Increasing the Cultural Responsiveness of Family Group Conferencing

Based on the work of Iris Carlton-LaNey, Ph.D., and Marie Weil, Ph.D.
Professors at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill School of Social Work

Developed by Ashlie D. West, MSW Student
Why do we need culturally diverse service systems?

In a multi-cultural society (such as the United States), it is “best practice” to go beyond self awareness and cultural sensitivity.

There needs to be a point were attention to cultural knowledge is mainstreamed, and service delivery systems and treatment models are adapted to fit diverse client communities.
How is North Carolina’s Division of Social Services providing culturally diverse service programs?

- Adopting (as policy) the family group conferencing service model
- Funding the North Carolina Family Group Conferencing (NC-FGC) Project (Pennell & Weil, 2000)
The North Carolina Family Group Conferencing Program (NC-FGC)

- Enhances the cultural responsiveness of child welfare interventions
- Introduces a partnership-building model
- Highlights the importance of the family’s culture in protecting children and other family members
- Cultural Groups Participating: African Americans, American Indians, and Latinos/Hispanics
Family Group Conferencing Model: Background

- Based on Maori culture (Love, 2000)
- First legislated in New Zealand in 1989
- Mandated use in child welfare and youth justice before proceeding to court
- Purpose: To provide the larger family group an opportunity to develop a plan to resolve their own child welfare problems.
- Impact: sanctioned lowering reliance on legal and protective interventions, and advanced the principles of family responsibility, children’s rights, cultural affirmation, and community-state partnerships (Hassall, 1996).
Family Group Conferencing: Benefits

- Built-in checks and balances – plan developed by the group must be approved by the protective authorities before implementation.
- Removes the power imbalance between the child welfare system and the family.
- Returns the authority of the family to solve their own problems, while providing assistance from outside parties (coordinator).
Family Group Conferencing:
Responsibilities of the Coordinator

- Does not carry the case, but organizes the conference
- Invites the family to attend
- Prepares the family for participation
- Based on the wishes of the family – schedules the time, location and format of the conference
- Provides sufficient information to develop the plan without imposing solutions
- Leaves the family group to allow private deliberation
- Assists with negotiating the final plan
Family Group Conferencing: Implementation and Research Results

- Families came when invited
- Groups developed plans that workers were grateful to approve
- Both family groups and workers (including those in North Carolina) were satisfied with the process and resulting plans (Pennell, 2002)
- Kept children with their families, kin, or cultural group
- Stabilized children’s placements
- Decreased child maltreatment
- Increased family pride (“Promising Results,” 2003)
NC-FGC and cultural definitions

- **Best practice**: quality professional practice based on the evaluation of effectiveness (Gibbs & Gambrill, 2002; Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003)

- **Cultural identity**: a negotiated process rather than a cluster of qualities (Barth, 1969; Bennett, 1975)

- **Ethnic identity**: the ways in which that distinctiveness is defended, asserted, preserved, or abandoned (Green, 1982)

- **Cultural identity comprises**: boundaries that groups define around themselves, using selected cultural traits as criteria or markers of exclusion or inclusion (Green, 1982, p. 12).

- **Cultural competence**: the commitment and capacity to learning about and appreciating cultural differences and similarities, evaluating one’s own cultural competence, adapting one’s personal and professional actions, and advocating accordingly (Pennell, Macgowan, Waites, & Weil, 1998, p. 20)
Components of Cultural Competence
(Browne, Brodrick, & Fong, 1993; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992; Weaver & Wodarski, 1995)

- Knowledge of the client’s cultural context, including history and worldview
- Practitioner awareness of own assumptions, values, and biases
- Application of appropriate interventions and skills
- Seen as an ability to provide services that are perceived as legitimate for addressing problems experienced by culturally diverse people (Dana & Matheson, 1992; Green, 1999)
Culturally Responsive Programs

- Workers need to tap into the traditions, worldviews, and strengths of cultural groups while remaining open to the dynamic nature of culture.
- Recognize that there is considerable diversity within each cultural group (Nakanishi & Rittner, 1992)
- View families in relation to their own values and natural support systems, neighbors, and communities (Hodges & Comer, 1995)
- Obtain the history, worldviews and overall cultural information of the communities to which they provide services
- Acquire this knowledge before planning and developing interventions that require participation from diverse groups
Studying FGC

Method: focus groups and quantitative measure on ethnic identity

Participants: 3 cultural communities: African American, Native American and Latino/Hispanic

