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About the Guest Editors and Content Reviewers

Jeanette Schmid, PhD, is a seasoned social worker who has practiced in South Africa (her country of origin), Switzerland, and Canada in a range of areas, including developmental delay, early childhood intervention, trauma, restorative justice, and child welfare. Her work has been guided by a passion for social justice.

In 1998, Ms. Schmid joined the Toronto Family Group Conferencing program as the sole coordinator. She felt deeply committed to this work, as it offers a respectful way of engaging with families frequently marginalized by the child welfare system. In 2006, she was privileged to coordinate the Provincial Resource. This body, building on the expertise of a small group of family group conference pioneers, took on the responsibility of promoting the growth of family group conferencing throughout the province through training and mentoring. She has been thrilled to watch family group conferencing grow in the city, the province, and nationally, and her exposure to this approach has left an indelible mark on both her professional and personal identity. Ms. Schmid recently completed her doctorate in social work, focusing on the child welfare discourses in South Africa. She and her husband relocated to Switzerland in 2008.

Formerly the director of child welfare for British Columbia and assistant deputy minister for integrated policy and legislation, Mark Sieben, BA, LLB, was appointed associate deputy minister and chief operating officer for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in June 2008. In this role, he oversees the development of cross-policy initiatives along a broad continuum of services for vulnerable children and families, including child welfare, adoption, child and youth mental health, and children and youth with special needs.

Over the last 20 years, Mr. Sieben has accumulated a varied set of experiences in child welfare-related positions ranging from youth and family counselor and child protection social worker to senior administrator in a large child welfare system. He is a strong proponent for family group conferencing and collaborative practice generally as components of principle-based practice, planning, and policy development. Mr. Sieben holds a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and a Bachelor of Law degree, both from the University of Victoria.

Lisa Merkel-Holguín, MSW, is the director of practice and systems advancement in child welfare at American Humane and has been the director of American Humane’s well-known and highly regarded National Center on Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) for over 10 years. She also spearheaded the development of American Humane’s initiative on differential response, co-authored the 2006 National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare, and served as the editor of the first volume of Protecting Children on differential response. For almost 20 years, through direct services, training, evaluation, technical assistance, consultation, and writing, Ms. Merkel-Holguín has worked to improve the outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. Ms. Merkel-Holguín has written more than 30 chapters, books, and articles on children’s issues.
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A few short years after New Zealand’s bold move of adopting family group conferencing as the major component of its child welfare planning and decision-making model in 1989, the seeds for family group conference practice were also sown across North America. In Canada, family group conferencing has taken root in many locations in the course of the last 15 years. In some provinces and territories, seeds sprouted and quickly withered — they were too dependent on the energy and drive of an isolated local champion. In other locations, hybrid variants have sprung up, similar to family group conferencing in character (such as youth transitioning or models unique to a local First Nations community), but different from what we know and recognize as the core “New Zealand model.” More recently, in a number of Canadian jurisdictions (British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, and the Yukon), child welfare legislation has been drafted or amended to include provisions directly related to family group conferencing. Overall, despite variable experience, family group conferencing has become rooted more firmly in the soil of child welfare practice in a number of Canadian provinces and territories.

Each year, Canadian practitioners and policymakers attend the American Humane Association Family Group Decision Making Conference in growing numbers. Initially, informal discussions arose among the Canadian collective to find out what each other was doing, what project or initiative appeared successful or required additional support, and what province was doing more than others to move practice forward. Numerous issues — while not uniquely Canadian — have received emphasis and discussion during the evolution of family group conferencing in Canada: Should family group conferencing be embedded in legislation? Should or can it be used in First Nations or cross-cultural child welfare contexts? If so, can the model be adapted or changed to respond to local needs? How does a comparatively large jurisdiction mainstream family group conferencing once it is past the pilot or project stage of development? How should quantitative and qualitative research be approached? We have sought to capture some of the richness of these discussions relating to family group conferencing practice as it continues to develop in Canadian provinces and territories.

This edition of Protecting Children offers a Canadian hue to the family group conferencing palette based on the experience, passion, and dedication of family group conference practitioners and policymakers “north of the border.” We offer our appreciation and thanks to all those who have informed our experience to date and in particular to the individual authors who have helped capture the trends and debates that help shape family group conferencing in Canada.
Introduction: Principled Diffusion of Family Group Conferencing in Canadian Child Welfare

Joan Pennell and Gale Burford

Joan Pennell, MSW, PhD, is the director of the Center for Family and Community Engagement and a professor of social work at North Carolina State University. Gale Burford, MSW, PhD, is professor of social work at the University of Vermont and director of the state and university Child Welfare Training Partnership. At American Humane, they both serve on the advisory council for the National Center on Family Group Decision Making and Joan serves on the advisory council for the Restorative Justice for Youth Initiative.

We are honoured, and honored, to have been invited by the guest editors for this special issue of Protecting Children to comment on the development of family group conferencing in Canada. Having lived and worked in both Canada and the United States, we are mindful of international conventions on word usage and stay accountable, in part, by keeping our respective word processing spell-check libraries up-to-date for both sides of the border. In so doing, we acknowledge the importance of identity as created by and sustained in language. This is no small consideration when generally appreciating the use of something as culturally situated as family group decision making and specifically reflecting on the unique and continuing developments in Canada and their international influence.

From the outset, family group conferencing in key start-up sites in Canada was greatly influenced by its development in Aotearoa1 New Zealand. Perhaps this influence contributes to what appears to be considerable fidelity of the practice in its child and family welfare application across Canada. We think this is so, in part, because the name used to describe the practice is quite consistent across the country in child protection practice, at least as compared to the United States (Nixon, Burford, & Quinn, 2005). This fidelity, however, seems to go further than consistency in name and also evinces adherence or fidelity to principles. Our understanding is based on our acquaintance with policy development, research, and training, and our professional contacts across the country. Detailed studies have yet to bear out our perspective. The diffusion of this innovation in Canada is worthy of careful study.

To further draw out the connection between Canada and New Zealand, we note that, as is also the case in the United States, both Canada and New Zealand have British-based child protection systems operating within a framework of saving children from neglectful or abusive parents (McAuley, Pecora, & Rose, 2006). This individualistic approach is seen as having primarily penalized marginalized populations with limited resources in all three countries and has resulted in their disproportionate representation on child protection caseloads and in state institutions (Belanger, Bullard, & Green, 2008; Connolly & Ward, 2008). Only New Zealand has a national child welfare system; in Canada and the United States, child welfare is...

1Aotearoa is a Maori name translated as the “Land of the Long White Cloud.” It refers to the islands later named New Zealand. The use of Aotearoa New Zealand in this introduction directly or implicitly refers to the indigenous population of New Zealand.
administered by provincial, state, or territorial jurisdictions. New Zealand and Canada have in common histories of greater federal support for universal health care provision. This is of importance given the connection between the health and well-being of children and those of their parents. At the same time, Canada and New Zealand have sizable indigenous populations, the presence of which is seen to refocus child welfare from blaming the parent (usually the mother) to collective responsibilities and rights (Cameron, Coady, & Adams, 2007; Connolly & Ward; Strega & Carriere, in press; Wharf, 2002).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, as demonstrated in Rangihau (1986), indigenous leadership, discontent with pakeha2 professionalized approaches that had been exported to that country, largely from the United Kingdom, but also from the United States, advocacy of community-state partnership, and affirmation of children’s rights led to the passage of the 1989 Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act (Hassall, 1996). Notably, this act’s language places children and young people involved with child welfare and youth justice within larger kinship groups.3 In child welfare, the act prescribes that the immediate family and their relatives (all composing the “family group”) are entitled to make decisions concerning a related child in cases where the child’s removal from the home and other significant matters relating to the child’s care and protection are at issue. A family group conference coordinator is expected to invite the family group to a conference at which the service providers share information on their concerns for the children. Then the service providers withdraw, leaving the family group members to formulate their plan in privacy. Once this plan is mapped out, the service providers return and negotiate the final plan with the family group. As mentioned, considerable attention to these principles can be seen in family group conferencing discussions in child welfare across Canada.

The indigenous connection between the two countries goes even further. In Canada, First Nations, Inuit, and other native peoples have promoted traditional healing and community healing (McCaslin, 2005), and more specifically, kinship-based approaches to decision making, to counter overrepresentation of native children and young people in state care or custody. This roots the development of family group conferencing practice in both countries in social change and justice agendas. While this is true in some parts of the United States (Crumbley, 2007), it has not held the same position as part of a national agenda to oppose the intrusion of the state; rather, in many places it is seen and measured as a “technique” or even a “treatment.” Exchanges that began in the 1980s between Maori representatives of Te Kōhanga Reo (translated as “language nests”) and Canadian First Nations groups in British Columbia grew out of a common understanding of the importance of language to the survival of culture. Moreover, they shared a belief in the necessity to learn language and culture in a total immersion context that draws on indigenous styles of teaching and learning. The obligations of the extended family, kin, and tribal groups to their children and of government to provide resource support are central to the mission of cultural sustainability.

These exchanges in the middle to late 1980s and early 1990s contributed significantly to the creation of a climate receptive to testing family group conferencing in western Canada. By developing contacts in New Zealand, social work educators in Alberta and Manitoba promoted the application of family group conferencing in child welfare and youth justice (Hudson, Morris, Maxwell, & Galaway, 1996). To our knowledge, the earliest Canadian pilot of family group conferencing discussions in child welfare across Canada.

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2 The Maori term pakeha is usually translated to mean New Zealanders of European descent.

3 The Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act specifically refers to the whanau (extended family), hapu (subtribe), and iwi (tribe).
Protecting Children

In eastern Canada, social work faculty had also connected with New Zealanders and were thus conversant with the model. What made it possible, though, in eastern Canada to undertake family group conferencing was the crisis in the child caring institutions. System change, particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador, was propelled by the disclosures of child sexual abuse committed by clergy. Discontent with the system in place, the high costs of dedicated funding, and knowledge of institutional abuse of children in foster and institutional care (Hughes, 1991) provided an opening to consider change that highlighted the rights of young people (Pennell & Burford, 1995). In 1993, our own trial demonstration of family group conferencing to address family violence commenced in Newfoundland and Labrador and was tested in three culturally diverse regions: an Inuit coastal community; a rural area with people of Francophone, Anglophone, and Mi’kmaw descent; and the provincial capital, primarily settled by the British and Irish. Especially during the start-up, we relied extensively on consultation and training by Maori and pakeha representatives from Aotearoa New Zealand (Pennell & Burford, 1995).

In turn, we soon found ourselves serving as advisors to others inside and outside of Canada about how to mount a family group conferencing program. With considerable financial support from a wide variety of federal, provincial, nongovernmental, and cultural groups, training videos Saputjinik (Centre for Academic and Media Services & OkâlaKatigêt Society, 1999) and Widening the Circle (Cahill & Centre for Academic and Media Services, 1998) and a training manual (Burford, Pennell, & MacLeod, 1995) were developed, and these are used not only in Canada but also in other countries. Health Canada makes materials on family group conferencing available at its website: http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnvivf/familyviolence/html/fvgroupdecision_e.html.

Those making connections between Canada and New Zealand agreed that central to the problem was decision-making processes dominated by professionals to the exclusion of family and culture. This contrasts with development of family group conferencing in the United Kingdom, where although model fidelity seems higher than in the United States (Nixon et al., 2005), less attention has been paid to the context of civil rights and oppression that spawned family group conferencing (Morris & Tunnard, 1996). As was the case in Alberta, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador at the time did not step in with continued support for family group conferencing. Importantly, British Columbia retreated from family group conferencing support to highly risk-averse practice in the wake of the tragic death of a 5-year-old boy (Gove, 1995), but has since renewed its leadership, having acknowledged increasing disproportionality in placement for native children and young people. The British Columbian experience shows how fragile can be the gains without long-range planning and careful consideration of the legal, managerial, and professional interests that surround risk-averse practice.

Emanating from New Zealand, the practice rapidly diffused across national boundaries (Burford & Hudson, 2000; Nixon, et al., 2005), with variations attributable to different legal, funding, professional, and cultural contexts. In addition to the work described in this volume, other significant Canadian child welfare projects have occurred in Alberta (Sieppert, Hudson, & Unrau, 1999), Manitoba (Routhier, 2006), and Nova Scotia (Glode & Wien, 2007). Several initiatives in First Nation and Inuit communities have embraced work from family group conferencing to build on existing efforts in communities. In general, these
efforts put healing at the center of the work and emphasize collaboration between cultural and government groups, and family and tribal leaders (Bushie, 1997, 1999).

Since the beginning days, attention has increasingly been redirected from how to initiate a family group conferencing project to how to mainstream the practice into child welfare with fidelity to its core principles. In our case, the early framework of “widening the circle” (Pennell & Burford, 1994) shaped our ongoing efforts to engage families and their larger network of supports in decision making (Pennell & Anderson, 2005). These same questions emerge repeatedly in the literature and more specifically, in this issue of Protecting Children.

Guest editors Jeanette Schmid and Mark Sieben have pulled together a series of articles examining principled diffusion of family group conferencing. These articles are based on work in two large Canadian provinces, British Columbia and Ontario, which have made major strides in establishing family group conferencing in their child welfare systems. The articles highlight the importance of principle-based practice from a range of perspectives within and outside government and using different methodologies from policy analysis to practice implementation to narrative inquiry to storytelling.

In their own article, Schmid and Sieben analyze how legislation and policy in the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario help or hinder family group conferencing practice, congruent with its values. Moving from policy to practice, family group conferencing trainer Marilee Sherry in Ontario shares her own discovery of how family group conferencing can reorient child welfare systems from risk aversion to a realistic appraisal of family strengths. Next, Amy Rohm and Lara Bruce interview two experienced family group conference coordinators, Inshirah Hassabu, an immigrant from Sudan now residing in Toronto, and Kevin Ward, of Native American heritage and living in Salmon Arm, British Columbia. Through poignant storytelling, Hassabu and Ward remind us of the creativity of family groups as they engage in planning for their young relatives whether they are the voices of indigenous people, recent immigrants, or long-standing settlers. The issue concludes with an explanation by researchers Maureen Maloney and Tara Ney at the University of Victoria in British Columbia of how narrative inquiry can frame questions to enhance understanding of family group conferencing processes in keeping with inclusive practice.

The insights of the authors of these current articles and those previously published works can assist other Canadian provinces and territories in carrying forward their own reforms in child welfare and various human services fields. A case in point is the New Brunswick Department of Social Development, which is in the midst of redesigning its child protection services and moving toward family group conferencing implementation (J. Freeze, personal communication, October 7, 2008). Additionally, Family Mediation Nova Scotia, with support from the Nova Scotia Law Foundation, began a 1-year project in April 2008 to explore and develop strategies to advance mediation and family group conferencing in child protection in that province. The first stage involves an inquiry into what is happening across Canada with respect to these processes within child protection delivery systems and jurisdictions, and the development of a strategy and demonstration pilot project (C. Harawitz, personal communication, October 14, 2008).

With this issue, we are pleased to see leaders in Canada step to the front and put on display some of what is unique about that country’s contribution to the international movement in family-centered practice in child welfare. The Canadian experience has shown how legislation alone cannot ensure that families gain a place at the table (Gove, 1995) and yet
how necessary enabling legislation is to holding governments accountable (Burford & Pennell, 1998). It would seem that a number of provinces in Canada have worked long and hard to bring a unique combination of enabling legislation, policy direction, and good leadership to the table. Notably, they have come to comparable, principled practice positions through a variety of sponsorships but share a recognition of quality practice.

References


A review of research and evaluation efforts in the area of family engagement in child welfare is being conducted with the support of American Humane’s Child Protection Research Center and the National Center on Family Group Decision Making.

Review committee members are Gale Burford, Marie Connolly, Kate Morris, and Joan Pennell.

