Family Group Conferencing
A systemic, socially responsible way
to support individuals with problems[1]

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Abstract

Family is not a political issue, but a social phenomenon that plays an important role in the lives of many. But why limit ourselves to families? Sometimes we have closer relationships with people who strictly speaking aren't family: friends, neighbours, etc. Family group conferencing uses this "extended family" approach when dealing with difficulties.

People face many different kinds of challenges. Fortunately they are mostly able to solve issues themselves. But what when they cannot? Sometimes professional help is called in, or public services like a child protection agency take over. This can help or it can make matters worse. The two main reasons why things go wrong are:

- "Take over" means the responsibility is taken away from the family; they no longer have "ownership" of the problem and others solve the problem "for" them or impose actions "onto" them.

- The problem is isolated from the community in which it occurs. Often solutions focus on the "problematic" person and forget to involve the possibilities which the social network can provide.

Family group conferencing is a way to keep responsibility and ownership of the problem where it belongs: with the family. It empowers people by letting them choose what course of action is the best for them, their children or other family members. A family group conference creates a forum where the problem can be addressed by the persons involved and those who are important in their lives. An independent facilitator leads the process and doesn't solve the problem for them, but creates an environment in which the family group can decide how to tackle the challenges they are facing.

Keywords

Restorative practices, family group conferencing, problem-solving capacity, problem ownership, responsibility, social responsibility, empowerment, facilitation, community involvement, community development

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1. Introduction

People face many different kinds of challenges in their lives. Fortunately they are mostly able to solve their issues themselves. They either tackle things independently or ask the help of family, friends or professionals. It is generally in the realm of professional help that their problems are greatest (else they wouldn't need professional help) and where the greatest challenges lie. Society has a role to play, especially when the issues affect those who are vulnerable, such as children and the aged. The danger is that society becomes paternalistic in its approach and makes all kinds of decisions for the individual or intervenes on grounds of "professional" expertise.

Before the Second World War, society was primarily a formalised affair. A definite hierarchy and distance of power between the echelons of this hierarchy created clear lines of authority and an emotional distance between individuals. After the Second World War a process of *informalisation* gave rise to today's society (Wouters, 1990). Ideally this trend reduces the emotional distance between individuals, leading to a more egalitarian society.

To a certain extent family structures reflect societal structures: Egalitarian relationships between family members are more important than previously, the distance in power is less and family members tend to interact more informally with one another. This is only a general trend and families find themselves somewhere on a dimension between a so-called command household on the one extreme to a negotiation household on the other extreme (de Bakker, 2006). In the command household, children are expected to obey their care-givers. Disobedience is not tolerated and is punished. In the negotiation household decisions are made by consensus.

In a way the development in society is lagging the development in family structures. Societal structures are mainly hierarchical. In the social sector intervention is product-centred rather than client-centred. An implicit distance of power exists in social organisations regarding the very people they were called into being to assist. Help organisations pretend to know better what is good for their clients and tend to impose their solutions on them. This is especially true when families or individuals within a family face problems that fall beyond the scope of what they are able to solve themselves.

Take child protection, as an example. We probably all agree that children are vulnerable members of our society who need to be protected *when the family is no longer able to provide that protection itself*. However, this should not automatically mean that caregivers are relieved of their responsibilities and that society takes over. Yes, there will be situations where this is necessary, but this must be a last resort. When society "takes over", responsibility is taken away from the family; they no longer have "ownership" of the problem and others solve the problem "for" them or impose actions "onto" them. The distance of power is obvious.

Our culture is also influenced by the success of the medical model. This model has its place; the question is whether its influence in the social arena is always beneficial. Take psychotherapy, for example. The general trend is an individual approach. The individual is treated, whereas the current health psychology paradigm should be bio-psycho-social (see

Sarafino, 2002, for example). The systemic approach to psychotherapy sees problems as the result of issues on any or all of three domains and in the interaction between these domains. You cannot treat an individual on the intrapsychological level without affecting biology (look at neuropeptide research, Pert, 1997, for example) and the social network. Yet the individualistic approach prevails. Also in the social arena solutions often focus on the "problematic" person. This defective individual needs to be fixed, either biologically or intrapsychologically. The role of the environment, if it is considered, is seen as a further reason to isolate this individual from this environment. Most importantly, help organisations forget to involve the possibilities which the social network can provide. In brief: The problem is isolated from the community in which it occurs.

