

Family group conference in Europe: From margin to mainstream

Ute Straub

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Abstract

A star is born: Among the many recently developed approaches of family support it is Family Group Conference (FGC)¹, which is about to establish an international career – slowly but surely. Coming from the other side of the globe FGC has been called „New Zealand’s present to the world“ and Europe – at first hesitating but meanwhile accepting the gift with pleasure – implements this approach in an increasing number of fields of Social Work. The article will outline the context in which FGC was developed and is implemented, describe its special quality and show how it is translated into practice in various European countries.

In recent years an enormous growth in methods of family oriented counselling, family support and family education has been seen. This is partly due to the focus on child protection issues in context of numerous scandalous cases of child neglect or child abuse, which seem to make it necessary to „educate the educators“ or at least to provide parents with more (controlled) support. On the other hand, the important role of the family for the development of children has been pointed out more sharply. More often not an individual family member but the whole family becomes the target group of social work interventions (Reischach/Straub 2007).

Whole family approaches

„Whole family approaches“ do not only focus on the individual family member but on the whole, often extended family and their social networks. In terms of intervention a scale can be applied reaching from „professionally driven“ to „family infused“ up to „family driven“, according the level of self-determination of the family in the context of professional help (Crampton/Merkel-Holguin 2007). On one side there are models of intervention in which professionals decide on the „right“ perspective on the case. The second model involves the family in decisions, but still in accordance with and dependent on the professional intervention. In both cases the diagnosis is done from outside the family. In contrast the third category is based on the needs and aims as defined by the family themselves. The fundamental assumption is that the family is capable of coping with their weakness and strength and of defining their needs by themselves under the condition that they are provided with the adequate frame. To leave the competence for decision-making powers totally to the family in all phases of a process is the most consistent version in terms of empowerment.

Why FGC can be categorized as family driven and whole-family-oriented, will be shown in the next section.

How does FGC work?

Family group conferences may also be referred to as “family group decision making”. They can be used in any area of family and childcare practice, e.g. children in need and looked-after children, youth justice, and education.

In a FGC the family members are the decision-makers rather than the professionals. The aim of the family group conference is to support families to find their own solutions to problems: the “family” is the primary planning group. In the second place FGC is a family-activating self-help approach, which brings the idea of empowerment into social work in a radical way (Straub 2005, Früchtel/ Budde 2003).

The process itself consists of three steps: referral, preparation and the conference itself; eventually a fourth step is mentioned: the review (see <http://www.frg.org.uk/the-family-group-conference-process>, <http://practicecentre.cyf.govt.nz/policy/seeking-solutions-the-family-group-conference/index.html>).

The referral is most often made by social workers to the local family group conference service. Whether or not a family group conference takes place is a decision made by the family, under no circumstances can a family be forced to have a FGC. Once the family agrees, the service allocates a coordinator to the family. The coordinator (usually a professional recruited from local statutory and voluntary service communities or trained volunteers, so called “citizen-coordinators”) is independent, negotiates attendance and informs participants about the FGC process. He or she invites the members of the family or the social network, chosen by the family, to attend. Absent family members can participate to the meetings in alternative ways, e.g. through letters, tape recordings or by skype. The coordinator acts as a neutral person, who will not influence the family to make a particular decision, but „just“ helps the family to plan the meeting. If possible the families are offered the opportunity to request a coordinator who meets their specific interests in terms of ethnicity, language or religion.

The second step, the preparation, includes many tasks for the coordinator, including arranging together with the child/ young person how they can be helped to participate in the conference and whether they would like a supporter or advocate at the meeting, to negotiate the date, time and venue for the conference and to make the necessary practical arrangements. But he or she also meets with members of the family network, discusses worries or concerns, including how the family group conference will be conducted, and stays in contact with the referrer e.g. concerning formal support that could help the child or family besides the informal help provided by the participants of the FGC.

The conference itself has three distinct stages: „information giving“ includes information about the reasons for the conference, about how the conference is conducted and explain ground rules, about resources and formal support that can be provided. In this stage the child/ young person and family members may also provide information, ask for clarification or raise questions.

