

Episode 27 | Exploring and assessing motivations to adopt transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We asked children, social care professionals and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis, CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. And today I'm talking to Laura Payne, author of *Exploring and assessing motivations to adopt*. This is a new book in our popular Good Practise Guide series. Laura has worked for a local authority and managed several adoption agencies and is now a trainer and consultant. With a particular interest in assessment panels and post adoption support. Welcome Laura.

Thanks very much for joining me. The book explores people's motivations to adopt. In the past, we know the majority of people adopted because of fertility issues and this is still a really important motivation. But what other motivations are being seen now?

So CoramBAAF produced a book in 2009, and that was just about infertility. So, we thought it was really time to do something different because we've seen a lot of changes since about 15-20 years ago. Maybe 70% of those coming forward to adopt was down to infertility and now it's closer to 50%. Wow. So we've seen a lot of changes in the law, in social attitudes and we've seen a big increase, particularly in the LGBTQ+ folk coming forward to adopt and about 15% of adoptions are of that group.

We've also seen the rise of single people coming forward and what we sometimes call elective adopters. So those are people who could have a birth child or another birth child, but they choose to adopt instead. So we thought the time was right to address some of those issues.

It's fascinating that those are some really major changes for adoption then, and so we know motivations are changing. So what does this mean for the social workers actually doing the assessments?

I think it adds significant complexity. I've certainly noticed, as somebody who has quality assured a lot of PARS and from talking to the panels and panel chairs, that this is a section from the PAR that often is not very well covered. You can get quite a lot of bland statements that don't seem to be particularly meaningful. And I think one of the aims of this guide is to help social people understand that there are different motivations, and to understand those motivations better, because each of those motivations have different risks and benefits, and we need to think about those.

Yes. And social workers also need to think about their own, you know, values and perceptions. You know, what constitutes a family. And we all can have quite fixed ideas about that, yeah.

And I think the other thing that came out from my research was that motivations are also kind of multi layered. People might have one primary motivation, but there are other things that come to play. As well. So it's actually really quite a complex area to assess.

Yeah, I can imagine we've got this big mix of motivations now. But infertility is most definitely still a big motivation. Do you find that social workers actually understand what fertility treatment entails and how it may affect people when they come to an agency and they're being assessed? I mean, I can imagine it must be an emotional and a difficult subject to discuss.

It's a very sensitive subject and also that's something else obviously that changes over time, you know, medical technology improves, and I guess that's probably another reason why we've seen a reduction in the number of people coming forward because of infertility. So we had to think about whether we needed detailed information about fertility treatments in the book. And we decided that actually that would be helpful to social workers because I think if you understand what someone's been through, you can be more empathetic. You can talk about it with a bit of a level of knowledge and also as part of exploring that topic.

I spoke to a fertility counsellor at one of my local hospitals, who I kind of know from one of my past jobs and that was a really powerful interview and we produced sort of part of that interview in the book and I think I think it really told me just how deep those feelings run. You know, even though I've done this work for time that was some very powerful statements in that interview.

I think one of the things that we have to keep remembering is that not being able to have children is possibly something that will always be with people. Yeah. And the times for social workers is to try and assess if people have actually come to terms with that, at least at a level, you know? Are they ready to move forward to adoption? and to know and understand that adoption is going to be different to having a birth child.

Yeah, I can see that's something that social workers, they really do have to go into detail about that you also look at LGBTQ+ adopters in the guide. Do you find that workers do a good job? Are fully understanding their motivations and their support needs.

I think again this is something that you often see is not particularly well explored in reports, and to be honest, even after 30 years of working in fostering and adoption, I realised in doing my research that probably I had never understood this properly either and somebody who really helped me with this chapter in the book was a guy called Matt Taylor Roberts, who's the CEO of an organisation called Proud to be Parents.

Ah yes.

They support and enable people not just adoption but , you know, LGBTQ folk, explore parenthood in a variety of form. Yeah, yeah. And he explained to me that LGBTQ people may never have envisaged having children, or they may well not have gone through infertility treatment, but they've had to deal with a lot of other complex things in their lives, particularly that coming out. And there'll be other losses and challenges. So I think that was really informative for me, and I hope it will be informative for other people because it's still very complicated, but it's complicated in a different way.

And it also makes you very conspicuous in society. I mean, particularly for men, he said. Kind of you're never gonna be as out as you are as gay male parents. And that's quite a statement. So yeah that I hope that chapter will be helpful, because it certainly taught me some stuff.

We can also see there is an increasing number of single adopters around and from what you say. In the book, they aren't always particularly well assessed in terms of their motivations and what they can bring to adoption.

Yeah, I think it's not so much that they're not well assessed, but I do think they're still to face a degree of discrimination. I think there's a sort of quite a strongly held view by a lot of people, including panel members, that two parents are always better than one.

Some of the research into outcomes for children, although obviously there are some practical advantages of having two parents, rather than one. But what research suggests is that outcomes for children are determined by the quality of family relationships, not the structure of the family. But I think even now you know, sometimes single people are the last people to be picked.

In terms of the matching process, couples are often favoured. So I think there's some myth busting to be done there really about single. I also think that they would be better placed if agencies would offer them some better support packages.

Think they're kind of missing a bit of a trick there really, because with a bit more support. Yeah, particularly, you know, financially for one person to be off work for a year with no second income. That can be really challenging. Yeah. So I think people often end up going for older, possibly more complex children because they can't actually afford to be at home for the time they need to be home for a smaller.