You are invited to contact the review committee if you are involved in evaluation and research or know of pertinent work that should be included in our review. Contact Gale at gale.burford@uvm.edu.
Help or Hindrance: Family Group Conferencing as Alternative Dispute Resolution in Child Welfare

Mark Sieben, BA, LLB, is the associate deputy minister and chief operating officer at British Columbia’s Ministry of Children and Family Development. He has played a leading role in developing both child protection mediation and family group conferencing as principle-based planning and decision-making options in child welfare service delivery in British Columbia. His child welfare-related experience includes having worked as a youth and family counselor, child protection social worker, policymaker, and senior administrator. He is the former provincial director of child welfare in British Columbia.

Jeanette Schmid, PhD, has been a program coordinator, conference coordinator, and consultant with the Toronto Family Group Conferencing Project and more recently, was the program coordinator for the Ontario Family Group Conferencing Provincial Resource. She recently completed her doctorate in social work.

The authors wish to thank Daniel Bogue of Toronto, Canada, and Darlene Sykes of Simcoe, Canada, for their contributions to this discussion.

Family group conferencing was introduced to Canada in 1995 through a pilot project run in Newfoundland (Burford & Pennell, 1996). While we are aware of projects in Manitoba and Nova Scotia, and know that in recent months New Brunswick has taken the beginning steps to introducing the concept in that province, the approach has taken hold in British Columbia and Ontario. A major impetus in both of these provinces has been the introduction of legislation presenting family group conferencing as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism, which is a similar framework to its introduction in South Africa under the Children’s Act of 2005 (Schmid, 2007). The intent of this article is to examine the effects of framing family group conferencing as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism on implementation. Our diverse multi-province experience suggests that while an alternative dispute resolution lens may create significant challenges in terms of family group conferencing model fidelity, other operative factors may minimize or even eliminate possible negative consequences.

Context

Although both British Columbia and Ontario have legislation regarding family group conferencing, the legislative developments in British Columbia predate those in Ontario, and thus the former program has a greater maturity. Another difference is that in British Columbia, child welfare services are typically delivered directly by the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development or in conjunction with aboriginal agencies, while in Ontario, nonprofit, community-based, independent agencies financed and regulated by the provincial government provide child welfare services. Each of these agencies has developed a unique culture reflecting local conditions. The relationships of the delivery agents with the Ministry are thus significantly different in the respective provinces. A commonality that exists across both systems is that differential response is currently a feature of both policy contexts, although as an approach, it is still in its infancy. Further, both provinces have urban and rural populations as well as diverse ethnic and language groups.
The trajectory of family group conferencing has been unique in each of these two provinces. In British Columbia, family group conferencing has taken hold as a practice after a relatively long evolution. Shortly after the introduction of family group conferencing in New Zealand in 1989, child welfare practitioners began to consider how the practice might be applied in a British Columbian context given that the province is roughly the size of New Zealand, with similar geography, population size, and demographics. In 1992, a public report commissioned to inform the development of new child welfare legislation recommended that family group conferencing be adopted in British Columbia and that a new child welfare act include family group conferencing-related provisions (Ministry of Social Services). Such legislation was passed 2 years later. It included a requirement that upon concluding after an investigation that a child needs protection, the director must offer to refer the parent or other family member to a family conference coordinator.

The intent in the new Child, Family and Community Service Act was to mandate family group conferencing in a manner similar to the way New Zealand did. However, prior to the new act coming into force, the "must" was amended to a "may" in response to concerns that family group conferencing was unproven beyond New Zealand’s initial experience. When the act was implemented in 1996, the amended family group conferencing provision was not proclaimed. Family group conferencing proponents, who still hoped to introduce family group conferencing as a principle-based child welfare practice, and others who wanted to implement practices believed to produce more positive outcomes, particularly curbing the continually rising numbers of children in care, urged the use of the provision. It was brought into force in June 2002. There was minimal fanfare and no infusion of resources to support implementation. American Humane provided initial training to a small group of coordinators in the fall of 2002 and resources were filched from other budgets to make the small pilot projects implemented in a number of communities viable. Some strong regional and community champions emerged as a result of the pilots.

In Ontario, in November 2006, an amendment to the Child and Family Services Act passed, requiring that family group conferencing be considered as one of four options for alternative dispute resolution (alongside child welfare mediation, aboriginal traditional circles, and "other"). Family group conferencing was also identified as one possibility in the range of family-centered requirements (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2007). The Ontario Ministry enacted this legislation as part of a broader transformation agenda. Ministry materials (for example, Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2006) noted that the child welfare system was ineffective in that families approaching agencies were all dealt with in the same way, regardless of their particular needs. A further concern was that the adversarial nature of child welfare practice had led to significant court delays and these ongoing adjournments were negatively affecting children and families. A shift toward partnerships with families and better service was recommended, using differential response, alternative dispute resolution, kinship care, and open adoptions. The continuum of service located differential response at one end and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms on the other end. Families whose issues were relatively straightforward were represented under differential response and families whose issues
were perceived as more complex and conflict-ridden were represented under alternative dispute resolution.

These resolutions were introduced into an environment that included a rich history, growing knowledge, and diverse experiences with the implementation of family group conferencing. For example, the Family Group Conferencing Project of Toronto was established in 1998, followed by the Brant Children’s Aid Society in 2002, and subsequent projects in the London-Middlesex, Simcoe County, Sault Ste. Marie, and Sudbury areas. By 2006, further agencies had participated in training and were exploring the possibility of adopting family group conferencing. In a province where there are 52 child welfare agencies, the family group conferencing initiative was growing, but it still represented a small practice in child welfare. Despite the existence of this family group conferencing community, the movement was fragile, as conferencing had not been adopted as a mainstream option, and challenges such as financing or the legitimacy of the approach continued to threaten its viability. Nevertheless, a particular family group conferencing tradition had been established, with model integrity being closely guarded. Family group conferences were implemented at different decision-making points, including when a family was before the courts, very early on in the life of the case, and at discharge.

When it appeared that the Ministry was viewing family group conferencing as an important tool in child welfare, members of the family group conferencing community were extremely excited, and they participated eagerly in consultations regarding the proposed legislation, believing that such interest would place family group conferencing in the foreground of child welfare thinking. Ultimately, the final legislation, regulations, and directives placed family group conferencing in the alternative dispute resolution framework, which raised concerns among some members of the family group conferencing community. How would this structure impact family group conferencing?

**Developments**

In Ontario, the expected family group conferencing boost did occur. In the first year, the pool of coordinators and coordinators-in-training expanded from fewer than 20 to almost 50, involving almost one half of Ontario child welfare agencies and ensuring there was at least one family group conferencing program in each region. Both urban and rural agencies and mainstream and native communities initiated programs. This development occurred primarily as the Ministry funded the establishment of a provincial resource to coordinate training, build family group conferencing capacity, and develop an accreditation process for, and roster of, coordinators, trainers, and mentors. The Ministry made start-up monies available to the various regions. The resource created a website and wrote a manual for coordinators, which was distributed to all the child welfare agencies.

Training components were developed, including (a) a half-day workshop to build capacity and orient stakeholders and decision makers about family group conferencing and organizational issues for holding conferences; (b) a 1-day basic training for prospective coordinators and referral sources to cover the history, philosophy, and process of family group conferencing; and (c) a 1-day advanced training to more deeply explore issues relevant to prospective coordinators and family group conferencing supervisors.

In addition, experienced coordinators trained aspiring coordinators in a mentoring component. Further, a professional development day aimed at enhancing coordinator skills, developing a network of support for coordinators, and promoting model integrity and fidelity was initiated and is held bi-annually.

Developments in British Columbia followed a slightly different path. Results and experiences in the initial project sites through the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003 were promising. However, somewhat paradoxically, a series of budget reductions led to a gradual expansion of family group conferencing across the province.
Practitioners and policy administrators struggled with impending budget reductions while trying to focus on principle-based practice. A need was identified — both for practice and budget reasons — to address the growing numbers of children in care. As part of a series of initiatives to address this dilemma, a solid project management framework was introduced to promote mediation and family group conferencing as principle-based practices that would place greater emphasis on the role of the family and community in case planning, decision making, and caregiving for vulnerable children, and likely result in fewer court-related admissions to care. Family group conferencing mediation goals were set in each region, based on factors such as population, number of intakes, and number of children in care. The goals were regularly monitored and regional managers were accountable for achieving them. Between March 2002 and June 2005, this project-management approach moved family group conferencing beyond a best practice-based pilot project and closer to mainstream utility. There have been over 1,500 conferences in British Columbia since 2002, and over 100 family group conferencing coordinators operate in both ministry- and community-based agency offices throughout the province.

Implications of Alternative Dispute Resolution Perspective

In Ontario, casting family group conferencing as an alternative dispute resolution option has resulted in the expansion of, and the child welfare community’s increased awareness of, family group conferencing. Along with other aspects of the transformation agenda, it promoted discussion of how best to engage families. Further, the clear framework promoted consistency in how family group conferencing should be approached in the province. At the same time, however, redefining family group conferencing as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism has led to a range of challenges which potentially threaten model integrity and fidelity.

The primary concern is that family group conferencing is characterized as a conflict resolution tool. While family group conferencing can be thought of as alternative dispute resolution in the sense that it acts as a court diversionary process, it is not a dispute resolution mechanism even though the process may result in differences being resolved. Family group conferencing is a planning or decision-making mechanism enabling the family circle to have a voice in matters that affect them (Burford & Hudson, 2000). Decisions can be made without conflicts being resolved. By labeling it a conflict resolution tool, family group conferencing is placed on the end of the continuum that presents conferencing as occurring in a context of high conflict and complexity. This immediately contrasts family group conferencing with family-centered approaches under differential response even though family group conferencing is considered a type of family-centered approach. Casting family group conferencing as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism reinforces system-led approaches as dominant practice, suggesting that family-led approaches need only be reserved for dispute resolution. In addition, having a range of “family-centered conferences” across the continuum of child welfare decision making potentially creates ambiguity regarding the essence of family group conferencing both for the service provider community and for families, and potentially directs resources and emphasis away from family group conferencing (Merkel-Holguin & Wilmot, 2005). Further, by referring to family group conferencing as conflict resolution, the focus is
placed on the conflict rather than on collaborative decision making. This can create confusion for family group conferencing participants, including the coordinator and service providers, because the core issue of creating a plan is juxtaposed with resolving a conflict, and the leaders of the process are different.

With the label of conflict resolution, family group conferencing is also construed as similar to mediation. This carries some positives in that protections have been developed around information shared during the process. It has also allowed the promotion of a neutral and independent coordinator and has formalized the use of a confidentiality agreement. However, the comparison with mediation has also been problematic. For example, the expectation has been that the family group conferencing sector, even in its infancy, become as organized as the mediation sector in terms of coordinator qualifications and training. On a practice level, the comparison with mediation has directed certain policy expectations that are inconsistent with family group conferencing principles. For example, the Provincial Resource has needed to challenge the idea that one party can terminate the process. A legal perspective has also influenced how the Ministry envisions the role of the Office of the Children's Lawyer (OCL). The OCL is expected, in traditional child welfare proceedings, to represent the child and ensure that the child's needs are met in child welfare plans. In the family group conferencing directives, the OCL is considered a party, thus having a voice equal to that of the child it is representing. The directives pertaining to family group conferencing place the OCL at the level of a party without examining the associated power dynamics and how such practice reinforces a professionally driven approach, thus undermining the family decision-making process. Some of the outcomes of this directive include the OCL potentially claiming the right that a family group conferencing coordinator not speak to the child without the lawyer present; terminating a conference; or vetoing a family plan if it does not view the plan as being in the best interests of the child. This elevates the role of these legal professionals, possibly reinventing family group conferencing as a professionally driven process rather than one directed by the family.

There is thus a tension between how the Ministry regulates and frames family group conferencing and how the original provincial family group conferencing community views the practice. This tension creates difficulties and conflicts in family group conferencing messaging, training processes, and existing implementation strategies. For example, for agencies that wish to use family group conferencing as part of their differential response to families, the suggestion that workers facilitate the family-centered conference process and determine the invitations in conjunction with only the parents (as noted in the Ministry standards, Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2007), conflicts with family group conferencing principles, resulting in inconsistent practices between various approaches. In the transformation agenda, the absence of a clear power analysis in child welfare systems contributes to the idea that being strengths-based and asking families to be involved is sufficient to create partnerships with families. The power of a family-driven conferencing process that facilitates voice and authorship by the family group is weakened.

Another question that deserves attention is whether Ministry control of family group conferencing is advantageous to or undermining of the family group conferencing movement. As referenced previously, the Ministry's promotion of family group conferencing as part of the transformation agenda has led to a spurt in interest. However, Ministry intervention may also lead to the demise of some family group conferencing programs. Ministry directives allow for both external coordinators (self-employed or employed by a community-based organization) and internal coordinators (employed by the child welfare agency), specifying conditions for arms-length independence in the case of the latter.
Historically, a number of Ontario programs have internal coordinators. Recently, the Ministry has insisted that in order for a program to qualify for funding, an external model must be followed. Where the pre-transformation agenda family group conferencing community could tolerate difference and innovation, Ministry oversight is leading to standardization that may potentially stifle the practice of those who are most experienced with family group conferencing in the province.

Given these trials, successes, and challenges of family group conferencing expansion, it is important to reflect on the possible reasons for family group conferencing being identified as an alternative dispute resolution approach in Ontario. First, there was the example of British Columbia to follow. One important structural difference should be noted: In British Columbia, there is no Office of the Children’s Lawyer, and thus Ontario is unique in having provisions for children’s lawyers. (While the New Zealand legislation does address the role of children’s lawyers, their involvement only becomes pertinent when the matter is before the court — a scenario that occurs only in a minimum of cases.)

Schmid and Sykes (2007) have elsewhere suggested that other factors may also have been at play in the selection of the alternative dispute resolution perspective. Lawyers are familiar with family group conferencing, as applied in the justice context, particularly after the revisions of the Youth Justice Act of 2003, which required that alternative measures be considered in certain circumstances. The restorative justice approach to conferencing has also been successfully applied in some native communities. Similarly, while lawyers are not necessarily experienced with child protection mediation, mediation in general is becoming the mainstream in the legal community and is thus a known quantity. Another factor is court overload, which led to the consideration of more legalistic alternatives. Family group conferencing may also have been cast as alternative dispute resolution because it is perceived as resource-intensive (shortsightedly, in our view), and thus should be reserved for more severe situations.

The family group conferencing community in Ontario has responded by attempting to reframe family group conferencing as a planning, family empowering mechanism with conflict resolution as a potential secondary benefit. The Provincial Resource has encouraged agencies that have the resources to use family group conferencing as a family-centered approach outside of alternative dispute resolution, ensuring that they heed the family group conferencing principles in doing so. Further, the family group conferencing community has worked with the Ministry to identify where the family group conferencing parameters can be revised and reframed, and has informally encouraged discussion among child welfare practitioners and family group conferencing coordinators regarding the differences between family-led and professionally driven interventions.

The British Columbia Debate

In British Columbia, the debate has been less on whether family group conferencing is or should be categorized as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism and more on when or whether family group conferencing or mediation should be used in the child welfare case management model. There are two strong rationales as to why the debate has evolved in this manner: a legislative rationale and a “separate development” rationale.

The child welfare legislation in Ontario and British Columbia are similar in many respects. Both reflect a strong commitment to child rights and due process considerations for parents; both are compilations in nature; both act as a child welfare code; and both have family conferencing and mediation provisions in close proximity to one another. In the British Columbia provision, family group conferencing and mediation fall under “Cooperative Planning and Dispute Resolution.” This heading is an appropriate descriptor for two mechanisms that have much in
common but are distinct practices, and that may co-exist and even cross paths in the same case, given they are motivated by similar legislative ends. The intent of cooperative planning and dispute resolution under the act is to develop the best plan possible for the child, given available resources and safety needs. Mediation and family group conferencing thus avoid proving on the balance of probabilities that the statutory definition of a child needing protection has been met.

