IT'S NOT ABOUT THEM WITHOUT THEM: COLLABORATING WITH CONSUMERS TO MEET NEEDS AND IMPROVE PRACTICE

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“Accelerating Impact: Harnessing the Power of Human, Social, and Financial Innovation”
Based on dissertation research using grounded theory approach:
- public child welfare organizational culture
- perspectives on readiness for change
- implementation of family empowerment

Broad interest in:
- Child welfare reform and systemic change
- Workers and supervisors’ perspectives on change and role of organizational culture
- Family perspectives, involvement & engagement
The problem

- Child welfare system is in need of reform
  - Historically functioning as a social control agency
  - Bureaucratic and inflexible structure & programming
  - Tendency to separate and alienate families
  - Lack of concrete mechanisms to ensure choice & voice
  - Ongoing struggle to adequately engage consumers

- Lack of/poor engagement results in:
  - Poor outcomes for children & families
  - Ineffective systems that perpetuate family problems
Impetus for change

- Family preservation and empowerment movement
  - Increasing empirical and practical support for efforts to strengthen families and keep them intact (Cleek, Wofsy, Boyd-Franklin, Mundy, & Howell, 2012; Dawson & Berry, 2002)
  - General agreement that building relationships with families, giving them choice and voice and keeping children with family produce positive outcomes (Graves & Shelton, 2007; Myers, 2008)
Impetus for change cont’d

- Socio-cultural & Demographic shifts
  - Concerns about institutionalization & over-reliance on foster care
  - Shortage of foster care placements
  - Opioid Crisis and increasing absence of biological parents
  - Legislation prioritizing kinship placements
    - All Title IV-E programs are required to consider placements with relatives first; some stipulating preference for grandparents
    - 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act
    - 2018 Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act
  - Emergence and significance of ‘grand-families’; intensification of grand-parenting (Meyer & Kandic, 2017)
    - 2.5 m grandparents raising grandchildren
RQ # 3: What do caregivers report to be their experience with family empowering interventions within their public child welfare county office?
Methods

- Convenience sample of 8 kinship caregivers, all grandparents in mid-West
- Kinship grandparents have between 1-4 children for between 8 months to 14 years
- Adaptation of the FES (Koren, Dechillo & Friesen, 1992) – measures levels of empowerment
- 14-question semi-structured qualitative interview protocol
- Use of Nvivo package to manage and sort data & aid in analysis
Kinship Grandparent Profiles

- **CG1**: Grandmother with 4 grandchildren in her care for the past 8 months; legal custody of 3; physical custody of 1 with limited decision-making power; dealing with kids’ behavioral health and separation issues; previous negative relationship with CPS due to neglect allegations; felt treated like “the enemy”

- **CG2**: Grandfather with multiple grandchildren for 3.5 years; feels adequately prepared and informed, but asks many questions due to couple being “new parents again”; appreciates autonomy that comes with having legal custody
Kinship Grandparent Profiles

- **CG3**: Grandmother with 1 grandchild for 6 years; custody of grandchild since age 18 months; child has ongoing medical issues; sees foster care and kinship as a 2-tier system disadvantaging kinship; unemployed within the last year; requested financial assistance but was denied

- **CG4**: Grandmother with 1 grandchild for 4 years; lacked information and assistance in gaining custody; suffers financially due to cost of court proceedings; cannot afford to retire; child suffers from neonatal exposure to substances, ADHD and birth defects; unhappy about disruptive court-ordered visits with biological parents but does not want to ‘rock the boat’ and risk losing the child; scared to ask for help
Kinship Grandparent Profiles

- CG5: Grandfather with multiple grandchildren for 8 years; previously licensed foster parent for non-kinship placements; knowledgeable about how the ‘system’ operates; able to manage associated frustration based on this knowledge

- CG6: Great grandparent couple with custody of 1 great grandchild for just under 2 years; child has ADHD and was exposed to trauma; needs constant human contact, even at bedtime; feels like 24-hour care; both feel weary; need outlet and respite; close relative is a CPS caseworker; has ‘insider’ relationship with ready access to information and resources, but still feels stretched by caregiving challenges
CG7: Grandmother with custody of 4 grandchildren ages 5 through 17, for 4 years; 2 male grandchildren diagnosed with ADHD; oldest granddaughter has diabetes; feels adequately supported; attends kinship support group and grandparents’ group through a local church.

CG10: Grandmother with custody of 3 grandchildren for 14 years, including an autistic 18 year old; positive experience with kinship services; uses support group to ‘blow off steam’; personal history of heart attack and hospitalization; needed respite but used family member to help with child care.
4 major themes emerged from the data:

- Kinship services and supports
  - Tangible resources and relational support
- Gaps and unfulfilled needs
  - Relational support, system navigation help, respite
- Perceptions of, and experience with public child welfare
  - Imperfect system, 2-tier, custody status and power
- Experiences of kinship empowerment
  - Feelings of competence
  - Differential decision making power & autonomy
  - Influencing systemic change
Collaborating to meet needs & improve practice

- Kinship grandparents are **critical** family and community **resources**
- Problem/needs focus vs. & strengths orientation?
- Kinship grandparents are **key stakeholders** in public child welfare systemic change and improvement
  - Engagement: not about them w/out them
  - Voice & Choice
  - Personal, system & community empowerment
Mechanisms to Foster Empowerment (Hennink et al., 2012):

- **Knowledge**
  - Access to training and information
- **Agency**
  - Ability to make decisions buoyed by sense of competence
- **Opportunity**
  - Enabling and supportive environment
- **Capacity-building**
  - Harness capacity of community
- **Resources**
  - Access to physical and financial resources
- **Sustainability**
  - Ability of families to maintain independence long term
References

- Cleek, Wofsy, Boyd-Franklin, Mundy, & Howell, 2012
- Dawson & Berry, 2002
- Graves & Shelton, 2007
- Koren, Dechillo & Friesen, 1992
- Meyer & Kandic, 2017
- Myers, 2008
Thank You!

For additional information, questions or other related publications:

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