

Exploring Dissonance with Strengths-based
Family Group Conferencing in Child Protection

By

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B. A., University of Victoria, 2007

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Abstract

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This study uses selected data from a qualitative study by Ney, Stoltz and Maloney (2013) who explored family experiences of voice and participation in child protection family group conferences in British Columbia, Canada. A family group conference is a decision-making process founded on strengths-based philosophies that encourages collaborative and empowering relationships between child protection workers and client families. Traditionally, relationships between these workers and client families in child protection are situated within an environment founded on problem-based perspectives with child protection workers positioned as experts. This study explores the perspectives of child protection workers and their client families about their experiences with a family group conference, focusing on areas of dissonance between strengths- and problem-based perspectives that are assessed by analyzing interview transcripts. Purposeful extreme case sampling was conducted to select three cases from the primary study that represented both positive and negative family experiences. Inductive and deductive thematic analyses were conducted on interview transcripts of nine participants.

Findings from the thematic analyses as well as between-case, within-case and within-participant comparisons revealed an underlying dissonance in two of the three cases in that the workers

endorsed the strengths-based philosophies of family group conferencing as well as – and perhaps unknowingly - the problem-based philosophies inherent in child protection practice. The families from these cases experienced the family group conference in contradiction to its strengths-based philosophies. The results point to possible connections between dissonance in practice, worker worldview and family experience. Recommendations for further research and for child protection workers to be more reflective and aware of worldviews are discussed.

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Dedication

To my little rising star Isaac. Your laughter and smiles carried me through this research study. Your passion for learning (and teaching) gave me motivation. Your love inspired me. Your words encouraged me. Thank you Isaac and now I have time to play ☺

To my dear mother. I am who I am today because of you. I will forever love you and cherish our time together.

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Research has shown that collaborative strengths-based practice can have considerable benefits in child protection (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004; Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Healy & Darlington, 2009). One strengths-based decision-making practice is the family group conference (Connolly, 2006; Sherry, 2008). Family group conferences (FGCs) are formal meetings that include professionals and family members working together to address child safety concerns; they provide a non-adversarial alternative to court involvement to develop care and protection plans in child protection situations (American Humane, 2010; Connolly, 2006; Pennell & Burford, 2000; Sherry, 2008). FGCs are intended to be collaborative with the fundamental principles of family participation and empowerment, reflecting a strengths-based approach to practice (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004). Child protection workers involved in FGCs are expected to implement strengths-based principles with the families they work with.

Child protection workers face a multitude of conflictual situations in the course of their practice, both in their work environment and with the families that they work with. FGCs add a further layer of dissonance for workers to navigate in an already complex role. The underlying pressure of working within a problem-based environment; the dissonance between strengths-based philosophies, inherent in FGCs, and problem-based philosophies, inherent in child protection systems; as well as worker identity, or worldview, may all be factors that influence or impact the FGC practice of child protection workers. The current study explores these ideas using selected data from a larger qualitative study by Ney, Stoltz and Maloney (2013) who explored family experiences of participation in child protection FGCs. More specifically, this study explores the dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies that child protection workers must negotiate when implementing FGCs in child protection practice.

Personal Connection to the Research

I completed my undergraduate degree in Psychology at the University of Victoria (UVic) before being accepted into its graduate program in Dispute Resolution. For 10 years I worked as a care provider at a family-based adult group home and during my academic time I also worked as a research assistant at UVic's Institute of Dispute Resolution (IDR). I have raised three children and have two grandchildren. Through my personal, familial, academic and work experiences, I have developed a great appreciation for the need and value of child protection services. Child protection concerns often involve families who are experiencing multiple challenges, such as substance abuse, mental and physical abuse issues, and poverty, and I believe that many families, particularly children, can benefit from child protection interventions.

While at the IDR, I helped on a research study that explored participant experiences of FGCs. The literature showed many benefits to FGCs and my own personal and professional values aligned with the strengths-based philosophies. From reading the literature, I became interested in the challenges of implementing strengths-based interventions, like FGCs, into problem-based environments, like child protection, and I wondered about the role of workers. They are situated in complex ambiguous positions dealing with child protection concerns, not to mention burdened with heavy caseloads and a lack of resources. My psychology background led me to wonder how child protection workers navigate the tension between divergent philosophies in practice and about the relationship between how they may articulate their practice approach and how they articulate their experience of an FGC and their client family.

Rationale for the Research

Research indicates that child protection is an inherently problem-based environment with workers positioned as experts when working with client families (Bransford, 2011; Mandell,

2008; Sherry, 2008; Sousa, Ribeiro, & Rodrigues, 2006). FGCs, on the other hand, are strengths-based interventions that rely on inclusive, participatory, collaborative work with families where there is no place for the expert role (Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Graybeal, 2001; Saint-Jacques, Turcotte, & Pouliot, 2009; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). FGCs are situated within an organizational culture that conflicts with the nature of its intended principles. There is a fundamental conflict between the collaborative process of conferencing and the hierarchical system of child protection (Healy, Darlington, & Yellowlees, 2012; Sherry, 2008). Child protection workers are positioned in the nexus of these divergent practice philosophies and left to navigate the dissonance in their FGC work with families.

There is a general assumption in the research and practice that if the FGC is implemented according to its best practice then client participants will experience the process as participatory and collaborative. In an extensive review of FGC research and practice, Barnsdale and Walker (2007) report that although researchers in several countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States, found positive outcomes for both families and practitioners, the evidence is mixed and concerns have been raised. One concern raised in the literature is the discrepancies found between the intended principles of FGCs and the negative and disempowering experiences reported by some family members (e.g., Healy et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2013). That some families experience FGCs in contradiction to the intended principles may be explained by a variety of factors, including family dynamics or behaviours that led to the intervention of child protection services. According to Dale (2004), it is unrealistic to expect that complete client satisfaction could ever be obtained in the field of child protection. “Some parents will always disagree with decisions relating to the safety and welfare needs of their children” (p. 152) and such “disagreements will often translate into dissatisfaction even when the child

protection decisions and subsequent actions are valid and necessary” (p. 153). In addressing the discrepancy between intended FGC principles and client experiences, Healy et al. (2012) suggest that tension between the strengths-based philosophies of FGC models and the problem-based philosophies dominating child protection services creates limits to family participation.

Research has also raised concerns about the discrepancies found between how social workers describe their practice as strengths-based yet their practice behaviours suggest a divergent approach (e.g., Holland, Scourfield, O’Neill, & Pithouse, 2005; Saint-Jacques et al., 2009). In addressing this concern and in the context of FGCs, Holland et al. (2005) suggest that both families and social workers often feel disempowered and they argue that the difficulties of introducing a radical change of practice style, such as with FGCs, requires fundamental changes to hierarchical social welfare systems. Literature on FGCs and on strengths-based social work practice similarly argue that for workers to shift from problem-based practice to that of strengths-based requires a fundamental change in how clients are viewed and may involve a shift in the worker’s worldview. Research from the dispute resolution and child protection literature suggests that the identity, or worldview, of a practitioner may influence their practice approach and therefore is important to consider in child protection work.

Using a mixed-methods design, Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) developed a study to determine if social workers’ practice was in keeping with the strengths-based model. They found that even though workers explicitly describe their approach with families as strengths-based, their practice contradicts that position; the workers’ espoused practice philosophies were dissonant to their actual practice. The current study builds on this work and focuses on child protection FGCs. The objective of the research is to spotlight areas of dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies that may be revealed by analyzing child protection

workers' interview transcripts, and by exploring the client family experiences of two cases describing a negative FGC experience and one case describing a more positive experience.

Research Objective

The current study analyzes interview transcripts of both child protection workers and client families involved in the same FGCs, thus providing multiple perspectives of a social event. The objective of the study is to discover contradictions and inconsistencies between participants' perspectives but more particularly within the workers' own narratives, to draw attention to how they may or may not negotiate the strengths-based philosophies of FGCs in their child protection practice. Exploring the tension that workers face at the crossroads of two divergent practice philosophies may help to understand latent barriers to the authentic delivery of an FGC and the potential impact on client families' FGC experience.

Research Question

What evidence, if any, can be seen of an underlying conflict or dissonance between strengths-based and problem-based philosophies for child protection workers involved with family group conferencing?

Study Context: Family Group Conferences

When a child's care or safety becomes a concern to a child protection agency or government ministry, decisions about the welfare of the child need to be made. A family group conference is one decision-making process that may be utilized. FGCs are group meetings that involve the child's family and community supports, as well as representatives from a child protection system, working together to make decisions for the care of children (Morris & Connolly, 2012; Pennell & Burford, 2000; Schmid & Pollack, 2009). The rationale behind FGCs is that parents and extended family have strengths and resources that social services may have

overlooked or undervalued and they operate on the premise that, in principle, families are considered to know best for their families and therefore best equipped to plan for their children's safety and well-being (Cunning & Bartlett, 2006). FGCs promote collaboration and partnership between workers and clients facilitating empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized families. FGCs, with their roots in New Zealand with the indigenous Maori peoples, are strengths-based interventions intended to be family-driven and collaborative.

In New Zealand, FGCs became legally mandated under the *Children, Young Persons and their Families Act*, in 1989, with the aim of building on family and community strengths in planning for the protection and care of children and empowering families (Pennell, 2004). At that time, there was concern that Maori children in care were losing touch with their ancestral roots, cultural traditions, values and beliefs, and the FGC was a decision-making process based on Maori culture and values that respected the family group's involvement and responsibility (Morris & Connolly, 2012; Olson, 2009). The FGC was intended to bring Maori family principles of family-centered decision-making into the New Zealand child welfare system increasing the understanding of Maori traditions and culture among the workers who provided child welfare services.

Since its implementation in New Zealand, there has been a marked uptake in the adoption and utilization of child protection FGCs worldwide; for instance, in Canada, Australia, United States, United Kingdom, Israel, Sweden, Denmark and South Africa (Barnsdale & Walker, 2007; Frost, Abram, & Burgess, 2012; Holland et al., 2005; Morris & Connolly, 2012). FGCs were first introduced in Canada in the early 1990's by Gale Burford and Joan Pennell in Newfoundland and Labrador (Pennell & Burford, 2000). Their family group decision-making was based on and

similar to the FGC as legislated in New Zealand and their 1995 hallmark study involved 32 families with the majority reporting positive results from the FGC (Burford & Pennell, 1996).

Child Protection FGCs in British Columbia

In British Columbia, child protection services are administered within the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) under the mandate of the *Child, Family and Community Service Act* (CFCSA, 1996) which is the legislative authority for child welfare in British Columbia. The fundamental guiding principles are the safety and well-being of children. Child protection workers employed by MCFD are “delegated under the *CFCSA* to assess reports, provide support services, investigate as needed and collaborate with other service providers... to help ensure the safety and well-being of children” (MCFD, p. 11). Reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are assessed on a case-by-case basis and may warrant different types of responses.

When concerns are raised about a child’s well-being, child protection workers often work with families to develop plans to keep children safe, without having to go to court. Consistent with the principles of the *CFCSA*, child protection workers will, where feasible, “involve the child’s family and community in a shared decision-making process to plan for the child’s safety and well-being” (MCFD, p. 11). Options for collaborative decision-making include family group conferences, traditional decision-making processes (e.g., following specific cultural traditions) and mediation. Section 20 (1) of the *CFCSA* states that the purpose of an FGC is to enable and assist families in developing plans of care that will: protect the child from harm; serve the best interests of the child; take into account the wishes, needs and role of the family; and take into account the child's culture and community. The FGC is described as a collaborative planning process utilized in situations where decisions need to be made for the care of children (MCFD,

2005). The *Child and Family Development Service Standards* apply to anyone providing service under the CFCSA and provide the mandatory framework for service delivery. It requires that alternative dispute resolution processes, such as FGCs, be offered and promoted as the preferred option to court-ordered decisions and be used to resolve disputes pertaining to a child's need for safety during the management of a child protection case.

Phases of the Conference Process

Certain phases in the FGC conference process have been established (Cunning & Bartlett, 2006; Frost et al., 2012; Schmid & Pollack, 2009). For instance, an FGC coordinator first contacts the family members and relevant service providers to discuss the conference procedures and to answer any questions (Pennell, 2004; Schmid & Pollack, 2009). With an interest in inclusivity, other professionals attending may include counselors, mental health practitioners, addiction workers or probation officers. The coordinator works with the parents to invite other family members, encouraging them to invite as many extended family members as they wish, as well as any other support or resource persons. This widening of the circle provides a rich base of knowledge encompassing diverse opinions and ideas (Schmid & Pollack, 2009). Workers and family members work collaboratively, as a team, to address the care and safety concerns of children (American Humane, 2010; Morris & Connolly, 2012; Pennell & Burford, 2000). During the beginning phase of the conference, participants typically take turns sharing information and offering input. The identified issues are often written on a board. Relevant issues are discussed with the aim of finding untapped resources and support to help address the concerns.

The second phase and an important step in the conference process is family time. Family time is when the child protection worker, other professionals and support workers, and the FGC coordinator, all leave the room and allow the family to have private time (Morris & Connolly,

2012). This private time is intended to optimize participation as the family discusses, amongst themselves, all of the issues that have been identified and addressed, and contributes to a child safety and protection plan. When accomplished, the Ministry personnel are invited back, as the last phase of the conference, to review and approve the plan ensuring it addresses the identified care and safety concerns (Pennell, 2004).

Strengths-based Foundation

A strengths-based approach to social work practice offers an alternative to the preoccupation with the negative aspects of clients and allows an expression of the deepest values of social work (Weick et al., 1989). Instead of emphasizing weaknesses or problems, strengths-based practice emphasizes the identification and enhancement of a client's unique strengths and positive attributes (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004; Sullivan, 1992). Dennis Saleebey, a prominent researcher in strengths-based practice, argues that a strengths-based philosophy "demands a different way of looking at individuals, families, and communities. All must be seen in light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma" (1996, p. 297). Other pioneers in strengths-based research, such as Ann Weick, Charles Rapp, Patrick Sullivan, and Walter Kisthardt, further argue that when the positive capacities of an individual are emphasized, such as with strengths-based practice, they are more likely to continue personal development along the lines of those capacities (Weick et al., 1989). The fundamental premise is that in the long run individuals will do better when they are helped to recognize and use the strengths and resources available in themselves and their environment (Graybeal, 2001).

