Strategies to respond to the research needs of family group conferencing

By Marie Connolly, PhD

In recent years, the development and practice of family group conferencing (FGC) has crossed geographical boundaries. In some countries, notably Aotearoa New Zealand, formal involvement of families in child protection decision making is legally mandated. The FGC model has emerged as the most significant practice, having been adopted in additional countries as a way of operationalizing partnership and empowerment. In the United States, such practice has been incorporated under the generic term family group decision making (FGDM). All FGC practices reflect a commitment to family being primary decision makers in child welfare matters, and they share a vision of harnessing the strengths of the extended family and social network toward better outcomes for children at risk.

Family group conferencing has been a legal feature of child welfare practice in Aotearoa New Zealand for 15 years. Notwithstanding this long history of practice and the richness of FGC experience in this area, Aotearoa has been slow to develop processes of research and evaluation. Little is known about how FGC impacts the lives of children and families. Little is known about how families perceive the practice, and whether the legislation’s empowering intent is being realized by people whose lives are most affected – the children and families of New Zealand. In addition, little is known about the outcomes of FGC and whether it furthers the medium- and long-term interests of children. In this regard, researchers internationally have become active in FGC research, and practice relies on the findings of studies generated outside the country of FGC’s origin. (See Merkel-Holguin, Nixon & Burford 2003).

The dearth of research in Aotearoa, paradoxically, has provided an opportunity. Having relatively little to begin with has created the impetus to develop a comprehensive research strategy – a thorough account of what needs to be done and how. Because FGC has been mandated in Aotearoa for so long, new research offers the unique potential to examine established practice and expertise over time. Since 1989, care and protection FGC practice has been allowed to develop largely uninfluenced by policy and research. Research into established practice can thus provide an interesting opportunity to examine how a new model can mature and change and how radical practices are affected by day-to-day application.

Developing a research strategy

Typically, family research occurs in an ad hoc way, often responding to the interests of a particular researcher. However, in recent years there has been a growing interest in research strategies that respond to the needs of children and families, particularly within the welfare context. Research strategies interrogate the information needs of a particular policy and/or practice area with the aim of shaping the nature and scope of future research and maximizing its effects. In 2002, the New Zealand government commissioned the development of a research and evaluation strategy that responded to the needs of children within the statutory systems of care. The project resulted in a strategy with 21 research projects to address the contextual, operational, evaluative, and developmental needs of children living in foster care, kinship care, and residential care (Connolly, 2004a).

Influenced by this project, work then began on developing a research and evaluation strategy that could respond to the information needs of FGC in New Zealand. The methodology used to develop both strategies was based on the grounded theory approach to social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and a model of analysis drawn from this approach (Connolly, 2003) (Figure 1).
Strategies to respond to the research needs of family group conferencing

Figure 1: The strategy development process (adapted from Connolly 2004a)

Briefly, the process involved bringing together practitioners and researchers in information-generating focus groups. The timeframes available restricted access to families that had experienced FGC, preventing them from being included in the focus groups. However, a literature review was undertaken to inform the focus groups, and qualitative research that had been undertaken with families strongly influenced development of the strategy. The literature review and focus groups together generated a huge amount of information and many questions about the needs of children and families that participate in FGC. It was then necessary to manage this information. Some questions and information related to the transitional phases of FGC: entry into the process, the FGC meeting itself, the exit and follow-up work, and the broader outcomes of FGC. These were gathered under the “operational” component of the strategy. Other questions related to resourcing, including servicing plans, resourcing FGC decisions, staff supervision, and training needs. These were gathered under the “servicing” component of the strategy. Finally, there were questions related to the developmental needs of FGC: the development of the system over time and

Figure 2: The strategic framework and the development of research projects

Projects that provide information on the phases of the FGC: processes of consultation; preparation; dynamics of; cultural components of; outcomes of etc.

Projects that provide information on the resourcing needs of the FGC process, including staffing issues.

Projects that investigate the evolution of the FGC how practice has changed and issues for the future.
Strategies to respond to the research needs of family group conferencing

changing patterns of practice. These three components -- operational, servicing, and developmental -- became the framework of the strategy that was then developed to include potential research projects.

Twenty-six projects that combine small-, medium- and large-scale studies were developed across the three strategic areas. The operational component of the strategy included proposals that respond to more general information about FGC, demographics, and processes in each phase of the work, including the experiences of participants. This covered the main phases of the FGC process:
• the entry into the FGC meeting (including studies investigating how families are consulted and the experiences of participants);
• the FGC meeting itself (including the dynamics of FGC, the ways in which cultural issues are addressed, and how the phases of the meeting are facilitated);
• the follow-up work (including investigation into the systems of accountability, the quality of plans, and the experiences of participants); and
• the broader outcomes of the FGC meeting (including the review of plans, and a major evaluative outcome study).