While they have some common legislative purposes, mediation and family group conferencing were developed, by and large, separately. The British Columbia legislative provision authorizing mediation in child welfare cases came into force when the Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCSA) was proclaimed in 1996. Mediation, therefore, had a head start in British Columbia, since family group conferencing was not available until 2002. Working closely with the Ministry of Attorney General’s Dispute Resolution Office, which was established in the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Children and Family Development established a roster of approved child protection mediators. Mediators are on contract through the Dispute Resolution Office. Drawing on pilot projects in British Columbia in the early 1990s and experiences in the Colorado and California dependency courts, mediations began under the CFCSA in 1998. Modest results where achieved between 1998 and 2002, with the vast majority of cases being resolved, but mediation did not catch on as a regular practice. The Dispute Resolution Office, with support from the Ministry of Children and Family Development, made a point of meeting regularly with the judiciary, court staff, and lawyers for both the child welfare authority and parents to discuss the benefits of mediation in a child welfare context. The above, in addition to the formal court system’s familiarity with the mediation model, has resulted in a strong infrastructure for mediation within the formal child welfare court structure.

In comparison, family group conferencing development in British Columbia occurred with minimal infrastructure initially, though the Ministry of Children and Family Development has made efforts to develop an appropriate provincial infrastructure in response to the growing demand for family group conferencing among practitioners. Orientation and training for coordinators are now managed centrally but are still largely influenced by coordinators themselves.

As a result of their separate developmental paths, mediation and family group conferencing in British Columbia are administrated separately. Also, family group conferencing and mediation tend to occupy separate places on the case management continuum. Policy allows for mediation and family group conferencing to be offered at any point in a child welfare case once an assessment has been made that a child needs protection. However, family group conferencing tends to be offered in cases prior to any application made to court, and the process is becoming more prevalent through the use of review conferences and youth transitioning conferences. However, while not unknown in court-related matters, family group conferencing is less known to judges, the court registry, and lawyers, who are more familiar with mediation and their role in relation to it. This results in a tendency toward mediation once matters reach court — particularly if an obstacle stands in the way of a positive outcome. Along the case management path, while both mediation and family group conferencing tend to reflect some elements of both collaborative planning and dispute resolution, family group conferencing is
likely more closely identified with the former and mediation with the latter.

**Conclusions**

British Columbia and Ontario have similar legislation that requires child welfare workers to consider using family group conferencing, mediation, or traditional aboriginal approaches when matters are before the court. However, the manner in which this has affected the interpretation and practice of family group conferencing seems to be quite different in each province. In Ontario, the alternative dispute resolution lens and the legalistic application in the regulations and directives have narrowed the scope of family group conferencing, and risk diluting the power of conferencing. A different approach has been adopted in British Columbia, where the legislation has simply created a backdrop for the introduction of family group conferencing into a broad collaborative model of engaging with families. This may be due in part to family group conferencing being implemented some years after the legislation was passed, allowing for a gradual germination of the approach. Further, Ministry personnel had a vision for family group conferencing that seems to have allowed for different possibilities at the practice level, facilitating family group conferencing as an option along the entire case management continuum. In addition, in Ontario, the Provincial Resource, rather than the Ministry, has taken on the responsibility for facilitating model integrity and fidelity. However, this resource, a group of family group conferencing trainers and mentors, is independent of the child welfare community (it does not have membership in the Ontario Association for Children’s Aid Societies), and has limited power in shifting thinking either within the Ministry or the child welfare sector. In British Columbia, the Ministry itself appears to monitor whether family group conferencing is both appropriately and extensively applied.

Subsuming mediation and family group conferencing under one title has led to challenges in both provinces. On the positive side, in Ontario, it has led to protections for the family group conferencing process, and in British Columbia, it has allowed policy makers to learn lessons that informed the introduction of family group conferencing. On the negative side, in Ontario, the overlaying of mediation processes onto family group conferencing practice has led to constraints and limitations on family group conferencing. In British Columbia, potential for an inadvertent competition for resources has arisen between the approaches. While the practices have different methodologies and purposes, they can be used in a manner complementary to one another, recognizing the value of each in enhancing traditional, court-oriented child welfare.

The processes in each province also speak to the notion of collaborative or family-centered practices and how these are identified, articulated, developed, and resourced. The experiences appear to confirm Merkel-Holguin and Wilmot’s (2005) thesis that multiple approaches lead to both confusion about and competition for resources, and risk losing the awareness of power differentiation and the family-empowering practice component.

What lessons exist for other entities considering family group conferencing legislation? First, our collective experience suggests that family group conferencing legislation can promote an awareness of conferencing and thus offer an important kick-start to family group conferencing initiatives. Second, one cannot assume resources will be made available for implementation. While
initial funding was given in Ontario, it is not clear whether further resources will be provided. In British Columbia, an infrastructure was not set up initially, but has grown in response to program demand (for example, there are now over 100 family group conferencing coordinators in British Columbia). Third, our experience suggests that the language of the legislation is critical. To the extent that the vocabulary of alternative dispute resolution constructs family group conferencing as a conflict resolution tool, the language may, in a variety of unanticipated ways, constrain the use of family group conferencing. It seems ill-advised to promote family group conferencing as primarily an alternative dispute resolution initiative. While an anticipated output of family group conferencing is dispute resolution, legislative language better suited to framing the purpose and anticipated outcome of family group conferencing emphasizes cooperative planning and decision making.

Debate can be a healthy component of conversation. Through debate, the expression of ideas, principles, and experiences often adds value to the collective thinking necessary to motivate systems and social change. We encourage child welfare communities to engage in critical discussion to grow appropriate new practices into regular mainstream components of a child welfare case management planning and decision-making model.

References


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What Have We Learned About Family Group Conferencing and Case Management Practices?

Marilee Sherry

Marilee Sherry, MSW, RSW, began practicing as the coordinator for family group conferencing at the Children’s Aid Society of Brant in Brantford, Ontario, Canada in 2005. In 2006, she became an Ontario family group conferencing trainer and Ontario family group conferencing mentor for coordinators in training. Prior to becoming the conferencing coordinator, she spent 5 years as a front-line child welfare worker and manager with the Children’s Aid Society of Brant, delivering child welfare protection services in community-based settings.

“Family group conferencing changes you forever after you have experienced one.”

Over the past 6 years, I have been privileged to participate in many family group conferences, both as a Children’s Aid Society manager and as a family group conference coordinator. During this time, I began to wonder about the impact of agency workers’ and managers’ case management practices and decisions with a family and how these impacted the family group conferencing process. I also began to wonder if the family group conferencing experience affected the workers’ and managers’ case management practices with other families.

During my time as a Children’s Aid Society manager, I started to realize that sometimes I needed to rethink my view of a family, past decisions, or decisions made during the preparation phase. For example, during the preparation phase for one family group conference, the coordinator advised me that some extended family members did not agree with one of the agency’s bottom lines. The worker and I arranged a meeting with these family members, and we agreed to change the bottom line based on the new information available to us. Because of this experience, I became more careful about stating the agency’s bottom lines for other families.

I also began to notice that sometimes things went smoothly during the preparation phase and the conference and other times there was quite a rocky road before and during the conference. I started to wonder about the impact of the

1All italicized quotes in this article are from focus-group participants.

2Family group conferencing is a family-led decision-making process which has been offered to families in Ontario since 1998. The model of family group conferencing practiced in Ontario is based on the Maori model of decision making. It includes an independent coordinator, comprehensive preparation of participants, private family time during the conference, and embracing the family’s culture throughout the process.

3Children’s Aid Societies are the mandated and legislated child welfare agencies in Ontario.

4For the purposes of this paper, the term worker will refer to the child welfare professional with case management responsibilities for a family receiving services from the Children’s Aid Society of Brant. The term manager will refer to the person to whom the worker reports.

5The case management model of social work practice includes assessment and service planning with a client, linking the client to resources and making referrals to services, and advocacy on the client’s behalf.
Children's Aid Society case management practices and decisions prior to the referral to family group conferencing, during the preparation phase for family group conferencing, and during the conference itself.

At times, I have reflected back on my work as a front-line worker, before family group conferencing was available in my agency, and realized that if it had been available, I probably would have worked differently with families and perhaps made different decisions.

As a family group conference coordinator, I have continued to ponder these questions as I coordinated many conferences with families, their friends, and service providers, including the Children’s Aid Society worker and manager. I have wondered why some referrals did not proceed to a conference and whether the worker’s and manager’s case management practices and decisions had an influence on referrals not proceeding. I started to have a clearer sense about the importance of the case management practices and decisions and their impact on the family group conferencing process.

For example, on several occasions a parent has had difficulty with the way one of the agency’s bottom lines was worded. If the worker and manager arranged to meet with the parent to discuss the parent’s difficulties, usually the differences were resolved and a family group conference was held. If the worker and manager were not willing to do this, the family group conference did not proceed.

On other occasions, a family member has been upset with past decisions the agency has made, usually regarding visits with his or her child. When the worker and manager met with the family member before the conference to try to resolve the difficulties, the conference usually proceeded relatively smoothly. When the worker and manager did not meet with the family member, usually the circle had to deal with the outstanding issue with the agency at the conference, and at times this became quite contentious.

During my time as a Children’s Aid Society manager, I also wondered how to support and help prepare the worker who would be attending a family group conference. As a coordinator, I have continued to wonder how to help prepare the worker and manager. I sense that the relationship the worker and manager have with a client family, which is supported by the worker’s and manager’s case management practices and decisions, affects the family group conference preparation, the conference itself, and plan implementation in profound ways.

Introduction

Child welfare practice in Ontario is undergoing considerable change as a result of new provincial policy initiatives which came into effect in 2006. Among other changes, there is an increased emphasis on collaborative practice with families. Family group conferencing is now embedded in Ontario’s policy and legislation. However, policy and legislative change do not necessarily result in practice changes in the field. It may be helpful to identify the practices that help effect these changes, so these practices can be encouraged in transforming child welfare practice.

There is a considerable body of literature about the experience of family member participants in family group conferencing and evaluation of the practice (Helland, 2005; Pennell, 2003; Schmid & Goranson, 2003; Stevens, 2003). Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford (2003), after reviewing the body of family group decision making research, found that social workers and service providers are satisfied with the family group conferencing process and that social worker rates of referral fluctuate, possibly based on the social workers’ values and philosophy. There is, however, very little in the literature about the child welfare case management practices that support family group conferencing or the impact of family group conferencing on the Children’s Aid Society workers’ and managers’ practice in general. This summary of views from Children’s Aid Society workers and managers in Brantford, Ontario,
begins to address this need and responds to the following questions:

- How has participation in family group conferencing influenced child welfare social workers in their work with families?
- What child welfare case management practices support family group conferencing?
- Does family group conferencing transform child welfare case management practices?

Children’s Aid Society of Brant and the Ontario Child Welfare Context for Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing and the Children’s Aid Society of Brant

The Children’s Aid Society of Brant (henceforth referred to as the Brant CAS) is located in Brantford, Ontario, and serves approximately 140,000 people in Brant County. The Brant CAS has a proud history of forming partnerships within the local community (Children’s Aid Society of Brant, 2004), developing community-based child welfare initiatives (Frensch, Cameron, & Hazineh, 2005), and supporting children living with kin. In October 2002, the Brant CAS decided to offer family group conferencing to families receiving their services. Family group conferencing is in keeping with the Brant CAS’s philosophy and values of collaborative work with families and the commitment to strengthen and value families. Family group conferencing offered a new way to enter into partnership with families.

In 2005, the coordinator position became a full-time management position within the Brant CAS child protection staff complement of approximately 200 staff members, with provisions in place to protect the coordinator’s independence from the child welfare mandate. This is in keeping with the Brant CAS’s efforts to provide seamless service to their client families (Children’s Aid Society of Brant, 2004).

By the fall of 2007, approximately 60 family group conferences had been held, giving the social work staff at the Brant CAS a body of experience to reflect upon and to learn from in looking at how family group conferencing has influenced its case management practices.

Ontario Policy and Legislation Changes Affecting Family Group Conferencing Practice at the Children’s Aid Society of Brant

In July 2005, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2005) announced a major policy shift that came to be known as the “transformation agenda.” The goal of the transformation agenda was to expand the intervention options to better meet the complex needs of children and families referred to child welfare services. Among others, the expanded intervention options included differential response and strategies to reduce delays in court and encourage alternatives to court. One of the anticipated results of the transformation agenda is more family and community involvement in planning (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies [OACAS], 2007), which is consistent with family group conferencing practice and values.

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Family group conferencing offered a new way to enter into partnership with families

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At the Children’s Aid Society of Brant, this service is called family group decision making, but for the purposes of this discussion, it will be called family group conferencing.
During the policy development by the Child Welfare Secretariat (2005), family group conferencing was included as an approved alternative dispute resolution mechanism under differential response. The goals of alternative dispute resolution are to reduce delays in child welfare court proceedings and to reduce the number of child welfare cases that go to trial (OACAS, 2007).

The legislation governing child welfare services in Ontario, The Child and Family Services Act (1990), was amended as part of the child welfare transformation agenda and now requires a Children’s Aid Society to consider an alternative dispute resolution if a child is or may be in need of protection.

Prior to the legislative changes in 2006, referrals to family group conferencing at the Brant CAS were encouraged but not mandated. During this time, referrals tended to be clustered among a few protection teams who enthusiastically embraced this service. This seems to be consistent with the international experience reflected in recent publications when family group conferencing is not legislated and essentially remains a fringe service offered to a few families (Nixon, Burford, & Quinn, 2005).

In the 18 months following the Ontario policy and legislative changes, the Brant CAS has been experiencing an increase in referrals to family group conferencing and a more even distribution of referrals across the protection teams in the agency. This is to be expected, given the policy, legislative, and financial supports now in place for family group conferencing. It is also encouraging that there are now more referring workers and managers using case management practices that encourage family-led decision making through family group conferencing.

The referral criteria for family group conferencing at the Brant CAS have remained fairly consistent during the past 5 years. If a family is interested in family group conferencing, feels that there is a crisis or a decision to be made, and can “live with” the Children’s Aid Society view of the family’s challenges, their child welfare worker makes a referral to family group conferencing. Usually, client families learn about family group conferencing through their worker, which means that if the worker does not inform them about family group conferencing, it is unlikely that they will know about this option. It is hoped that over time, the local community and service provider community will have greater knowledge of and experience with family group conferencing and that client families will start to self-refer to family group conferencing.

**Children’s Aid Society of Brant Social Work Staff’s Experience With Family Group Conferencing**

With the implementation of the transformation agenda in 2006, the Brant CAS staff is expected to work in a collaborative manner with client families. Family group conferencing is viewed as a collaboration with client families and their extended family and friends (Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, 2007; Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005).

Prilleltensky, Pierson, and Nelson (2001) propose a model for promoting family wellness and preventing child maltreatment:

- The two foundational blocks are *vision and values* and *context and etiology*.
- Building on these two blocks are the interventions, which include policies and programs.
- The final block is *implementation and diffusion*.

The family group conferencing program uses this framework and is supported by the policy and legislative changes in Ontario, which grew out of a vision for child welfare and the surrounding time and context. It seems that the Brant CAS, along with all other child welfare agencies in Ontario, is at the implementation and diffusion stage of these policy and program changes. One important
aspect of implementation is to promote practices that support the particular policy or program being introduced, within the organizational context.

Given this context, the Brant CAS was interested in learning what case management practices had worked in the past to support family group conferencing and how to support further growth in collaborative case management work with families, including family group conferencing. The chosen way to do this was through an April 2007 focus group with the management staff, using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) model. One of the opportunities identified during this focus group was, “Case management done differently — greater expectation on case manager to do things differently in a collaborative manner/gain skill set.” The feedback from this focus group helped define the questions addressed in this discussion.