One of the fundamental principles of a strengths-based philosophy is the belief that, even in the midst of complexity, people have the ability to determine what is best for them and even when their choices seem to be wrong, from an outsider's perspective, they are exercising this ability to find what is best for them (Weick et al., 1989). Furthermore, it is impossible, even for a trained professional, to judge how someone else should best live their life and that the power of such decisions should rest with the person whose life is being lived. Therefore, how workers approach and engage with their client is critical (Saleebey, 1996). Recognizing the influence a worker has on clients, a strengths-based approach encourages workers to engage with clients, as equals, in a respectful mutual sharing of knowledge and concerns. It is a participatory approach with client and practitioner working together toward the goal of recognizing and calling forth the inner and outer resources of a client (Sullivan, 1992). A strengths-based philosophy values and respects the opinions of clients and endeavours to create a collaborative partnership (Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Grant & Cadell, 2009).

These strengths-based philosophies form the fundamental values and guiding principles of FGCs. For instance, child protection FGCs are intended to focus on the positive aspects, attributes and qualities that parents have to offer rather than focusing on their shortcomings and using problem-based approaches (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004); the central aim is to find the strengths and resources within a family (Cunning & Bartlett, 2006). Although conferencing may deal with the aftermath of harmful behaviour, it is considered a non-adversarial process that focuses on healing and preventing future harm. An FGC creates a space for family members and practitioners to collaboratively make care and safety decisions for children (Morris & Connolly, 2012). Family members are given opportunities to participate in the decision-making as they are accorded both public and private times to express their concerns and to formulate a care and

protection plan for their children. FGCs aim to explore what has worked and what is working for the family, and to find new or existing resources that can benefit the family's situation. An FGC is an inclusive approach that encourages cooperation and consensus-based decision-making and is founded on the premise that the manner in which decisions are made will impact the outcomes.

FGCs are intended to be empowering, aimed at fostering family participation and engagement (American Humane, 2010; Connolly, 2006; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Pennell & Burford, 2000). They generate new relationships between practitioners and families (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004) by acknowledging that the family circle's experience and input is crucial to developing an effective plan for the child's future (Schmid & Pollack, 2009). The fundamental premise of the FGC is that families have the right to be involved in the decision-making about their children and that solutions found within the family will likely be more effective than those imposed by child protection workers (Cunning & Bartlett, 2006).

Child protection workers involved in strengths-based interventions, such as FGCs, are expected to incorporate these fundamental principles with the parents they work with. However, as the literature review will show, the tensions between a traditional problem-based system and a strengths-based intervention can be complex and challenging to navigate.

Significance of the Research

Previous research suggests that participatory collaborative work in child protection has the potential for positive outcomes for families (e.g., Pennell & Burford, 2000); therefore, investigating the barriers and tensions that may impede these outcomes is critical. Exploring these tensions may help to explain why some families do not experience FGCs as participatory and since the children of these families may be adversely impacted, such understandings can be constructive. As suggested by Proctor (2002), studies are needed that examine and describe the

decisions workers face, the influences on their practice decisions, and the impact on outcomes. The goal of the current study is to contribute to the discussions not only on the inherent challenges of implementing strengths-based practice within the problem-based environment of child protection but also on the dissonance that child protection workers may experience when implementing FGCs. Such research may help to understand the challenges involved when implementing FGCs in an environment that does not resonate with its inherent values or perhaps, the FGC values do not always resonate with the personal values or worldview of its workers. This study aims to explore how workers describe their practice juxtaposed by how the same workers describe their client family, highlighting tensions and dissonance that workers may be experiencing, perhaps unknowingly. Increasing understanding of this dissonance is an important area to be studied and may offer insights into how to identify, navigate and overcome barriers that may impede the authentic delivery of FGCs.

Child protection workers, supervisors and policy makers could benefit from this research as it may help to inform relevant policies and practices, specifically in the context of FGCs, so that services and interventions improve to become more effective in meeting target objectives and in providing respectful service to an often marginalized population. This research may also benefit society in general by helping to bridge the divide between child protection agencies and the family members they serve. With a reported estimate of 67,000 children in out-of-home care in Canada in 2007 (Mulcahy & Trocmé, 2010), and 8,187 children in out-of-home care in British Columbia (CWRP, 2014), this research is significant for society as a whole.

Thesis Outline

The study consists of six chapters as follows. The above chapter: *Chapter 1- Introduction and Context* outlined my interest in and connection to the current study and discussed the

rationale that guided the research. It introduced the research objective and question, articulated the significance of the study and described the study context of family group conferences including their strengths-based principles and value as an alternative to problem-based practice. *Chapter 2 – Literature Review* provides a discussion of the literature to establish the background and context for the study. More specifically, it reviews relevant literature pertaining to the fundamental conflict between problem-based child protection systems and strengths-based FGCs, focusing on workers and client-worker relationships. It highlights the challenges workers face when implementing FGCs and considers the impact of worker worldviews on practice. *Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework* outlines the theoretical foundations for the study. In particular, it discusses the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the study and how the theoretical influence of constructivism informs the research. *Chapter 4 – Research Methods and Data Analysis* explicates the research design and methods employed, providing a summary of the primary research study used for the data analysis. It explains secondary data analysis and discusses credibility and the purposeful extreme case sampling conducted on the primary study. It details the phases of the thematic analyses and addresses the limitations of the study. *Chapter 5 – Findings and Discussion* presents the findings from the thematic analyses, organized by case, and links them to the literature. It juxtaposes the perspectives of family members with those of the child protection workers. It also summarizes the key findings organized by category and then addresses the research question. The final chapter, *Chapter 6 – Conclusions* discusses the results of this study by highlighting conclusions and building a foundation for further research. It outlines recommendations for child protection work, particularly the importance for workers to critically reflect on their work with families. I end the chapter with final remarks and reflections.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Child protection work involves a multitude of complex emotional concerns that are inherent in the work, such as child neglect, child physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse and addictions, mental health issues, domestic violence, poverty and unemployment. Child protection workers are engaged with families because the child or children have been considered at risk. Workers are situated in the complex and difficult position of acting as protectors of children upholding legal mandates and as collaborators with families addressing care and safety concerns for children. Families involved with child protection services are often dealing with a variety of stressful and emotional matters and could be hurt, angry, embarrassed and defensive when dealing with child protection workers. Collaborative strengths-based decision-making interventions, such as family group conferences (FGCs), add a further layer to this already complex environment by positioning workers and families as partners in decision-making (Healy et al., 2012).

Child protection practice is typically conducted within a problem-based system whereas the FGC is founded on strengths-based collaborative work. Workers are positioned at the nexus of two divergent practice philosophies. The purpose of this study is to explore the tension, or dissonance, that child protection workers face at the crossroads of these divergent philosophies and to draw attention to how they may or may not negotiate this dissonance in their FGC practice. Consequently, the focus of the literature review is to establish a foundation and provide context for the current study emphasizing the dissonance and challenges to implementing strengths-based FGCs within problem-based child protection environments.

Although the literature review presents research from other countries, a direct generalization to British Columbia child protection practice is neither intended nor possible.

Furthermore, literature from different countries use different terms to describe workers practicing in child welfare or child protection services and even literature from within British Columbia's Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) uses different terms to describe the same role. Some examples include: social workers, child protection workers, child protection social workers, child services worker and child welfare workers. For the purpose of consistency, this study will use the term "child protection worker" to describe a practitioner working within the context of child welfare or child protection services.

The chapter is divided into four parts. *Part One – Child Protection as Problem-based* positions child protection within the context of a problem-based environment emphasizing traditional client-worker relationships. It considers the complex contradictions that workers must navigate. *Part Two – Implementing Family Group Conferences* describes the challenge in adopting strengths-based practice, particularly how client-worker relationships take on new meaning and the notion that FGCs require a fundamental shift to working collaboratively with clients. *Part Three - Dealing with Dissonance* explores the tensions between strengths- and problem-based philosophies in social work and child protection. *Part Four - Worker Identity and Worldview* discusses worker worldview situated within the context of child protection. It addresses the influence of workers' worldview on practice approach and discusses the benefits of worldview awareness in working with clients.

Part One – Child Protection as Problem-based

Historically, the social sciences, in an effort to live up to the scientific methods and philosophies of the field of medicine, embedded in an enlightenment paradigm, adopted a disease-model or medical-model approach to theory and practice (Blundo, 2001; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1999; Schmid & Pollack, 2009). A medical-model approach maintains a

pervasive focus on pathology, where assessments concentrate on what is wrong or not working and interventions focus on fixing the problems (Weick et al., 1989). In the last 80 years, the field of social work has likewise been built on the basic themes of disease and expertise, with a focus on problems and what has gone wrong or failed (Blundo, 2001). The social work field has constructed theory and practice based on the pathology and problems of its clients and such negative constructions can be detrimental to families (Grant & Cadell, 2009; Saleebey, 1996).

The literature suggests that problem-based approaches still exist, even dominate, in social work practice with families and in child protection (e.g., Dale, 2004; Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, & Hughes, 2008; Noble, Perkins, & Fatout, 2000; Saint-Jacques et al., 2009; Sousa et al., 2006). For example, Noble et al. (2000) note that although child protection practice has adopted changing attitudes and language to reflect strengths-based philosophies, it still emphasizes failure and clients are evaluated based on individual pathology and problems, rather than on their personal strengths and positive qualities. In his qualitative study, Dale (2004) analyzed the perspectives of 18 families in central England about their involvement with child protection services and found concerns of parents were that child protection services frequently adopted a worst-case scenario perspective, resulting in protection plans disproportionate to their perceived seriousness of the situation. Forrester et al. (2008) analyzed 24 recorded interviews between child protection workers and simulated clients. They found that workers asked many closed questions, rarely identified positive aspects of parents and exhibited low levels of empathy. These negative communication behaviours generated resistance in the responses of the simulated clients. In a combined qualitative and quantitative study investigating social work practice with families in difficulty, Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) found that when describing families, most of the practitioners were focused on the weaknesses and not the strengths of parents.

Paternalism in Child Protection

According to Weick et al., (1989), a central tenet of a problem-based approach is that the client's problem is understood as a lack, weakness, or inability within the person. Another central tenet is that the nature of a client's problem is defined by the worker, thus giving the worker power by the very nature of naming or categorizing clients; the process of assessing, categorizing, or naming clients takes place within a discourse that belongs to the professional, not the client. The authors note that the client's situation is made to fit predetermined categories and these categories are not likely ones the client would choose to adequately describe their situation. Calder (1995) presented a similar view by describing paternalism in child protection as when the worker's ideas of benefits and harms differ from those of the client and the worker's ideas of what should be done prevail. Likewise, Bell (1999) reported that even though child protection conferences were portrayed to be about decision-making, the evidence indicated that the decisions were already made; child protection workers conceded that their decisions were predetermined prior to the conference.

In a study exploring parents' perceptions of child protection interventions, Dumbrill (2006) reported that parents believed their opinions had little impact, even when consulted, because workers were already categorizing their cases to fit predetermined plans. Sherry (2008) notes that in traditional child welfare practice, the worker takes on the role of expert and, with a focus on accountability and mandated authority, creates a plan for risk reduction, subsequently trying to achieve parent cooperation with a predetermined plan. Such predetermined plans, solutions and categories naturally position child protection workers in a paternalistic role with clients. Labelling and categorizing can in fact perpetuate power imbalances as clients come to rely on the experts to not only figure out what their problems are, but also to fix them. Bransford

(2011) found that such a paternalistic approach, akin to the medical model, secures the worker in a position of superiority; the worker defines the problem and identifies its cause and then can either provide or withhold the necessary resources to the dependant client.

Power in Roles

In her research addressing power in child protection investigations, Bell (1999) emphasizes that in client-worker relationships, families have a limited amount of power to negotiate; whereas, workers have the power to decide which facts are relevant and are in a position to make judgements about the parenting behaviour of others. This situates the worker with a great deal of control over the client family. In a study that explored the ways parents experience and negotiate child protection interventions, Dumbrill (2006) interviewed 18 parents. He found that the primary influence shaping parents' views and reactions was how parents perceive child protection workers use their power. The author reported that parents perceived workers to hold the power to impose their opinions and plans for their family even when those plans were not in the best interests of their children. Furthermore, results indicated that parents perceived "power over" them as a form of control and "power with" them as a form of support. When power was used with them, parents worked with the intervention but when power was used over them, they would either fight the intervention or concede and play along.

Mandell (2008) recognizes the importance of being cognizant about the power inherent in the role of a child protection worker; however, she also recognizes this as a challenge within a hierarchical organizational culture. The author argues that it is essential to pay attention to the ways in which interactions with clients, in the context of relations of power, construct workers' identities as expert helpers and the clients as needy others. She warns that using power over clients may perpetuate a hierarchical relationship and the client's experience of social

marginalization. Grant and Cadell (2009) align with Mandell and suggest that by taking a problem-based view in social work, clients can be labelled as different, thus providing a context that preserves knowledge and situates power with the worker. The imbalance of power that exists between the worker and client must be acknowledged and addressed.

Navigating Complex Contradictory Roles

With an intense focus on problems and deficits within social work practice, it is difficult for workers' values, such as the belief in the dignity and worth of people as well as clients' strengths and potential, to be fully realized (Weick et al., 1989); therefore, workers may find it easier to adopt a paternalistic role with their clients rather than a collaborative one. Calder (1995) argues that even when committed to partnership principles, child protection workers may utilize a paternalistic approach to practice, as such an approach is rarely challenged by the child protection system whose hierarchical structure supports and defends paternalism. Bransford (2011) states that paternalistic approaches continue to dominate in social work practice and workers in child protection face dissonance between the opposing concepts of paternalism and partnership.

Child protection workers also face conflicts between their role as investigators for the state and their role as advocates working collaboratively with a family (Bell, 1999). In her research with 22 child protection workers undertaking child protection investigations, Bell found that even when workers were committed to being (and believed their practice to be) participatory, their dual roles produced conflicts of interests and rights. She argues that there are intractable challenges in balancing care and control in the child protection system with no rules to guide workers in how to resolve the conflicting roles. Mandell (2008) agrees that child protection workers face conflicting and ambiguous roles where they are positioned as both

helpers and protectors and must balance both authority and power. She states that the contradictions inherent in the child protection role are inescapable.