Restorative practices offer a way to alleviate some of these issues: Firstly through its inherent systemic approach and secondly from its fundamental principle that citizens should be empowered to take responsibility for their own lives. No-one really likes to be told what to do. It robs them of their feeling of competence and their sense of freedom. Restorative practices empower people by giving them options, allowing them to make a choice and be in charge of the decisions which impact directly on their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

2. Restorative Practices

Restorative practices has its roots in the justice system in New Zealand (Consedine, 1995; Maxwell, 1996). The aboriginal people saw a great deal of their youth sliding into criminality and the Western justice system seemed to have little impact in changing their behaviour, leave alone deal with the effects on their welfare. From this concern the Maori people suggested that their delinquent youths could be dealt with more effectively using traditional methods.

In brief, in the old Maori tradition problems in the community were approached as follows: All those involved, including their complete families, were called together to find a solution. Especially the involvement of the families was regarded as essential. This group would withdraw, taking with them food and drink and only returned once they had reached an agreement with which all were satisfied. If necessary such a session could take days.

The government agreed to try out this method. It proved so successful that the 'Children, Youth and Families Act' was passed in New Zealand in 1989. It gave all children and adolescents, irrespective their heritage, the right to such a process. As a result Family Group Conferencing became the standard approach to deal with youth delinquency. The principles of family group conferencing spread across the world and broadened into several social arenas including dealing with incidents and problems at schools, in families, neighbourhoods and even cities. The term *restorative practices* was coined to include the principles of family group conferencing that were applicable to all fields where citizens should have responsibility and the leading role in solving issues.

In the USA the International Institute of Restorative practices has been active in this field since 1994 (iirp.edu). The author came into contact with Restorative Practices in the

Netherlands (www.Eigen-Kracht.nl), where he spent some ten years facilitating Family Group Conferences, mainly for families having some kind of difficulty with their children and who needed the assistance of the Dutch Child Protection Agency.

3. Family Group Conferencing

Restorative practices is a general, systemic approach that fits well with concepts such as salutogenic health (Antonovsky, 1979) and social responsibility. In separate articles (Van Alphen, 2013a and 2013b) the application of these principles regarding crime and in school environments is discussed. In this article the emphasis is on applying the restorative approach in dealing with challenges in the family environment.

Antonovsky's (1979) model predicts that it is not stress alone that determines health, but the degree to which a stressor violates the individual's sense of coherence. By coherence he means confidence that stressors are comprehensible, manageable and meaningful to be dealt with. All three these components can be supported by involving the social environment in general and family in particular.

Family is a social phenomenon that plays an important role in the lives of many. In this article family is not limited to "blood" families. Sometimes we have closer relationships with people who strictly speaking aren't family: friends, neighbours, etc. For the remainder of this article family means all those meaningful people in the life of an individual who also feel "connected" to him or her. These people know the individual and his or her situation better than anyone else in the community, certainly better than any professional. Knowing the individual and the situation, they are able to help to make sense out of the situation. Feeling connected usually means a willingness to help, materially or simply through moral support, increasing the sense of manageability. And the knowledge of being connected makes it worthwhile to deal with the issues that are being faced. In brief: involving the family supports coherence. All good reasons why family group conferencing uses this "extended family" approach when dealing with difficulties.

Facilitation

A facilitator is someone who makes things possible. The facilitator does not fix the problem, does not advise and has no interest in the solution chosen. All he or she does is creates a forum where the appropriate people can make their own decisions. A facilitator is not a case manager, who actually arranges and coordinates a help package.

The first question then is: who decides that a family group conference should be offered. This is where the professionals need to be proactive. A family group conference is never mandatory, always voluntary. Yet it should be the intervention of first choice. When a plan is decided upon by the individual and his or her family, it is *their* plan. It has their explicit approval and therefore has a better chance of actually being executed. As they own both the problem and the plan of action they are motivated to follow a particular course of action which they believe will adequately deal with the issue at hand.

This does not mean that the professional doesn't play a role. Certainly help may be offered and advice given. When a family group conference is used, this offer of help and advice needs to be placed on hold until the conference itself is held.