The servicing component of the strategy included research into the resourcing patterns of FGC -- what decisions were supported and how. This addressed both the financial impact and resourcing of the FGC meeting (e.g., getting families to conference, resourcing FGC decisions), and service resourcing (e.g., staffing issues, qualifications, and competencies; supervision and training). Finally, the developmental component of the strategy included research studies that contribute to policy and practice development with respect to FGC. This component responded particularly to the system's evolutionary needs -- the ways in which the system evolves and develops over time. Although in New Zealand much of the FGC system is enshrined in legislation, it is important to remember that law (and policy) is variably interpreted by workers in daily practice, creating the potential for discrepancies in implementation.

In addition, law and policy is also subject to review and change and research is needed to inform these processes.

Research projects from the strategy

Since the strategy was developed in 2003, three studies from the developmental menu of projects have been undertaken. These studies were designed to investigate how practice has changed in the years since the FGC legislation was introduced. They explore practice from the perspective of FGC coordinators, and offer insights into how a radical practice model like FGC can be influenced and shaped by formal and informal processes over time. Undertaken first, they provide information that enables a further review and development of the strategy itself. Research strategies are not static, unchangeable statements. Research strategies are not static, unchangeable statements. They are working documents that are most valuable when they are reviewed and updated. As they become available, new information and research findings inform and enrich the strategy, ensuring that research remains relevant to practice and policy development.

Project 1: Fifteen years of family group conferencing: Coordinators talk about their experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand. This qualitative study examined the experiences of care and protection coordinators who have convened FGC meetings since the early years of the legislation. Interviews explored their early perceptions of the legislation, the practice tensions that rest within family-centered child protection models, and the ways in which FGC has developed in response to modern imperatives. Findings from the study indicate that over time subtle changes in practice have the potential to shift the emphasis from family-led process to more professionally driven practice (Connolly, in press). Under these circumstances, reinforcing and protecting the family-led philosophy of FGC becomes an important supervision and training imperative.
Strategies to respond to the research needs of family group conferencing

Project 2: Up front and personal: Confronting dynamics in the family group conference. This study involved focus groups with care and protection coordinators across New Zealand and explored the dynamics emerging from FGC practice. Findings reinforce the power of confrontational dynamics within FGC in terms of both process and outcome (Connolly, 2004b). Creating a climate of honesty within FGC and being upfront with families was found to enhance the potential for the family to also respond honestly about their issues. In terms of professional power dynamics, the research suggests that tension between professionals can be destructive to positive FGC outcomes when it shifts attention from the child’s care and protection needs. With respect to private family time, the research indicates that, while power differentials in families inevitably exist and are likely to influence decision making, importantly, private family time has the potential to promote family challenge and self-regulation.

Project 3: This study involved the administration of a questionnaire to all care and protection coordinators in New Zealand. The first research article to emerge from this study can be found in American Humane’s Protecting Children, 19.4 (In press) (Walton, McKenzie & Connolly). This work explores the important issue of private family time and how it is facilitated in New Zealand practice. Findings suggest that in some situations professional discretion and individual interpretation with respect to private family time may compromise family power over this important family-driven process.

These first three projects from the FGC strategy provide new information about FGC practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. They raise questions about how practice is impacting families, and they inform the research strategy by highlighting the need to examine how families may perceive practice changes. Although the first of the projects emerging from the strategy examines professional perceptions of practice change, the strategy overall incorporates a significant number of studies to capture the voices of children and families experiencing FGC. Professional opinion, while important to the better understanding of practice, is inevitably shaped and influenced by professional concerns. Hearing the voices of people most affected by practice – the children and families – is essential to provide services that best suit their needs. Involving families in the development of research and evaluation strategies would contribute rich understanding and provide insight that professional input alone cannot.

Conclusion

Developing research strategies within specific areas of policy and practice can provide a number of benefits. As a research mapping exercise, strategies help identify gaps in research. In addition, because they investigate all aspects of the practice/policy system, they provide holistic responses to research development. Finally, strategies are developed collaboratively with families, practitioners, and researchers, they can create partnerships in research and bridge the gap that sometimes exists between the worlds of lived experience, research, and practice.

References


Strategies to respond to the research needs of family group conferencing

About the Author:

At the time of writing this paper Marie Connolly, PhD, was Associate Professor and Director of the Te Awatea Violence Research Centre at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Her research interests include child and family welfare and participatory practice with families in child protection. She was recently appointed to the position of Chief Social Worker within the New Zealand government. She can be reached at the Department of Child Youth and Family, P.O. Box 2620, Wellington, or via e-mail at Marie.Connolly005@cyf.govt.nz