Together, these authors are saying that the role of the child protection worker is replete with complexities, tensions and contradictions and without clear direction it seems workers are left on their own to negotiate the conflicting values and philosophies within the system they operate. Within such a system, workers may naturally and perhaps unknowingly position themselves in the role of expert when dealing with client families, potentially exacerbating power differentials in the client-worker relationship and further marginalizing the clients they are intending to assist.

Part Two – Implementing Family Group Conferences

Despite an increase in use, the promotion and implementation of collaborative work within traditional child welfare systems has been described as complex and sensitive (Healy & Darlington, 2009). In addressing these complexities, Sherry (2008) notes that the challenge to implementing FGCs in child protection may be attributed to “a fundamental conflict between engaging in a family-driven process and the requirements of a child welfare system which tends to view itself as the expert” (p. 35). The fundamental values of FGCs defy the client-worker relationship premised on a hierarchical structure between helpless client and helpful professional. Healey et al. (2012) complements this finding arguing that fundamental tensions exist between strengths-based family group decision-making and traditional problem-based child protection and this dissonance creates barriers and limitations to family participation.

Redefining Client-Worker Relationships

Practicing child protection work within a strengths-based framework requires workers to reassess their role with client families and adopt a collaborative approach. FGC is intended to be

family-driven and inclusive with the worker positioned as a team member working together with the client family. The roles of both the worker and the client are dramatically changed as clients are considered the experts in their own lives and the focus for the worker is on the client's personal capacity and positive attributes, rather than limitations or obstacles (Saleebey, 1996; Weick et al., 1989). The FGC model represents a considerable shift in attitude toward the way in which families are viewed and brings into question the practitioners' role of expert (Blundo, 2001).

Similarly, Adams and Chandler (2004) argue that an FGC offers the potential for a paradigm shift as it fundamentally alters the relationship between professionals and client families. It widens the circle of decision-making and responsibility to include those whose relationship to the children is based on caring and kinship and “[b]ringing about such a fundamental shift in the balance of power between child welfare professionals and families, a shift from domination to partnership, is both at the heart of FGC and a daunting task” (p. 104). In line with this view, Merkel-Holguin (2004) stresses that the FGC redefines the notion that child protection workers are the experts. Within the FGC model, the role of the worker is that of information giver, community organizer, resource provider and lender of expertise, in contradiction to decades of established practice and beliefs. Furthermore, if workers hide behind professional agendas or expert roles thereby distancing themselves from their clients, the strengths perspective will not work (Sousa et al., 2006).

Healy et al. (2012) add that family decision-making in child protection is complicated due to the complex roles of both child protection workers and parents, with parents as the “subjects of investigation as well as clients in need of assistance [and] child protection workers [who] often bear the dual responsibilities of being investigators and providers of support and

assistance to vulnerable families. Collaborative family group decision-making models add a further layer to this already complex mix by positioning families and workers as partners in a decision-making process” (p. 10).

Part Three – Dealing with Dissonance

Social workers face dissonance between problem- and strengths-based philosophies during their academic training (Bendor, Davidson, & Skolnik, 1997) as well as in their professional practice. The dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies has been noted by Itzhaky and Bustin (2002), who assessed the prevalence of pathology-oriented perspectives in community social work in Israel. They found that while the majority of workers adopted a strengths perspective in their practice, they reported experiencing more empowerment when adopting a pathology-oriented, or problem-based, perspective, suggesting they encountered internal tensions between the two approaches. To explain their findings, the authors posit that a problem-based perspective is more deeply rooted in workers’ education in Israel and in subsequent professional practice. Thus, when adopting a strengths perspective, dissonance emerges between what was learned and the attempted practice approach.

Holland et al. (2005) report that despite workers expressing strong beliefs in and commitment to the strengths-based philosophies and process of FGCs, their findings revealed that, in practice, workers maintained some of their traditional roles and power by retaining control over the meetings and the decision-making process. This was evidenced by: workers having an agenda, bringing pre-prepared lists, assigning tasks for the family’s private time and helping to formulate or change the plan during or after the conference. The authors suggest that such strategies, although sometimes welcomed by families, may be invoked knowingly or unknowingly as a way to manipulate, if those in control are not prepared to share their power and

thus could be a worker's attempt to avoid the loss of control inherent in the FGC process. In addressing the difficulty for workers to relinquish their power in FGCs, the authors point to the institutional culture of child protection that promotes top-down decision-making and suggest that such a system may support workers retaining power in possibly unintentional ways. They conclude that child protection workers, in their role of helping families in distress, often feel disempowered as well and argue that it can be "difficult to introduce a radical change of style such as the FGC without some more fundamental changes to the current hierarchical social welfare systems in the UK" (p. 75).

Sousa et al. (2006) argue that making the shift from problem-based practice to strengths-based is a considerable challenge for workers who have been educated in the basic tenets of the social work profession's knowledge base and practice methods and that problem-based philosophies and language are embedded in our social, cultural and professional context. They argue that it is also a considerable challenge for clients who are accustomed to requesting and receiving solutions from workers. The aim of their exploratory study in Portugal was to understand whether clients facing multiple challenges and the practitioners that work with them are incorporating a strengths-based approach. As the strengths perspective positions workers and clients together in partnership, the researchers were interested in exploring both participants' points of view. They interviewed 16 workers and 28 families and their results indicated that both workers and clients are not thinking in a strengths-based way and in fact are more focused on a problem-based philosophy. The authors argue that practitioners are oversupplied with tools and perspectives focused on problems and such a problem-based view may obstruct the delivery of a strengths-based approach. They conclude that problem-based philosophies are dominant and that a shift in perspective is still in an incipient stage.

In a mixed-methods design, Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) investigated the strengths-based approach in interventions with families in difficulty in two different organizational environments. They analyzed the importance workers placed on parents' strengths and the extent to which practice was actually delivered in ways consistent with this approach. In particular, they employed a qualitative analysis of workers' personal practice descriptions and a quantitative analysis to measure the professional behaviors of the workers. The researchers found that although workers described the strategies they used in evaluating family situations to be in keeping with the strengths-based approach, most of the workers in both organizational settings focused on the weaknesses and faults of the parents paying little or no attention to their strengths. Even though the workers explicitly espouse strengths-based philosophies in their professional role, their practice and views of their client show to contradict that position, and these contradictions may reflect the tension between problem- and strengths-based philosophies or the individuality of workers. The authors also suggest that professional education may play a role as a pathology-oriented perspective is embedded in workers' education. They point to organizational changes as being necessary to facilitate the delivery of services in keeping with the strengths-based model as well as decreases in caseloads and greater flexibility in work schedules. There may also be strategies that workers can use to counterbalance organizational obstacles to the strengths-based approach.

Consistent with this research is a study on family participation in family group meetings (FGMs), which follow the same principles of FGCs. Healy et al. (2012), observed 11 FGMs and conducted 62 follow-up interviews with those who participated in the meetings. The authors observed considerable variation in the extent the FGM incorporated collaborative decision-making as outlined in the FGC model and they noted significant constraints on families' capacity

to participate in what is described as an inclusive process (p. 9). They also observed that in contravention to the strengths-based principles of FGCs, such as sharing power with families, workers adopted a dominant role in the majority of the meetings. This finding suggests that workers face difficulties in relinquishing the power of their hierarchical position with clients and it reflects the challenges they face in navigating between divergent philosophies. The researchers argue that the limits and barriers to family participation reflect the tensions between the collaborative democratic philosophies of family group decision-making models and the problem-based philosophies dominating child protection systems.

The literature thus far has indicated that the FGC is a strengths-based intervention based on participation and collaboration; however, it is embedded within a larger system of child protection that supports a problem-based practice. The FGC is therefore vulnerable to co-optation by the more powerful system of child protection. Of particular concern is that workers may appear to adopt the principles of strengths-based practice, as when implementing FGCs, yet aspects of their practice contradicts those principles. Workers may be unaware of how their practice is shaped by the expectations and philosophies of the larger system and by the dissonance between problem- and strengths-based philosophies or perhaps by their own underlying worldview.

Part Four - Worker Identity and Worldview

The term worldview comes from the German word, *weltanschauung* – *welt* for world and *anschauung* for perception or view. As a philosophical concept, *worldview* can be traced to Kant, Hegel, and Wilhelm Dilthey (Naugle, 2002). Worldview can be thought of as one's view or perspective of the world and reality (Redfield, 1952). More specifically, worldviews are composed of values, attitudes, concepts and opinions and may impact how one thinks, behaves

and makes decisions. Worldviews influence goals and behaviours and directly affect and mediate beliefs, assumptions, problem-solving, decision-making and dispute resolution (Ibrahim, 1991). In the dispute resolution literature, Danesh and Danesh (2002) consider worldviews as reflexive, shaped by our conceptions of our own experiences, and developed from a variety of sources such as family, culture, and religion; worldviews are shaped by our life stories within the context of our cultural history and they impact individual and group decision-making in conflict situations. These authors lend support for a constructivist perspective that one's worldview is shaped by the social interactions that one experiences.

Similar to worldview, a conflict frame has been described as a lens through which disputants view a conflict situation and that guide, perhaps subconsciously, the selection of information they receive, perceive, and interpret (Pinkley, 1990; Pinkley & Northcraft, 1994). Disputants will frame even the same conflict quite differently, speaking to the importance of individual differences within conflict decision-making processes. These frames, or worldviews, play a critical role in determining how disputants view each other and what tactics and strategies they follow during a conflict process (Campbell & Docherty, 2006; Goldberg, 2009).

Also found in the dispute resolution literature is research to suggest that the conflict frame, or worldview, of a practitioner impacts their orientation to conflict resolution (e.g., Goldberg, 2009; Neale & Bazerman, 1985). For instance, Neale and Bazerman (1985) argue that a negotiator with a positive conflict frame (focused on gains) has more successful outcomes than one with a negative frame (focused on losses), and that the frame of a negotiation significantly shapes the negotiation process. Goldberg (2009) argues that worldviews can shape our approach to conflict resolution practice and therefore impact power differentials. She concludes that it can be problematic when practitioners unconsciously impose their worldviews on clients who are

different from them and being unaware of these dynamics virtually guarantees that conflict processes will be biased.

Although the dispute resolution literature addresses worldview in relation to how individuals perceive, experience, and behave in a conflict situation and that practitioners' worldviews can impact their practice orientation, research on worldviews in the unique situation of child protection interventions or the professional role of a child protection worker is lacking. What is addressed in the social work literature in the context of child protection practice is worker identity. Although not specifically named worldview, the current study takes identity to be interchangeable with worldview.

Mandell (2008) argues that working in child protection involves the personal, professional and social aspects of an individual and these dimensions of identity cannot be separated. In child protection, authority and care are intertwined in responding to vulnerable families and the fact that different workers deal with all of the tensions and paradoxes of child protection differently from his or her unique position, tells us that the identity, or worldview, of the worker influences decision-making. Hoskins and White (2010) argue that a child protection worker's identity influences their decision-making. From their qualitative study of child protection workers in British Columbia, that explored worker identity and decision-making, they found that decision-making in child protection is a value-laden process. A worker's identity will influence what information gets highlighted and what information is relegated to the background when making decisions in child protection cases. Likewise, a worker's identity influences the standpoint from which they view clients, such that "[w]hen a practitioner sees through the lens of detective work, the cues and information have a particular emphasis; when seen through a relational lens, the view is very different" (p. 41). These arguments are consistent with the

literature on conflict frames that how workers view their clients impacts their decision-making and practice approaches. The authors note that workers “may miss certain kinds of evidence because of how they have chosen to script and be scripted by the role of child protection” (p. 41). This view suggests that while workers may have some space or agency in how they approach their professional practice, this space is constrained by their position and role within the child protection system.

Problem-based Worldview

Robbins et al. (1999) argue that worldviews influence not only the organizational context but also the helping context itself and that worldviews influence the relationships, roles and decisions within social work practice; worldviews shape and define the role and appropriate behaviour of the client and the role and appropriate behaviour of the professional. In the context of child protection, decision-making brings into play both the system within which the worker operates as well as the worldview the worker holds.

The problem-based philosophies inherent in child protection are present within the social science professions, discourse and practice texts as well as within general social attitudes and culture (Blundo, 2001; Saleebey, 1996; Sousa et al., 2006; Sullivan, 1992; Weick et al., 1989). The dominant language and practice in social work resides within a problem-based framework entrenched within a discourse focused on weaknesses, wherein the faults and failings of parents are the central focus (Grant & Cadell, 2009; Sousa et al., 2006). Grant and Cadell (2009) argue that such a problem-based perspective has infiltrated society enough to be considered a worldview – a pathological worldview. They define pathological worldview as “the belief that practice begins with what has gone wrong... [it] forms the basis for an approach to practice that examines what is not working rather than what is” (p. 425). By seeing clients as different from

them, workers view client actions, feelings and experiences through a problem-based lens. The authors are concerned that a pathological worldview can produce detrimental consequences in that its focus on the negative can impact social workers' attitudes toward their clients and possibly exacerbate unequal power relations.

Worldview Awareness

According to Poonwassie and Charter (2001), practitioners who work with marginalized populations “must critically examine their role as *experts*” (p. 70) and be willing to surrender the power and control of such a position to accept worldviews different than their own. Worldviews are hidden deep within the history, traditions and discourse of a surrounding society, culture or community (Clark, 2002); therefore, it is challenging to recognize or identify the influence that paternalistic or oppressive roles may have on worldviews or correspondingly the influence worldviews may have on social work practice and client-worker relationships. Nevertheless, when conducting social work research involving marginalized populations, it is meaningful to consider that the worldviews of workers may play a role in their professional practice approach (Grant & Cadell, 2009; Goldberg, 2009; Hoskins & White, 2010; Mandell, 2008; Robbins et al., 1999).

Being aware of one's worldview and being aware of one's client's worldview can facilitate more successful outcomes for practitioners and clients. For instance, in counseling and psychotherapy, when practitioners are aware of their worldview and able to understand and accept the worldview of their client, they will have more effective interventions and encounters (Ibrahim, 1985; Ibrahim, 1991; Sue, 1978). This awareness assists the professional in terms of goals, processes, outcomes, and facilitating change. Unfortunately, counselors tend to approach practice based on their own conditioned values, assumptions, and perspectives of reality, with

little regard for other views (Sue, 1978). Without an understanding of how their clients perceive and understand the world, counselors may have difficulty establishing effective interventions, may create frustration and anxiety for both themselves and their client (Ibrahim, 1985), may make negative judgements about their clients, and in working with culturally diverse clients, may be engaging in cultural oppression (Ibrahim, 1991).