The next question is: where to find a suitable facilitator. In the Netherlands an organisation called *Eigen-Kracht Centrale* (www.Eigen-Kracht.nl) was set up for that very purpose. This organisation trains and coordinates a pool of free-lance facilitators who may be hired in to arrange a family group conference. The author hopes to find sufficient interested parties to set up a similar organisation in Slovenia.

Why not the professional? Simply as the professional almost always *does* have an interest in the solution chosen: Either from their organisation or due to their specific role.

Preparation

Most of the hours spent by a facilitator are in preparing the conference. The first step is to meet with the family and find out whether a family group conference is wanted. This requires giving information about the conference itself, its purpose and the role of the facilitator. Often some resistance needs to be overcome, especially when the family has had negative experiences in the past with care agencies. This resistance usually fades when they realise that the facilitator operates confidentially, does not report to any authority or agency and that the family is in charge.

A conference is always held around a particular question. The facilitator needs to assist the family in making this question concrete. The result of the conference is a plan which answers this question.

The next step is finding out who all should be invited to attend. Experience in the Netherlands indicates that generally the larger the family actually present, the better the plans made. It is not an "adults only" party, children usually are present too, especially if the issues concern the child.

Also important is to find out what information could help the family to make an appropriate plan. This may also mean inviting professionals to explain what they could offer, if the family so chooses. In child protection cases the case manager or legal guardian assigned to the child is usually present at the conference and will also provide information to all present.

The facilitator needs to ensure that these professionals also understand the principles. Essential is that any bounding criteria are stated up-front. It is unreasonable to ask a family to put in the effort to come up with a good plan only to shoot it down afterwards because it doesn't meet with criteria. Therefore the criteria should be clear up-front. Also here the facilitator has a role to play. Up-front criteria need not be worked out in a legalistic way. Only the essential boundaries need be explicitly stated.

The other point to clarify to professionals is that when a family group conference comes up with a plan, this plan will be ratified, unless boundary conditions are not met, the plan is illegal or where the safety of individuals is compromised. The experience is that families do not make unsafe or illegal plans. This is why the up-front criteria are so important: If a family

is asked to develop a plan and know up-front that they are in control and that their plan will be accepted, they go about this task seriously.

The last piece of preparation is logistical. A suitable location needs to be found. Experience shows that it is better if this is on some "neutral" ground, not in the offices of an agency or in the home of the family. Often churches or community centres are prepared to rent out a suitable space for a reasonable fee. The space should be such that the family are able to negotiate a plan in complete privacy. Arrangements for food and drink need to be made and invitations need to be sent.

The Conference

The conference itself consists of three parts: The sharing of information, the private time and the acceptation of the plan.

In the first phase the facilitator welcomes all present, states the reason for the conference and the questions it is called to answer. The course of action is briefly explained and then the professionals are invited to each provide the information they have to offer. If there is a legal guardian or case manager, this person is usually asked as first to explain the current situation. Sometimes it is necessary to reflect on the past, especially if there have been failed attempts to resolve the issue at hand. It is better that these negative emotions are dealt with openly and frankly so that they don't smoulder on during the rest of the conference. The focus needs to be on the future, however: What can the professional and their organisation offer. These presentations should be relatively short, 10 minutes at the most. Participants are given the chance to ask questions. The purpose of this first part of the conference is to make sure that all participants have the same information and are aware of resources external to the family which they may consider during their deliberations. The facilitator sums up, thanks the professionals for their input and puts the family to work.

During the second phase neither the facilitator nor any of the professionals are present. The negotiations are private. How the family chooses to go about working out their plan is not the facilitator's responsibility. An anecdote: At a conference concerning divorced parents and their daughter, the parents managed to scream and shout at each other for an entire four hours under supervision of their daughter and various family members. The noise could be heard three doors away. The trap is to intervene. The way these two communicated with each other during the private time was representative of how they communicated with each other generally. For their daughter this was nothing new. The plan they came up with was impressive. Despite their manner of communication, they had managed to come up with a plan that was worked out in minute detail. The moral of the story: Have faith that families will do what is best for their children.

The opposite is not true: The facilitator doesn't lock the door and only open it once agreement has been reached. Not only is participation voluntary, but sometimes participants need a breather or want to ask a question. Seldom do they actually leave the conference. After all, while they are present they have a say in the plan. Sometimes families are also unable to reach consensus.