This discussion will focus on the front-line case management practices that support the implementation and diffusion of family group conferencing as one of the policy changes, rather than on the broader questions of the vision and context of the policy changes, the content of the policy changes themselves, or the practice paradigm in general. It is recognized that many influences, including the ones mentioned, affect front-line case management practices in child welfare.

Based on the SWOT analysis from the April 2007 focus group, Sherry (2007) reviewed Brant CAS staff feedback (evaluations) after a family group conference and identified several themes: (a) increased awareness of family strengths; (b) satisfaction with the plan; and (c) increased satisfaction with Children’s Aid Society’s role. This is consistent with findings reported elsewhere (Helland, 2005; Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003).

Focus Group Details

To explore the case management practices that support family group conferencing and identify which practices to encourage in future collaborative work with families, the family group conference coordinator at the Brant CAS (Marilee Sherry) invited all workers and managers who had participated in a family group conference over the past 5 years to attend a focus group in October 2007. Invitations were sent to 12 managers and 19 workers. Nine staff participated, with six attending a focus group, one responding in writing, and two meeting individually with the coordinator. Six participants were managers and three participants were workers, which is approximately a 30% response rate. While the response was lower than anticipated, the timing of the focus group may have been a factor. During the same period as the focus group, staff were required to attend many different training sessions regarding changes in child welfare. Participants’ experience with family group conferencing ranged from participating in one conference to participating in 15, with an average participation rate of 4.5 family group conferences per participant.

The family group conferencing coordinator facilitated the focus groups, recorded responses as they were given, identified the themes from the responses given, and reviewed the results with focus group participants to ensure that their responses were reported accurately.

Two questions guided the focus groups:

1. What case management practices support family group conferencing?
2. How has your experience with family group conferencing influenced your case management practices with other families?

Participants provided many varied responses and examples for the first question, but seemed to struggle somewhat in articulating the impact that family group conferencing has had on their
case management practices with other families. This may be due to the way the question was worded or due to the tendency to see family group conferencing as separate from everyday case management practices. There is, however, an emerging awareness among the participants about how family group conferencing has affected their own practice.

**Impact of the Family Group Conference Experience**

“A bridge happens during FGC. The success of FGC has a calming effect”

In reviewing the focus group feedback, the impact of the family group conferencing experience seemed to be an important factor for the group in moving toward a more collaborative practice with both the families who had conferences and the other families served. They did not provide much feedback about the impact of implementing the family group conference plan with families except to identify some systemic challenges they encountered. This may be due to the way the question was worded or due to the developmental stage of family group conferencing at the Brant CAS.

Participants talked about their own emotional reactions to the family group conference and then feeling affirmed after the conference in why they came to work that day.

Based on their responses, focus group participants seemed to struggle somewhat to find the words to describe the impact of the experience. However, it seems to have been a powerful and positive experience for them. This is in keeping with previous findings (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2003; Sherry, 2007).

**Philosophy and Values**

“FGC gives a different message to the child.”

“FGC has a humbling effect on service providers and you can see the development in the workers in their ability to let go of the belief in their own expertise and in trusting the potential for healthy supports in a family.”

Participants stressed the importance of the belief in family support and having faith in the family’s ability to make decisions. They also spoke about family group conferencing as affirming their basic belief in the shared responsibility for the safety of children.

Participants also expressed an awareness that their own practice was being assessed by family members. This may be linked to a humbling effect and a sense of vulnerability felt during the conference itself, which they expressed in their responses.

Over the past several years in Ontario, child welfare practice has focused on investigative risk assessment practices, with the child welfare service provider being the expert in identifying risk and forming plans to keep the child safe. The
philosophy and values identified by participants as supporting family group conferencing are collaboration, a focus on strengths, and the belief in the family’s ability to make decisions to keep their child safe. In many ways, this is in direct conflict with how child welfare staff has been trained and has practiced over the past several years.

The importance of the worker’s and manager’s philosophy and values is in keeping with Connolly and McKenzie’s (1999) observations that the fundamental principles of shared decision-making practice may be at odds with a service provider’s prior training and philosophy. They stress the importance of a Children’s Aid Society worker’s commitment to the philosophy of family participation and shared decision-making. Merkel-Holguin et al. (2003) also point out the importance of the referring worker’s philosophy and values in making referrals to family group conferencing.

These comments hint at a re-ordering of the service provider-client relationship to one that more closely reflects participatory practice (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999). Given the focus on investigative child welfare practice within a risk assessment paradigm in the child welfare field for the past several years (Cameron, 2003; Wharf 2002), it seems reasonable that the move toward collaborative practices will be a gradual one. For some workers and managers, collaborative practice will be rooted in their own philosophy and values.

It seems that somehow the experience of family group conferencing affirms its own underpinning philosophy and values for the focus group participants. It is not clear whether the workers’ and managers’ philosophy and values shifted as a result of their experience with family group conferencing or if family group conferencing fits the philosophy and values they already held. It may be that family group conferencing provided a way for them to experience participatory practice, as defined by Connolly and McKenzie (1999), which may either have shifted or further affirmed their philosophy and values. A question for possible further exploration may be how the experience of family group conferencing affects the child welfare service provider’s philosophy and values.

**Case Management Practices**

Connolly and McKenzie (1999) have stressed the importance of the caseworker’s philosophy and values being in line with participatory practice. They have also identified some caseworker activities that support participatory practice while a child welfare agency is involved with a family.

Prilleltensky, Laurendeau, Chamberland, and Pierson (2001) point out that “values are the principles that guide our actions” (p. 125) and “are guidelines for thinking and acting in ways that benefit others” (p. 131). They call those who move vision and values into action “practical philosophers.”

The following discussion of case management practices identified by the focus group participants reveal some of the ways they are being practical philosophers in their work with families at the Brant CAS, keeping in mind the importance of these practices being grounded in the philosophy and values supporting family-led decision-making processes.

**Trust the process**

“When the worker presents the idea initially to a family and receives a positive response, these are the ones that usually get to a conference. After the family has said yes to the conference, there are a lot of questions. This takes time for the worker and the worker needs to keep explaining the steps to the family. The worker needs to have a good understanding of what happens at a conference in order to reassure the family members.”

“It takes time and effort to engage the family in FGC. The timing needs to be right for the
family. The worker may need to revisit it several times before the family is able and ready to do this.”

“You have to spend the time and that is hard. It takes time for families to start thinking this way and buy in, to open up to other family members assisting in the decisions.”

“Sometimes there are hard questions during FGC preparation and this may lead to more work, but I understand that it needs to be done for the sake of the process.”

In traditional child welfare work, the child welfare service provider is the expert and holds a great deal of mandated authority. As Connolly and McKenzie (1999) point out, “Just as workers have to make a paradigm shift from professional decision-making to family decision-making, the family have to make a similar shift” (p. 87). It may be a new practice for workers and managers to trust the family-led decision-making process. It may also be a challenge, at times, for family members to believe that they can or will be given the opportunity to make their own plans to keep their children safe.

Participants recognized that increased work may be required before the family group conference, but they experienced their job as much less time-consuming after the conference because family members could be redirected to their plan.

Connolly and McKenzie (1999) discuss the importance in effective participatory practice of the worker’s skill of generating hope. They state, “hope is directly related to the family’s participation in the process, rather than, necessarily, hopefulness with respect to outcome” (p. 79). The focus group participants did not articulate this important distinction. This response may point out the developmental stage of family group conferencing practice at the Brant CAS, with the current focus being on participation in the process. Perhaps with more experience, child welfare service providers will be able to articulate the importance of generating hope for family members through participation in the decision-making process itself.

Participants identified the importance of being patient and persistent with the process. They stressed the importance of explaining the steps to family members several times, reassuring family members when they become anxious, accepting where the family members are in the process, and working with family members to carry out the plan.

In traditional child welfare practice, the child welfare service provider is the expert who designs ways to reduce the risk to a child and then tries to find ways to achieve parent cooperation with the plan made. The case management practice of waiting for family members to work through the information and decide if they want to participate in family group conferencing, revisiting the process with them, and working with them in carrying out the plan is a new one. It becomes a matter of waiting for the time to be right for the family, rather than for the child welfare service provider.

The child welfare service provider needs to make decisions to support the family’s sense of when the time is right and to advocate with others, both on the child welfare team and in other service provider agencies, to allow the family this time. This practice also ties in with the paradigm shift from plans being made by the service providers with no meaningful input from family members to plans being led by family members with input from service providers (Merkel-Holguin & Wilmot, 2005).
Awareness of strengths in families

“Through FGC, deficits are not the only thing you see in clients. You can lose sight of the positives.”

“There needs to be an attitude of openness with families, a looking for strengths and belief that the family can deal with this.”

“You need to be willing to talk to outside supports like the types of conversation you would have at the FGC without the FGC process. You know families are capable of it — you just have to explore it and trust it.”

“You learn about issues the family is facing when support people are involved. You have a realistic view of the support that people are able to offer.”

The Canadian child protection paradigm over the past several years has focused on risk and deficits rather than on strengths of family members (Cameron, 2003; Wharf, 2002). Child welfare workers and managers are highly attuned to their legal responsibilities and the liability that goes along with their work. One of their greatest fears is that a child will be seriously harmed or killed while receiving service from them.

Dumbrill (2005) points out the phenomenon of the pendulum swing in child welfare between family preservation and child safety. During the family preservation phase, the focus is on children remaining with their parents, and avoidable child deaths occur. Public outcry over child deaths moves the child welfare system to a focus on child safety with an inquisitorial practice. This may lead to a public outcry over the misuse of authority, and the pendulum then swings back the other way. Dumbrill proposes a model of collaborative child welfare practice as a way of finding the balance between these two extremes.

Between 1998 and 2006, the focus in Ontario leaned more toward the child safety end of the pendulum, which tended to focus on a family’s deficits rather than strengths, in order to prevent an avoidable child death. The challenge for workers and managers is to find the middle ground, where an awareness of the family’s strengths and challenges informs their practice. Focus group participants seemed to identify this challenge in their feedback about a realistic view of a family’s strengths.

Family group conferencing is built on the strengths in a family and the belief that the family circle will be able to keep its child safe and meet the requirements of the mandated child welfare service. Participants talked about having a realistic view about what family members can do to assist after participating in a family group conference. They also expressed a greater awareness of the strengths in all the families they serve and a greater appreciation for the uniqueness of each family after experiencing a family group conference.

Family group conferencing may be one of the only opportunities a child welfare service provider has to meet the members of the client’s extended family network and understand the dynamics at work in the family. For the worker and manager, this may be an experience of learning to trust the strengths present in a family rather than blindly trusting strengths that they are not even sure are present. This realistic view of a family’s strengths experienced through family group conferencing helps alleviate their anxiety about their legal mandate and liability.
Widening the circle

“You need to be prepared to have conversations with the wider family, foster parents, etc.”

“Our practice is to look at who else is important to the child and family, who in the family can look after the child if the parents can’t and what are the barriers to the parent caring for their child. In order to answer these questions, an FGC process makes sense.”

“I have a broader understanding of family.”

“FGC changed how I view systems. Family is larger than blood family. Just because I do not know about family members, it doesn’t mean that they are not out there.”

Participants stressed the importance of considering who is in the family support system and actively seeking them out, being willing to have conversations with people in the extended family, and finding ways to support the foster parents.

Traditional child welfare work tends to focus on working primarily with the parent(s) raising the child. Traditional gender roles have given the responsibility of raising children to women, which has limited the role of the father in a child’s life (Pierson, Laurendeau, & Chamberland, 2001). These views have contributed to a narrow definition of “family” for child welfare staff.

Workers and managers are keenly aware of the requirement that clients consent to their file information being shared with anyone else, including other family members. They are also aware of the time required to develop relationships with members of the wider family system.

The narrow focus on mother and child, the requirement for consents, and time constraints have tended to result in minimal engagement with the wider family system, especially the paternal family system, in traditional child welfare practice. Participants identified the importance of engaging in conversation with the wider family system when participating in the family group conferencing process, which does not usually happen to any great extent in their practice. Practicing in this way includes expanding the view of “client” to include the wider family system and working out the issue of the clients’ consent to share information with their families.

This expanding view of the client seems to be particularly challenging during the preparation phase. The challenge may be due, in part, to the increased anxiety of the worker and manager and the family system as the family group conference approaches. It may also be because the worker and manager have not yet experienced the strength in the family that becomes evident during the family group conference.

Sometimes during the preparation phase, a particular family member may challenge the worker’s and manager’s previously held assessment regarding a child’s safety, and the worker and manager need to be prepared to address these issues as they arise. Other times, extended family members may want to resume access to the child or have other requests for the worker. Such requests require the worker and manager to have a measure of humility and the willingness to revise previous assessments and engage in conversations with the wider family prior to the conference.

When implementing the plan, collaborating with the wider family circle seems to flow more easily for the worker and manager than it did before the conference occurred. This may be due to the family circle and the child welfare staff being committed to working together to implement the plan, as well as the impact of the family group conferencing experience on the worker and manager.

After experiencing a family group conference, participants identified how they are applying the principle of widening the circle in their case management practices in general. Applications include being more open to learning about the...
relationships within a family, being more aware of who the family’s supports are, and having greater skill in asking questions about a family’s support system.

It is very encouraging that participants talked about being able to transfer the experience of a family group conference circle into their everyday practice in this way, since many times the informal supports of client families tend to be invisible or discounted in traditional child welfare practice. This is also an important step in moving toward strengths-based and collaborative practice in the child welfare field.

**Awareness of family dynamics**

“The number of people involved may escalate conflict within the family. The family dynamic and the anxious phone calls from family members are just part of the process.”

Child welfare service providers work with many of our community’s most vulnerable members. Conflict or abusive or neglectful behavior between family members, or generational family difficulties are often found in their client families. When working with a mother and child, the worker may not see the need to explore the wider family dynamic or may discount someone in the family as a source of support based on what the client says about that person.

When engaging in collaborative practice, the child welfare service provider needs to balance building a therapeutic relationship with the client family with engaging extended family members in planning processes. The balance becomes challenging for both family members and the child welfare service provider when there are conflicts between family members involved in the planning process.

Family group conferencing engages the whole family system and may bring family conflicts and dynamics into the view of the child welfare worker and manager. This helps the worker and manager have a realistic view of what support various family members are able to offer and may challenge previously held opinions. This also requires the worker and manager to manage the conflicts that may arise within the family and support the family before and after the conference.

Participants stressed the importance of remaining neutral, or not getting pulled into the family dynamic and not taking attacks personally. They stated that they need to remain neutral when family members try to get the workers’ opinion about “mini plans” before the conference and not get pulled into discussions when one family member tries to discredit other family members. They also talked about being careful to not feel personally attacked during conflicts between various family members. This seems to be an important skill when engaging with a wider family system and one that requires the worker and manager to pay careful attention to boundaries.

Social workers are trained to help, and this includes helping people resolve conflicts. It requires considerable skill for a social worker to hear all sides of the story in a conflict without appearing to favor one particular person or version of events. Focus group participants identified this as a challenge particularly during the preparation phase of family group conferencing, when family members’ anxiety may be heightened.
Participant talked about the power differential between Children's Aid Society staff and family members and stressed the importance of personal awareness and acknowledging this differential. Family group conferencing was identified as an anti-oppressive practice and a place where the family understands the concerns of the Children's Aid Society. They also talked about how a family receives a different message through family group conferencing, even if there is no solution, because the family developed a positive plan that was their choice.

This awareness seemed particularly powerful to the focus group participants. There is almost a sense of relief that the child welfare service providers are not solely responsible for keeping a child safe.