Awareness of one's worldview is also addressed in the dispute resolution literature. According to Pinkley and Northcraft (1994), those intervening in a conflict should be both sensitive to the possibility of differences among disputants' conflict frames and acknowledge those differences. Information about those differences might help disputants to understand the perspective of the other party, potentially increasing the value and effectiveness of the resolution for both. LeBaron (2003) and Campbell and Docherty (2006) suggest that when conflict resolution practitioners pay attention to others' world-making stories and frames, as well as their own, they will be more effective in conflict resolution. The challenge is to become aware of how one's worldview impacts the attempts to resolve a conflict, and why and how certain behaviors and approaches may be utilized if they wish to achieve resolution (Danesh & Danesh, 2002). Worldviews provide an important tool for improving the quality of negotiated agreements and enhancing effective resolutions, and awareness of worldviews is beneficial and effective in working with clients.

In the context of child protection FGCs, worldview awareness may help workers to be more cognizant of their practice approach and how it impacts their clients, thus producing more successful processes and outcomes for both workers and client families. Considering that a lack of worldview awareness could create not only frustration for both parties (Ibrahim, 1985), but cultural oppression (Ibrahim, 1991; Sue, 1978), this is important to take into account when

working with marginalized populations. Worldview awareness may open the door for child protection workers to practice FGCs more authentically with their client families.

Worldview Dissonance

Buckley, Carr, and Whelan (2011) argue that although the talk of child protection may have changed to include and endorse strengths-based principles, problem-based philosophies may influence, even override, workers' practice. Shifting frames in child protection work from a traditional problem-based practice ideology to one based on strengths and collaboration necessitates a significant shift in orientation or basic viewpoint; "a fundamental shift in how we think and view the world" (Blundo, 2001, p. 297). Blundo argues that such a shift is not an easy task; it is uncomfortable, even disturbing, and often new ideas are incorporated but only as attachments to older frames without altering the basic frames of thinking and action. Therefore, even when given new information, such as strengths-based principles, the information may not actually be assimilated into a worker's underlying worldview.

In the context of the counseling profession, Wilcoxon, Jackson, and Townsend (2010) argue that some professions align more easily with a practitioner's worldview than others, and that when one's professional role (or aspects of it) conflicts or opposes an existing worldview, an internal conflict, or dissonance, may be experienced, particularly when the role opposes or challenges existing values and attitudes. The authors describe worldview dissonance as a conflict between one's personal worldview, and information, perceptions, or situations, that arise and challenge this worldview.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature reviewed highlighted how child protection systems may directly and indirectly influence workers. The pressure of working within this system may persuade workers

to adopt the role of helpful expert with their clients. In this role, they focus on client problems and develop plans to address those problems, thereby reflecting a problem-based approach to practice. The literature indicated that workers face a conflict when expected to implement philosophically divergent practice philosophies, such as strengths-based FGCs, into traditional child protection practice. Practicing strengths-based work requires a different way of viewing clients than traditional problem-based approaches and may involve a personal alignment with its fundamental principles or a fundamental shift in worldview in order to truly collaborate with client families. Research further indicated that professional practice between workers and clients may have more successful outcomes when workers have awareness of worldviews and when their worldview is congruent with their professional child protection role.

CHAPTER 3 –THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter discusses my personal alignment with the principles and philosophies that underlie the research study. In particular, it describes my ontological and epistemological views and explains how the theoretical influence of constructivism and a holistic perspective frames and informs the study. This framework influences the way I engage with, understand and communicate my research. The chapter lays the foundation for the research design and methods described in the next chapter.

A theoretical framework, or research paradigm, is the lens through which the researcher views the world; a combination of their ontological and epistemological views and how these pertain to the research goals. Patton (1999) describes a research paradigm as a way to think about and view research, built on assumptions about the world, and Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe a paradigm as a worldview or basic belief system that guides the researcher and is based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. When conducting research, it is important to explicate the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a researcher, my own worldview influences the research process and I believe it is impossible to be completely objective and this belief is a fundamental element to acknowledge.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is the study of the nature of existence or the nature of reality and epistemology addresses how that reality is known - a theory of knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Morrow, 2007). In research, issues of ontology and epistemology tend to merge together; they are interconnected and both inform the theoretical perspective and methods of a study (Crotty, 1998). At one end of the ontological spectrum is the belief that reality exists independent of the mind, that there is an objective external reality out there that can be objectively studied for truth claims (e.g., realism),

and at the other end, is the belief that reality does not exist externally, it exists within the human mind; reality resides in the human consciousness or spirit (e.g., idealism). I situate myself in the middle with ontological relativism (Guba, 1992).

There are debates and misunderstandings in the literature on the position of relativism but from the discussions in Morrow (2007), Guba (1992) and Guba and Lincoln (1994), I have embraced the relativist assumption that there are multiple, sometimes conflicting, realities that are the products of human intellect and social interaction; mental constructions are socially and experientially based. The fact that different people hold different worldviews, ways of knowing, and sets of meaning, resulting in divergent interpretations of the same phenomena, suggests a degree of relativism (Crotty, 1998). Applying ontological relativism to research would posit that there are as many realities as there are participants, as well as the researcher, and subjectivity is integral to the research process. This ontology is foundational to the epistemologies of constructionism and constructivism and holds that constructions are fluid and dynamic as are their associated realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A challenge with relativism, as noted by Andrews (2012), is that adopting the view of multiple realities, all considered valid, leads to the conclusion that all research claims about knowing or understanding social phenomena are equally valid, and he points out that more pragmatic views of knowledge (epistemology) judge truth in relation to what is already known rather than by appeal to philosophy, intimating that ontology need not be a concern of epistemology.

Regardless of the debates and confusion in the literature, I view reality and the nature of the world as subjective and believe meanings about the world and reality are constructed from individual unique perspectives, resulting in multiple realities; however, I also believe that reality does exist separate from our inner world. For instance, I believe that without humans, the rocks

and trees of an objective reality would still exist; however, without human consciousness this reality would not have meaning to humans. The subjective world gives the objective world meaning. In discussing objectivity and subjectivity, Crotty (1998) states, “experiences do not constitute a sphere of subjective reality separate from, and in contrast to, the objective realm of the external world... subject and object, distinguishable as they are, are always united” (p. 45).

Epistemological Framework: Social Constructionism

The interconnectedness of the subjective and objective is reflected in the epistemology of social constructionism. In social constructionism, society exists as both a subjective reality and an objective reality and the social process of constructing an object enables it to exist and have meaning in a social context (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckman, 1991). The natural and social worlds are not seen as distinct and separate worlds but as one human world interpreted and understood socially (Crotty, 1998). Ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (how we know and understand that reality) are interrelated in constructionism and “to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of meaningful reality” (p. 10). In their work on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckman (1991) argue that questions of ontology and epistemology are justified by their social relativity; for instance, what is considered real for a Tibetan monk is different from that of an American businessman and what is considered knowledge for a criminal is different from that of a criminologist. Thus, ontology and epistemology are seen as relative to specific social contexts. This position links my views of relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology.

Social constructionism postulates that people construct meanings from their experiences in order to understand and make sense of the world (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985; Young & Collin, 2004) and as a culture we construct reality between us (Burr, 2003). Reality

then is a negotiated meaning in the context of social interactions, and knowledge about the world is formed (constructed) through social interactions that are historically and culturally situated (Burr, 2003; Creswell, 2009; Gergen, 1985; Young & Collin, 2004). Furthermore, meaning-making is an ongoing process that changes alongside peoples' knowledge of the world and their interpretations of it; it is dynamic and fluid, changing as context changes. Social constructionism argues that there are multiple ways to make sense of the same reality; however, a fundamental assumption is that there are no absolute true or valid interpretations; interpretations can be many things, but what they cannot be is true or valid. The interpretations, or meaning-making, of one person are no more valid than those of another. An epistemology espousing multiple ways of knowing aligns with an ontology espousing multiple realities.

Social Constructionism and Constructivism

The terms constructivism and social constructionism have been, and still are, used interchangeably in the literature and definitions and delineations are inconsistent (Andrews, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Young & Collin, 2004). Like constructionism, constructivism has been described as an epistemology and an epistemological perspective (Young & Collin, 2004). To differentiate the two fundamentally: constructivism is focused on the world of experience as constructed through cognitive processes; the individual cognitively engages in meaning-making and the construction of knowledge, whereas social constructionism focuses on the meaning-making of the collective where knowledge and meaning are historically and culturally constructed through social processes and interactions (Andrews, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Young & Collin, 2004).

In research, constructivism focuses on the unique experience of each person and argues that each person's way of making sense of the world is valid and worthy (Aderman & Russell,

1990) while constructionism focuses on the role that culture plays in shaping the way people view the world (Crotty, 1998). The current study endorses and sees value in both theories. On the one hand, the study places significance on the individual participant experiences of the social process of family group conferencing; it is interested in participants' unique meaning-making (constructivism). On the other, it recognizes that the social process of interest (FGC) is not only embedded within a paternalistic legalistic system but is influenced by social, historical and cultural aspects; the study acknowledges meaning-making of the collective (constructionism). Although positioned differently, each theory has important considerations for the current study.

Kruckeberg (2006) notes that sociocultural constructivism recognizes that knowledge is not constructed in isolation by individuals but begins with social interactions historically situated within a culture and then internalized by the individual, thereby drawing links between constructivism and social constructionism. In their examination of these two theories Young and Collin (2004) point out that the lines between constructivism and constructionism have blurred, particularly with social constructivism recognizing that influences on individual meaning-making are derived from and preceded by social interactions. Social constructivist perspectives focus on the interdependence of individual cognitive processes and social collective processes in the co-construction of knowledge; learning and understanding are regarded as both individual and social (Palincsar, 1998). These views inform the theoretical lens of this study.

Theoretical Influence: Constructivism in Learning

One area of constructivist research that informs the current study is in science education, particularly with Saunders (1992). Constructivism is described in the education literature as a theory of learning based on the assumption that people create knowledge as a result of interaction between existing knowledge or beliefs and new knowledge (Rakes, Flowers, Casey,

& Santana, 1999). It seeks to understand how students learn and how they create knowledge constructs (Adams, 2006), with the central idea that learning is constructed as an active process by the learner (Prawat & Floden, 1994). In discussing how students acquire meaning and understanding and the role prior knowledge has on understanding, Saunders (1992) suggests a constructivist perspective can offer insights. He explains that learners respond to their experiences by constructing schemas or cognitive structures in their minds which constitute an understanding of their world. These structures can be thought of as one's subjective knowledge of the world, or worldview. Saunders argues that because meaning is constructed by the learner, as a result of their interaction with the world, it cannot simply be communicated by the teacher to the student. It takes more than just being told something to assimilate or incorporate new knowledge. In the context of implementing FGCs, it could be hypothesized that merely telling child protection workers the fundamental principles of strengths-based practice does not ensure this has been constructed into new meaning or that this new knowledge assimilates with established schemas from previous experiences.

Theoretical Influence: A Holistic Perspective

In discussing qualitative research, Patton (2002) supports the notion of capturing, honouring and reporting multiple perspectives rather than a singular truth and argues that this is an important contribution of social constructionism and constructivism to qualitative research. He describes a holistic perspective as an analysis strategy where the phenomenon under study is considered as a whole with complex interrelationships and interdependencies, and where greater attention can be given to the nuances and idiosyncrasies as well as the complexities of these interconnected relationships. I believe it is essential to pay attention to the complex and interconnected relationships that underlie child protection FGCs, to take a deeper look at the

voices of the participants and consider conflicting perspectives of the same FGC experience or conflicting philosophies from the same worker.

In the context of patient satisfaction research, Turriss (2005) argues the importance of a holistic approach and to address underlying issues in research. She states that “without a deeper understanding of the values and beliefs (or the worldview) that informs our approaches... we are bound to ‘chase our tails’, reacting to the most obvious indicators and failing to address the underlying issues related to individual experiences of health care” (p. 297). This resonates with me when analyzing the FGC experiences of participants as it is important to explore underlying issues, such as systemic influences, child protection worker worldviews and dissonance between traditional child protection and collaborative work, in order to gain a holistic perspective. In keeping with my combined constructivist and social constructionist framework, I am interested in the individual participant experiences and their meaning-making but am also interested in understanding that meaning-making within the broader context of child protection and worker worldview.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This chapter explicated the theoretical framework on which the study is built. It explained how ontological relativism and the epistemologies of both social constructionism and constructivism are interrelated and aligned with the study intentions. Exploring the subjective experiences of participants and the intricacies of these experiences, within a particular social and historical context, aligns with the fundamental principles of social constructionism and constructivism. It discussed how the influences of constructivism, as applied in some theories of learning, and a holistic perspective inform the theoretical perspective of the study. This theoretical perspective offers a framework for understanding the multi-layered interconnections

between strengths-based practice, child protection workers, client families and the contradictions and dissonance that may exist among these relationships, set in the context of child protection systems. This chapter has laid the foundation for the research design and methods described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

It is important to be explicit and transparent not only regarding the theories that frame a research study, but also the methods of data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Patton (2002), there is no single, ideal standard or formula in making decisions about methods; however, the methods chosen will depend on the goals of the study. As the goal of this study is to explore rich and deep descriptions of participant experiences with child protection Family Group Conferences (FGCs), a qualitative design and a qualitative approach for the methods of data analysis were chosen. The chapter first presents the research design and then the primary study from which the current study's dataset was derived. Secondary analysis is discussed, including credibility. Next, the extreme case purposeful sampling that was conducted is explained. Following this, the process of data analysis is described, including inductive and deductive thematic analyses. The analytical strategy of juxtaposition that was embedded within the analysis process and that adds credibility and validity to qualitative research, is discussed. Study limitations are then considered and the chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

This study is a secondary analysis. In line with the theoretical framework, and compatible with a secondary analysis, I chose a qualitative research design. Qualitative designs recognize that true objectivity is not possible, acknowledging both the promise and limitations of subjectivity (Morrow, 2007). They fit well with social constructionist principles that contend knowledge is constructed and meaning-making subjective. Qualitative research aims to develop deep understandings of human experiences in the social world (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1995); it seeks to understand phenomena from the view of the individual who lives the experience; and it can provide rich insight into human behaviour

(Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research can capture the essence of someone's experience in the world (Patton, 2002) and explore the meanings people attach to these experiences (Fossey et al., 2002). Qualitative research is descriptive and exploratory and the current study aims to describe participants' unique FGC experiences, contrasting multiple perspectives of the same FGC process, and to explore the deeper complexities of implementing strengths-based philosophies within child protection.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), I take *data corpus* to refer to the data collected for the primary research study, *dataset* to refer to all of the data from the data corpus that is used for the current research study, *data item* to refer to each interview in the dataset and *data extract* to refer to an individual coded chunk of data which was identified and extracted from a data item. A data extract refers to a participant's response to an interview question, or a portion of that response. A selection of data extracts is presented in the findings chapter. Finally, I consider the individual participant to be the *unit of analysis* for the study.

