

FAMILY CENTRE PROJECT - LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

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Background

This study was a follow-up of 60 low income families who took part in an innovative family support service: the Family Centre Project (FCP) (1972-1975).

The families themselves were all were on low income, with most of them reliant on government benefits and pensions, supplemented by emergency relief. A small number of men had low paid low skilled employment. Most were early school leavers with no qualifications or trade skills. About half were single parent families, headed by women and totally reliant on welfare payments. There were over 150 children involved in the project.

Description of main features of the FCP

The Family Centre Project provided each household with a guaranteed minimum income, based upon the minimum wage, and roughly in line with the Henderson poverty line. Eighteen staff worked with these 60 families, giving a high staff-member ratio. Formal qualifications were social work, youth work or teaching. The project provided a drop-in centre for up to six days per week, a wide range of activity and learning programs for adults and children, social events, professional support and advice, and substantial assistance with housing. It also provided opportunities outside the Centre, with an extensive camping program plus a regular Sunday outing program. By the end of the three years, control of the Centre had been handed over to the members through control of a Centre Management Committee and members also held the staff positions at full salary.

Conceptual approach/developmental model

The conceptual approach that the project took was a developmental one, which saw people taking control of their own lives, through the control of four powers: power over resources, relationships, information and decision making. A guaranteed minimum income was seen to be essential before families could improve their lives; that self-help could be encouraged through small group activities amongst the families. The concept of deprofessionalisation highlighted the importance of making professional staff accountable to the families, and sharing skills across the different professional groupings. Collecting information about how the families lived was a strategy for social reform and social action, which would also directly involve the families. Families were to have control over information within the Centre through access to their own social work files. Families were to participate in all the planning and decision making process with eventual devolution of power and control.

The developmental approach was contrasted with remedial and preventative approaches (Benn 1974, p15). It is true that some parts of this project were remedial, such as teaching people literacy and numeracy skills, and budgeting. It is also true that it had some preventative effects, such as strengthening some families, preventing family break-up, and keeping children out of institutions. However the approach was developmental in that the emphasis was always on the wider social institutions, and wider social processes, that denied these families the right to participate as full citizens. Whatever help was given to individual families was always seen in the context of action for broader social reform. While recognising people's needs, it focused strongly on people's rights.

Here is a comment from this study, from one of the family members, with a wide experience of other voluntary agencies at that time:

The Family Centre had a totally different philosophy ... You are talking about agencies on the one hand that had a total welfare mentality against an agency (FCP) which I believe was trying to do something about that mentality.

The research study

This study traced and interviewed 52 of the original adult members, which was over 60% of the original membership. The study sought out a sustained consumer view of the overall project and the developmental approach that it took. There is insufficient time to discuss important technical issues, such as the limitations (and strengths) of a consumer study, and the validity of memory.

Main findings- what the families valued

So what were the main research findings? What did the members tell us about the project?

To avoid repetition of actual percentages I use terms like "most", "majority", "just over three quarters." These terms have a common sense meaning but also cover an exact percentage range.¹

The FCP was successful in engaging and maintaining the interest and involvement of most of the families, with most going everyday or nearly everyday at some time during the project, and most increasing their involvement over the three years. Most of the

1. The right hand column indicates the percentage range of the term listed in the left hand column.

A minority	= 25%-45%
Just under half	= 46%-49%
Half	= 50%
Just over half	= 50%-54%
A majority of	= 55%-70%
Just under three quarters	= 71%-74%
Three quarters	= 75%
Just over three quarters	= 76%-79%
Most	= 80%-98%

members' 113 children went to the Centre every week. Most members said they felt part of the project, and a majority said that their children felt part of it.

Most people took part in social events, Sunday outings, and family camps. Just over three quarters of the members were involved in a bulk food store run through the Centre, half the members were involved in cooking, just under a half in arts and crafts, and a minority in sport.

So why did the families go to the Centre? Members indicated that money and other forms of practical assistance were very important. All but three members in this study received the income supplement and a majority of members received housing help. Just over three quarters said they had learnt to get along with other people, three quarters that they learnt how to discuss issues and talk things through, a majority how to talk about personal problems and how to handle their kids, just over half how to get along with other people, just over three quarters how to manage the family budget better. A minority had learnt to dealt with welfare and housing bureaucracies. Between four and nine members had been helped to learn how to write a letter (9), how to drive (7), how to use public transport (6), and how to read (4).

Main findings--developmental approach

So what did the families think about the developmental approach empower 60 families on low incomes to control their own lives?

Power over resources

The first part of the developmental approach was power over resources, which was mainly about income and housing assistance, but also included the resources of the building, the support motor vehicles, and so on. Members spent their income assistance on essential items such as food, clothes, rent, shoes and bill

payments. Their main comments was that it reduced family stress, and that they didn't have to go to other welfare agencies for assistance.

Members' comments provide major support for the view that it would have been very difficult for them to make any positive changes in their lives with the constant battle to put food on the table for their children, or indeed to participate in any full sense in the Centre itself.

