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Book Reviews

Gail Buford and Joe Hudson (Eds.), *Family Group Conferencing: New Directions in Community-Centered Child and Family Practice*. New York: Aldine DeGruyter; \$25.95, papercover, 2002.

This ambitious edited volume addresses family group conferencing and touches on other popular new children's services initiatives, including *patch*, and *wraparound* services. This is an encyclopedic volume, encompassing 30 chapters by a total of 49 authors from seven countries. The book is structured into four sections: origins and philosophical orientation of family group conferencing (FGC), practice framework, comparative practices, and evaluation issues. The editors provide a general introduction and succinct section introductions, although no concluding chapter. Although there is some discussion of evaluation, the typical chapter is a description of how family group conferencing is delivered in a local municipality or with a certain population. Readers seeking examples of ways that family group conferencing could be implemented will find much richness.

Most of the chapters, regardless of their placement in the book, take time to articulate and commend the philosophical orientation of FGC—perhaps because this is FGC's strongest selling point. Although much of the attention given to FGC positions it at the front end of the child welfare system, as part of the determination of a case plan, during the first months of child welfare involvement. Yet, Maluccio and Daly's chapter, in the practice section, extends the argument for the relevance of FGC to the duration of child welfare services. They conclude that "Permanency planning embodies a number of features that are quite consonant—if not identical—with the key characteristics of conferencing" (p. 70) and details them. They make no mention of any aspects of FGC that might not be consonant with permanency planning, missing a chance to discuss reunification bypass procedures and adoption as issues that might not be so consonant with a family-based decision making process. More generally, there is nary a cross word said about FGC—it is generally treated as having limitless possibilities.

Indeed, in general the chapters lack the hard edge that I like

to see—the critiques and concerns are generally mild. This may be because of the unassailable virtues of FGC, commitment to the core principles of FGC and wanting to be sure that it has a chance to develop, or to the selection of authors. To their credit, the editors clearly indicate the themes used in selecting authors. They sought authors who, together, created an international slate, viewed FGC as part of a widespread effort toward civic renewal, could link FGC to other theory, practice, and research activities in social work, could locate FGC in a value-based commitment to social justice and culturally competent practice, knowledgeable about program sponsorship and new roles in communities that might emerge from FGC practice, and commitment to multiple-method, multiple-indicator forms of evaluation.

This volume appears most suited for persons who have already made a commitment to increasing their delivery of community based services through the FGC mechanism. My major disappointment with this volume is that so little attention is given in this volume to the differences in activities and cost between “standard” child welfare CPS or intake procedures and family group conference approaches. I wish that the editors had asked each of the authors to indicate the level of effort, cost, and expended time required to organize family group conferences. Although we now have a notion of the procedures involved in delivering FGC, and that organizing a conference may take a month or more, there is little detail about the cost of these efforts and how they might compare to conventional CPS costs. Without this effort and cost data, decisions on whether or not to employ FGC must assume that the costs are not so much greater than the costs of standard CPS services and that the benefits are substantially greater. We may never know if FGC achieves better results than standard CPS services, but we should be further along in determining differences in cost.

The advancement of human services can be conceptualized as following a path of scientific inquiry that builds a range of coordinated, rigorously evaluated pilot projects followed by major clinical trials that generate reliable evidence of intervention effectiveness. This is not the standard model for the development of child welfare services, at least. The development of these services seems to involve the rapid expansion of intervention approaches—

e.g., classroom-based child abuse prevention programs, intensive family preservation programs, and post-adoption holding therapies—prior to rigorous evaluation and then lose credibility, when their efficacy is found to be seriously wanting. This may also be the path of FGC—there is little science in this volume to suggest otherwise. If the editors had asked authors to raise and answer serious concerns, FGC would be better protected against later disappointment.

The evaluation section acknowledges or addresses a few of the numerous and massive evaluation challenges attendant to such a flexible broadly focused intervention, but provides little guidance about approaches that will be most useful in future evaluation efforts. FGC evaluation efforts must recognize findings summarized by Sundel (and observed by others), “today it is understood that one FGC does not bring about instant change, but that a series of FGCs are needed where a succession of problems are dealt with, and the extended family is motivated to continue to support the child and parents” (p.205). None of the authors directly addresses the question of which designs and statistical treatments are most useful for capturing the benefits of such a fluid and ongoing intervention.

Yet, the assumptions of family group conferencing are so compelling that variations on this practice will undoubtedly continue to develop without evaluation endorsements. The field is better off now that this volume is available to guide that development.

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