Primary Study

The dataset for this thesis originated from a larger mixed methods research project that studied family group conference (FGC) processes and outcomes in British Columbia, conducted between 2007 and 2011. The research project was interested in addressing the overall question: How does FGC improve the safety and well-being of children and their families? The objective of the research was to understand the short- and long-term impact of an FGC on participants. The qualitative portion of that research project, by Ney, Stoltz and Maloney (2013), was premised on a narrative framework. The purpose of their study was "to explore the tensions that emerge when two very different discourses – i.e., the 'democratic', participatory discourse of FGC and the hierarchical discourse of traditional child welfare practice – attempt to integrate" (p. 184). They

explored how families describe their FGC experience in relation to voice and participation and their aim was to delve deep into the lived experience of the FGC process. To achieve this goal, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews. There were a total of 74 interviews conducted, recorded and transcribed involving 35 participants. The current study's dataset was derived from this data corpus of interview data.

Primary Study Participants

The participants included caregivers, extended family members, child protection workers/social workers and FGC coordinators. Child protection workers tend to have at least an undergraduate university degree and specialized training; there were no other known salient characteristics pertaining to the workers. The caregiver participants tended to be from an impoverished population of society. Primary caregivers are most often women, but the researchers aimed for a reflection of the distribution of age, ethnicity and gender that is found in the general population of those whose children come into care. The dataset for my study did not include demographic information; therefore, I am unaware of the specific details of the participants. Participants were recruited from south Vancouver Island and participant criteria for families included: 1) involvement in the child protection system; 2) availability for interviews and follow-up interviewing; and 3) referral to a family group conference.

Secondary Data Analysis

A secondary data analysis involves the analysis of pre-existing data derived from a previous research study to investigate new or additional research questions that differ from the original question of study (Heaton, 2008; Hinds, Vogel, & Clarke-Steffen, 1997; Thorne, 1998). In discussing types of secondary analyses, Heaton (2008) describes *supplementary analysis* as an undertaking of “a more in-depth analysis of an emergent issue or aspect of the data that was not

addressed or was only partially addressed in the primary study” (p. 39). Similarly, Thorne (1998) refers to a type of secondary qualitative research that she names *retrospective interpretation* (p. 548), in which a pre-existing dataset is utilized to further develop themes that emerged but were not fully analyzed in the primary study. An overarching aspect of the primary study, used for the current thesis, was the inherent conflicts with implementing FGCs in child protection; however, the notion of dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies with the workers was not directly addressed. I determined that exploring this further would be appropriate for a secondary analysis.

Credibility in Secondary Analysis

The utilization of secondary analysis of qualitative data has been more controversial than secondary analysis of quantitative data (Heaton, 2008); however, interest in and recognition of secondary qualitative analysis has been growing since the mid-1990s. Two major considerations for a secondary qualitative analysis that are discussed below include: 1) quality of the primary data and 2) appropriateness of the secondary analysis to fit with the primary data - data fit (Heaton, 2008; Hinds et al., 1997; Thorne, 1998).

In discussing the quality of primary data for secondary qualitative analysis, and using examples from the literature to expand their points, Hinds et al. (1997) identified important factors to be considered in assessing the feasibility of conducting a secondary analysis. For instance, they suggest that in assessing the quality of the primary dataset, the researcher check that interviews are accurately transcribed; that missing data is not an issue; that there are few typographical errors, which may influence the validity of the initial context of the interview; and that they determine the accessibility of the original dataset. Consistency across interviews is

another important factor; if an issue is explored by a researcher in one interview but then not addressed in all other interviews, then secondary analysis may not be appropriate.

I examined the interview transcripts of the primary study for accuracy of transcription as well as consistency in questions across interviews. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews following an interview guide with the same general questions - this would suggest that the phenomenon of interest was uniformly addressed in the primary study, as described by Hinds et al. (1997). With regard to accessibility of the primary data, I was granted access to the interview transcripts and I had access to the principal investigators of the study who were readily available to answer questions about the context of the interviews or provide relevant background information. Establishing an effective communication link between the original researcher(s) and the secondary analyst(s) can add depth to the research analysis.

Another aspect in determining if the primary study is appropriate for a secondary analysis is if the data contains enough detail and thick enough descriptions of meanings to answer secondary research questions – data fit. According to Heaton (2008), the flexible nature of qualitative research designs, as well as the semi-structured nature of data collection, can yield data with depth and breadth. Research methods that invite exploration of phenomena with open-ended questions provide more depth for a secondary analysis (Hinds et al., 1997) and “the extent of detail in a given data set determines whether new and valid information can result from the secondary analysis” (p. 412). The primary study employed in-depth interviews that were semi-structured and exploratory, with many open-ended questions. Heaton (2008) argues that this interviewing style helps participants to construct their own stories about their experience which allows rich detailed data that could be considered suitable for a secondary analysis. The primary study explored participants’ experience of FGCs. The open-ended interviewing style allowed

participants to share their stories in their own words and the semi-structured style tapped into their deeper perspectives of how they experienced the process of FGCs. It is my opinion that the data obtained from the primary study provides a thick and rich source of data.

In determining if a primary study is appropriate for a secondary analysis is if the primary and secondary research questions are close enough in topic and intent to be valid for a secondary analysis, while at the same time offering a new or extended view of the original data (Hinds et al., 1997; Heaton, 2008). The primary study was interested in exploring how families describe their experience with having a voice and participation throughout the FGC process. Findings revealed that participants' voices were co-opted by the child protection discourse and "very few narratives indicated a consistently positive experience for families through the three stages of pre-FGC, FGC, and post-FGC" (Ney et al., 2013, p. 189). The current study aims to take these findings further by analyzing how the workers of client families describe the same FGC experience. By exploring the worker narratives, new insights and understandings may be unraveled. In this regard, the study expands on the previous research and contributes to the discussions about the challenges workers face when implementing child protection FGCs. Research questions about the same or similar phenomenon of study is more likely to yield data of relevant depth and detail (Hinds et al., 1997). For all of these reasons I concluded that a secondary analysis of the primary study was suitable and appropriate; both the quality of the primary data and the data fit between primary and secondary research questions warrants a secondary analysis.

A Social Constructionist View

While agreeing with the descriptions of secondary data analysis by Heaton (2008), Hinds et al. (1997) and Thorne (1998), I am drawn to a perspective offered by Moore (2007). This

author argues that the depiction of secondary analysis as a re-use of pre-existing data involves a false conception as it fails to recognize the complexities of how data is co-constructed through research projects, rather than existing independently of these. In this sense, data is not even collected in the first place because it is always constructed and contextualized and re-contextualized within any project. Thus, secondary analysis is not so much the analysis of pre-existing data; rather, secondary analysis involves the process of re-contextualizing and reconstructing data. This interpretation reflects a social constructionist view and although I consider the current study a secondary analysis of pre-existing data, in the traditional sense, I also agree with Moore that every analysis of data is an original process of re-contextualizing and reconstructing data allowing the research to have a life of its own, albeit guided by the researcher.

Purposeful Sampling

Hinds et al. (1997) describe one approach to secondary analysis of qualitative data as “to extract a subset of cases for a similar but more focused analysis relative to the primary study” (p. 409). This selection of a subset of data falls in line with the principles of purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (2002). According to Patton, the power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study, rather than for empirical generalizations; “information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling” (p. 46). Purposeful sampling is fundamental to qualitative research, and qualitative designs typically focus on small samples - even single cases - selected purposefully. Purposeful sampling can yield insights and in-depth understandings that can illuminate the research questions. It is my intention that this study will yield such insights and understandings.

According to Patton (2002), there are various strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases and the current study utilizes “extreme or deviant case sampling... [which] involves selecting cases that are information-rich because they are unusual or special in some way, such as outstanding successes or notable failures” (p. 230-231). I purposefully selected two cases from the larger primary study where the families described a negative FGC experience and one family who described a more positive experience. My intention was to narrow the focus on these case examples to explore how the workers negotiated the dissonance between two divergent philosophies. Consistent with qualitative research, the objective of the study was to gather and explore rich descriptions of extreme case examples with an emphasis on contradictions and dissonance rather than to generalize to the greater population of child protection workers or FGC practice.

Study Dataset

Selection criteria for my purposeful sample began with the data corpus which included transcripts for 26 family members and nine workers. The interview schedule typically included a pre-conference interview, a post-conference interview shortly after the FGC (e.g., one to three weeks later) and one follow-up interview a number of months later. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. A total of 74 interviews were transcribed. The original researchers divided all of the interviews into pods. Each pod consisted of one family and all of their relevant interviews, along with the interviews of their worker and sometimes an FGC coordinator. There were a total of eight pods. Some pods consisted of a family with only one parent while others consisted of not only two parents, but extended family members as well. For my study, I use the term case instead of pod to represent the grouping of interviews of one family, its members and the corresponding child protection worker.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a dataset can be derived from the data corpus based on the identification of a particular analytic interest in a topic within the data. My analytical interest was to select two cases from the data corpus where the family members described a negative FGC experience and one case where the family described a more positive experience. This was in keeping with purposeful extreme case sampling (Patton, 2002). I examined all of the family interviews reading and re-reading the transcripts, paying particular attention to descriptions of a negative experience. I also consulted with the original researchers to obtain their input and insight. After extensive reviewing and note-taking, I decided on two families that stood out the most as having a negative FGC experience. I made this determination based on intensely emotional words. For instance, “I had no power in there”, “It didn’t matter what I said” and metaphors such as “they nailed the coffin shut”, “they just put the gavel down and that was that.” Next, I chose a third case where the family members described a more positive FGC experience. I purposefully selected these three cases as my thesis dataset. These cases consisted of three different families and their corresponding workers. There were a total of nine participants – three child protection workers and six family members. With a social constructionist framework, qualitative design and methods, along with the intended goals of my research, a small dataset purposefully selected was an appropriate research method for the study.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is considered a qualitative approach that analytically examines narrative materials by breaking the text into smaller units to explore and identify common themes (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). It focuses on identifying themes and sub-themes from the participants’ stories and then piecing these together to form a comprehensive picture of their experience. Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain that thematic analysis is

compatible with constructionist paradigms and is theoretically flexible. It is a useful research tool that organizes and provides a rich detailed account of data. In line with the social constructionist framework and qualitative research design of the study, thematic analysis was well suited for the research goals. Thematic analysis “can be a method which works both to reflect reality, and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (p. 81). It involves description and interpretation and can include both deductive and inductive processes, emphasizing context and integrating manifest and latent content (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that “data analysis is the final stage of listening to hear the meaning of what is said” (p. 226). With this in mind, I analyzed the interviews with the intention of listening to the deeper meanings of what the participants were saying and identifying relevant themes to capture the latent content of the data. Thematic analysis was conducted first on the family member transcripts and then on the child protection worker transcripts. Both inductive and deductive approaches were applied. Within-case, between-case and within-participant comparisons of the data were utilized in order to provide a rich analysis of the manifest and latent content of the interviews. According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), interpretations of manifest and latent content differ in their depth and level of abstraction: manifest content is the more obvious interpretation of what the text says while latent content focuses on the underlying meaning of the text, involving a deeper interpretation. The authors note that a theme expresses the latent content of the text.

Data Analysis: Family Members

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts of family members. This type of analysis was chosen to allow family participant stories to be heard unencumbered. Although the overall focus of the study is the analysis of child protection worker

data, adding the perspectives of client families provides a holistic picture of the research inquiry. The data analysis followed the processes of thematic analysis as outlined in a six-phase guide by Braun and Clarke (2006). Their six phases of thematic analysis include: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

In Phase 1, to familiarize myself with the data, I read and re-read the transcripts several times in order to immerse myself in the narratives and become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. I also took initial notes on meanings and patterns that I was beginning to see. The goal was to become intimately familiar with each case and each interview. In Phase 2, I generated initial codes. In particular, I carefully examined the entire dataset for potential patterns. As part of this coding, I underlined key terms, phrases and data segments and used different coloured highlighters to indicate potential themes that I was finding. I also made extensive notes in the margins with the same colour codes and on separate index cards. I copied and cut-and-pasted data extracts so that I could organize them under all of the codes they appeared to represent.

In Phase 3, I searched for patterns. This involved carefully analyzing the codes for potential themes. The process was labour-intensive, as I continually made extensive notes and diagrams to capture the themes that I was trying to identify. Having data extracts cut out and coloured-coded helped to view them under each emerging theme, rather than embedded within the context of their interview, this helped to achieve a more objective view of the data. At the same time, I kept a certain amount of the original interview extract so that I would not lose the context. Sometimes, I would keep two copies of an extract (one with no interview context and one with context). I then sorted and compiled all of the relevant coded data extracts together

within each theme. Phase 4 involved reviewing themes. After identifying potential themes, I noted similarities and differences between the coded data extracts to consider if they all fit under the identified theme, making adjustments as necessary. I then analyzed my themes within the context of the entire dataset. When I felt I had exhausted the transcripts into themes that I was satisfied with, I moved on to the next phase.

In Phase 5, I defined and named the themes. Part of this phase included further defining and refining the themes to best represent the data. Here, I also considered each theme in relation to the others to further refine the themes. I kept finding overlap between the different themes and sub-themes and it was challenging to decide on how each was different from the other. Once I was satisfied with the themes identified, I moved on to Phase 6, the final phase, which was producing the written component. The findings derived from the data analysis of the family transcripts are presented in the following chapter.