The next step is the most important one: The „family-only-time“. Agency staff and the coordinator leave the room and family members have time to consider things from their point of view and come up with a plan that addresses concerns raised. The effect is that they will identify their own resources within the (extended) family, but also find out which support is additionally required from agencies to make the plan work. When the family has finished and come up with a plan, it is the referrer’s responsibility to agree to the plan of action. The plan must be accepted unless it puts the child at risk of significant harm. It is

also important to ensure that the children involved have a clear understanding of what is decided and that their views are understood, as finally it is about their lives. Timescales and responsible persons for any tasks are clarified. Contingency plans, monitoring arrangements and how to review the plan also need to be agreed. Every participant receives a plan.

What makes FGC different? Families remain responsible for the solution of their problems, professionals concentrate on organisation, information and support for the process (not for the solutions!). The crucial element, the „Family-only-time“, the fact that the professionals have to accept the plan under the condition that the child is not put at risk and, the possibility for the families to choose the social network with who they want to work on the problem solving process leads to a radical form of empowerment. In accordance with this principle, individuals learn how to feel responsible for their conflicts themselves instead of relying on experts. The challenge for social workers is the change in paradigm: Families who, at first, are regarded as the problem, turn out to be the start of the solution. Another difference to conventional social work approaches is the inclusion of a number of people and the idea that the more people who participate the more resources can be activated and creative and helpful ideas will be recruited. Everybody contributes a knot to the net that will be strong enough to carry the child and the family. Thus the family receives „tailor-made“ support that matches exactly with their needs and opportunities and allows differentiated responses to different situations. Besides, a “social immune system“ will be built up.

The theoretical framework

As a pragmatic concept, emerging of innovative practice and being implemented by dedicated practitioners long before it reached academic levels, the theoretical categorization of FGC took place in retrospect. The following concepts form part of this on-going process: The reconciliation of life world and system (Habermas 1981), postmodern developments like individualisation (of families), the search of new life styles by “Wahlverwandtschaften” (relatives of choice) (Beck-Gernsheim 1994) and elements of civil society building (Putnam 2000). FGC is more and more looked upon not only as a problem-solving tool but rather as a concept of democratizing professional support and community building. In the context of the relation between welfare state policy and civic engagement of varying social groups Dahlberg (2005) introduces the concept of “crowding in – crowding out”. Crowding out refers to the process that welfare state activities may reduce civil society’s responsibility to be voluntarily engaged (at least in some groups of the population). Crowding in would be the opposite, meaning to professionalize social services in such a way that they support civil engagement and volunteering – as is the case with FGC.

Additionally FGC forms part of two „movements“ within Social Work: „restorative practices“ and „indigenized social work“ (Straub 2012b). Restorative practices are based on the fundamental assumption that individuals are more willing to change behaviour if there is the possibility of participation on the one hand and on the other hand a clearly defined expectation of the community (Wachtel 2012). „To restore“ indeed not only refers to the „restoration“ of the actors and their social environment but reaches further and includes the restoration of the citizens’ competence for their own affairs, keyword „ownership“, which they lost through expert-dominated and universalistic procedures (Braithwaite 2004). FGC supports the idea of ownership, activates the extended family and the social network and leaves the responsibility for coping with problems to those who “own” them and thus forms part of restorative practices. The proponents of this approach aim to build up the potential of civil-society so that many individuals have the possibility to participate.

Indigenisation refers to approaches in developing countries or within indigenous minority communities who (re)conceptualize forms of support that have gone lost during colonisation or have been covered by processes of adapting into in the dominating society. It also means a bottom-up-process which is dynamic and integrative. „Indigenisation or localisation of social work refers to the process of mainly developing social work approaches rooted in the local context, but also adjusting mainstream social work to fit in the local context“ (Barise 2005, online). Reproaching Social Work for being subject to an institutionalized racism, a Maori civil rights movement made the New Zealand Ministry of Social Welfare (now Social Development) develop an approach, which is methodically based on distinct family ties, clan structures and a specific culture of communication following the principle of consensus (Doolan 2007). Since “modern” FGC brings Maori values and patterns of Maori conflict management into Mainstream Social Work it is a typical example of indigenized Social Work (Gray/ Coates 2010, Straub 2012a).

Evaluation

Several evaluation studies show that the concept of FGC in terms of developing their own plans of support is very successful. The most elaborated studies are done in the Netherlands where a number of 1000 conferences has quantitatively and partly qualitatively been evaluated since 2001 and contains data on referrals, results and execution of the plans, and on the satisfaction of participants. The results of 2010 (826 completed FGCS) show that in 95 percents of the conferences the participants make a plan together and that in 66 percents the own sources are complemented with a request for professional support, which means on the other hand that one third of the families manages to cope with their problems on an informal basis. After about three months two third of the respondents from professionals and family members feels that the situation has improved and 40 percents of the participants feel that the plan has been executed completely, 50 percents that the plan has been executed partially (www.eigen-kracht.nl/inhoud/onderzoeksresultaten). These results are supported by a study from Berlin, which shows that in 96 percents of the FGCs a plan is developed and that the selfhelp rate (the support that is developed within a FGC by the family) amounts to 61 percents, which shows the high potential of activation (Früchtel et. al. 2010).

