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Democratising the family and the state? The case of family group
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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential of family group conferences to act as a liberating intervention for families traditionally controlled by the state welfare system. Family group conferences are interventions designed to remove control of decision-making from professionals and allow family groups to make decisions about the welfare of one or more of their members. Using data from a qualitative evaluation of family group conferences in Wales, this paper examines 'imposed empowerment' and social control, and the feasibility of treating 'the family' as a unit for state intervention. The authors propose that the family group conference approach not only has the potential to shift the balance of power between the state and client-families, but that it may have the potential to democratise decision-making within families. However, it is also noted that such interventions can be seen to be maintaining social control through subtle and possibly unintentional means. The paper engages with sociological research and theory on democracy in the family.

INTRODUCTION

This paper uses data from a qualitative evaluation of family group conferences to examine a number of issues related to the role of the family and its relationship with the state welfare system. This particular child welfare intervention, which

represents a radical attempt to adjust power differences between families and statutory authorities, overtly requires its participants to examine definitions of the family, family care and relationships. It also raises questions about the role of the state in facilitating or imposing family decision-making in relation to the care of children. In this paper we argue that family group conferences, in implementing a reduction in the power difference between professionals and families, also may serve to facilitate more democratic relations within families. Alongside these democratising tendencies, we note the means with which those in the most powerful positions (typically professionals and adult family members) retain some control over decision-making. The findings of our evaluation are discussed in the context of some sociological research and theory on democracy in the family.

THE FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE AND FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

Family group conferences (FGCs) have been in use as a child welfare intervention in the UK, on a small scale, since the early 1990s. Government guidance in England and Wales recommends their use in cases where there are not child protection concerns, and, where appropriate, alongside standard child protection procedures (Department of Health, 1999). FGCs represent a radical attempt to change the nature of decision-making in child welfare cases. When a child's welfare is endangered, either because he or she risks being admitted to state care, or has committed a criminal offence, or is the object of child protection concerns, then a meeting of the child's extended family and social network is convened. Professionals state their concerns and the availability of resources, and the family

network is left alone for 'private family time' to come up with a plan for the child. Professionals are required to agree to the plan as long as it meets basic requirements of protecting and enhancing the child's welfare. The origins of FGCs in Maori traditions, and their adoption as statutory practice for decision-making in child welfare in New Zealand from 1989 have been well documented (see for example, Marsh and Crow, 1998). The intervention has been successfully transported to many different environments, including the USA, South Africa, Canada and Scandinavia. The restoring of decision-making about the child to the family can be seen to represent a reversal of power relationships, when compared to the traditional mode of decision-making by groups of professionals with, often, minimal family involvement. User satisfaction is high amongst both family and professional participants, and research findings from across the world, using a variety of research methods, suggest that the intervention is successful compared to traditional approaches in terms of mobilising family involvement, maintaining children's care within the family network and reducing repeat offending (Marsh and Crow, 1998; Lupton and Nixon, 1999; Pennell and Burford, 2000; Shore *et al.* 2001; Tapsfield, 2003).

Despite the generally positive endorsement of the FGC intervention, some important concerns have been raised about the principles and practice. Those that are particularly pertinent to the discussion here are concerns about the reproduction and reinforcement of family power imbalances during private family time, particularly along dimensions of gender and generation. With the knowledge of widespread violence against women in families coming to the attention of child welfare systems and the predominance of male offenders in child abuse

(particularly child sex abuse), many welfare professionals and potential family participants have voiced concerns about possible male dominance or aggression in the FGC (Robertson, 1996, Lupton and Nixon 1999). Additionally, many have expressed concern for the welfare of the child in the FGC who may be there as a result of abuse by at least one of the participants, or because their current carers are no longer willing to provide their everyday care, or because they have committed an offence and are therefore the negative focus of the meeting (Dalrymple 2002; Shaw and Jané, 1999). There is a poor body of empirical knowledge about these issues from research conducted so far (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). There are therefore concerns about whether an FGC approach rather naively views the family as a single unit for intervention, downplaying possible differences in needs and wishes within the family, some of which may be contradictory or even in opposition to each other. The FGC model might be seen to be promoting an optimistic view of intra-family relations and belief in ‘the family’ as an institution, both of which have long been challenged by those, such as some feminists, who take a conflictual view of family relations. The FGC model raises the question of whether there is a conflict between empowering individual family members, for example by providing advocates for children, and attempting to empower the family as a whole.