So there's, you know, possibly, as I say, a missed opportunity. There in terms of, but the right supporting it would be more of a level playing field.

Now I can see that the book also looks at the final group - elective adopters - and that's people who are, as you say, they could have a birth child or a second birth child, but they choose to adopt for altruistic reasons like their faith, or wanting to give back to society, or perhaps

environmental reasons. We know that's a growing area. Now and you say these kinds of areas, they can be tricky for social workers to assess what particular issues should workers be thinking about in those sorts of cases?

I think you really brought up against values and norms again here. And certainly, you know back in the day when I was a social worker, elective adopters were quite rare and. And if they did come up, they were regarded with degree of suspicion. And some of the research backs that up as well, that's not just my experience. So I think it's important that social workers try and make sure they sort of truly understand different motivation as some people talked about having kind of training around faith and what that meant to people and that was help.

Things like if you're starting to see an increase in people coming forward for environmental reasons and it might be hard to understand why somebody is so passionate about that. So I think there is a case for social workers really trying to get to grips with where this person is coming from. But it is a complex area as well cause one.

Of the things that came up with the Social Workers Questionnaire and the focus groups was that sometimes what looks like an altruistic motive can be masking something else, so you kind of need to dig into that and quite a lot of people in this group already have children. So do sort of separate that out and talk about the importance of assessing the whole family and thinking about the needs of children already in the household.

Right. Yeah.

And one of the things that a lot of social works were concerned about is, is there a sort of rescue mentality going on here? You know, some but one person talked about my good deed. Might be unfair or it might not, you know, be it might be a disruption waiting to happen. So I think it is complicated and workers need to spend time really trying to get to grips with where people are coming from and looking perhaps beneath the surface as well, yeah.

Yeah, it's definitely something that needs to be really thought about in some detail there.

It's now time for a quick break.

Introducing our innovative agency decision Maker Group, a specialised forum designed exclusively for adoption agency decision makers to engage in meaningful discussions, exchanging insights and contemplate cases, practises and procedures, alongside fellow professionals departing from the traditional forum format. They provide a unique surgery online every other month from 8:30AM to 9:30 AM, every 3rd Thursday reach out to us or visit corambaaf.org.uk to discover more.

Now back to the episode.

One area that does come across strongly in the book and you do devote a chapter to this, is the effect of expectations around parenthood. What people think it will be like from paired with the reality. And of course this will be something that anyone who adopts, or indeed anyone who has a child. Would you focus on this as something that can really affect the stability of an adoption and even contribute to disruption? Can you explain this a little bit more.

Well, it was a theme that started to emerge really early on and it just kept coming back and back from just talking to people, from talking to the doctors, from talking to social workers. And I very quickly realised, and I suppose it's not rocket science, when you think about pretty strong link between people's motivation and their expectations of what it's going to.

And you know, I suppose if you think, well, if you imagined, you know, a perfect newborn who perhaps looks like you, looks like your partner and you had this vision of, you know, really kind of carefree family life. It's quite a switch to then be thinking about parenting a child who hasn't been born to you, maybe an older child. They might have significant needs, you know. And if you look at the statistics from things like adoption barometers, 3/4 of adoptive families, they would say it's not plain sailing.

And nearly all adopters talk about it so that it would be more difficult. They thought it was gonna be. So I think if a child's, like, wildly different to what you thought it was going to be like, that might impact on your capacity to attach to that child. Your ability to parent them. I certainly, you know, I worked in adoption support for a long time.

And both as a social worker and then later as a manager. And I've had people say, oh, we didn't sign up to this. This is not what we signed up to. Yeah, when things have been difficult. So. And we do work, we work really hard to prepare our adopters, but it is very difficult to prepare people for the reality of it.

The guide encourages people to explore in detail that journey to adoption. How do people get there and what did they imagine? Originally, their family life was gonna be like sometimes the workers talk about their fantasy child. Yeah. What was it gonna be like? And I think also particularly, I think if people have been through infertility, but maybe other bits as well if you haven't been able to have a birth child. And that's what you wanted. They'll probably always be a sadness there. There'll be the potential to be triggered, you know, by particularly if things are not going well.

We need to be as confident we can be that people coming to adoption come to it with an open mind. Yeah, they're ready to love and accept a child for who they are, not who that person wanted them to be, as it were.

Yeah. Wow, there's there is a lot to take from this book about what needs to go into assessment, I can tell. And Laura, thank you for a fascinating discussion. Do you have any final message for assessing workers out there when it comes to this subject?

Firstly, think about your own values. Every time you start and think about your own values and whether they're influencing how you approach this family and I think one of the social workers in the survey very honestly said she'd had to decide her own views about becoming a mother and to understand that somebody else might not want to do that, you know, in the biological sense. So I think that's really important to visit that and continually revisit it with every family and look in detail about how did people arrive at this decision. And this is something that the workers and the focus groups talked about a lot. You know, this journey to adoption, how many people get there, what influence them, what were the steps along the?

Say and what are they really expecting? Oh, wow. Well, thank you very much, Laura. It's been great to hear a little about this complex area and for any assessing workers out there who need more advice on this, you can buy, *Exploring and assessing motivations to adopt* now in the CoramBAAF bookshop. Thank you very much.

Thank you for listening to this episode of CoramBAAF Conversations, if you'd like to know more or listen to earlier episodes, visit corambaaf.org.uk. Thanks.

Please note that this is a transcription of a video interview. The content remains the same whilst some changes have been made to improve readability in a written format. Therefore, there may be some inconsistencies between the recording and the written conversation.