A comparative study (Netherlands) of families who have taken part in a FGC and a families who have not is based on interviews three and nine months after the meetings and examined especially the following aspects: the safety and welfare of children and the ties between the family and its social network. FGC-parents generally indicate that they are receiving somewhat more support in upbringing and also require less formal support than before. Most are more satisfied with their social contacts and have more confidence in them. Although this study provides an insufficient basis for the conclusion that these beneficial results could be attributed solely to the holding of a FGC conference it became apparent that the director function rests mainly with family and more children remain in their network whereas in cases from the shadow group the director function rests mainly with the family guardian and there is a shift toward residence outside the family (Wijnen-Lunenburg et. al. 2008).

How is FGC implemented in Europe?

There are quite some differences but also communalitiesⁱⁱ, concerning the level of standardisation, the areas of implementation and the background of coordinators (professionals or lay persons) and the form of their training. One crucial difference is whether FGC is implemented bottom-up by NGOs (in the Netherlands and most Eastern European countries) or top-down by a governmental initiative (like in Norway). In between there are models where FGC was initially promoted by NGOs and then became more and more influenced by local authorities (like in Northern Ireland).

In spite of all the variations in the different countries there are some principles seen as *conditio sine qua non*: The family-only-time is the key issue. There is a strict separation of functions in the different roles of the social worker, the coordinator and the family. The coordinators have to maintain a dual independence, of the social administration as well as of the families' problems. Social workers have to act neutrally in regard to solutions and to shift the relation of power in favour of the families. The participation of children/ young people and their needs demands a special consideration. Enough time for the preparation and organisation of the conference has to be provided.

In the following I will highlight the situation in some European countries.

Although there is no official European umbrella organisation, there is a grass-root-like exchange between the countries. The annual European Network meeting, in which five participants of each country take part, is an opportunity for the exchange of ideas, of practice experiences and research projects, and of course for networking. There is also a close cooperation and a substantial support from "more developed" to "less developed countries", e.g. the Netherlands or Norway help to establish FGC in Eastern Europe. Up to now only Southern Europe remains a FGC-free zone. An important step towards a broader attention for FGC in the European socio-political public was done by the First European FGC-Congress under the paradigmatic title: "Democratizing Help and Welfare" in 2011. A crucial debate had been on the question whether the quite informal meetings of the European network should be continued or whether it would be time for more structure, e.g. to build up sections for different topics like methods, training, legal basis and lobbying, which would work throughout the year. The homepage for the congress information was turned into a joint European Network homepage (www.familygroupconference2011.eu/en/home/).

In some European countries FGC has a long tradition: In Scandinavia FGC was implemented between 1995 and 2003 (Vik 2008). Norway decided to introduce a nationwide centralistic system driven by state institutions, which are responsible as well for the standards as for the recruitment and training of coordinators. The Directorate for Children Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir), which is the governmental office under the Ministry of Children and family Affairs that is responsible for child welfare, has been given the responsibility to implement FGC in the whole country since 2007. Subordinate there are five regional offices and 27 teams who do the training in the municipalities, coach social workers in method fidelity and are in charge of the approximately 300 coordinators in Norway. By now nearly two thirds of all communities in Norway are trained in FGC, but since there is no obligation, the implementation quote in relation to the means is rather low. It is interesting to see that the top-down approach at one hand leads to a widespread knowledge about FGC on the professional level but not necessarily to a growing demand if families are not motivated enough to do a FGC. As a consequence a communication strategy for mass media is being developed.

In the Netherlands where FGC started in 2001 under the name of „Eigenkracht conferenties”, a central umbrella organisation (Eigenkracht centrale) also fixes standards, provides training and evaluates the conferences (Straub 2008) but is – in difference to

Norway – not state-run but an NGO. This organisation can look back on a very successful first decade: not only that meanwhile 5000 FGCs have been carried out and that FGC is implemented in more and more contexts (see below), but since 2012 FGC has got a legal basis. The Dutch House of Commons voted unanimously to accept an amendment to the Civil Code which allows parents in trouble in the area of youth care to work out their own plan first before any other intervention takes place. A list of research projects, which were finished by the end of 2011, shows around 60 different studies done in the Netherlands (www.eigenkracht.nl/en).