Data collection: six focus groups (2 per cultural group), in both rural and urban settings (spanning across the state), along with the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992)

Focus group procedure: introductions, completion of consent forms and ethnic-identity measures, presentation of video (introduction of FGC through the New Zealand video “Mihi’s Whanau” (New Zealand Dept of Child, Youth and Family, 1995), discussion on FGC model [Refreshments were provided]
Focus Group Findings – African American Consultation

- 16 participants – 11 women, 5 men; included professionals, human service providers, and 2 consumers (1 in each group)
- Strong connection with the recognition of the importance of faith, singing, and prayer
- Indicated that rituals and traditions that were very meaningful to the families would be a welcomed addition
- Conferences needed to be held in culturally appropriate locations (churches, fellowship halls, or community centers)
- Acknowledged general agreement that families had been treated negatively by departments of social services – could provide support for FGC program or be difficult to convince families that the program is legitimate
Focus Group Findings – Native American (Cherokee) Consultation

- 15 Participants: 12 women, 3 men; included professionals, community members, some of whom were consumers
- Appreciated the video, specifically the family group following indigenous rituals
- Viewed the program as moving away from governmental control
- Model fits with traditional cultural approach, in which women make the decisions about the family and tribe
- Recommendations – do not rush the program; keep FGC informal and orchestrated to flow with their usual ways of gathering families; conferences should be held at the home of a respected relative (not directly involved); elders should lead the discussion and grant younger members permission to speak; and allow sufficient time for processing the issues.
Focus Group Findings – Latino/Hispanic Consultation

- 18 participants: 14 women, 4 men; all participants bilingual, 1 participant identified herself as European American, while all others identified Latino/Hispanic; all members of the local Latino/Latina communities, 1 person had been consumer of services
- Reported that involving extended family in dealing with family problems is congruent with their culture
- Allowing families to develop the plans gives them ownership – increases the likelihood of success
- Due to geographical concerns and documentation status, it is difficult for many families to include extended family; Additionally, many new to North Carolina, so there is little/no multigenerational representation
- Bilingual and bicultural facilitators are essential for success.
General Themes Across Cultures: Location

Do not use social services agencies – community-oriented settings preferred

Should allow the family to be comfortable and feel some degree of privacy and control

Most often, families elect to have conferences held in either churches or community centers

Study results: Family’s wishes are being respected (Pennell et al., 2002)
Cultural Traditions

Critically important to recognize cultural traditions and worldviews

Common tradition – having food for an all-day conference

Beginning with a ritual is favorable to a productive conference

Cherokee participants stated that their problem-solving approach required all to consider the issue and not rush to a decision

Study Results: Conferences were shaped to families’ wishes.
Community Identity

- FGC Coordinator should have some relationship with the community and identify with them in some way.
- Latino/Hispanic focus group found language as a major barrier – requested a bilingual coordinator
- Preferred service provider from their own culture – at least someone who is culturally competent and accepted by the cultural group
- Study Results: Plans include hiring local coordinators from various backgrounds, securing interpreters with whom the families are comfortable, and providing training to child welfare workers on how to take part in conferencing.
The Role of Elders

Most participants agreed that elder participation was best.

However, this is challenging for Latino/Hispanics due to geographical considerations.

Inclusion of family elders viewed as essential to the community’s acceptance of FGC and the types of solutions that families would identify.

Study Results: A wide age spectrum found at conferences, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles.
Communication

- Community education needed regarding the change in how agencies work with families.
- On-going communication between social service agencies and all local communities was suggested.
- Outreach efforts through tribal newspaper, local ethnic publications, community meetings, church group presentations, community-based organizations, and schools.
- Community outreach and education programs that work closely with Latino/Hispanic families, to address the confusion of Latino/Hispanic families relating to different culture, values, policies, and laws of the United States.
- Study results: Development of a training program for social services staff and community partners that spelled out strategies for addressing cultural issues.

Research to Teaching Initiative UNC SSW

Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey, & Weil

Copyright 2004
What did the NC-FGC Project Reveal?

- Consulting with community partners to develop a culturally competent model can help the partnership-building process;
- Families appreciate the opportunity to resolve their own problems;
- FGC can work if cultural adaptations are used and cultural traditions are respected;
- Bicultural and bilingual coordinators, practitioners, and allied workers are important to effective FGC;
- Holding FGCs in a culturally appropriate setting is important; and
- Establishing and maintaining ongoing communication and joint problem solving is necessary.
References


References continued