A further concern sometimes expressed is that a state agenda for adopting the FGC approach might be as much about pushing obligatory self-reliance and reducing state intervention as about consumer control (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). Concerns include lack of professional support following a FGC and an unwillingness to commit resources requested. There were reports from New Zealand in the mid-

1990s about professional domination and manipulation of some conferences (Robertson, 1996). There can be a fine line between a professional outlining her concerns at the start of a meeting and imposing an agenda and preferred solution on the meeting.

This paper attempts to explore some of these ethical and policy issues involving FGCs, using data from a Welsh study, and links these FGC-related issues to some of the broader debates concerning the nature of the contemporary family. Debates about contemporary family life form an important context to this study of family group conferences, as this welfare intervention is particularly concerned with both public and private conceptions of the family and family responsibilities.

CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ABOUT THE FAMILY AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

The past decade has seen much debate in the social sciences about intimate relationships and the role of the family in western societies. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have suggested that, in an era of individualism, our intimate relationships become more vital to give meaning to life and combat loneliness. They suggest that the trend in intimate and family relationships is of individually negotiated, examined and justified relationships, rather than externally imposed norms. Giddens (1992) similarly notes that relationships now involve more choice and are more contingent than previously. He introduces the notion of ‘confluent love’, which is based on an equal and negotiated relationship that can be moved on

from if it does not provide satisfaction. More autonomy, reflection and equality in 'pure' relationships lead to a democratising of the family, that also holds promise for a better civic society more generally. Giddens suggests that parent-child relations are changing, with more emphasis on intimacy, respect and participation, and less on authoritarianism. The notion that there has been a significant shift in intimate relationships in Western societies has been challenged by authors such as Jamieson (1999) who notes the persistence of traditional gender roles in contemporary empirical studies. Others (such as Garrett, 2003) have argued that Giddens' underestimation of the continuing influence of social structures on family lives entails a misreading of the lives of oppressed groups in society. It should be noted, however, that Giddens (1994) has written that the move towards 'pure' relationships is a trend rather than an everyday experience for most people. Smart (1997) notes the under-theorising of the role of children in Giddens' notion of confluent love. Children's lack of choice in matters of parental separation means that this theory cannot capture the nature of intimacy in modern society, as it cannot fully encompass parent-child relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest that the parent-child relationship has become a refuge in an individualised society where couple relationships face almost impossible contradictions:

The more other relationships become interchangeable and revocable, the more the child can become the focus of new hopes – it is the ultimate guarantee of permanence, providing an anchor for one's life.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 73)

However, their analysis tends to concentrate on parent *to* child emotions (Smart *et al.* 2001), underplaying the child's active role in shaping family relationships – a role that is much evident in the data in our study.

The understanding of children and childhood in both social science and social policy arenas has been gradually transformed over the last two decades by the changing emphases in the sociology of childhood (see, for example, James *et al.*, 1998) and developing interest in children's rights, as reflected in the 1989 UN Convention. There is an emphasis on children's agency and a move away from viewing children as passive beings who are underdeveloped adults. There is an attempt to hear children's voices and enable participation. Children are seen as having a right to be involved in some of the decisions that affect them. Giddens (1992) notes that these developments fit well with his theorising about the democratising of interpersonal relationships.

Theorising about contemporary families has been aided by empirical work. Finch and Mason's (1993) important study of kinship care amongst adult family members can be seen to support Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) assertion that family relationships are negotiated, examined, agreed and subject to change rather than conforming to external regulations or norms. Finch and Mason found that most people subscribe to the principle of open negotiation to make decisions about caring, although the manner in which this is done varies considerably. Studies of family relationships by Brannen *et al.* (2000) of children aged 10-13 and by Solomon *et al.* (2002) of teenage children both suggest that assumptions of negotiation, openness and honesty are common in contemporary British family life.

They also note that within this discourse, power and control are still live issues. Brannen and colleagues found that some parents used a tactic of consultation to ensure compliance. Solomon *et al.* note that, for parents of teenagers, information gain can mean the retention of control (as can the retention of information mean some control for teenagers).