After a hesitant start in Germany, the municipalities, which offer FGC are increasing slowly but surely; currently there is an estimated number of 40. The implementation started in 2006 independently in different places by committed social workers in social administration or NGO-service providers. The result is a wide variety in FGC-services and there is still no umbrella organisation but a very active informal network, which meets once a year. These meetings started in 2007 with 40 participants, in 2011 there were 150. As of 2010 the participants of the nationwide network agreed on joint standards (Früchtel/ Straub 2011), and since last year a nationwide quantitative research project started and a central homepage is available (www.familienrat-fgc.de). Very active FGC-centres are Berlin (Bezirk Mitte), Stuttgart, Bremen and Hamburg. But there are also small rural districts like Main-Taunus-Kreis, the district of Husum or Darmstadt-Dieburg which are quite active.

In Great Britain the different countries have developed various forms of implementation since the 1990ies. Welfare-organisations promote FGC: „Day Break“ in England and Wales or „Children 1st“ and Barnados in Scotland. They hold the position as umbrella organisations, but as there are some FGC-providers that are not members of these organisations it has to be mentioned that in some cases the principles of FGC may be watered down, especially in terms of the Family-only-time and the independence of the coordinators from the youth welfare office.

Success in terms of spreading the approach can be ambivalent also in other aspects. On the one hand it is desirable that there be an increase of FGC due to the fact that it is mandatory as best practice before a juvenile justice court is opened. On the other hand this leads to certain carelessness in FGC-processes because „it just has to be done“ and method fidelity cannot be guaranteed. Altogether there are more or less 80 public and private providers in England offering FGC. In Northern Ireland, where FGC has been implemented since 1998, five social care trusts, which are working nation-wide, offer their own FGC-projects but have now formed a national „FGC Forum“ in order to develop joint standards. In 2011 the target of 500 children having attended an FGC has been met and, given the economic climate, FGC services have successfully managed to maintain the level of services (www.fgcforumni.org).

In Eastern Europe several „FGC-movements“ are active. In Russia, but also in small countries like Slovakia, Poland and since two years also in Bosnia and Herzegovina foundations – often supported financially by the West and in terms of training by Eigenkracht from the Netherlands – are making first steps. In Russia FGC has been implemented since 2006 as a pilot project in the Murmansk region in cooperation with SOS-Children’s’ villages. Up to now there is one (!) project manager who has meanwhile trained around 160 coordinators, and 52 FGCs were completed in 2010. The difficulties are that there is no governmental support and that Russian families seem to be very suspicious of any form of intervention – possibly a consequence of communist times. The solution is that the coordinators work closely together with schools, because the families trust teachers and there is a bigger chance for an FGC if a teacher does the referral. The Norwegian SOS Children’s’ village association supports the Russian initiative. In Serbia the NGO FICE Serbia (International Federation of Educative Communities) started FGC in Belgrade and

Novi Sad. Interestingly enough the regional authorities in the South of Serbia (Vojvodina) are considering an FGC-cooperation in the Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euro region (DKMT) including provinces of Serbia, Rumania and Hungary (<http://www.ficesrbija.rs/>). These examples show how the “FGC-movement” strengthens connections within Europe as well as between European Social Workers.

What are the fields of practice?

In some countries FGC is offered in special contexts or settings, e.g. in group work with children or young people from FGC-families, in community work, in cooperation with schools and very often in victim-offender-mediation. In Germany up to now FGC is mainly established in child welfare, but some municipalities start in the fields of looked-after children, elderly people needing help, schools and restorative justice.

In Wales, possibly because of a long tradition of service user involvement, a so called Young Person Group works with children and young persons after their having taken part in a FGC. The results show that this contributes enormously to a sustainable activation of the resources of the children. A presentation done by one of those groups during the conference of Family-centred solutions in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2008, their personal reports about their experiences showed a high level of reflection (more information on www.childreninwales.org.uk).