In child welfare practice, the child welfare service provider holds the mandated authority and uses it when necessary to protect a child. The risk for the child welfare service provider is that over time, he or she becomes less sensitive to the power differential and the impact that this power differential may have on client families (Frensch et al., 2005). Family group conferencing may be a way of reminding child welfare service providers to pay attention to this power differential.

Participants spoke about a heightened sense of the power imbalance and an awareness of how to address this in their everyday work with families. They talked about having a greater awareness of the impact that the Children's Aid Society has on a family, and of the importance of starting from a perspective of “what can I do for you,” rather than from an authoritative stance.

This is perhaps one of the most hopeful responses from the participants in terms of transforming child welfare practice. The
awareness of the power differential and the impact on families is essential when working collaboratively with family members. The participants hint at moving away from viewing themselves as the “experts,” which is necessary in order to move toward a family-led decision-making paradigm.

**Timing**

“After you have done one and it was a positive experience, it is always in the back of your head for other families.”

“Adoption philosophy is tangled up with FGC, often because we waited too long for FGC.”

“Through FGC you learn about family members you didn’t know existed. Maybe there would be a different outcome or better outcomes for kids? The decisions look different if they are made earlier on.”

Participants talked about offering family group conferencing to families earlier in their involvement with the Children’s Aid Society, not always using family group conferencing as an alternative to court, and using family group conferencing as a tool for permanency for children. Participants also stressed that review conferences are part of the process, and that the family group conferencing process is shorter than the court process even when there are review conferences.

In child welfare work, workers and managers have many standards and legal obligations to meet, which often include timelines. The sense of timing for the child welfare service provider and the sense of timing for the family may not necessarily be congruent. The skill for the child welfare service provider is to be prepared to offer family group conferencing many times, and let the family decide if or when the time is right. This also ties into trusting the process and being aware of family dynamics.

Participants stressed the importance of thinking about family group conferencing early in a family’s involvement with the Children’s Aid Society, which might make the decisions look quite different. Participants also talked about considering family group conferencing for decisions other than where the child could be while not in the care of a parent.

The timing of a referral to family group conference is an important consideration. Nixon et al. (2005) reported on the findings of an international survey regarding family group conferencing: “while the agency may set criteria for referral, either prescriptive or permissive, the judgment of whether a family is well-suited for a family meeting rests to a large extent with social workers” (p. 24-25). This trend is continued with Ontario’s legislative changes, which require the Children’s Aid Society to consider a referral to an alternative dispute resolution mechanism. Just what “consider” means has not yet been fully determined.

Ontario’s child welfare policy and legislation do not specify when a referral to an alternative dispute resolution must be considered, and so this is left to the individual agencies to determine as they implement alternative dispute resolution. This will probably result in uneven referral rates to family group conferencing across the province, even though all Children’s Aid Societies are operating under the same legislation.

Occasionally, a family group conference has been held at the Brant CAS after the court has made an order allowing a child to be placed for adoption. This puts the family in a difficult situation, since their choices about how to achieve permanency for their child have already been somewhat limited by a court order. This also puts the Children’s Aid Society staff in a difficult position, due to their responsibilities toward a child who is legally free to be adopted and the stringent requirements of an adoption home study, even if the person offering to adopt the child is kin.
It is encouraging that participants are considering this question and recognize that things might look quite different for a child and family if family group conferencing is offered earlier. The question of timing ties into who holds the power to offer family group conferencing, determine the timing, or decide whether or not a referral is “appropriate.”

**Articulating bottom lines**

“We are trained to identify risk indicators and define things. Bottom lines are often unknown.”

Participants discussed how difficult it is to identify the bottom lines for a family group conference. They talked about how helpful it was to develop these bottom lines through the family group conferencing process since this gave them more clarity about their work with a client family. They also talked about using the concept of bottom lines in their work with other families.

Child welfare work is often crisis-driven. As a result, workers and managers spend considerable time responding to the crises, leaving less time to consider how to address the underlying challenges facing a family.

Social workers’ clinical training tends to focus on teaching them to assess and plan. Child welfare service providers have been trained to assess risk of harm to a child and to build service plans that mitigate the risk. This results in a service plan that often includes things the client has to do, without actually identifying the underlying difficulty which has led to the risk of harm to a child. The focus of the worker’s and family’s work together then usually becomes whether or not the client has done the things expected in the service plan. This is also what usually happens when there is court involvement and a client is expected to follow the court-ordered plan of care.

Family group conferencing is a way for the extended family circle to create their own plan to keep their child safe. This means that the child welfare service provider needs to identify the underlying difficulty in a family that leads to the assessment that a child is at risk of harm, so that the family circle can create the plan. This has not formed part of the usual practice, and it takes some skill to learn to articulate the bottom lines in strengths-based language.

It is very encouraging that participants identified how helpful it is to identify these bottom lines, how surprised they are at how difficult it is, and that they are expanding this practice with other families they are serving.

**Does Family Group Conferencing Transform Child Welfare Practices?**

It appears that, based on the participants’ responses, family group conferencing is helping transform child welfare practices at the Brant CAS toward more collaborative case management practices. As a result of their experience with family group conferencing, the focus group participants seem to be:

- **Affirming their philosophy and values about family-led decision making processes.**
- **Changing their understanding about their client families in general.**
- **Maintaining a realistic sense of the strengths in individual families and knowing how to seek out the client family’s informal supports.**
- **Increasing awareness of the power differential between them and their client families and beginning to move away from the “expert” role in the relationship with a client family.**
- **Asking questions about the timing of family group conferencing referrals.**
- **Starting to expand the concept of articulating the Children’s Aid Society bottom lines to their work with other families.**
Participants highlighted some important system supports and challenges as they moved toward more collaborative case management practices.

**System Supports**

“With differential response, we are starting early to identify supports and link families to people. Drawing in support people is part of the planning all along with differential response.”

Participants identified how system supports make family group conferencing and collaborative case management practices easier to implement. A community-based child protection setting and the implementation of differential response were seen as two important system supports.

Child welfare service providers work within a specific legal and policy framework. The Brant CAS has experienced family group conferencing both prior to the Ontario transformation agenda and after the legislative and policy changes came into effect. The Brant CAS already had community-based child protection services before the policy and legislative changes, which may have supported the growth of family group conferencing when it was first introduced.

Participants pointed to the importance of the policy changes, specifically differential response, as supporting collaborative practice, with family group conferencing being one form of collaborative practice. It is encouraging that participants see that family group conferencing fits into a broader collaborative practice framework. It is also encouraging that there are some legislative and policy changes at the Ontario provincial level, as well as at the Brant CAS level, which support this collaborative practice.

**System Challenges**

“CAS [Children's Aid Society] still has the legal mandate — how to bridge the requirements of the mandate and the family-driven process?”

“CAS still has to be the boss, such as 'I have to see you every 30 days' and this may be in conflict with the family-driven plan.”

Given the context of the requirements of the agency’s usual practices, legislation, legal regulations, and Ministry standards that still need to be met, participants identified some of the challenges associated with implementing the family group conferencing plan and in working in partnership with family members rather than going back to doing business the old way.

They stressed that before the Children’s Aid Society staff members can explain to family members the reasons for the agency’s requirements, they must reconcile them in their own minds. Participants also talked about the time it takes to engage a family in the alternative dispute resolution process, and that other caseload demands sometimes make it difficult to have the time to spend with family members in this way. They also pointed out that sometimes other service providers in the community find it hard to wait for the family group conferencing process and wonder why the Children’s Aid Society does not use their mandated authority to move more quickly.

These system challenges formed an area of some frustration for the focus group participants, and in some ways confirm Connolly and McKenzie’s (1999) observation about the conflict between a worker’s core values and a worker’s prior training.
There appears to be a fundamental conflict between engaging in a family-driven process and the requirements of a child welfare system which tends to view itself as the expert on risk reduction with a focus on accountability and use of mandated authority.

Merkel-Holguin et al. (2003) discuss the challenges associated with integrating family group conferencing into mainstream practice. Family group conferencing challenges the assumptions and “decision making approaches that place power and sanction in the control of service providers” (p. 5). Merkel-Holguin and Wilmot (2005) further articulate this challenge: “Who decides what process a family is offered?” (p. 195) and “Does the promulgation of a continuum of family involvement models give permission to social workers and the system to remain within their comfort zones instead of moving toward better engagement and partnership efforts with families?” (p. 195).

Nixon et al. (2005) identified several key blocks to sustaining family group conferencing or moving family group conferencing into mainstream practice: program drift, agency constraint, budget constraint, lack of resources, and lack of feedback and awareness. Each of these has the potential to keep family group conferencing marginalized and under-used.

While individual workers and managers are finding creative ways to reconcile family-led decision making into the current child welfare system, this will remain an exercise in frustration and futility unless the child welfare system itself embraces family-led decision-making processes and makes the necessary systemic changes to support this.

Where to Go From Here?

While it appears that family group conferencing is helping transform child welfare case management practices at the Brant CAS, there are some important questions about how this happens.

Keeping in mind the importance of policy, legislation, and agency practice, an individual worker or manager’s philosophy and values seem to be the foundation of helping him or her practice in a collaborative way. This brings some questions to the forefront, including:

- How does the experience of family group conferencing affect the child welfare service providers’ philosophy and values underpinning their practice?
- What has supported their collaborative practice philosophy and values in the child welfare field?
- How can others be encouraged to practice in this way, knowing the importance of philosophy and values?
- What will help a child welfare service provider move toward the philosophy and values underpinning collaborative case management practices?
- What can we learn from those who are less enthusiastic about family group conferencing?
- What case management practices support family group conference plan implementation?

Another area for further attention are the requirements, usually legislated or based on Ministry standards, that may hinder collaborative practice through family group conferencing. Participants spoke about these being a challenge mostly during the implementation phase of the family group conference plan. Some questions to ponder include:

- How will the challenges to collaborative practice be identified both at an agency and Ministry level?
- What changes can be made to further support collaborative practice?
Exploring these questions may further assist the child welfare field to implement family group conferencing and collaborative case management practices in general.

Conclusion

It appears that family group conferencing is helping transform the case management practices of child welfare service providers at the Brant CAS toward a more collaborative practice model. These case management practices that support family group conferencing seem to be multi-faceted and nested within broader policy, legislative, and agency contexts.

The experience of participating in a family group conference seems somehow to be foundational in supporting collaborative case management practices. Encouraging and supporting the philosophy and values underpinning collaborative practice also seem to be important, although it is not clear how the experience of family group conferencing affects child welfare service providers’ philosophy and values.

Some collaborative case management practices have been identified, and the next step may be to find ways to support these practices. This may include the broader systemic supports of policy, legislation, and agency practice as well as staff members’ philosophy and values. It also appears important to address broader systemic challenges to collaborative practice.

Hopefully, this beginning exploration will help further refine some important questions about building collaborative case management practices in the child welfare field.

In summary, it appears that family group conferencing holds enormous potential to transform child welfare practice from viewing the service provider as “expert” to a collaborative practice with families receiving child welfare services. For family group conferencing to move into mainstream practice and thus have greater influence over case management practices of child welfare service providers, the legislation and policy, local agency policy and practice, and individual worker and manager practices all need to support family-led decision-making processes.

References


Responding to Culture in Family Group Decision Making: Summarizing Interviews With Kevin Ward and Inshirah Hassabu

Amy Rohm and Lara Bruce

Amy Rohm, MSW, and Lara Bruce, MSW, are program analysts and are part of the family group decision making team at American Humane.

Culture and cultural competence have become key considerations in strengths-based social work practice with children and their families. The core components of family group decision making also support the inclusion of key elements of a family’s culture to enhance this family-driven practice. This article seeks to combine the unique and diverse perspectives of two seasoned family group conferencing coordinators, Kevin Ward and Inshirah Hassabu. Ward’s and Hassabu’s personal and professional perspectives and experiences provide a unique contribution to the existing literature on family group decision making and culture. The authors conducted four telephone interviews1 with Ward and Hassabu, and this article represents an infusion of their responses to a series of questions regarding their work with children and families. The section headings provide a general sense of the questions posed. Through Ward’s and Hassabu’s work and personal experiences, cultural lenses, and wisdom, social work practitioners will gain a better understanding of culture in the context of family group decision making processes.

Meet Inshirah Hassabu and Kevin Ward

As coordinators, Hassabu and Ward demonstrate the meaning of cultural competence in their daily practices. Their own ethnic diversity, education, and experiences aid them in acknowledging the importance of understanding a family’s culture, values, and beliefs and recognizing the abilities of the families they serve to lead decision making for themselves and their children.

Hassabu immigrated to Toronto, Canada, from Sudan in 1997. She grew up in a tribal-based culture in which the concept of “family” goes beyond the Western notion of a nuclear family. On a professional level, Hassabu worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other international nongovernmental organizations, where she assisted in relief operations in East Africa. In that role, she was able to work with many of the refugees from her native and neighboring countries, learning about their hardships and needs firsthand. After moving to Canada, Hassabu worked as a settlement officer, advocating for new immigrants involved with child protective service agencies. In this position, Hassabu quickly realized the impact that court decisions had on the children and families she worked with. Her frustration rapidly grew due to the conflict between what the families wanted and the decisions made by the courts. She often found that this discrepancy was due to cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication between the family and court personnel.

In Toronto, about half the population is considered “newcomers” or recent immigrants (YMCA of Greater Toronto, 2008). Much of the newly immigrated population comes from Africa, the Caribbean, Portugal, Spain, France, and

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1The interviews with Inshirah Hassabu and Kevin Ward took place between November 19, 2007, and July 2, 2008.
Asia. With such a diverse population, Hassabu knew that cultural misunderstandings would only worsen for children and families served by child protective service agencies. She often heard newcomers saying, “They [agencies] don’t understand what this means to us.” This comment demonstrates the lack of cultural competence within these agencies and the important role that culture plays on how children are raised.

Hassabu was invited to participate in a 2-day family group conferencing training at an ethno-specific center in Toronto. While only planning to attend the first day, after learning about how this approach enables children to play a vital role in the process, she decided to go back. Her experiences in traditional child protection taught her that children were voiceless within a system that was designed to protect them. For Hassabu, family group conferences give children an avenue to express themselves, their experiences, and their hopes for their futures and their families. In May 2003, Hassabu became a freelance family group conference coordinator with the Family Group Conferencing Project of Toronto. In 2004, she was chosen to become the manager of the project, which is dedicated to spreading the model throughout Toronto and across the province.

For Hassabu, family group conferences give children an avenue to express themselves, their experiences, and their hopes for their futures and their families.

Ward's ancestry stems from two different clan systems. His father is Native American (Choctaw Nation), from a large tribal family in Arkansas, and his mother is from the Tower/Towry clan of Ireland. Ward describes his native ancestry as one of continual connection because he learned about his aboriginal ancestry at an early age, even though it was a topic not openly talked about in his community. He started school on the Lahontan Indian reservation in Fallon, Nev., while living on a ranch near the community. In the late 1950s and early '60s, it was “inadvisable” to be of Native American ancestry, so his father and mother raised him quite independently.

Ward's memories from his early teen years are of a strong tribal family consisting of over 300 cousins. There was a sense of communal parenting that enabled Ward to feel a strong sense of security and belonging and also to recognize and have confidence in the power of family.

Ward moved to Victoria, Canada, in 1980 and says that he initially had a hard time getting used to the dominant Canadian culture, as its rules and norms were foreign to him. After 5 years, he decided to leave the populated area of Victoria and settle in the interior, rural community of Salmon Arm, British Columbia. There he was invited to live and work in the native communities, where there was a strong reminder of the comfort and safety of being a part of a familial territory where he understood the cultural rules. Since then, Ward has continued to exercise his passion and dedication to serving his people, through respect, acknowledgment, and understanding of their culture.