How long is this second part? In principle as long as it takes. Sometimes half an hour is enough, sometimes the conference needs to be adjourned and continued on another date. Sometimes they will need to take a break for a meal, others choose to eat while continuing their negotiations. Food and drink are beneficial as a social bonding factor. Flexibility is an essential virtue as it is only once the family has reached consensus without being pressurised that the plan is truly *their* plan.

Sometimes the family commits their plan to paper themself; sometimes the facilitator is called to assist. The closing of the second phase involves making sure the plan is on paper, that it is complete. The facilitator does not involve himself or herself with the content of the plan, but may help in making sure that all agreements are concretely written down, that the plan includes arrangements for evaluation and there is a plan of action for if things don't go according to plan.

In the third phase the plan is formally accepted. If there is a legal guardian, the plan is presented and the legal guardian needs to check that the up-front boundaries have been respected.

The conference is closed. The facilitator's last task is to type up the plan and distribute it to all family members and any other professional the family feels should be informed. Once this is done, the facilitator vanishes out of the lives of these people. The work has been done.

Results

In the Netherlands several thousand conferences have been held leading to plans. What is notable is that compared to other ways of organising help, families put in more of their own resources, are motivated to execute their plans and generally execute them in their original form or adjust agreements when they prove unworkable. Generally the participants are satisfied. Some results from the Netherlands:

A study in youth protection (Wijnen-Lunenburg, et al., 2008) shows that professional help in families where a conference was held reduces faster than in those without a conference: In other words, less professional help. The number of foster placements was the same, but these placements were on average three months shorter and were more frequently network placements.

The metropolitan area of Amsterdam commissioned a study to calculate the cost effectiveness of family group conferencing (Schuurman & Mulder, 2012). Calculation of savings due to 100 family group conferences, corrected for the costs of the conferences, amounted to 1,7 million Euro on an annual basis.

Of particular note is a study by Van Beek (2009) regarding the use of family group conferencing in the period 2007-2009 in cases of domestic violence, especially as there is criticism (Filipovic, 2013) on the use of restorative justice for this kind of population. Of the 17 cases where a conference was held, all 17 of them agreed on a plan. In all cases the violence stopped. In the six cases where partners were still living together, three cases were

still living together after three months and the other three had split up. The bottom line is that the violence stopped and that the participants were satisfied with the process.

Van Beek (2009) sums up that the most important effects of family group conferencing in this study were: More support from family and social network; better relationships between family members and other acquaintances; more safety; improvement of the situation; boundaries were set; and more understanding and more people were aware of the situation. As one of the primary independent researchers of family group conferencing she adds that with exception of boundary setting, which is peculiar to domestic violence issues, these effects are similar to what is found generally when evaluating family group conferences.

4. Conclusion

Family group conferencing is a way to keep responsibility and ownership of the problem where it belongs: with the family. It empowers people by letting them choose what course of action is the best for them, their children or other family members. A family group conference creates a forum where the problem can be addressed by the persons involved and those who are important in their lives. An independent facilitator leads the process and doesn't solve the problem for them, but creates an environment in which the family group can decide how to tackle the challenges they are facing.

Not only do these points of departure make for a socially responsible way to support families in difficulty, they also cost society less.

This article is meant to be more than providing information. It is a call to action. The author is looking for parties interested in creating a pool of trained volunteer and free-lance facilitators in Slovenia, who can be used in helping families take control of their own lives.

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About the author

Markus Franciscus van Alphen was born on the 27th of June 1960 in Pretoria, South Africa. After receiving his school education he moved to Cape Town, where he received a degree in Electrical and Electronic Engineering at the University of Cape Town and studied two years towards a commerce degree. He worked for several years as a partner of a firm of consulting engineers before moving to the Netherlands at age 31. His focus shifted to software development and from there towards the human component, leading him to complete a Master's degree in clinical psychology at the University of Amsterdam. Markus currently lives in Slovenia and works as a therapist for individuals, couples and families. He is a trainer and lecturer for undergraduate psychology students at NTI University in Leiden, NCOI in Hilversum and for post graduate psychology students. As a restorative practitioner he works both hands-on, being called in to resolve incidents and to lead the process of conflict resolution, as well as training others to implement the restorative approach.

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