In Bristol, England, the municipality implemented an Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) Team working with families at risk. ASB includes harassment, vandalism or use of drugs but also insulting or racist remarks. Often it goes along with domestic violence or alcohol abuse. The goal of the approach is to reduce ASB but also to avoid homelessness due to not fulfilling the tenancy agreement but also to avoid social exclusion of the families in their neighbourhood and to improve the atmosphere. FGC is implemented to work with families and neighbours to develop and install joint rules for a generally accepted behaviour. A first evaluation after 18 months showed that registered incidences were diminished by 75 percents, less vandalism was complained of and the feeling of safety in the quarter had risen.

In Kent, England, the focus is put on preventive cooperation with schools. Two schools and up to 15 families a year are integrated. The criteria of the programme are oriented on the campaign “Every Child Matters (ECM)”ⁱⁱⁱ, which identifies five key needs for children: „Be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well-being“. There were clear improvements like fewer disturbances during the lessons and fewer disciplinary interventions along with a higher rate of attendance and school-leaving qualifications (Barton/ Walsh 2008).

An innovative possibility for families to communicate is offered by the Dutch FGC-Service provider, Eigenkracht Centrale: an interactive tool on an internet platform, called E-circle, which is adapted especially to the needs of FGC-communication. Windows with different icons, which can be easily decoded, for example one for the plan, a joint calendar, a journal, for current information, for each family member. According to the needs of the family blogs or chat rooms can be installed. This enables family members who live further away to stay in contact with the rest. The tool can also be used for mobilizing a network without having done a FGC.

In Norway the implementation of FGC in foster care is a crucial issue and a research project is going on. In a region of Northern Germany (Landkreis Husum) FGC is mainly used for providing a care-network for old people and their relatives.

Open questions

Of course there are numerous questions to be discussed. What are the differences in implementation in European countries due to different circumstances? How can it be guaranteed that the approach is not watered down and that the special needs of each family are regarded so that the FGC leads to a solution that is „tailor-made instead of ready-made“? Which are the pros and cons in terms of top-down or bottom up implementations or of different models existing parallel versus strictly standardized ones? How are the coordinators to be recruited: professionals of NGOs or trained lay people, how much proximity to social professions is allowed? How would an inclusion in welfare laws look that puts more weight on FGC but also maintains it as an open option to families?

However, there is unanimity about the following: „Family Group Conferencing is about mutual self reliance and the right of citizens to remain in control of their own lives, even in times of trouble when official institutions are playing an important part. This philosophy should become the starting point in help and welfare, available to everyone“ (<http://www.familygroupconference2011.eu/>). It seems that this message is spreading cross-border among European social workers and may cause a paradigm shift in social work approaches. This and the impact on (extended) families and their role and participation in civil society will have to be proved by future longterm studies.

ⁱ Not to be confused with Family Conference by Thomas Gordon, which is directed by a professional (therapist) and concentrates on the core family

ⁱⁱ If no other references are mentioned, the following informations are based on presentations, workshop sessions and individual interviews by the author during the conference on „Family-centred solutions“ of the Family Rights Group, 17th to 18th of september 2008 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, the yearly European FGC Network events, especially the 9th, 18th to 19th of October in Utrecht and the ensuing first European FGC-Conference „Democratizing Help and Welfare“, 19th to 21st of October 2011 in Utrecht.

ⁱⁱⁱ This campagne was released after some horrible incidents of child abuse and death. Since 2004 it is part of the Children Act and of the national programme „Sure Start“, including Early Excellence Centres, Local Programmes und Neighbourhood Nurseries (<http://www.everychild.matters.gov.uk/earlyyears/surestart>) (01/02/09)

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Internet resources

Association for support of children in out-of-family upbringing, Serbia:

<http://www.ficesrbija.rs/> (04/24/2012)

Children in Wales: www.childreninwales.org.uk (04/24/2012)

Eigen kracht, Netherlands: www.eigen-kracht.nl/inhoud/onderzoeksresultaten (04/24/2012)

European Congress on Family Group Conference 2011:

www.familygroupconference2011.eu/en/home/ (04/24/2012)

Family Group Conference Forum, Northern Ireland: www.fgcforumni.org (04/24/2012)

Family Rights Group, United Kingdom: <http://www.frg.org.uk/the-family-group-conference-process> (04/24/2012)

Informationsportal des deutschen Netzwerktreffens zum Familienrat, Germany:

www.familienrat-fgc.de (04/24/2012)

Practice centre - a practice resource for Child, Youth and Family, New Zealand

<http://practicecentre.cyf.govt.nz/policy/seeking-solutions-the-family-group-conference/index.html> (04/24/2012)