It can be seen therefore that empirical studies appear to be suggesting an increasingly democratic discourse in contemporary British family life, where the nature of intimate relationships and obligations are subject to negotiation and flux. However, it is also important to note the continuance (and evolution) of other general norms regarding parent-child relationships. Ribbens McCarthy *et al.* (2000: 791), in a study of step-parenting, note that ‘there is a non-negotiable moral obligation to put children’s needs first’, especially for mothers. This norm has also been noted in studies of mother-daughter relationships (Lawler, 1999) and social workers’ expectations of mothers (Scourfield, 2003). Children in general expect parents to be respectful, caring and for children to be listened to but not to be overburdened with adult responsibilities (Brannen *et al.*, 2000; O’Quigley, 2000; Smart *et al.*, 2001). However, outside these general principles, there is evidence of family members holding an inclusive and negotiable view of family relationships (Brannen *et al.*, 2000; Smart *et al.*, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research project was a qualitative evaluation of a family group conferencing project in Wales that was managed by a national children's charity. The research took place between 2001 and 2003. The FGC project was mainly funded by one local authority at the start of the research, but by the end of the research period there were four local authorities involved. The main focus of the project was to facilitate FGCs for families where a child was at risk of requiring accommodation by the local authority, although the project was also used for families where children were already accommodated, and in cases where there was conflict over family contact. Seventeen separate conferences were evaluated. These comprised an almost universal sample of families involved in the project over a 12-month period (one family declined to take part in the research). Interviews were conducted with 25 children and young people, 31 adult family members, 13 social workers and 3 FGC co-ordinators. All were interviewed within a month of the FGC taking place, with children being interviewed again 6 months later. The co-ordinators were each interviewed on a number of occasions concerning different FGCs, and a small number of interviews involved more than one family member at the same time. In total 96 semi-structured interviews were conducted, all by the same member of the research team (Sean O'Neill). In addition to the interviews, baseline data were collected on all children, linked to the data requirements for looked after children in the Quality Protects/Children First programmes. These data were updated at the six-month interview. Children rated themselves at the time of the FGC and six months later according to Goodman's Strengths and Weaknesses Scale, as included in the Framework for Assessment for Children in Need and Their Families (DoH, 2000).

The children and young people (who for the sake of brevity will hereafter be referred to as ‘children’) ranged in age from 6-18 and a number had learning or physical disabilities. To hold discussions that would touch on both abstract and intimate subjects with such a wide age range posed a challenge. To aid comparability, all interviews covered the same subject areas, but each could be carried out in any order and using a number of different means. For example, children could choose to rate their and others’ levels of participation in the FGC verbally (with the interviewer recording each rating), physically (by placing pieces of pasta in pots), or privately (by completing simple rating scales). Similarly children might choose to draw the FGC seating arrangements, model it (using plastic insects to represent participants) or verbally describe it. Whilst younger children were particularly keen to take part in the interviews through play and activities, choice of interview style was not necessarily linked to age or ability. Adult interviews covered the same broad themes and included verbal questioning, statement sorting and simple rating scales. Interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and all were fully transcribed.

Analysis proceeded according to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987) insofar as the concern was with themes emerging from the accounts of research participants rather than with the testing of any particular hypothesis. Data were coded with the aid of the Atlas-ti software. Initial codes were generated from a pilot study (Holland, 2001), relevant literature and the research team’s reading of the initial data. Further codes were added as the analysis progressed. Cross-coder reliability was aided by double-coding of some of the initial interviews. Analysis was carried out on a cross-case and intra-case basis, with close reading and re-

reading of the data and a search for exceptions. Emerging conclusions were shared and discussed at a project management meeting comprising professional and family members, thereby providing an informal element of participant validation.

FINDINGS

In reporting research findings in this paper we concentrate on two linked aspects of the research. Firstly, we consider the issue of empowerment, and the potential tension between a professional wish for families to take more control of decision-making about their lives and the presence of other professional agendas. It will be seen that it can be difficult for professionals to ‘let go’ of the decision-making and that some FGCs appear to run according to a professional agenda. Secondly, we consider the impact of a democratisation of professional-family relationships on relationships within the family. We explore the potential impact on individual family members of an intervention designed to empower the family unit as a whole. Pseudonyms are used throughout for research participants.

Imposed empowerment?