Data Analysis: Child Protection Workers

My immersion in the literature and then in the family member interview data shaped my analysis in that I formed pre-conceived notions about what the interview data was saying and its fit with the literature. For this reason, I chose a combined inductive/deductive thematic analysis for the child protection worker transcripts. From a social constructionist view, data analysis cannot be completely objective and themes although emerging do so within the bounds and limits of the researcher's perceptions and perspectives, or worldview; themes are co-constructed between researcher and data.

For the thematic analysis of worker interview data, I followed the deductive thematic analysis process presented by Lambert and O'Halloran (2008). This process was informed by and based on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), as outlined above. A deductive or

theoretical thematic analysis is “driven by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven” (p. 84), rather than data-driven. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data rather than a description of the data overall. This was a goal of the current study.

Lambert and O’Halloran (2008) present a five-stage process that includes: detailed reading of the data corpus, identification of datasets, identification of initial themes from the datasets, refinement of themes and clustering themes into categories. Within the stages outlined by Lambert and O’Halloran, themes were refined into specific clusters based on my initial readings and understandings of the literature, as opposed to themes first emerging from the data. More specifically, after immersion in the literature and prior to the data analysis, an initial list of potential categories was created. This initial list was derived from the research question that was driving the study and from the following literature topics: principles and philosophies of strengths-based practice, tradition of problem-based child protection practice, expert-driven and pathological approaches to practice. Related themes were then grouped into clusters and then clusters were categorized, based on their relationship to the literature. The category most relevant to the research goals was: Worker Views of Client Family. The findings from the data analysis of the worker transcripts are presented in the following chapter.

Analytical Strategy: Juxtaposition

The strategy of juxtaposition was utilized to analyze each child protection worker’s interviews (within-participant analysis). More specifically, workers’ explicit practice philosophies, as they described, were compared with how they talk about and describe their client family. The comparison of talk from the same worker adds a further layer of analysis to the study providing a deep exploration of the participant experiences and rendering this study unique

compared to current studies on strengths- and problem-based philosophies in child protection.

The layers of analysis embedded in the study include:

1. Within-case analysis (comparing worker and family perspectives of the same FGC)
2. Between-case analysis for each group (comparing perspectives of each family with the other families, and workers with other workers)
3. Between-case analysis (comparing each case overall to the others)
4. Within-participant comparison (comparisons within each workers' narratives)

When comparing and contrasting the participant perspectives, questions came to mind posed by Burnard (1991) concerning interview analysis: "To what degree is it reasonable and accurate to compare the utterances of one person with those of another? Are 'common themes' in interviews really 'common'? Can we assume that one person's world view can be linked with another person's?" (p. 462). Although the author concedes the presumption that it is reasonable to compare participants in data analysis, he also provides these questions for the researcher to remain cognizant of the complications and challenges of interview analysis. These questions resonate with me as they reflect the struggles I faced when identifying and finalizing themes and comparing and contrasting participant perspectives. As with Burnard, I make the presumption that perspectives of different participants can in fact be grouped together or compared, but I also recognize that my own beliefs support the notion that every person has a unique perspective of the world and that our knowledge is socially constructed from within this worldview.

Study Limitations

This study is a secondary analysis of a previous qualitative study and there are certain limitations inherent in this type of analysis. For instance, as a researcher, I was not directly involved with the participants. Therefore, the interview questions were already determined and I

could not amend them to be more appropriate for the study. Also, I was not able to confirm the findings with the participants themselves, which can add credibility to qualitative research. I did however determine and establish that the primary study was both suitable and appropriate for a secondary analysis which adds credibility to the research.

An important limitation to the study is that I was not provided details of the families' history, background or involvement with child protection services. Families involved with child protection often face a variety of challenges and these challenges may have played a role in how they perceived and described their FGC experiences and their involvement with their child protection worker. This limitation is important when considering the results of the family members' data analysis. Furthermore, the focus of this study is on the child protection workers' interview data and in particular the dissonance between how the workers' describe their practice philosophies and how they describe their client family. The analysis of family member data was only intended to add a holistic aspect to the research and should be considered secondary.

A small dataset size is also a limitation to the study and should be considered when reviewing the results. Although a small sample size is appropriate for the qualitative methodology of this study, it does not allow generalizations to be made for all families and workers involved in child protection FGCs. The intention of the study was to explore and analyze the different perspectives of the same FGC; therefore, although only looking at a small number of cases, it involved multiple interviews and extensive data full of rich and detailed narratives to analyze. Another aspect to consider is social desirability. For instance, when child protection workers were asked specifically during the interviews about their practice philosophies and views on the FGC process, they may have responded with agreement and endorsement because they felt this was the appropriate response for their professional role. They

may have been uncomfortable voicing a negative or contradictory view about an intervention they were expected to endorse and implement in their professional practice, and they may not have wanted the interviewer to be aware of any discomfort they were experiencing. On the other hand, if workers were giving responses they felt the interviewers (or their supervisors) wanted to hear, one would expect their responses about client families to be aligned with this claim in order to substantiate their endorsement. However, this notion was not supported by the results.

Lastly, researcher bias and inexperience should always be considered a limitation when assessing student research. Although my education helped equip me, this is the first piece of major research that I have conducted and the first time I engaged with a qualitative design or secondary analysis; therefore, my experience is limited. Having open access to and consultation with the primary researchers (Dr. Tara Ney, Dr. Catherine Richardson and Dr. Joanne Stoltz) and my supervisor, Dr. Thea Vakil, allowed me to gain a wealth of knowledge on conducting qualitative research as well as being reflective of my work and aware of my own biases.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the methods chosen for the study, explained the rationale for those choices and outlined the data analysis process. The study is a secondary analysis utilizing a qualitative research design. Purposeful extreme case sampling was employed in order to select an appropriate and relevant sample from the data corpus of the primary study. A qualitative design aligns with the theoretical framework of the study, facilitates a deep exploration of participant experiences and seeks to understand those experiences from the perspective of the individual. The study employed inductive and deductive thematic analyses and utilized the strategy of juxtaposition to conduct within-participant comparisons. A secondary analysis lacking in

background information and a small sample size are limitations to the study. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings of the data analyses.

CHAPTER 5 –FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses the findings of the data analysis. It is divided into three sections to fully present the findings in a holistic manner. The first section and the bulk of the chapter presents the findings of the thematic analyses by case, and juxtaposes the narratives of workers and families; the second section summarizes the key findings in relation to the categories that framed the analysis; and the third section uses juxtaposition of the findings to address the research question. In considering the presentation of qualitative data, Chenail (1995) argues that juxtaposition is the key to producing a quality presentation and to do so requires juxtaposing data excerpts of one's study with the talk about the data.

As discussed in the introduction to the literature review, families involved with child protection services are often dealing with a variety of stressful and emotional matters that could impact how they describe their FGC experience and their child protection worker. Furthermore, the focus of the study is on the workers' interview data and the analysis of family interview data was intended as secondary in order to add a holistic aspect to the study. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from the family data analysis.

Section One – Findings by Case

Within each of the three cases, the findings are organized by the following three categories: 1) Worker Practice Philosophies, 2) Family Experiences and Perspectives, and 3) Worker Views of Client. Child protection worker statements about their practice philosophies are presented first. This establishes how workers position themselves in relation to strengths-based principles within the context of family group conferences. Next, family perspectives are presented to compare and highlight how they experienced the family group conference (FGC) process with their worker. These findings are organized by the emergent themes of the thematic

analysis. Then, the focus moves back to the child protection worker interviews, this time on how workers describe their client family, spotlighting places of tension or contradiction between these views and their espoused practice philosophies. This juxtaposition of the findings allows for a deeper consideration of the research objectives.

Relevant quotes from the interviews were selected that best illustrate the nature of the themes. These exemplars are provided in relation to the research aims and objectives and to highlight the identified categories and emergent themes. The overall intent of the selected quotes is to capture the essence of the participants' perspectives. Names of the child protection workers have been removed and replaced with the acronym CPW or "worker". Family participant names have been removed and are identified by their role with the children (e.g., mother, father, and aunt). In order to add context and clarity, for some of the excerpts, the interviewer's preceding narrative (as INT) was included.

Case One: Worker Practice Philosophies

In this case, the excerpts relating to the child protection worker's practice philosophies came from an interview conducted five months after the conference.

INT: ... in general, can you summarize for us your philosophy or driving values around child protection and your views on how FGC fits or doesn't fit.

CPW: Well, family driven. Really working in a supportive capacity...trying to be respectful and supportive but recognizing that there is, there are specific concrete concerns that need to be addressed. And how do we do that in the most respectful manner, hoping, and attempting to engage the family so that they get to understand this and want to work... At the end of the day we're all working together for the same cause, it's for the child. It's child-focused, family driven...

...[the FGC is] a really valuable tool to be able to sit down with every family member... bring them together, and have the family work out the plans so it felt like it was family driven. And the parents felt that they had some control in this... they were more invested than me saying well this is how I would like to see things... So, I feel it's an invaluable tool.

...The family want to make this work because they feel that they're being heard... So it's very powerful for a diverse group of people with different interests and hopes coming together to – but with a common aim – coming together to really share what the concerns are with a view to a positive outcome for the parents.

This child protection worker describes her practice philosophies as strengths-based, in line with the principles of FGCs. For instance, she describes her philosophies as family-driven and participatory and speaks about engaging the family and working in a supportive capacity. The worker notes that because the FGC is family-driven, the parents feel they have some control and will therefore be more invested in the process. She acknowledges the value that control has for the family and that she believes they experienced this control. The worker endorses collaborative practice with her clients when she speaks of “*coming together... with a common aim... to really share... with a view to a positive outcome for the parents*”, suggesting that she wants to share power and engage in deliberate and collaborative talk. One would anticipate that a family involved in an FGC with a worker believing in and supporting a strengths-based perspective would experience the process as collaborative and participatory.

Case One: Family Experiences and Perspectives

The analysis of family data in this case included a mother and a father. The excerpts presented below were selected from an interview that took place five months after the FGC.

Theme One - Loss of Voice and Power

MOM: I suppose, in some small manner, it feels like a trial, that when the gavel goes down [the worker] has the last say as to what happens legally...And if I say, you know, I'd like my children back, blah blah blah, this is what I'd like the solution to look like, you know, she has the power to veto and say, well I'm saying you're not getting your children back until you do this and this and this.

INT: ...what would stop you from bringing up these concerns at the next FGC?

MOM: I suppose - a sense of hopelessness. It doesn't matter what I have to say at the next FGC, they're going to have whatever they want happen, the gavel goes down and that's that. It's closed. I can say; I can talk there until I'm blue in the face but the solution of everybody else comes down. You know I've got no power in there... You know, they sealed and nailed the coffin shut. Like there was no word that I could get in there.

These excerpts show that the mother is aware of the power held by the child protection worker. She is articulate with her choice of metaphors and her words, “*it feels like a trial*” and

“the gavel goes down and that’s that” highlighting the magnitude of this power as it resonates with the organizational structure of the legal domain. The finality of the decisions that were made by the Ministry is powerful as she states, *“they sealed and nailed the coffin shut”*. In this context, the mother is powerless in relation to the oppression she is experiencing with the worker and the legal environment. There is no room for deliberation and collaboration. She has the experience that her voice is on the verge of being vetoed and she feels restricted by the conditions of this power over her. For instance, it doesn’t matter what she says, she can *“talk there until I’m blue in the face,”* the worker has the power to say, *“you’re not getting your children back until you do this and this and this”*.

The mother’s experience of the power held by her worker is similar to findings reported by Dumbrill (2006), where parents perceived workers to hold the power to impose their ideas and plans for their family, even when they disagreed with the worker’s assessment. In line with this, Bell (1999) argues that families in child protection conferences have limited power to negotiate with their worker. Although the aim of the FGC intervention is to share power, this mother feels her voice is being ignored and she is experiencing powerlessness as a client.

Theme Two – Negative Judgements: Degradation, Resistance, Compliance

MOM: I just felt like I was on trial, I suppose... My parenting and my being a parent was on trial, about what kind of parent I am. If I was a good parent or not. Like all these everyday negative things were brought up of [I] did this wrong, [I] did that wrong and blah blah blah and here’s what we’re going to do about it.

...all these negative things came down and the weight hit and it was like, I felt almost depressed. Like, you know, I’m such a terrible person and a terrible mother. All these negative things.

As well as experiencing a loss of voice and power, this mother feels negatively judged about her parenting. Her perception of the conference was a focus on negative things, judgements and what she had done wrong; her ability to be a good mother was questioned. The impact of feeling unfairly judged is seen when she says, *“I felt almost depressed. Like, you know,*

I'm such a terrible person and a terrible mother." She is troubled that the conference process has been scripted with such negativity, leaving her feeling degraded and humiliated.

The father also perceived the focus of the FGC to be on judgements and negativity:

DAD: ...I thought the meeting was supposed to be about the kids... you think it's about the kids but it's everybody attacking [the mom] and me. We've done nothing ever to our kids.

... We're doing nothing and I stress this today and I've been saying it every day, we've done nothing to harm our kids. Nothing...

Like the mother in this family, the father is feeling attacked and negatively judged. He reacts with resistance and defensiveness, as seen in his comments: "*we've done nothing ever to our kids... nothing to harm our kids. Nothing.*" This finding aligns with Forrester et al. (2008) who found that negative communication behaviours from social workers in child welfare, such as focusing on negative aspects of parents, resulted in resistance on the part of parents. Similarly, Dumbrill (2006) observed that parents who perceived workers to have power over them, tended to either fight or play the game. Although this father is fighting and resisting the power over him, in the sense that he is defending himself, the effect of those negative judgements in the following comment later in the same interview:

DAD: ...The confidence that I had when [3-year old child] was first born and today, I have not very much confidence in me now.

The father is left feeling degraded and disheartened as he has lost confidence in himself.

Theme Three - Questioning Expertise

MOM: I suppose a way to say it was it was the presentation of it, it was things were looked at darker than they were, I suppose... It wasn't that I didn't think it was a big deal. I know what they were saying, you know, had some sound to it. But I guess I suppose I could say that my perception was different. I didn't see it as heavy as they nailed it down.