Power over relationships

Power over relationships concerned with three things. One was concerned with building mutual support between the participating families through small group activities. Two was developing professional accountability to the consumer through choice of worker, informal contact between members and staff, and formal accountability through a management structure. Three was sharing skills across professional disciplines.

The importance of having a place to meet with other people, often in similar or worse position than themselves, is one of the strongest themes to emerge from family members' comments. Important themes here were the overcoming of social isolation, the development of long lasting friendships, and helping others. About a third of the members made comment about how these good feelings about each other were translated into practical expressions of helping each other, such as minding each other's children. As one member commented:

I suffered and seeing others suffer, I'd try and help them. It made me feel great to help someone else. We used to often have a chat or a cup of coffee, or go shopping together. We would sit down and talk to one another about our problems. It used to ease your mind, to know that you are able to talk to someone else about it.

Unresolved conflict amongst members was a minor but important theme, with half the members having something to say about arguments and violence in the Centre, eleven members commenting on jealousy and nine about gossip.

On the deprofessionalisation approach of accountability, and the sharing of skills across professional disciplines, the feedback we have is on how members viewed the staff and what they had to offer. Most members told us that they developed a close one to one relationship with a staff member which was important to them, that they learnt most from staff but that they also learnt from volunteers and other family members. Most of those who had used other welfare agencies saw FCP staff as different and better- with their main comment being about their better manner and approach. This was particularly significant, given the families generally poor experiences of staff at other welfare agencies. As one member put it:

People from the Centre who went out to other organisations had dreaded fears, very strong feelings towards social workers, and even hold them to this day. Whereas they never with the sort of workers they employed in the Family Centre.

Power over information

Power over information was the third building block in the developmental approach. It began with the documenting of the lives of the families, through discussion groups, survey research, and through maintaining "open" social work files; where members had open access, were free to challenge anything in them, and were encouraged to make a contribution. Control of information was seen as important to members changing their own lives, helping others, and demanding broader social reform. Only a third of members in this study took part in social action and public education, and only a half of these felt it was important. Seven of these members commented that it gave them the chance to help others. Similarly, only a quarter of members were both aware of the open file system and said that it was important

in their lives. The main theme running through their comments was that they had a right to know what was in their files, and that it gave them a sense of control of their lives.

Thus power over information in this more general sense can be said to be less understood and less important for members, than other parts of the developmental approach. However two other comments are worth making. One is that members appear to have good control of information within the four walls of the Centre in terms of knowing what was going on. There was also the interesting comment from a member that the information about their lives in poverty that they gave to the staff allowed them to be more effective in arguing for social reforms.

Power over decision making

Power over decision making concerned members' power over decisions within the Centre, and how this would help them to control their own lives.

Most members participated in decision making, with the Centre's a majority of members participating in the Management Committee, just over half taking part in social events, and a minority taking part in the activities program and the help that families received.

All but two of the members felt it was important to have a say in the running of the Centre. A third felt that the Centre ran better, mainly through making suggestions to staff; a third felt that that as the Centre way for them they had a right to a say; and the remaining third talked about personal gains, such as overcoming dependency on the welfare system and learning to speak up for themselves.

On the issue of handing over control to members, members feelings now are fairly evenly divided. Those in favour of handing over control cited the same kinds of reasons mentioned above on the

value of participation. Those who now think the decision was wrong argued that members didn't have the skills and that professional staff were needed. These comments often included disagreement with the decision to employ members as staff. There was a sense that although there were important skill gains for those on the Centre's Management Committee, and those employed as staff, the needs of those who only wanted a good service were to some extent "sacrificed". Thus there was strong support for consumer participation, with a deal of complexity involved in the issue of devolution of control.

Lessons for the present

What then can a consumer view of a developmental approach to empowering people on low income contribute to our understanding of good welfare practice for the 90's?

1. Adequate income and stable affordable housing appear to be an essential prerequisite if families are to build a decent life for themselves. Without these two essential things, it is difficult to see any family intervention services being effective, whatever the quality of its service.
2. Once basic resources have been provided, self-help in a drop-in centre environment can work extremely well in overcoming people's social isolation and building self-confidence. The process of how conflicts within a self-help group can be resolved is an important issue within self-help.
3. Client/staff relationships can be significantly improved through allowing for informal contact in which to develop trust, allowing for choice of worker, and recognition that that professionals need to learn from service users, as well as skill transfers from professional to service users. Professional accountability to consumers and the sharing of

skills across professional groupings should continue to be issues we focus on in developing services to people on low income.

4. Social action and public education needs to continue both as a self-help activity, but also as a partnership between professional staff and service users. The FCP experience should leave us with some optimism about the ability of staff and clients to work towards common goals.
5. Consumer participation has a lot to offer in improving quality of service, and in developing service users' growth in self confidence, but the level of participation will vary with people' interests and skills. Devolution of control is a more complex issue, that may also requires considerable transfers of skills even beyond what was offered in the FCP.
6. The FCP is a good example of a successful support service to families, most of whom had been poor over a long period of time. It should remind us that such support services have an important place in improving the quality of life for families on low income, and the life chances of parents and their children.