given to nature over nurture.) All of these social movements have led to an overwhelming loss of foster care providers.

In one sense, foster families are unwilling/unable to compromise their beliefs and physical health in secession to the political impositions of the administrative state. With each new protest, march or

demonstration under the guise of social progress, there is an underlying level of social regression as the administration enforces one side of an issue without considering whether it is the most prudent course. Given that the new rules were followed by an increase of abused babies and children grouped in hotels instead of in a warm home, I suspect that such overt disregard for discussion has proven detrimental to society. The people who initiated these changes were imposing their own political agendas on the families otherwise willing and incentivized to undertake such grueling work: Christians. By appealing to pathos, they wound up only giving precedence the loudest and easily accessible communities. They failed to see the collateral effects such precedence of specific people groups and political agendas would have on those who have no such privileges as free expression.

It's easy to complain about how conservative minded Christians prevent social progress. It's easy to throw terms around like racist, misogynist, or Neanderthal. But none of these term-throwers around me were stepping up to replace the homes lost to their social ventures. And why would they step up? From a pure Darwinian perspective, they should only seek to maximize their own pleasures. The majority of people involved in foster care are not hedonists. They believe in a higher calling. And as such, there are certain volatile political issues that they are unwilling to compromise on—even if it means dropping their licenses.

People around me were quick to say, “Well, that’s because these families need to evolve,” referring, I suppose, to a reformation of ideology. But this is a very puerile excuse for justifying their own unwillingness to enter into dialectic with these families. They used circular reasoning to justify putting cotton in their own ears: “They won’t listen to us, so why should we listen to them?”

My battle has been with the tendency for many people to believe that recognizing the existence of injustice somehow resolves it. At the very least, their consciences are freed of the burden of guilt by merely recognizing how terrible the abuse is. Yet they don't do anything about it. They will do something about the "sexy" social campaigns that boost their own status in the eyes of the social majority, or social campaigns that otherwise benefit their hedonistic pursuits; even if it's to the detriment of the truly innocent members of society. They apply exceptions to the rule; they override dialectic and undermine liberalism by using agency discretion as a method for undercutting the rule of law.

My reader will likely be sorely disappointed in my take away from all this. Rather than elevating other people's suffering to the level of child abuse, I have instead been made cognizant of how insufficient our complaints often are. In particular, our complaints are quite blown out of proportion, and we frequently take for granted the medium by which we express our complaints. A baby on the brink of starvation with three broken ribs is not only *incapable* of offering complaint of the grievances he experienced, but in our current system is offered, at best, ineffective representation. And this same baby does not have a home because the political majority won't recognize the ideological concerns of the political minority incentivized *by that same ideology* to take the child in.

At the same time, as I read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and heard my words through the mouth of Ivan Karamazov, I grew increasingly disconcerted. His cynicism eventually causes him to spiral into madness. The fact is, to immerse myself in suffering and pain, and the lament that "adults" are often the perpetrators of the suffering of innocents will only result in bitterness and madness. It's a game with the Devil to rob me of my hope and sanity. And this battle has gone on, without my recognizing it, for years.

In the end, then, I have walked away with a newfound perspective on how much most of us have to be thankful for every day. I can be grateful that God delivered me from comparable sufferings that these children have experienced, and that when things go awry, I can speak out against these grievances. Furthermore, my experience has compelled me to offer myself in service to something greater than myself. I do not want to squander my gift of a voice by complaining about every conceivable slight towards myself. Life isn't about pursuit of personal comfort. It's about using your gifts and privileges with wisdom and prudence to stand up for those who *truly* cannot stand on their own. It's about remaining cognizant of the collateral effects of selective empathy.