...it wasn't as bad as they made the picture to be.

The mother claims that her view of the child protection situation was not as severe as presented by the Ministry. This is illustrated in the following statements: "*things were looked at*

darker than they were”, “I didn’t see it as heavy as they nailed it down” and “it wasn’t as bad as they made the picture to be.” This finding aligns with the parents’ views in Dale (2004) that child protection workers often adopt a worst-case scenario perspective resulting in protection plans that are not in proportion to the actual seriousness of the situation. Both the mother and father in this family maintain that the portrayal of their parenting by child protection services was disproportionate to their view of the situation. Both parents are left questioning the expertise of the child protection system. In the following passage, the mother also questions the actions of their worker:

MOM: ... there was a lot of emphasis on the fact that I couldn’t really parent [the child], you know... Because I have ADHD that’s affecting the children. [the worker] called one of my psychologists and asked, oh how does [the mom]’s ADHD affect her ability to parent. I thought that’s kind of a weird question to ask because it’s going to affect my ability to parent because [the child] has it and I’m going to have more understanding. And yes I am going to have more challenge, but I understand what he goes through, you know. Instead of if he had it and I didn’t, you know, I wouldn’t have that ability to say oh I understand what he’s going through because I’ve been there.

In this excerpt, the mother questions the worker’s view that having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may negatively impact her parenting. She seems bewildered that the worker called one of her doctors to investigate her ability to parent because of ADHD; she finds this “a weird question to ask.” Despite the worker’s concerns, the mom actually has a positive outlook; she believes that because both she and her son have ADHD she will be a more effective parent and will therefore have more insight and understanding and be better equipped when parenting the child. This mother appears to have an understanding of what strengths-based perspectives are about and is confused why the worker has taken such a judgemental position.

Summary of Family Perspectives

This family describes their FGC experience in contradiction to its intended strengths-based principles. While the family may desire a sense of participation, inclusion and

empowerment, the behaviour of the worker deprives them of these possibilities as her responses continually show the force of the problem-based philosophies inherent in child protection. The family's experiences indicate that negative talk has overridden anything strengths-based. They did not feel empowered and are left with a sense of hopelessness. Ultimately, they have lost confidence in their parenting.

Case One: Worker Views of Client

The excerpts that highlight the child protection worker's views of the client family came from an interview just a few days prior to the conference. The excerpts are organized by the themes that were identified in the analysis.

Theme One - Problem-based Lens

CPW: ...So one of the issues with these parents is that they have some developmental disabilities and we don't know exactly what they are but they have struggles, so these are manifested by very poor impulse, very poor decision making

... [dad] and [mom] have some challenges, their own challenges, which has impacted the parenting of the children... There were some issues around [dad] having chronic back pain and this was affecting the children because the kids, rather the oldest child was not getting to daycare or getting to daycare late. And there was no consistency around that scheduling. [the mom] was having a very difficult time coping, already having some of her own difficulties. She's quite an impulsive person and so finds it hard to see the bigger picture and often this couple are in intense crisis.

... [dad]'s back pain, back problems, have caused added stress to [mom] who already has difficulty coping at the best of times, and ongoing concerns about the consistency and care of the children... That's sort of the bottom line... the kids need to be getting to daycare on time.

The child protection worker speaks critically about her clients' disabilities, faults and weaknesses. Her talk is judgemental, depicting her clients as deficient. This finding aligns with Weick et al. (1989) who argue that with a problem-based philosophy, the client's problems are understood as a lack, weakness or inability within the person. Also, Noble et al. (2000) found that workers in child welfare still emphasize failure and assess clients for individual pathology rather than for personal strengths. In strengths-based practice, the central aim is to find positive

qualities and strengths within a family “rather than providing a litany of deficits” (Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004, p. 221). The above passage outlines a litany of deficits; the worker is focused on the negative aspects of her clients. Also, the child protection worker’s talk is filled with labelling and categorizing. According to Bransford (2011), this is a paternalistic approach that secures the worker in a position of superiority over the client. The worker, in this case, is using the state’s power to frame issues thus making negative and presumptuous judgements about this family and their challenges. She states, “[t]hat’s sort of the bottom line... the kids need to be getting to daycare on time” suggesting that the children’s getting to daycare late is a fundamental problem; however, one may wonder who is dictating this time schedule. The worker’s focus appears to be on judging and criticizing the parents rather than on the needs of the children.

Theme Two - Dissonant Worldviews

In the following excerpt, the child protection worker discusses the mother’s choice to go back to school:

CPW: ...I know that they have money issues, they have debts and now she is looking at taking on a student loan and embarking on this course. I’m really not sure to what end. And I know that she has difficulty concentrating so I don’t know how she’s going to make it through.

The worker exhibits a negative view about the mother and lacks faith or confidence in her abilities. The worker’s disagreement about the mother’s choice to go back to school indicates that her views are dissonant to those of the mother; the worker believes the mother is making a wrong choice. As noted in the literature review, Weick et al. (1989) argue that even when clients appear to be making wrong choices, they are in fact exercising their ability to find what is best for them and it is inappropriate for someone else to judge how they should live their life; the power for such choices should rest with the client.

The next interview excerpt highlights another decision made by the family that the worker disagrees with. In this example, the worker discusses the parents' decision to remove their son from daycare. According to the mother, they removed their son "*because he was saying that people were beating him up... He would cry... [and she later learned that] there were other parents that had problems with that daycare.*" Despite this explanation from the mother, the worker formulates a different assessment:

CPW: ...They also had [3-year old child] in a daycare but [the child] was presenting with some behaviours that had concerned [dad]. He was crying when he was going to the daycare and he was behaving as if he was very apprehensive. But they didn't have any discussion with the daycare around that and they pulled him out. And so, again, I felt that, you know, this was sort of an arbitrary decision. Let's meet with the daycare, let's have a conversation with them, because this is a skill that you're going to need as they get older anyway, to be able to discuss, mediate and manage, communicate...

The worker does not agree with how the parents handled their concerns about their son's daycare; she states that they should have had a "*discussion*" or "*conversation*" with the daycare about the matter, but instead "*pulled him out.*" The worker seems to expect that the parents should have dealt with the situation in a way more congruent with the worker's own principles and methods, such as "*to discuss, mediate and manage, communicate*". If the worker was genuinely practicing from a collaborative strengths-based perspective, her opinions may have been quite different. For example, she may have respected and admired the parents for taking action when they felt their son was in a dangerous or unhealthy environment. Instead, the worker described their decision-making critically.

Goldberg (2009) warns that when workers deal with clients who are different from them, the worker may unconsciously impose their worldview in ways that are problematic for both parties and remaining unaware of or denying such dynamics virtually guarantees that the conflict process will be biased. Research indicates that when workers are aware of their worldview and

able to accept the worldview of their client, they will have more successful outcomes (Ibrahim, 1991; Goldberg, 2009; Sue, 1978). Without such an understanding, workers may make negative judgements about their clients (Ibrahim, 1985). The findings support this research and indicate that the child protection worker is unaware of her clients' worldviews and of her own and is imposing her dissonant worldview upon her clients.

Theme Three - Adopting the Expert Role

In the following excerpt, the child protection worker again disagrees with the parents' decision-making; however, in this passage the theme of "Adopting the Expert Role" is highlighted. This theme aligns with research that suggests child protection workers may adopt the role of helpful expert, as discussed in the literature review (e.g., Sherry, 2008).

CPW: ...I said to [mom], you know, I'm really concerned about this. I'm really concerned about how you're managing, and I'm very concerned that you may bring in a babysitter – because she was looking for a babysitter. And I thought a teenage babysitter who is not adept at dealing with a child that is really very hyperactive and who will likely be burned out within half an hour. And I had said to her, if you make a poor decision on this I may have to look at an alternative route for the kids. And then an hour later, I have a phone call from [dad] sounding right as rain, oh I'm fine and I'm taking care of things. And I did have a discussion with him and say, you know, I would have to say that if your kids were put in a situation where they were at risk because of your decision making then maybe I would have to look at an alternative. And we would take more intrusive measures. And I was very up front with him about that.

There appears to be no discussion to problem solve with the parents. The worker does not ask them what is working or what help they may need, and instead takes on an authoritative expert role. In this role, the worker enforces her opinion of what an appropriate babysitter should be; she believes a teenaged babysitter is not suitable for dealing with a hyperactive child and refers to this as a "poor decision".

This finding is consistent with Weick et al. (1989) who argue that adopting the expert role places the worker in a position of authority to make decisions impacting clients' lives. This worker not only adopts the expert role, but uses the authority of her position to wield power over

the parents, making threats if they do not comply with her directives. It is not surprising that the dad phoned back “*sounding right as rain*” as he and the mom were likely feeling powerless and scared that they may lose their children; therefore, compliance was their only option. The worker seems unaware of how she is using her power over these parents. Mandell (2008) argues that using one’s power over clients may perpetuate the client’s experience of social marginalization.

Summary of Case One

The child protection worker in this case describes her practice philosophies as strengths-based and portrays her work with families as respectful and supportive, in line with FGC principles. The findings from the family interviews, on the other hand, indicate a disempowering FGC experience. The family did not describe their FGC as collaborative or participatory and were left feeling negatively judged and humiliated. In turning to the child protection worker’s descriptions of the client family, the evidence suggests that a problem-based philosophy underlies her practice. The worker speaks critically and judgementally about this family and positions herself as the expert in how they should live their lives and parent their children.

Case Two: Worker Practice Philosophies

In this case, the excerpts relating to the child protection worker’s practice philosophies came from an interview that was conducted three weeks after the FGC.

CPW: ...I really like to think that I’m a really strong advocate for my clients and that is a strength that I bring to practise... I can say, I guess what my concerns are and all that, but I reiterate it that we’re all on the same team. We probably share the same concerns and we all want this to be successful, right?

...I like to kind of take kind of a casual approach and to really, I think, not to downplay the protection concerns but basically to say, to focus on the child. We’re all here – and to thank everybody for coming – to focus on what’s best for this child. Let’s meet the needs of this child, right? We’re all together. This is not the Ministry versus the family. We all want the outcome to be successful for this child. They have a future and we can really, profoundly affect the brightness of that future. So I kind of like to reach out with that olive branch right off, and I think that the family group conference really, really helps...

The worker describes her practice philosophies to be in-line with strengths-based principles in that she endorses an inclusive and respectful approach. She positions herself as a strong advocate for her clients. A collaborative philosophy is indicated when she states “*we’re all on the same team... share the same concerns... We’re all together. This is not the Ministry versus the family.*” Furthermore, her remark about reaching out with an olive branch implies that she discounts an adversarial or confrontational approach.

In the next quote, the worker attempts to negotiate the two different roles inherent in her position believing that she can overcome the negativity of the problem-based tradition by how she connects with the family, and she is insistent that she can and does.

CPW: ... at the end of the day I am not a – my role is not as a child and youth advocate because that would look different. It is as a child protection social worker. So my drivers are legislation, are risk assessment models and all that. So when I go in there, I know that I need to say what our protection concerns are. But how I say that, how I frame it, how I present it, I do have control over that.

INT: So what I’m hearing you say out of this then that you can find a way to make the advocate work with the collaborative through...

CPW: I can and I will. And I will do that every time. Every time. If there’s a way to soften that, or say it in such a way that will be less intrusive and possibly better received, I will always try to find a back door... And that’s not soft pedalling it. I think it’s way more effective to do that.

INT: Effective in terms of what?

CPW: Effective in how I can work with that family.

CPW: ... it’s not my job to judge why people come in that front door. It’s not my job to judge. I’m not a judge. That’s not my role.

Although she recognizes her professional role as a protection worker with legislation and risk assessment models driving her practice, the worker also insists that she has control over how to approach clients. She is confident that she can do her professional protection work but still be collaborative. She also recognizes that she has the choice, or agency, to frame the negative of what she must discuss about the Ministry’s concerns in a positive way. For instance: “*But how I*

say that, how I frame it, how I present it, I do have control over that.” Saleebey (1996), in discussing the strengths perspective, notes that how a social worker approaches and relates with his or her client is critical and the worker must engage the clients as equals and meet them eye-to-eye to engage in mutual decision-making.

Case Two: Family Experiences and Perspectives

The analysis of family member data included a mother, father and an aunt. The quotes selected here come from interviews with each of the family members that took place approximately one week after the FGC.

Theme One - Loss of Voice and Power

For the following excerpts, it is helpful to understand some of the context for this case. Just prior to the family group conference, the child protection worker obtained the results of a drug test that the mother took. Unfortunately, the worker read the test results wrong and came to the FGC with the assumption that the mother was using drugs. The worker did not bring the results with her to the conference so there was no way for this family to prove their assertion that the mother was still drug-free.

AUNT: So, the meeting went according to the fact that [the mom]’s drug test has gone up. So, all these supervised visits and all this stuff which we don’t necessarily need to have any more because [the mom]’s already proven to date that she’s not using.

... it didn’t make sense at all... And the meeting went a completely different direction because of it. The meeting wasn’t about, you know, what we wanted it to be about, it ended up we had to backtrack... The whole meeting was a waste of time... the entire meeting was a complete sham. It was a total waste of time and really frustrating...

MOM: ... Since they were assuming and accusing me of using, everything just took a different turn so now we’re still with supervised visits. We have more visits but that’s as far as we got.

...And if we had realised that everything was going to be so set in stone we would have went there a lot more prepared. No, actually, it wouldn’t have mattered what we did. Because they came in assuming I had been using. So that set everything right there.

The family is frustrated and disheartened because the child protection worker assumed the mother was using drugs. Due to this assumption, the conference resulted in the mother still having supervised visits. The conditions and rules that were set left the mother with a loss of power in the sense that everything was “*set in stone*” and “*it wouldn't have mattered what we did.*” This family has the perspective that the worker made her decisions about their case prior to the conference.

This finding is consistent with Dumbrill (2006) who found that parents believed their opinions had little impact because child protection workers categorized their cases to fit predetermined intervention plans. Similarly, Bell (1999) reported that although child protection conferences are portrayed to be about participatory decision-making, the evidence suggests that decisions are already made prior to the conference and families have limited power for negotiating in child protection conferences. Further evidence of the loss of power felt by this mother is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

MOM: ...there's tons of false hope. You think you're getting somewhere and all it takes is for the foster lady to say, oh, the baby seems overstimulated, the baby seems to be coughing or the – the next thing you know it can all be taken away, just like that...It's totally out of my control.