All professionals interviewed for this study subscribed to the general principle that families should be empowered to make decisions about their own lives and the care

of family members. This is perhaps unsurprising as all involved in the study had made the active decision to refer families to the project or were employed as FGC facilitators. Of interest is how this general principle can contain many tensions or even contradictions, especially for social workers that work within a system that is generally dominated by professional power structures and the notion of social worker-as-expert (Doolan, 2002). In this setting, social workers are moving into a role of facilitator and provider of resources, and relinquishing many decision-making powers. Some were able to describe this tension in interview:

They knew that they were going to be doing a plan of what they were going to do. But I think it's quite a difficult thing to do anyway isn't it? Us professionals asking them to come up with a plan and being a team for the next year is a hard thing to do, so maybe it's my thinking that needs to change. Maybe I should be thinking, well fine, that's their plan and I shouldn't be disappointed. (Social worker for Matthew, 6)

I was expecting to play less of a role than I would normally, you know, because I'm used to conferences where you have to present everything. So yes, I was a bit apprehensive about it working, 'cause I thought, 'well, how's it going to work?' 'Cause I'm not used to that way, you know - 'how can a family solve their own problems?' (Social worker for Leighton, 17)

These quotations represent the general thoughts of referring social workers as expressed in interviews. There was a general impression that they had a

commitment to the philosophy and process but that in practice it can be difficult to change the power relations and to trust the families to formulate their own plans. The following quotation from a social worker represents less of a commitment to empowerment. This was a much rarer stance:

And when we came in each of them wanted to go through what they'd put on the board. So they took it, obviously sort of following what we'd done, but they'd adapted it to suit themselves (laugh), so it was quite amusing really the way they'd adapted that to suit themselves. (Social worker for Lianne, 14)

A further issue related to the empowerment of families was the association between this and the wish to propel families into taking more responsibility for themselves. It has been noted that consumer empowerment has won support from both the right and the left. This is because it can be seen to be associated with a retraction of the state, favoured by free-market advocates and also with the push for user-led services associated with many on the left (Lupton and Nixon, 1999). These two strands can be seen in the interviews with social workers. Most subscribed to the principle of user empowerment, despite struggling with the realities of sharing power in practice. Many also suggested that the FGC should be about parents being confronted with the reality of their situation and taking responsibility for their own family.

I think it's about really saying you've got to take responsibility, you can't just come to us saying 'we need support' if you're not prepared to go and

do something about it and I think I like the idea of that (social worker for Martine, 16).

In general, family members were positive about their experiences of being in a FGC, particularly in comparison with standard social work meetings. However, there was some resistance to certain aspects of the 'family empowerment' agenda. This was particularly illustrated by mixed views concerning the time spent by the family making decisions in the 'private family time'. The concept of professionals leaving the family alone in the room to make decisions was one that was almost universally welcomed by the professionals interviewed, but which provoked divergent opinions amongst the family participants. In seven of the 17 families, at least one family member stated clearly that they wished the professionals had not left the room. The main reason that these families did not want professionals to leave the meeting was because professionals helped to maintain a calm emotional temperature and prevent rows, with a more minor theme of wishing for professional expertise throughout the meeting.

His Mam was left in with us. Well we told her [*the co-ordinator*] it's a stupid thing to do, leave her with us without them there, because it was just a complete blazing row. (Sylvia, step-mother)

When they went out the room, mum started getting upset and arguing and shouting, and that's when we got upset. And when they came back in the room no-one started getting upset or shouting. (Craig, 11)

Nobody was there to help, to support the children. I was basically on my own. I could have done it at home. (Gayle, mother and step-mother).

In six of the 17 FGCs, all members interviewed were happy (or indifferent) about having private family time (in a few further FGCs opinions were contradictory or unclear). Several were enthused by their ability to participate in decision-making in a way they had not previously thought possible. The parent in the following quotation can be seen to be endorsing the philosophy behind FGCs and emphasising the positive nature of a plan that emerges from the family rather than from professionals:

So it's worth getting the professional input and people saying, giving us advice and things like that. But at the end of the day they have to step away, they can't enforce a plan onto us, because if we don't like it or we're not happy with it then obviously it's not going to work no matter how good it is. So the fact that it did come from us and the way elements did from the whole family really even, even people who didn't turn up, the plan included elements that they'd say yes to. (Dai, step-father)

The notion of private family time is central to the FGC (Marsh and Crow, 1998) and an important part of the underlying philosophy. There is a certain irony that this empowering model is partly imposed on some of those it is intended to empower. This may be due to many factors, such as a lack of confidence in those with a long history of involvement with a welfare system dominated by a very different approach, and also perhaps over-optimism on the part of professionals in

the power of the 'family' as a unit over intra-familial divisions and struggles. However, having outlined these key concerns, it is important to note that many of the family members in our small sample appeared to take some pride in their achievements *as a family* in the meeting.

We was all in one place together, we had the chance to sit down all together as a family, we was all there, in one room, had things to say and all accepted that everybody had something to say... It's the first time that we've all sat down together like that and talking. (Louise, 17)

In addition to some suggestion that participants felt that their family as a whole had gained from the process, there is evidence that some individuals within the family, particularly children, gained in power in relation to other family members. This is discussed later in the paper.