In 2002, Ward received training in family group decision making and began to use this process within the communities he was serving. Most of the tribal community was deeply rooted in traditional thinking and quickly rejected the foreign aspects of family group decision making approaches. Ward learned from the tribal elders that the respect for their traditional ways needed to be emphasized throughout the process. Through more consultation, he realized that the guiding principles behind family group decision making had always been part of the traditional response among First Nations people; they just did not use the same terminology. Ward continues to acknowledge and honor Native American and Canadian First Nations people's inherent cultural
knowledge, especially when it comes to making decisions.

Through his conversations with community members in Coldwater First Nation, Ward found that of the more than 600 members, only eight distinct families existed from many different ancestries. He also found that each of the eight families has its own distinct way of making decisions and a unique and sacred location for this purpose. When asked why he chose to use family group decision making processes within these communities instead of their natural processes, Ward explained that many of the traditional forms of decision making within the families had been forgotten or forced aside through colonization and other assimilation techniques. Ward described family group decision making as an “authorized” practice by the mainstream governing agencies in Canada. Because so many of the core principles supporting this practice align with the traditional decision-making practices of the First Nations people, they were able to see how family group decision making could fit into their traditional way of life. The First Nations people were also drawn to family group decision making’s international use and its ability to be flexible in response to family and community needs. His challenge as a “visitor” to the community became how to reintroduce this form of decision making and show the community how the values and beliefs align with its traditional processes. He was faced with finding a way to honor existing cultural practices by increasing the confidence of the “knowledge keepers” of the community in old practices and demonstrating the strengths of family group decision making within that context.

Both Hassabu and Ward believe that family group decision making is a powerful and highly effective way to work with children and families in the child welfare system. Family group decision making and its corresponding processes empower families to use their culture as the root of their ability to form a plan. While both coordinators are working with very different populations and cultures, family group decision making allows those differences to be embraced. The power of the process combined with the spirit of the family is what keeps Ward and Hassabu dedicated to family group decision making.

What We Know About the Definitions of Culture

Culture means many different things to different people. In speaking with the authors, Ward defined culture with a statement made by one of the elders in his community: “[Culture is] who we are and how we do things.” Hassabu felt that one cannot define culture for someone else and that it would be inaccurate to try. Throughout the interview with Hassabu, she seemed to have one recurring theme: “The best way to learn about a family’s culture is to ask.” This idea is similar to the social work value of “starting where the client is,” which serves as a framework for all levels of intervention. An individual’s culture, cultural affiliations, and cultural influences can only be determined by the individual. While a person’s cultural affiliations may be considered the same as someone else’s, they can mean something completely different to each individual. According to both Ward and Hassabu, the best way to understand a person’s culture is by allowing that person time and space to tell his or her story, and being willing and open to listen. Hassabu stressed that the more we listen to families, the more invested they will be in the process, and the more likely they will be to listen to what we have to say.

What We Know About Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is something that most professionals strive to achieve, but what does it mean in family group decision making? While cultural competence is important, the critical issue in family group decision making is allowing families to shape the process and content to their particular cultural situation. In the end, if coordinators are truly following the values of family group decision making, then it is really up to the children and families they work with to define culture for themselves. Seeking,
acknowledging, and responding to a family’s self-determined definition of culture drives the coordinator to cultural competence with that family. Both Ward and Hassabu believe that it is their role to ensure that cultural considerations are taken into account from the first contact with a child and family.

Hassabu told a story that illustrates this theory of cultural competence as a byproduct of thorough preparation in family group decision making. An East African family came to the attention of the child protection agency in Toronto. Hassabu was asked to coordinate a family group conference for the family. They spoke an East African dialect that she did not know and were from a culture that she had not worked with previously. In her first phone call to the family, Hassabu felt that they were polite but not welcoming. The grandmother gave her the phone number of her granddaughter, who spoke fluent English. Realizing that there must be a better way to talk to the family, Hassabu spoke with the granddaughter and asked if she had offended anyone in the family. The granddaughter informed her that this high-profile case had isolated the family from their community. With the granddaughter’s consent, she visited the local East African community center to gain a better understanding of the family’s cultural group. The staff at the center explained that the family carried a lot of shame as a result of the investigation. They did not want to interact with people in their community because they were afraid that additional information would be revealed and cause them more shame. The center helped guide Hassabu and introduced her to some family friends who talked with her about how to set up a meeting with the family and their friends in a more respectful way. A family friend was able to translate during the meeting and Hassabu found that the family was very open and welcoming.

Hassabu’s efforts to be culturally competent improved her relationship with the family and allowed their meetings to be culturally relevant to them. When asked how her cultural competence led to cultural relevance for the family, Hassabu responded that family group decision making allows for a natural progression to cultural relevance because it allows more time to understand and acknowledge the families’ cultures and make them feel more comfortable with the process.

**Preparing for a Meeting**

Many aspects of preparation are essential to the success of family group decision making and the family’s ownership over the process. The coordinator has the critical task of gathering essential information about the family. Coordinators are also considered the “carriers of information” about the needs of the child welfare system to confer with participants and stakeholders. Hassabu mentioned that coordinators have a responsibility to carry information from the family back to other stakeholders. It is also the coordinator’s responsibility to create clear expectations about which pieces of information shared at the family group conference are entered into the case system.

Hassabu and Ward stated that among other items, coordinators must address the following areas in order to be truly culturally aware:

- Language barriers
- Intimidations of community norms
- Conflicting values
- Migratory stress

Coordinators have several ways to gather information about a family’s culture. For most coordinators, the avenues of preparation differ
depending on their community and the resources available. Ward, who works in a rural/tribal community, and Hassabu, who works in an urban setting, will prepare for a family group conference differently. Both Ward and Hassabu agree that coordinators should start their cultural preparation before they have a specific family to work with. Coordinators should become familiar with the cultural demographics of their agency’s community.

Another key point that Hassabu stressed throughout her interviews is the constant support she receives from her peers on the Toronto family group conferencing team that allows her to conduct such a thorough preparation for the conference. Hassabu also mentioned that she has some flexibility in the amount of time she is allotted for preparation with a family prior to the conference. This flexibility allows her to explore the complex relationships within a family and the time and effort enables the family group conference to move forward in a more culturally respectful way. In addition, Hassabu considers herself lucky to be based in Toronto, where resources on many cultures are easily accessible through numerous ethno-specific community centers for newcomers. Hassabu stated that she often uses the people and resources available through these community centers in Toronto. She also uses the Internet to conduct preliminary searches for the overall cultural views of the population and speaks with co-workers and colleagues who have worked with families from the same cultural group.

Ward has a very different approach to cultural preparation. He sees family group decision making as a possible link between the system and the tribe, and therefore focuses his role solely on coordinating the process. He has the opportunity to speak with tribal elders, learn from family and community members, and facilitate the creation of cultural graphs or sociograms and family trees of four or five generations of community members. Ward recommended “hearing who the family is” from the family, much like Hassabu. “With self-education, a coordinator can have an ear to facilitate with, not simply a message to bring. You don’t have something to tell, you have a lot to learn. Checking with the family to find out if there are any barriers to making the FGC [family group conference] happen is also a critical step.” Again, the emphasis is on finding out more about a family’s culture from the expert — the family.

You don’t have something to tell, you have a lot to learn

In one interview, Hassabu and Ward also discussed the various ways to approach families in order to learn about their culture and to introduce them to the family group conference process. The coordinator “widens the circle” and takes into account the entire family, including those who are not currently connected and who do not live in close proximity to the family. Coordinators work toward inclusion of all members of the family group, as children are entitled to their family group members planning for them, while attending to any emotional, spiritual, and physical safety issues that may emerge during preparation. With this in mind, it is essential to include the children’s perspective when learning about a family’s culture and about members of the family group. Hassabu and Ward were asked how they approach multicultural families when preparing for a family group conference and Hassabu acknowledged that working with “mixed” families was often more challenging because of the extra time needed to properly prepare. She suggested that coordinators talk to each side of the family separately to get an idea of their cultural considerations and ultimately let the parents make the final decisions about their cultural preferences for the meeting. She also recommended that if additional issues arise, the coordinator should remind all parties of how their disagreements negatively impact their children.
and to continually redirect the focus of the meeting back to the children.

Ward suggested conducting a genogram and sociogram with the family to determine if there are other family members and social factors to consider when examining the family’s cultural influences and creating a list of people to invite to the conference. He mentioned that often, families continue to do things a certain way because that is how they have always done it, not necessarily for cultural reasons. Once these things are brought to light, families sometimes reconsider their family traditions. He provided a great example of this point: One day a young woman was watching her mother prepare a traditional pot roast meal. As always, her mother cut off the end of the roast and put it in a pan. The young woman asked her mother why she cut off the end of the roast. “Well, that is a good question,” said her mother. “My mom always did so I have always done it.” The young woman decided to go ask her grandmother. Her grandmother had the same reply: “Well, that is a good question. I guess it was just how my mother did it.” The young woman continued on and asked her great-grandmother why she always cut off the end of a roast. Her great-grandmother replied, “I never had a big enough pan!”

In his role, Ward finds it particularly important that he and other coordinators recognize generational differences within the family and the community. They must also take into account whether children are being raised within or outside of their native communities. Hassabu pointed out that “older generations hold on to their community’s cultural traditions and values and often become isolated from their children.” Hassabu and Ward both feel that it is natural to learn from past experiences with families from the same cultural group, but pointed out the importance of not making generalizations based on those experiences. As already stated, members of the same cultural group may perceive their involvement and beliefs very differently. There may be different identifications with the same culture. Personality and interfamilial dynamics may also influence how culture is expressed or understood and families are often not as homogenous as they may initially seem.

How Do You Handle Timing Issues When Working With Families?

A common challenge within family group decision making processes is the issue of timing for the preparation phase and scheduling the conference itself. Many child welfare workers struggle with this issue because they want to follow the model and ask the family to decide when they are ready to schedule their meeting, but they are also bound by the timelines and procedures of their agencies. The authors were curious to find out how Ward and Hassabu address these challenges when they arise in their work with children and families and asked them to provide specific examples to explain their situations.

Ward shared an experience working with a family within a tribal community in British Columbia. A youth accidentally shot a 12-year-old boy, who died. Ward talked with the deceased boy’s parents. His mother was from a tribal nation in which, Ward understood, it is customary not to talk about the dead for a week or two or until after the “passing-on” ceremonies. The boy’s father was from a different tribal culture in which, Ward understood, it is not appropriate to talk about a death for at least a year. Ward checked with community members and decided to wait to hold the family group conference until a year had passed. Ward quickly realized that the family and the community were very upset by this decision and saw it as a lack of respect for their family and culture. Ward’s final findings were that the father was living among his wife’s tribe, and therefore her cultural traditions took precedence over his cultural traditions. When asked how Ward might have done things differently, he said he would have asked the family directly what they wanted to do rather than attempting to consider both positions for them. This example
illustrates the importance of gathering as much information about a family’s culture as soon as possible. It also highlights another important aspect of family group conference timing. Ward suggests “waiting until a family is ready” to hold a conference. It becomes the coordinator’s responsibility to adequately prepare and empower the family to make decisions about the timing of the conference. Ward also believes that it is the coordinator’s responsibility to frequently check in with the family and clearly identify a point when they will be ready to make decisions. Ward described this as, “being present, but not pushy.”

Allowing the family to decide when they are ready can be difficult under the time constraints and mandates of child welfare agencies. Ward and Hassabu discussed the importance of educating caseworkers, court officials, and other key stakeholders about family group decision making processes. Their involvement in the process is critical, as is their support of the meeting occurring when the family is ready, even if it does not occur within system-driven timelines. It is important for caseworkers and other stakeholders to understand that a family cannot make decisions about what is in the best interests of their children if they are not ready or if they have not been provided with all the information.

How Do You Consider Culture in a Specific Family-Driven Meeting?

This section explains Ward and Hassabu’s views on providing families with the space to make decisions in a culturally appropriate manner for themselves within family group decision making processes. Ward stated, “If families truly drive the family group decision making process, then their culture is a crucial component to its success.”

A family’s culture can be interwoven into the process of creating a plan for its children in many ways. The coordinators need to provide families with a voice and space to share information related to the families’ history with the system; their relationships with each other; spiritual, financial, medical, or other needs; and their culture. The coordinator must be mindful of and respect families’ needs to have the meeting and meeting materials in their own language. This detail is very empowering to a family and to the success of the meeting. According to Hassabu, for some cultural communities, this language consideration may also mean being silent in certain situations and respecting a family’s tradition in doing so. Some coordinators are even looking into hiring a translator, to ensure that the meeting is culturally relevant to the family. Coordinators should not rely on family or community members to translate for them unless that has been arranged during the preparation phase.

The opening and ending of a conference may also be culturally important to a family. Some literature suggests that families may want to open their meeting with a traditional meal, a prayer, or a song, or in some other culturally appropriate manner. Discussing these options with a family recognizes their leadership over the conference proceedings and further adds to the coordinator’s cultural understanding during the meeting. This information and understanding should also be relayed to the worker who continues to work with the family after the meeting. Furthermore, this information allows system professionals to understand and appreciate the family’s experience, hardships of being uprooted, and struggle to adjust in a new culture. Hassabu witnessed firsthand the significance a family’s experiences have on all conference participants. She coordinated a conference that involved two children who were removed from the care of their mother and older brother (16) to be placed in foster care. The oldest child decided to open the conference by reading a narrative he wrote describing their traumatic journey from their home country to Canada and the loss of their father and sole protector along the journey. He talked about how they felt loss again when his brother and sister were removed. At the closing of the conference, the family’s caseworker acknowledged that for the first time, she was witnessing the incredible strength this small
family had regardless of their inability to speak fluent English or assimilate.

In his work with First Nations people, Ward also recognizes and acknowledges the ancestors and the territory or land on which the meetings take place; all land has caretakers or guardians. Ward understands that if that essential aspect is not acknowledged, disrespect falls on the meeting and the users of that land.

For all family group decision making processes, it is essential to the focus and success of the conference that the child’s voice and opinions are heard and acknowledged as being essential to each step of the process. For some cultures, this is a challenge due to traditional views on the role that children play within the community. For others, such as the First Nations, this is an understandable step already incorporated into their decision-making processes. Children may not always want to be present during the conference due to the anxiety, stress, and additional trauma it may pose. Therefore, it becomes the role of the coordinator to ensure that their voices are heard or that they have the supports they need, should they choose to be part of the conference (Nixon, 2007). Professionals have suggested that this can be accomplished in many ways. Children can choose a support person and a signal to use when they are feeling overwhelmed or anxious during their conference. They can choose to write a letter to be read aloud during the information-sharing phase of the conference and referred to throughout the conference whenever the focus needs to be shifted back to the children. They can also participate by audio- or videotape, in which they express their needs, wants, and hopes. A significant component of the preparation phase for the coordinator then becomes educating the other family members and conference participants about the importance of having the children’s perspectives present during the conference.

**How Do You Address the Balance of Power Between Workers and Families?**

A fundamental element of all family group decision making processes is balancing the power between families and the system. Coordinators have the responsibility to adequately prepare families and professionals to expect families to lead the initial decisions. Families may not be comfortable with this role after historically being voiceless and powerless. Service providers may also be reluctant to embrace the shift (Merkel-Holguin, 2004).