The professionalisation of family decision-making

Despite the professionals expressing strong beliefs in family empowerment and the FGC philosophy, a close examination of the conferences in this study revealed that professionals in practice retained some control over the decision-making process. Professionalisation of meetings can be seen to occur in the following ways: by the

bringing to the meeting of pre-prepared written statements or lists; by setting the agenda and giving tasks for the private family time (PFT); by helping to formulate the plan, and, by changing the plan after the meeting. These observations are not necessarily critical of these processes, indeed they may at times be essential in order to secure the welfare of the children involved, but it may be useful to note that such processes are at work and to reflect on how they may fit with an empowerment agenda. In the following examples family members note the structuring of their decision-making by the co-ordinators, with the first family overtly satisfied with this:

Geoff (stepfather): Basically, [co-ordinator] gave an introduction, gave a few background information about how she felt the meeting should progress, which I think probably set us in the right line, 'cause if we hadn't had that sort of direction I think it would have just been one big free for all.

Fiona (mother): We wrote charts didn't we?

Geoff: They supplied charts and bits and pieces and said 'right, this is how we want it structured', and we just followed instructions basically.

Interviewer: you said you were quite pleased when you left with that plan on the table.

Trevor (father): As I said, this wasn't presented to us until we got to the meeting itself, so we didn't really know what was on the agenda. (Co-ordinator) had it on a sheet on the wall and so (pause) we just sort of followed that.

In some FGCs there appear to have been examples of professionals transposing norms from other meetings, particularly in introducing written agendas, or in rewriting plans in professional language. In two FGCs, participants had difficulties with literacy, and noted that they struggled with the professionals' tendencies to put all the important points in writing. In almost every FGC some or all professionals wrote on flipcharts or handouts the key issues they saw as affecting the family. Some also wrote down possible outcomes and areas in which decisions needed to be made. This sort of direction was often welcomed by families. However, there might be seen to be a fine line between stating key issues and resources available and actually structuring the decision-making process to the extent of listing topics to cover in private family time and giving out tasks. In some FGCs the latter approach appears to have prevailed. This might be seen as an attempt by professionals to avoid the loss of control implicit in the FGC process and even a lack of trust in a family's ability to find their own way of reaching decisions. Certainly, both professional and family participants describe this process of setting tasks for the private family time. There are also many examples of both family members and professionals noting that the family plan was altered or co-written by the professional group.

Alongside the professionalisation of some aspects of the process, however, there are many examples of participants describing friendly, informal atmospheres that developed during the conference. This was more the norm than those that were acrimonious or cold and unfriendly.

It was like they were all chilled out, like happy and everything. So it was surprising. (Leighton, 17)

Researcher: What did you think as a place for the meeting?

Michelle (mother) Beautiful, I thought it was a nice relaxing afternoon. It was out of County Hall . . it didn't feel so official. There was lemonade put down for the children. . .it was a very relaxing atmosphere. . . you didn't feel so, what you call it, official.

Kevin (father): We had tea and biscuits. We thought we was in heaven. I was looking forward to my third course when I got there.

Such descriptions are very different from family members' accounts of the type of atmosphere that generally prevails in formal meetings on local authority premises.

It can be seen, then, that the path to empowerment of welfare service users cannot straightforwardly be navigated through the introduction of a radical intervention. Within an institutional structure and culture that promotes top-down decision-making, often disempowering front-line practitioners as well as service users (Jones, 2001), power can be retained by professionals in covert and possibly unintentional ways and service users may be distrustful of professional means and motives.

Democratisation of the family?

As was noted above, Giddens' (1992) view that there are potential inter-relationships between the democratisation of civic institutions and the democratisation of the family has particular relevance to this intervention, where through the democratisation of one aspect of state-client relations there may be the possibility of promoting democratisation in the private sphere.

The FGC intervention does appear to have had some positive impact on many families in ways that could be labelled as democratising or participative. Democracy could be seen to have been actively promoted by the FGC organisers. A FGC coordinator spoke of her aim for one meeting as being:

To try to improve family relations a little, for them to sit and talk together, to stop every problem suddenly flying into a raging mountain.

Co-ordinators suggested strategies such as that everyone should be allowed a chance to speak, that people should listen to each other, and that careful attention should be paid to the opinions of the child, whose meeting it is. The following two areas are notable in the data: the involvement of men and other family members normally excluded from the welfare decision-making process, and the central role of children in the FGCs.

Child welfare services are often criticised for overly concentrating on mothering (see, for example, O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995). Criticism is made both by those who think that women come under pressure from coercive interventions and by those who think that men lose out from a supportive service. One encouraging

development, from the points of view both of those who want to take pressure off women and of those who want to improve men's access to services, is the high incidence of men's attendance at conferences. Whilst we did not set out to quantify the FGC experience, it is noteworthy that there was a father or father figure present at 15 out of the 17 conferences we followed (88%). In contrast, Thoburn *et al.*'s (1995) research on 200 child protection case conferences in the early 1990s found men to be present at only 16%.

Child welfare is a highly contested field of course, and not everyone would automatically welcome the increased involvement of fathers. For example, Oakley and Rigby's (1998) research on the effects of men on the welfare of women and children shows a mixed picture and they conclude that 'it is primarily patriarchy that is bad for women and children's health' (123). In the context of men's responsibility for most of the abuse of women and children, one concern is that some men might use the forum of the FGC to coerce women and children. In the context of this concern, it is interesting to note that in 7 out of the 17 conferences it was specifically mentioned by family participants that it was the father who had the least power. Men were often described as 'quiet', sometimes unusually so, and in some cases, participants spoke of women dominating the discussions. In some senses this is unsurprising, since women tend to be used to taking the lead in discussions about children and child care. As well as being described as passive in several cases, men are also described as dominant in two cases. One of these featured a father who had attended uninvited, despite the boy who was the subject of the conference not wanting him to be present. There were three cases where, interestingly, fathers who were normally domineering were described as being

restrained by the style of the conference and the presence of children. This observation was made by several parties, including the men themselves in two cases. This feature of FGCs might suggest their potential for diffusing hostility, at least for the duration of the conference.

In addition to engaging men in welfare decision-making about their children, FGCs by their very nature draw in other family members, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, adult siblings and god-parents, most of whom would not normally be consulted about a child's welfare. Such participants appeared to be helpful additions to the decision-making and in offering resources. In around half of the FGCs an extended family member appears to have taken a facilitative or leadership role in the decision-making process. Extended family members also feature in many of the plans for the child. For example, for one eleven year old boy, god-parents, aunts and cousins volunteered for a variety of tasks such as home tuition, finding out about clubs and having him to stay for holidays.

Perhaps most significantly, the FGCs in this study appeared to promote the participation of children in decision-making about their welfare. Children were asked about their experiences of participation and power in their everyday lives in order to contextualise their comments about the FGC. It was notable that these children on the whole were able to report very few previous experiences where they had felt powerful, particularly within the family. In contrast, many reported vivid experiences of their lack of power, relating stories about bullying at school and on the street and also problems at home. It is therefore encouraging that the predominant experience for the children in this study was of feeling relatively

powerful in the FGC. They particularly valued being able to say how they feel and what they want. This was often something they had never been able to say to their family (or a specific FGC participant) before. Some children used the FGC to ask questions about their family. Other things that children wanted to say in the meetings included wanting to have contact, wanting to come home, not wanting to come home and not wanting a step-relation to be present during contact. One child noted that she felt powerful in the meeting because she was able to say what she wanted. She had used the meeting to express her feelings to her father:

Brittaney: I told them that I wanted to spend more time with my Dad ... He says he's always working and when he's not he doesn't even bother with me

Interviewer: so you said that did you?

Brittaney: yeah... and if he loves me he would want to spend time with me. (Brittaney, 10)

Mark reported that he was able to get what he wanted (a regulation of contact with his mother) from the meeting:

It would have been worse if we wasn't at the meeting because it wouldn't have been what we wanted and we had to be there to make sure it was what we wanted. (Mark, 11)

Parents also tended to note that they listened to their children in the FGC, sometimes implying that their children's wishes dominated the decision-making.

The meeting was for the kids an' the kids come with what they wanted. Not what we wanted, not what their mum wanted, not what the social workers wanted, they come out with what they wanted. (father of two children aged 10 and 11)

I think the other part of it as well, a lot of it did come from Belinda herself, which is always good 'cause there's no point in saying 'this is what we're going to do Belinda', you've got to do this, you've got to do...well you can forget it, it won't happen, em, so a lot of it was, was suggested by Belinda, or at least agreed by Belinda, I mean it would have to be a chance for it to succeed. (step-father and mother of girl, 13)

In the last quotation the parents promote a model of family decision-making similar to a democratic model, with a suggestion that it is not practicable to impose solutions on (older) children and that they must be listened to and negotiated with. Despite this tendency towards involving children and other family members in family decision-making in the FGCs, this was not a universal experience, and a small number of children reported that they had not felt listened to at all. It should also be noted that although a majority (16) stated that they felt listened to 'a lot' in the meeting, a smaller number (6) felt that they had influenced the outcome 'a lot'.