What is interesting is that when professionals are encouraged and supported in minimizing their assumptions of informal powers by affirming the knowledge and expertise of family groups, by facilitating family group influence on the processes followed, by positioning family groups to lead decision making and by supporting family group plans that emerge from the process — they find they are able to work with family plans, enjoy better relationships with families, and witness improved outcomes, yet use their formal powers less often. (Doolan, 2007, p. 15)

**Conclusion**

Child welfare systems have made significant strides toward working with families through family-centered, strengths-based practices, and moving away from treatment-centered, paternalistic practices. This shift in practice may not be complete until a family’s culture, cultural influences and cultural affiliations are always considered part of the main focus when working with them to enable them to make...
decisions about their safety, permanency, and well-being. As professionals, our value of cultural competence stems from our own personal, professional, and cultural experiences — who you are is what defines how you work. Family group decision making provides many of those invaluable experiences to the child welfare system and its stakeholders, and provides a way to demonstrate genuine respect for a family and its culture. It is critical for the continued success of the implementation of family group decision making practice within child welfare agencies that its values be incorporated into an agency’s entire culture and not just with individual families and cases. If this aspect is not thoroughly considered during implementation, then family group decision making practice may prove to be a child welfare fad rather than a lasting practice. We encourage social workers and other key stakeholders to consider the importance of a family’s culture and traditions to the success of family group conferencing, to better support the children and families they serve.

References


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Bringing Narrative Inquiry to Family Group Conferencing

Maureen Maloney and Tara Ney

Maureen Maloney, QC, is a professor of law and the director of the Institute of Dispute Resolution at the University of Victoria. Tara Ney, PhD, RPsych, is an adjunct professor on the faculty of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria.

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"Historically, social-welfare work has been rooted in an ethos of human compassion and justice, with justice, like compassion, understood as something qualitative and context-specific." (Heather Menzies, 2005, p. 142)

This paper describes how a case study approach using a narrative methodology can be used to advance our understanding of how a family group conference serves children and families engaged with the child protection system. In this paper, we first refer to a critical review of the existing family group conference outcome research and conclude that to successfully implement collaborative practices such as family group conferencing, we must recognize that important questions remain unanswered. Next, we identify and challenge the key assumptions from the positivist research tradition on which existing family group conference outcome research is premised. Finally, we describe some qualitative research turns, primarily based on narrative inquiry, which may help bring about answers to important questions.

Summary of Critical Review

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how a narrative inquiry can contribute to understanding how family group conferencing in child protection can (and cannot) bring about and sustain collaborative practices for those for whom the services are intended. To facilitate further understanding of family group conferencing, we first situate the family group conference research, which is largely steeped in a positivist research tradition (characteristically focusing on quantitative data which embraces notions of cause, effect, and proof) and address the limitations of this research paradigm.

The short but intense history of family group conference research over the past decade has largely been concerned with demonstrating whether participants are satisfied with the process, the best practices to use in administering the intervention, and the short-term outcomes for families (Isaacs, Maloney, & Ney, 2007). To date, this research has overwhelmingly focused on questions of satisfaction, program process, and short-term outcomes resulting in what Barnsdale and Walker (2007) conclude is a “glut of evidence . . . in relation to the high ‘process’ satisfaction of participants and some [positive] short-term outcomes” (p. 65), but a corresponding “dearth of research on long-term outcomes” (p. 37), especially as they pertain to children.

Bearing in mind the lack of longitudinal research as noted by Barnsdale and Walker, evidence nevertheless leans in the direction of supporting continued practice of family group conferencing in child protection (Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, & Burford, 2003). Current findings confirm not only practitioner and user
satisfaction, but also better communication, better working relationships, and less conflict. Family group conferencing has also been shown to be effective in a wide range of high-risk cases. Outcome studies have further shown that safe and effective plans have been derived and carried out and duration of placements has been reduced. Moreover, children were more likely to be placed with extended family rather than in nonfamily care. Support for continued practice has also come from studies that showed cost-neutrality or savings (for key, stand-alone summaries of existing process and outcome studies, see Barnsdale & Walker, 2007; Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Isaacs, et al., 2007; Lupton & Nixon, 1999; Marsh & Crow, 1998; and Merkel-Holguin, et al., 2003).

Although the majority of studies have concluded that the family group conference results in better outcomes for children or, in some instances, inconclusive outcomes, there have also been some perplexing negative findings that leave some central questions unanswered. Worth noting here is that rarely have children been included in these studies1, and many of the studies were beset with methodological problems. In particular, few studies have had valid comparator groups to verify that the positive outcomes are related to family group conferencing. Moreover, the long-term outcome studies have been quite short, from 6 to 18 months. Added to these concerns is the fact that the one study that met these hurdles and dealt in depth with the long-term outcomes directly contradicts these rosy assumptions and conclusions (see Isaacs, et al., 2007, for a critical overview of these studies).

The most methodologically sophisticated long-term research was carried out by Sundell and Vinnerljung (2004) in Sweden and is a case in point. Ninety-seven children (all under age 17) participating in family group conferencing were followed over 3 years and compared with a random sample of 142 children dealt with by traditional child protection processes. This study found that young people who were involved in family group conferencing were more likely to experience rereferral to the agency, often by extended family members, for reoccurrence of abuse. The family group conference children also spent longer in out-of-home placements but were subjected to less intrusive support from the child protection agency, compared with those dealt with through traditional processes. Sundell and Vinnerljung cited possible factors contributing to these results, such as the lack of continuing supports. They also cautioned against extrapolating research results in different contexts and countries and assuming that the results apply in all cultural contexts.

Nonetheless, the contrast between these results and the short-term outcome research is disturbing and highlights the need for further in-depth long-term research to explore the unique circumstances or general applicability of the findings to other countries and regions. Reporting the reoccurrence of abuse or neglect may also be a misleading indicator of the failure of family group conferencing. Higher levels of reporting further abuse following participation in a family group conference may indicate improved relationships or communication with social workers or authorities. Research that inquires about and records not only what occurs but also why and how it occurs is clearly required.

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1We have identified two studies that included children’s and youth’s voices that focused on the immediate benefits and risks of participating in a family group conference (Bell & Wilson, 2006; Holland & O’Neill, 2006).
Consistent with our concerns outlined above, Merkel-Holguin, et al. (2003) also spotlighted this pressing issue: “It is not possible to assess the value of [the family group conference] without understanding the context in which it operates and how [italics added] this shapes its practice and expectations” (p. 134). In other words, previous research has focused on what contributes to the effectiveness of the family group conference. Consistent with Merkel-Holguin et al., we believe this body of research is ready to be advanced by shifting the research question from what contributes to this effectiveness to how and why it happens.

To address these concerns, we argue for a turn from a positivist to a nonpositivist research paradigm. To do this, we first explicate the basic assumptions of the positivist paradigm. Readers familiar with these assumptions may choose to skip directly to the Narrative Inquiry section, in which we provide an overview of the basic tenets of narrative and discourse theory and methods, and demonstrate some specific issues and questions about family group conferencing that can be addressed with these nonpositivist research approaches. We conclude that, in combination with quantitative research approaches based on a positivist paradigm, narrative inquiries can advance and enrich the understanding of “what are the outcomes of family group conferencing?” by addressing questions of “how and why.”

The Positivist Paradigm and Qualitative Research

In the late 19th century, when social science was separating from natural science and striving to legitimize itself, the social sciences made a deliberate gesture to adopt the scientific methodologies developed for the natural sciences (Kuhn, 1970). This made sense, since the scientific method was a powerful, accepted, and credible discourse. Thus, as disciplines in the social sciences evolved, they typically took seriously the central notions of the positivistic paradigm, including reliability, objectivity, generalizability, and validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). The signal that social science was “advancing” was that researchers were now representing their findings with numbers — the absolute language of the positivist paradigm. Social science emerged, then, as an attempt to adopt the empirical, statistical, and scientific methods to establish some absolutes about human behavior and social interaction. The limitations and dangers of representing human behaviors and interaction using these methods and their inherent assumptions, however, were not fully underscored until recently (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

It is misleading and simplistic to characterize the positivist traditions as quantitative and nonpositivist traditions as qualitative, though this is often done. Positivist research often incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For example, Pennell & Burford (2000) conducted a study with a comparator group to assess the long-term outcomes related to levels of family violence before and after family group conferencing. Having administered checklists and examined progress reports, they determined that those families who had participated in a family group conference demonstrated a decrease in abuse and neglect. Individual interviews verified these findings. Because the qualitative interviews were used to validate the original research question (“What are the long-term outcomes of family group conferencing?”), we would suggest that this research still falls within the positivist paradigm. A nonpositivist approach and a narrative methodology in particular would be less concerned with championing the norm and more interested in making unique and unexpected experiences more visible. The dissimilarities between the positivist and nonpositivist traditions will become more evident as we explore the underlying philosophical assumptions and distinctive features of the scientific method as laid out by Pinnegar and Daynes (2007).
Reliability

To understand the positivist notion of reliability, one must first assume that the object of study has some “independent, object-like existence with no intrinsic meaning” (Smith, 1983, p. 7). The idea from the physical sciences is that things like rocks or other physical substances can be measured accurately and consistently; outcomes may be reduced to numbers and are predictable. Researchers use numbers to demonstrate that the phenomenon under study can be reliably determined and represented with a particular number on one occasion, then another and another. Reliability is to consistently obtain the same findings across time. However, in the following discussion, we will use narrative inquiry to move away from the idea of how objects of study are knowable and fixed to examine how meaning is represented by its context; that is, meaning is context-dependent.

Objectivity

The notion of objectivity is based on the same assumptions of reality as those that underpin reliability, but now the idea is applied to the researcher. The researcher is capable of being a detached, disinterested, and disengaged observer. Accordingly, the researcher is not considered a part of what is being researched; the researcher is neutral and objective. This notion has significant implications when it comes to developing methods of narrative inquiry.

Generalizability

Many positivist inquiry methods are geared to controlling conditions of experimentation to increase the power to predict across situations. This is called “generalizability,” and it allows the researcher to “discover” universal laws which will tell us about our human interactions. Thus, methods such as “controlled treatments,” “manipulation of variables,” and “randomization” are methodological inventions of the positivist tradition that assume we can control the object of study. These methodologies also set the stage for creating universal laws from the “facts” discovered. As will be demonstrated below, the idea of applying universal laws to all individuals is highly problematic from a narrative perspective.

Validity

In philosophy, epistemology is about how we know what we know. Within the positivist paradigm, the underlying assumption is that there is one way of knowing, and this single way of knowing (which becomes the “truth”) is measured by the way the numbers can be shown to be reliable and generalizable. Thus, validity refers to establishing the “truthfulness” of something.

In sum, the quantitative approach in social science research is based on assumptions from positivist traditions which have made it possible for social scientists to believe that their results about human behaviors and interactions are meaningful and generalizable across time and space if only these methods of “science” are adhered to. When failures or inconsistencies occur, they are attributed to the difficulties of identifying or controlling all relevant variables in social science research, not to the methods themselves.

The qualitative researcher, on the other hand, is more interested in understanding than controlling and predicting the world of complex, human behaviors. As a result, qualitative research has developed a different set of standards and ethical principles to guide its work. Some of these will become apparent as we describe the various questions that can be addressed using narrative inquiry. But first, we will describe the underlying tenets of narrative methodology and theory.
Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry in the social sciences comes from a tradition of work called qualitative research. In their now classic *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) provide the following definition:

> Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. . . . Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.
> Qualitative research involves the studied use of and collection of a variety of empirical materials. . . . that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives.  
> (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2)

In contrast to the positivist tradition, which focuses on cause, effect, proof, and reducing behavior to numbers, qualitative research is interested in understanding the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research is curious about the complexities of social life, focusing on processes rather than essences (Hall & White, 2005). Also inherent in this definition are very different assumptions about interpretation, truth, and the human experience. In terms of researching family group conferencing in child protection, these assumptions have critical implications for both the stance of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher and the subject.

Narrative has a particular meaning in everyday life. In popular culture, it is a metaphor used to tell a story of our human experience. The story becomes a fundamental unit to convey that experience. Stories in everyday life connect people with other people and their everyday lives — experiences of profound joy, sadness, courage, and despair, good times and hard times, good deeds and misdeeds (Isay, 2007). In everyday life, stories provide a profoundly moving listening experience, and they have the power to connect us to a shared humanity. Meaning becomes represented via story. As Gubrium and Holstein (1998) put it, “More and more, we are learning that life comes to us in the form of stories” (p. 163).

Narrative approaches in social science research accept that story, in the colloquial sense as described above, is a powerful device for human communication and connection. But a narrative inquiry, in the way we would like to convey here, has deeper philosophical roots, and wants to excavate the meanings represented in the language used by the storyteller. In this sense, a narrative inquiry is concerned with “how and why did the story get arranged that way?” Below, we will show how this general line of inquiry may be able to reveal insights about and advance our understanding of family group conferencing and the experiences of participants.

In everyday life, stories provide a profoundly moving listening experience, and they have the power to connect us to a shared humanity.

To understand the value that narrative theory and methodology can contribute to understanding family group conferencing in the practice of child protection, we need to begin with what the “narrative turn” means. In exploring this definition, we ask, “What are the inherent assumptions of a narrative inquiry?” Our synopsis below is brief; for a more comprehensive overview of the uses of narrative in the social sciences, we refer you to Jean Clandinin’s comprehensive edited volume of narrative papers (2007).

In a survey of narrative research in the social sciences, Riessman and Speedy (2007) noted an underuse of narrative in social work research, though definitions and criteria for defining
narrative theory and methods are many and evolving (see Riessman & Quinney, 2005; Riessman & Speedy; Seale, 2002; and Speedy, 2007). Rather than providing an overview of the various theories here, we agree with Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) that identification of thematic commonalities underlying narrative approaches to research are most useful in understanding what the narrative turn is all about. Below we explicate four themes and their accompanying assumptions: (1) a change in the relationship between researcher and subject, (2) the kinds of data used for a study, (3) the focus of the study, and (4) the kinds of knowing embraced by the researcher (Pinnegar & Daynes, p. 6). We also juxtapose these narrative turns with the positivist paradigm as described above. We add to this discussion the kinds of specific questions that can advance our understanding of the experience of family group conferencing or those who participate.

**Researcher-Subject Relationship**

The first theme brings our attention to the relationship between the researcher and the subject. Underpinning this theme is the philosophical notion of “reality.” From the description above, we are reminded that a positivist paradigm assumes that things, people, or events are real, have an essence, and can be separated for study. It follows that within this paradigm, the researcher is viewed as neutral, unchangeable, and independent from the topic of research; that is, the researcher is not only objective, bounded, and static, but also largely unconcerned with his or her relationship to the temporal, social, and historical context.

In contrast, a narrative inquiry treats “reality” quite differently. As Stone (1997) observes, “measuring social phenomena differs from measuring physical objects because people, unlike rocks, respond to being measured” (p. 177). This assumes the researcher and the subject are in contact and interacting with one another. They are embedded in a dynamic social and cultural relationship with one another that is liable to change in time, and, importantly, this is so whether they are in physical proximity or not. This relationship is apparent in mind and body, and transcends physical space. As such, it is possible and expected that there is a relationship between the researcher and subject that influences and changes each one.

The implication of these assumptions for narrative methods becomes obvious. No longer are the processes of data collection, analysis, and interpretation an empirical and detached activity. Rather, the relationship between the researcher and subject is necessarily and constantly located and questioned; what is being researched is a socially constructed concept that emerges in the relationship between them. Thus, data collection, analysis, and interpretation must first provide explicit descriptions of the relevant context, which may include personal, social, cultural, historical, or political factors, to accurately understand the topic of research.

An important implication of this more connected researcher-subject relationship is the focus on ethics. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) observe that “researchers need to engage in more responsive and interactive ways with research participants” (p. 13). Thus, researchers need to be concerned with standards of research practice which take into account “the articulateness of subjects, the integrity or honesty of the accounts, and theory of tacit knowledge in a research subject’s ability to reveal his or her thought or belief” (p. 13). The marginalized people typically engaged by child protection workers deserve to have researchers take these ethical concerns seriously.