Our assertion that this intervention might have a role in democratising family relations therefore must be a tentative one, particularly in relation to children's participation. These children were able to distinguish between being listened to and

being influential in a meeting. In the follow-up interviews at six months, children continued to make this distinction in relation to decision-making within the family. We conducted follow-up interviews at 6 months after the initial interview. Unfortunately, we were only able to interview 13 of the 25 children at this second stage due to a variety of reasons, mainly through access being denied directly or indirectly by professionals and carers due to a belief that a follow-up interview was unnecessary or ill-advised. Of the 13 interviewees, most report improved family relationships, with a few reporting much improved family situations. Some directly attribute this to the experience of the FGC, and others to the fact that they have matured. Some report that they have now had their voice heard, or everyone in the family has done so, therefore they understand each other better. One reported that the family have continued to have meetings on an informal basis within the family home to iron out disputes, and some others feel that the family does more talking and listening. Despite this increase, very few believe that they now have more say within the family, particularly in terms of influencing decisions. Most report that they are happier, more secure, and some also say they are more confident. None report that life has got worse since the FGC. The quotations below represent just a few examples of some of these themes:

My mum understands me more like, and [my sister]. I've been having help and that's another good thing really...I think (it's been) mostly good and sometimes sad like. (Claire 14)

Before I would tend to talk a lot and they would shout me out.....they seem to listen and take notice of me more now (Alan 15)

I think we all got our feelings out at the meeting. I think that's what pulled us all together. I think we all found out about each other, we found out about what each other felt rather than keep it in our head and I mean our Mam completely understood where I was coming from and I understood everybody else as well. I got a lot from the meeting. (Susan,16)

It's a lot better than since you last saw me, than what it used to be, but I don't think its because of social workers and all the plan and everything. I just feel it's because we've all grown up a bit. (Stacey, 14)

The picture therefore is complex regarding the impact of the intervention on family relationships in the longer term. Some children report real benefits in their relationships with parents, although they still tend to feel unable to influence decision-making. It is important to note that positive changes cannot necessarily be attributed to the intervention alone, although some children perceived this to be the case. It should also be noted that the children we were able to re-interview *may* have been those in more stable and happy situations. It should be noted, however, that we were able to follow-up the baseline data on all 25 children at 6 months and at that stage only two were in local authority care, and both of these were in long-term placements. This is an encouraging finding because the primary reason for referral in most cases was that children were at risk of requiring substitute care.

DISCUSSION

This evaluation considered only a relatively small number of conferences, albeit in some depth and via a large number of interviews, and the findings can only be seen as exploratory. The study concerned a specific type of welfare intervention with a specific group of families, yet we believe that the data reveal something of the dilemmas and opportunities facing contemporary welfare interventions with families in need. Practical, legal, ethical and political issues are raised by this attempt by welfare professionals to negotiate a new way of relating to families in need.

Welfare professionals have been seen by some commentators on social policy as inevitably part of the disciplinary apparatus of the state. Donzelot (1980), for example, takes a Foucauldian approach to the ‘policing of families’ by social workers. He describes a process of professional surveillance of the family through moralisation, normalisation and coercive intervention, with family members (typically mothers) being enlisted as accomplices in the disciplining of the family. More recently, commentators on child welfare have often followed Donzelot’s approach (e.g. Parton, 1998) but Ferguson (1997; 2003) strikes a very different note. He argues for the potential of reflexive modernisation to democratise relationships between welfare professionals and their clients and suggests that this process is already taking place in contemporary social work encounters. Ferguson argues that, despite claims to the contrary, the concept of self-reflexivity developed in the work of Beck and Giddens can be relevant to the lives of marginalised people who are the recipients of social welfare. He specifically argues this in relation to child and woman protection, with reference (in the 2003 paper) to an empirical study. Ferguson’s analysis of state social work has been criticised as a naïve

reading of the lived realities of clients' and professional lives (Garrett, 2003; Scourfield and Welsh, 2003). Scourfield and Welsh argue against Ferguson's assertions both on the basis of theoretical problems with the work of Giddens and Beck on which Ferguson relies and also on the basis of their ethnographic research on child protection work.

Whilst some aspects of statutory child welfare work in the UK, especially the child protection role (Scourfield and Welsh, 2003), can arguably still be characterised as socially controlling, family group conferences as a specific intervention (albeit one that is mainly implemented by voluntary sector organizations) might in fact be seen as an example of Giddens' 'pure relationship' concept working in civic society. Giddens (1992) argues that the ethical framework that emphasises respecting each other's capabilities, protection from arbitrary use of authority, negotiation, participation, reflection and accountability can apply equally to personal and public relationships. Giddens notes the interconnectedness between democracy in intimate relationships and democracy in the public sphere. With the FGC model, a welfare intervention models a democratised relationship between professionals and families, and simultaneously overtly promotes democratised family relationships. We acknowledge the potential argument that this promotion of a specific way of conducting family relationships risks being an attempt to impose middle class (or at least 'chattering class') values on working class families. However, we would contend that the children and most of the adults in this study held ideals of family life similar to those proposed by Giddens.

In the qualitative study reported here, we believe that our data suggest there is a *potential* interconnection between a democratised relationship in state-family relations and a move towards more democratic inter-personal relationships. This may be to do with the way in which the FGC is facilitated. Co-ordinators overtly suggest to family members that they follow basic democratic principles, such as letting everyone have a turn to speak, listening carefully, respecting each other's views and paying particular attention to the contributions of those with the least power, the children in the family. Certainly, the FGCs in this study appeared to have some success in including those traditionally not involved in decisions about the welfare of children when there is social services involvement – fathers, children and extended family members. However, we noted that, whilst nearly all the children felt involved in the FGC, fewer felt influential. This tendency continued at the six-month follow-up, with children generally reporting improved family relationships but a continued lack of influence over family decisions.

Morgan (1991) notes that some public discourses of the family promote 'family' as something universal, natural and essential, and in so doing might risk smoothing over divisions such as gender and generation. The FGC approach might be seen as promoting a belief that the family is more than a sum of its individual parts, that there is strength in the ties of intimate relationships and sense of group feeling within the umbrella of family. It is possible that some early proponents of FGCs, when speaking of 'the family' making decisions, actually were referring to the adult family members (in the same way that when speaking of 'parenting' what is often meant is mothering). The increased emphasis on children's participation in the welfare field, including an increased use of children's advocates (these were

involved in five of the FGCs in this study), has rather changed this conception of family decision-making. It might be seen that this advocacy model is more akin to the ideal 'democratic family' model. However, it also, to some extent, challenges the notion of the family as an individual unit for intervention, introducing a more conflictual model of intra-familial relations.

It might also be argued that the FGC model represents a popular ideal of how families should function, that is far removed from the actual norms of British family life. Finch and Mason (1993) found that around three-quarters of the participants in their research appeared to like the concept of families gathering together to discuss family care issues, with some even using the term 'family conferences', but that when describing how exactly decisions had been made, these participants reported decision-making through a series of individual conversations. Nonetheless, and despite some resistance to imposed empowerment, this model appears to have been generally successful for individual family members and for families as a unit, in this study.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have made the observation in relation to family group conferences that this attempt to democratise professional-family relationships might also have the potential to model and promote democracy within family relationships. Our findings have many positive elements. Most families and professionals were happy

with this style of decision-making in comparison with traditional, professional-dominated decision-making and almost all FGCs produced plans, many of which were creative and unique to the family. Similarly, there appeared to be positive signs in relation to children, father figures and extended family becoming more involved in family decision-making about children's welfare. Many of the children reported an improvement in family relationships. We propose that these small steps may suggest that the Family Group Conference *can* serve to promote more democratic decision-making within families, which *may* serve to promote relationships that are more generally democratic. Our optimism does have caveats, however. We noted that children felt listened to but not necessarily influential in the family meetings. We also noted that some professionals retained some of their traditional roles and powers by continuing to retain control over meetings through indirect means. Participative strategies can be simply devices to encourage involvement, or even to manipulate, if those with control are not prepared to share their power. The point of this paper is not, however, to criticise professionals, or even adults in general, for their control strategies. Social workers are based near the bottom of a managerial and bureaucratic structure and themselves often feel disempowered in their ability to help families in distress. It can be difficult to introduce a radical change of style such as the FGC without some more fundamental changes to the current hierarchical social welfare systems in the UK.

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