While there are challenges associated with understanding and continually tracking the shifting relationship between researcher and subject, useful practices and questions emerge. For instance, when subjectivity is not something to be controlled and predicted, we can ask, “Can and should we use the research relationship in bringing about profound change?” And, because
narrative inquiry gives status to the notions of human agency and imagination, we can ask, “Can we embrace the particular stories and experiences of clients to support them in re-imagining and reshaping their lives?” In this view, participants are no longer the subject of research but are involved in their own lives as agents of change; the research is participatory. Participants are now able to involve their stories in political and bureaucratic spheres (see for example, Dart & Davies, 2003). We might also ask, “How can policies be shaped by participant stories rather than being administered top down?” and, “How can the stories that participants share be used to advocate for their perspectives and positions?” The researcher can thus participate together with the research subjects in being a catalyst for change. And finally, in terms of the changing relationship, where time is no longer viewed as static and neutral, we can ask, “How does the experience of those involved in the family group conference change over time, and how is this conveyed to the researcher?” and, “What influences those changes as the stories are shared with others?” From a narrative perspective, a relationship cannot be held still in time, but rather, it is constructed and influenced by the circumstances of people’s lives.

Use of Words as Data

Turning from a focus on numbers to a focus on words signals an understanding that words are produced socially, historically, and culturally. From a narrative perspective, all science (and therefore research) is ultimately represented in language — it has to mean something. This is so whether the language is represented in numbers or words (numbers can only have a meaning when represented in language).

In narrative inquiry, then, the stories are used as platforms from which to examine the nuances of language

Numbers are especially subject to the pressures of non-neutrality when they are seen to function as specialized knowledge within a discipline where power resides and is administered (this is called “discourse,” as per Foucault, 1980). Bring to mind the conclusion of Sundell and Vinnerljung’s (2004) randomized control study conducted over 3 years, perhaps the most methodologically rigorous study conducted to date. They found that family group conferencing accounted for 0-7% of the statistical variance of outcome variables, and from this they concluded, “The findings did not support the alleged effectiveness of the family group conference model compared to traditional investigations in preventing future maltreatment cases” (p. 267). From a positivist paradigm, this is a reasonable conclusion; from a narrative perspective, the conclusion is overstated and problematic. The narrative researcher wants to ask:

“How trustworthy are these conclusions?”
“What privileged discourse shapes such conclusions?”
“How did maltreatment continue for families who had a family group conference?”
“What are the exceptions, and how can they be accounted for?”
“How did maltreatment desist or transform for families who had a family group conference?”

Thus, as numbers are represented by and conflated with particular discourses, they can conjure a singular and fixed idea of what they represent, and in doing so, misrepresent or overlook the complexities of human interaction.

As can be surmised here, while the positivist paradigm views language as transparent, stable, and singular, from a narrative perspective,
as Riessman (1993) explains, “language is understood as deeply constitutive of reality, not simply a technical device for establishing meaning. Informants’ stories do not mirror a world ‘out there.’ They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (p. 5). In narrative inquiry, then, the stories are used as platforms from which to examine the nuances of language.

As the narrative perspective favors words over numbers, attention is drawn to a number of methodological implications. First, and perhaps quite obviously, the narrative researcher will ensure there are opportunities for participants to tell their stories. Also, using words as data to understand human interactions and experiences requires particular methods that permit textual analysis of the stories shared by participants. Detailed transcripts must be compiled and given adequate attention, to avoid memory errors and personal influences (Riessman and Speedy, 2007).

Narrative inquiry focuses on revealing where the language is derived (which discourses), where the dominant discourses are being drawn from, how meaning may be appropriated, how meanings and understandings are (jointly) constructed, and how these understandings become constituted in the particular actions and practices of those who are taking them up. When the language that narrators use is viewed as representative rather than value-free and unbiased, questions that can be asked include:

“For whom was this story constructed, how was it made, and for what purpose?”

“Are there gaps and inconsistencies in these stories that might suggest alternative or preferred narratives?”

“What cultural discourses do they draw on or take for granted?”

“What does the story accomplish?”

A central assumption of the narrative project is that people live by their stories. If we wish to engage with participants’ lives, then we must understand the nuances of the language — both as larger themes and expressed words and phrases — contained within the stories of their lives.

From the General to the Particular

One of the attractions of the positivist paradigm described above is that of generalizability — expressing something general based on something particular. In the physical sciences, if we apply a temperature of 32 degrees to water, the water will freeze. This fact is generalizable: Water will always freeze at 32 degrees, no matter who tries to freeze it or when. But try to make a generalization about temperature with human beings. For instance, “All humans will experience 32 degrees as cold and miserable.” When it comes to the human experience, such generalizations are not so simple; it depends on the person; his or her disposition and history; the way he or she is dressed; whether he or she is hungry, poor, at work or on vacation; who he or she is with; geography; culture; previous temperature; and so on. Even people who are dressed the same may experience the temperature differently. So, when it comes to human experience, notions of generalizability can be misleading, and more often, inaccurate. The narrative turn is concerned with making space for those whose experience is not picked up in the “significant” findings of the quantitative tradition.

Challenging the assumptions of the positivist paradigm which aims to control and predict human behavior so that it can turn facts into laws, narrative inquiry focuses instead on the specific and local, calling for a different way of carrying out an inquiry. Now, instead of large numbers of subjects, the case study is of interest. Within a positivist paradigm the question is, “How does this behavior, interaction, or experience generalize to other individuals or other circumstances?” The narrative inquirer asks:

“What difficulties do individuals experience?”

“What are individuals’ resiliencies?”
“How do these strengths get used?”

“What is of value for this individual and how does this get played out?”

Thus, rather than relying on the laws, facts, and truths that are generated from within a grand theory, the objective of the narrative inquiry is to obtain a deeper, more complex understanding of the particular experiences and lives of individuals.

With this turn in view, the stage is set to provide for sharing and listening to the particular stories of individuals: The individual stories are taken seriously.

In sum, the narrative researcher is interested in the complexities of individual experiences, and excavates the local and particular for understanding the way individuals engage their worlds and how their worlds engage them.

**Alternative Ways of Knowing**

The fourth theme brings our attention to the underlying tenets of what philosophers call epistemology, or how we know what we know. As discussed, the objective of the narrative project is to obtain a deeper and more complex understanding of the human experience. Efforts to establish reliability, objectivity, generalizability, and validity (hallmarks of the scientific method), while important to the positivistic researcher, are no longer central concerns in the narrative paradigm. Instead, the narrative turn is shaped by taking seriously the philosophical underpinnings of relationality, atemporality, and context. Attention shifts toward the relational and interactive features of human experience, the stories and the language used in those narratives, and how the specific and local are taken up by individuals. In sum, the narrative turn represents a different way of knowing what we know. To repeat, people represent their experiences in the world through narrative; narrative is the source of meaning-making and knowing.

As features of the scientific method are challenged, truth or knowledge is no longer represented exclusively by numbers or in one way. Rather, within this framework, “truth” is always context-bound, and therefore, tentative and variable. The narrative inquiry is always conscious of where power resides (who gets the final say), who has and is seen to have authority, how authority is represented, and what the varying world views are. How, then, does the narrative inquiry contend with the provisional nature of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing human experience? Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) suggest that narrative inquirers are guided by an attitude of wonder, tentativeness, and alternatives as they develop their research accounts. In the spirit of this attitude we ask three questions relevant to family group conference research:

“Whose voices are included?”

“How is information presented?”

“How is information used?”

Following, we use this attitude of conjecture to address some questions relevant to family group conference research.

First, given the concerns of narrative inquiry described above, the narrative inquirer asks, “Whose voices are included?” As we review the research on family group conferencing, conspicuously absent is the voice of young people who are ostensibly central to the family
group conference project. We are troubled by this absence since it is in the voices of the marginalized that we hear and see the nature or form of society: It is not in the voices of the powerful that meaning is contained. So, though the practicalities of enabling the voice of children and youth to be heard in the family group conference are complicated, still, we must ask:

“How can we involve young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives?”

“What is the experience of the family group conference like for children or youth who are most affected by decisions made at these conferences?”

“If there are benefits for youth and children, how are they sustained or not?”

“How do these experiences change in time?”

Spotlighting marginalized voices also brings our attention to the experiences of families (however defined), given they are central in assuming, supporting, and sustaining the well-being of children. Rather than asking, given the family group conference experience, “Did rereporting by extended families increase or decrease?”, the narrative inquirer asks the following kinds of questions:

“How are extended families able to act in accordance with the family group conference plan (or not)?”

“How does a family return to a child protection agency for further service provision?”

“What are the family and social conditions that support a family to report abuse or neglect?”

Asking these kinds of questions takes seriously the knowledge that families have to share with researchers.

A common family group conference research categorization in the studies reviewed here divides family participants into two groups: those who have “abused” or “neglected” their children and those who have not. But from a narrative perspective, the characters and identities of family participants are likely to be more nuanced than a two-pronged and rather simple categorization can describe. Reducing identities this way can also conjure bilateral categorizations such as wealthy or impoverished, white or aboriginal, employed or unemployed, native or immigrant, “normal” or traumatized, disabled or able-bodied, and so on. Limitations arise when these categories become variables to be controlled, and they can overlook the particular identities that constitute individual lives. How, then, do the circumstances of individual lives and the constituted identities hold them in place? The narrative inquirer is interested in making space for nuanced, complex, and particular voices of those on the margins, and takes seriously their stories as representation of what is true and meaningful for them.

As well, within the framework of multiple ways of knowing, how do the voices of those most marginalized get taken seriously by those who are in positions of power to make and administer the policies that shape their lives? In other words, how can those who have power use the knowledge of those who are most central to the project? Narrative inquiry challenges the top-down process of decision making, since alternative ways of knowing are given value. Rather than asking, “What are the outcomes of family group conferencing and implication for policy?”, the narrative researcher seeks to explore elsewhere:

“How can the relationship between policy and practice be energized and sustained?”

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2In a rare study in keeping with a narrative turn, Dalrymple (2002) contemplates the impact of advocacy on the family group conference process, bringing attention to dominant power structures, and insisting that both “family members and professionals [must] hear what the children involved have to say and understand their world” (p. 297).
“How do we foster congruency between family group conference policies and legislations, the practices that are being administered, and the experience of families and children?”

Narrative inquiry is interested in sustaining a dynamic relationship between legal and administrative policies and the experiences of those affected by them — both service providers and users (see Wharf & McKenzie, 2003).

And finally, how do the voices of those most impacted by these policies reach those within the bureaucratic and political hierarchy? In research currently being conducted in British Columbia, we have developed a research plan that will bring women working in the sex trade and child protection workers together to talk about their experiences in protecting and caring for children. The stories (narrative data) generated from these dialogue sessions with women, their children, and child protection workers can be transported to policymakers who will have an opportunity to listen and assign value to the stories that are meaningful to them. Knowing that their perceptions of the stories will be presented back to the families and workers, the policymakers respond and engage those who are more directly impacted by the policies. This proposed process is iterative, and service providers and users then have another opportunity to generate stories that can be transported back to policymakers. Essentially, this age-old device of knowing — storytelling — is used as a methodology to optimize congruency between family group conference policy, practice, and experience.

Discussion

The outcome research on family group conferencing has made gains in ways that have allowed policymakers and managers to promote the practice. This research area has now been flooded with findings that, for the most part, demonstrate satisfaction and efficacy. Large-population quantitative studies have been useful in bringing our attention to particular phenomena, allowing us to comment on human behaviors and interactions and to understand the kinds of variables that might influence behavior. But important limitations underpin the positivist paradigm and need to be acknowledged. While these studies use numbers to tell us that something is happening, they can neither tell us why it is happening, nor can they express what it feels like.

This paper is not a treatise to abandon large-population quantitative studies. That style of information rendering clearly has its place. Rather, we are suggesting that the time has come in family group conference research to supplement and balance statistical knowledge studies with methodologies that get behind what the numbers represent. In order to achieve this, we promote a complementary paradigm which involves a turn in methodology.

Two important benefits can be rendered from such a turn. First, the statistical data from the positivist paradigm are clearly not able to speak to the particular and unique circumstances of people’s lives, especially those most marginalized. There is a simple but profound assumption that undergirds the qualitative paradigm: Lives cannot be reduced to numbers.

There is a simple but profound assumption that undergirds the qualitative paradigm: Lives cannot be reduced to numbers.
How are we to know the lives of those who live on the socioeconomic edge of our culture? How do we expose the experience of the homeless, the traumatized, the children, the addicted, or the mentally unwell? How do we humanize the lives of these much-maligned individuals? The limitation of statistical findings is that they overlook the value of the personal story and by doing so, leave those already marginalized without voice. Bringing the individual to the center of the research resonates with Heather Menzies’ (2005) concerns about the social welfare crisis in general. She complains, “There’s neither the time, nor the congeniality of shared space, for someone to tell their story” (p. 152). This concern may be as true for the general practice of child welfare as it is with the research on family group conferencing.

A second concern is that when policies and practices are based on results without understanding how and why, “policy gaps” can unknowingly be created. Using a qualitative paradigm (and a narrative methodology in particular) can facilitate understanding of the “how and why,” as expressed by those who administer and use the systems. This information, when fed back to the policymakers, has the potential to hone policies and practices so that they become more clearly aligned with individually lived experiences.

A narrative methodology is one way to address these concerns. This being said, we are cautious not to overstate our case. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies have their limitations and strengths. We hope to see the future of family group conference research cast with studies that make use of both methodologies to enhance our understanding of what works best for the young people and their families who are at the center of this work.

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About the Guest Editors and Content Reviewers

Jeanette Schmid, PhD, is a seasoned social worker who has practiced in South Africa (her country of origin), Switzerland, and Canada in a range of areas, including developmental delay, early childhood intervention, trauma, restorative justice, and child welfare. Her work has been guided by a passion for social justice.

In 1998, Ms. Schmid joined the Toronto Family Group Conferencing program as the sole coordinator. She felt deeply committed to this work, as it offers a respectful way of engaging with families frequently marginalized by the child welfare system. In 2006, she was privileged to coordinate the Provincial Resource. This body, building on the expertise of a small group of family group conference pioneers, took on the responsibility of promoting the growth of family group conferencing throughout the province through training and mentoring. She has been thrilled to watch family group conferencing grow in the city, the province, and nationally, and her exposure to this approach has left an indelible mark on both her professional and personal identity. Ms. Schmid recently completed her doctorate in social work, focusing on the child welfare discourses in South Africa. She and her husband relocated to Switzerland in 2008.

Formerly the director of child welfare for British Columbia and assistant deputy minister for integrated policy and legislation, Mark Sieben, BA, LLB, was appointed associate deputy minister and chief operating officer for the Ministry of Children and Family Development in June 2008. In this role, he oversees the development of cross-policy initiatives along a broad continuum of services for vulnerable children and families, including child welfare, adoption, child and youth mental health, and children and youth with special needs. Over the last 20 years, Mr. Sieben has accumulated a varied set of experiences in child welfare-related positions ranging from youth and family counselor and child protection social worker to senior administrator in a large child welfare system. He is a strong proponent for family group conferencing and collaborative practice generally as components of principle-based practice, planning, and policy development. Mr. Sieben holds a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and a Bachelor of Law degree, both from the University of Victoria.

Lisa Merkel-Holguin, MSW, is the director of practice and systems advancement in child welfare at American Humane and has been the director of American Humane’s well-known and highly regarded National Center on Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) for over 10 years. She also spearheaded the development of American Humane’s initiative on differential response, co-authored the 2006 National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare, and served as the editor of the first volume of Protecting Children on differential response. For almost 20 years, through direct services, training, evaluation, technical assistance, consultation, and writing, Ms. Merkel-Holguin has worked to improve the outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. Ms. Merkel-Holguin has written more than 30 chapters, books, and articles on children’s issues.
The mission of American Humane, as a network of individuals and organizations, is to prevent cruelty, abuse, neglect, and exploitation of children and animals and to assure that their interests and well-being are fully, effectively, and humanely guaranteed by an aware and caring society.

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