This excerpt highlights the impact of oppressive forces in that the mother believes she does not have any control. She connects this to the authority of the worker who has the power to take her baby away. These perspectives are counter to the intended collaborative and inclusive principles of strengths-based practice.

Theme Two – Negative Judgements: Degradation, Resistance, Compliance

The following quotes reveal the father's experience of feeling negatively judged:

DAD: They let their jobs go to their heads. People with certain jobs in authority, they act like they're it and I'm just toe jam, for example. I'm nothing... I don't know how else to explain it, but you know. I sometimes feel as though I'm fighting a losing battle here.

...they do have power. They are the big, bad bullies who have my daughter right now and I have to – when they say jump I have to jump. And ask how high.

Quite vividly, this father describes how he perceives the child protection workers as the “big, bad bullies” that treat him like “toe jam”. The dad shows compliance in his statements: “when they say jump I have to jump. And ask how high.” Feeling judged and bullied, there is no sense of choice for this father, which is antithetical to the collaborative family-driven nature of FGCs. Just as the father concedes that he must comply with the authority over him, the mother expresses a similar perspective:

MOM: ... I just keep going with the hopes that [my daughter] is going to be returned soon... It's just a matter of time and I'll just do whatever they need me to do for now.

Although the parents in this case disagree with the worker's negative judgements and assessments, their narratives illustrate the fear underlying their compliance; they will comply with the conditions set by the worker, even if unreasonable or unjustified, because they fear losing their baby daughter. Next, an excerpt from an interview with the aunt provides further evidence of this family's perspective that the mother, in particular, has been unfairly judged:

AUNT: ...I confronted [the worker] and I said to [the worker], you know I need you to just hear me out on a human level. And I know that that might be difficult because you're on one side and we're on another, and that is clear in this room today. However, this is really happening to this girl. You are really telling her that she has used drugs when she really hasn't. So, that's where we're all coming from. This has really happened today. You are telling her something that she knows she hasn't done. That's a problem for all of us.

The family has solidarity in defending the mother's position that she has not been using drugs. The aunt shows resistance to the negative assumptions of the child protection worker by advocating for the mother. She pleads with the worker and tries to appeal to her sense of humanity. This interaction seems to be about whose truth will prevail, but with the force of the law and authority on her side, it is more likely that the worker's judgements will prevail. This aligns with Calder's (1995) view of paternalism in child protection as when the worker's

perceptions differ from the client's and the worker's ideas prevail. In this study, the family members proclaim that the child protection worker's judgments and assessments have indeed prevailed, despite their insistence otherwise.

Unsure of how to behave when faced with unfair and inaccurate judgments, this family appears to vacillate between resistance and compliance. For instance, although the mother admits she will “*do whatever they need me to do*” and the father states “*when they say jump I have to jump*”, indicative of compliance, they also resist these negative social forces by taking action, as demonstrated in the following quotes:

DAD: I don't agree to another family conference, actually. I don't see any need for it. What's going – they're going to throw something else at us... and I have to base my trust with the lawyer now and find more rights for us.

AUNT: ... we've also encouraged [the mom] to no longer have a meeting with [the worker] without support. Not to be in a room alone with her any longer, that [the mom] needs to now get an advocate. For herself, to make sure that she's being protected. And that she knows what's being said to her...

The family has not only lost their voice and power but also their trust in the FGC process. The negative judgements about them and the restrictions put on their time with their baby have been difficult on this family and the quote above shows their desperation to fight against the worker and base their trust with the legal system instead. The father sees no need for another FGC because he believes, “*they're going to throw something else at us*”. This family believes that an advocate and a legal course of action are necessary in order to have rights and be protected; they are seeking external support because they feel disempowered, disrespected and degraded by the FGC process and child protection system.

Theme Three – Questioning Expertise

The following quotes highlight this family's frustration with the FGC process and, more particularly, their worker's actions and behaviour:

INT: Was there anything you think that was useful that came out of [the FGC]?

AUNT: Nothing... I don't feel like anything was useful. None of it. None of it. I think the only thing that was useful was I finally got to hear, sorry, to experience myself what type of worker [the child] has, because I've been hearing it from [the mom] and [the dad] since the beginning.

As a matter of fact, [the dad] had told me in the past that he has witnessed [the worker] roll her eyes at him and he couldn't understand how she could professionally even do that. And then we all watched it happen in that room. We all watched [the worker] roll her eyes on a number of occasions, in the middle of conversation. And at the washroom break, I went into the washroom, and I was just floored. I was just standing in there going, like how is it possible that [the worker] just rolled her eyes at me? And we're all going to continue to think that we're going to have a conversation with her that is going to enable [the mom] more visits with her daughter. Like the woman is looking at us and rolling her eyes at us. Like where do we even think we're going with this any further. At one point, when I went for my washroom break, I said to my mom, I think we should call this off.

Similar remarks are expressed by the father:

DAD: ...I expressed my concern of how [the worker] made me and [the mom] feel, [the worker], she made me feel this tall... I told her you made me and [the mom] feel like crap... we told her at the end of the conference how she made us, our family, our group, our support, we confronted her on how she made us feel, she wasn't answering questions, she was rolling her eyes, she was sighing, doing whatever, she was very unprofessional...

Quite intensely, this family expresses dissatisfaction with their worker's behaviour during the conference and are left questioning her expertise and believing the FGC was not effective, useful, or helpful. The findings from this family resonate with a study that explored parent perceptions of participation in child protection family group meetings by Darlington, Healy, Yellowlees, & Bosly (2012). These authors found factors that contributed to a negative experience included "not feeling respected, not having their opinions heard and not being supported during the meeting" (p. 331).

Summary of Family Perspectives

This family describes their FGC experience in contradiction to the fundamental principles of strengths-based practice. Even though this family pleads to be heard and have their views and opinions respected and validated, the overarching theme of power and control overrules and this

family is left feeling frustrated, angry, powerless and hopeless. The family members react to the power used over them by both resisting and complying.

Case Two: Worker Views of Client

The excerpts selected to spotlight the child protection worker's views of the client family were taken from an interview conducted three weeks after the FGC. The quotes are organized and presented by the themes identified in the analysis.

Theme One - Problem-based Lens

CPW...I felt that [the family] really did not understand why we have a family group conference. I felt that they might have been under the misconception, or the erroneous understanding that it was what I felt was just like an opportunity to vent, as opposed to an opportunity to problem solve and work together to come up to some solutions and address some concerns.

Because the family, I don't believe they really understood why we were having a family group conference and the structure of that. I think that they came to vent.

For whatever reason they did not have the comprehension, in my feeling, of what the intent of the family group conference was.

These quotes indicate that the child protection worker holds a judgemental view of the family in that she believes they do not possess the comprehension to understand the purpose or intent of a family group conference and instead had the erroneous understanding that the FGC was only an opportunity to vent. The worker describes the family as needing to vent, rather than describing the family as needing to be heard. The results reported here support those of Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) who found that most social workers concentrated on the personal weaknesses of families, according no importance to their strengths. Similarly, Forrester et al. (2008) found that social workers rarely identified positive aspects of parents and exhibited low levels of empathy. With this blame-focused view of the family, the worker places herself in a position of superiority and speaks about the family as if she knows better than they; she is right about the purpose and intent of the FGC and the family is wrong. These findings resonate with

Grant and Cadell (2009) who argue that by seeing clients through a problem-based lens, “we interpret the actions, feelings, experiences, and beliefs of those we support from a pathological framework” (p. 425).

Theme Two - Dissonant Worldviews

In the following quotes, the worker discusses what she felt did not work with the FGC:

CPW: ...why don't we go to what didn't work... because that comes through. What didn't work. Um, I think that to me it was a family group conference of surprises... when I came to the family group conference I was actually quite surprised by the amount of what I felt was hostility and confrontational attitude in the room.

...They were separating, you know, who's the good guy and who's the bad guy... Right at the get-go there were camps.

In describing the FGC, the worker talks about the “hostility” and “confrontational attitude” and suggests that the family was separating the good guys from the bad guys, creating divisions; however, the worker neglects to mention that she read the drug test wrong and came to the conference with a mistaken assumption about the mother and that this assumption and resulting valuations may have created, or at least contributed to, an us-versus-them dichotomy between the Ministry workers and the family. The misreading of the drug test and the predetermined decisions made by the worker likely contributed to a non-collaborative environment, yet the worker does not mention her mistake to the interviewer.

Hoskins and White (2010) posit that a child protection worker's identity can influence the lens from which he or she views clients and it can impact their decision-making, and furthermore that a worker's identity filters what information gets highlighted and what information gets disregarded. The worker in this case went to the FGC viewing her client through a judgemental lens presuming the mother was using drugs; she maintained her view throughout the FGC, discounting the family's insistence that the mom was not using drugs. The worker chose to

highlight her own facts and disregard the new information that was dissonant with her preconceived view.

This finding is consistent with Bell (1999) who argued that in assessing risk, workers have the power to decide which facts are relevant to make judgements about parenting and that such judgments are rarely changed as a result of any discussions in the conference. Furthermore, the worker appears to carry this view into the interview which took place three weeks after the worker learned about the mistaken drug test results. This suggests that the worker's identity influenced her practice approach in that the strengths-based principles of FGC practice, that the worker claimed to endorse, were overridden by a problem-based approach, or perhaps an underlying pathological worldview. As discussed in the literature review, Grant and Cadell (2009) describe a pathological worldview as an approach to practice that focuses on what the client is doing wrong and what is not working, rather than focusing on what the client is doing right and what is working. Viewing clients with a pathological worldview cultivates negative opinions and attitudes, positioning clients different from workers and potentially exacerbating power differentials.

Theme Three – Adopting the Expert Role

FGCs are intended to include extended family, community resource persons, professionals and any other support persons all working collaboratively toward common goals of supporting a family in decision-making. In this case, the child protection worker discounts the family's assertion about the mom not using drugs and, in the quote below, she also discounts the mental health and addictions counselor's similar assessment of the mother:

CPW:...The other surprise to me, was, um that the drug and – mental health and addictions counsellor actually said, as a matter of fact, that [the mom] wasn't using. And I found that quite interesting as a professional because I thought, you know what, unless you actually are with someone 24/7 and I mean going to the washroom with them, sleeping with them and all of that and being with their every move, we can't say that. And so I felt that that was really interesting...

And I found that that kind of, for, that – while that might have helped the family, it might have been what they wanted to hear, to me, I felt that actually it was not factual. I go on evidence-based reporting and that was not a fact, in my books.

This quote indicates that the worker has positioned herself in a helpful expert role rather than in a collaborative team-member role. It highlights the worker's reliance on facts and evidence in her decision-making as she discounts the counselor's opinion as "*not factual... not a fact, in my books*" implying that her evidence-based reporting is the right way to approach issues in child protection. She is very clear on her stance on this and is critical that other professionals may rely on the narratives from their clients as evidence.

The worker's critical view of the counselor resonates with literature from Anderson, Monsen, & Rorty (2000) in their studies of nursing and genetics from a feminist perspective. These authors note that in multidisciplinary models of health care, the power and authority for final decisions and future directions often lie with only one member of the team, usually the physician. The reason for this is because the other team members are not considered equal in terms of their expertise, status, or function. With this case, the worker does not appear to consider the other team members (i.e., the addictions counselor) as equal and therefore discounts their assessment, relying on her own expertise as superior, thus acting non-collaboratively.

Summary of Case Two

The worker in this case espouses the talk of strengths-based practice. She positions her work as collaborative and participatory stating that she has control over how she approaches and works with clients. The experiences of the family highlight a contradictory perspective. They express frustration that the mother was unfairly judged and suggest that this set an adversarial tone. All of the family members express a negative FGC experience; they did not find the process participatory, collaborative, or family-driven. The family was left feeling frustrated and disempowered with a loss of faith and trust in the child protection system to help them. When

looking at how the worker describes the family, there is evidence of a problem-based view that does not support a collaborative forum. The worker speaks critically of the family and discounts their insistence that the mother is drug-free. Truth, for the worker, comes not from the people but from what she considers facts and evidence-based reporting. For the family and the professional counselor, truth comes from the accounts of the family members. In this context, the family's truth was overridden by the workers' truth in her role as the professional expert.

Case Three: Worker Practice Philosophies

The excerpts selected from this child protection worker's interviews come from a follow-up interview eight months after the FGC. The worker in this case, as in the previous two cases, describes her approach to practice in keeping with strengths-based philosophies:

CPW: I think it's always good to bring family together... I support the FGC process... if I'm talking about how I practise social work... I try and build relationships with my clients... I think you need to be able to develop some level of trust and openness... I really try and be collaborative both with other professionals and with families

The worker's words reflect her endorsement of a collaborative approach in working with families. Further evidence is seen in the following quotes:

INT: So, working collaboratively, that's part of the way you orient yourself. Working collaboratively and openly with families, with other professionals, it sounds like a real team.

CPW: And I think we owe that to our families. Cause how can they address our concerns if they're never really told in a straight-forward way what those concerns are. You know, I've just had a case transferred to me from [different city] and there's a risk assessment on file that outlines some pretty significant concerns but mom has never seen it. Mom is like, no, I've never read that risk assessment. I don't know what you know – So, I'm like, well, you need to know what's in that because I can only go on what's on your file. So, you know, I've shared that with her because that's important.

The worker values inclusiveness and transparency as seen when she learns that one of her new clients is unaware of the protection concerns on file and so decides to inform and include the mom. She felt it was the mother's right and privilege to know what had been documented

about her. In this way, the worker is acting more in the role of collaborator than authoritative expert. Furthermore:

CPW: ... Schools deflect [child protection], you know, they call us with a report that they think a kid's being neglected because he's coming to school dirty and no lunch and he's got head lice and it's never treated, mom's late to pick him up. Well, have you talked to mom about any of this stuff? Oh no, no. That's why we're phoning you. Well, actually, you know, have you considered that mom's got four kids under the age of five at home, they're on income assistance, she's late getting to school cause she's got to bundle up the other four kids in order to get to the school, and head lice is an issue, but she's doing her best. These bugs have become resistant to treatment.

This quote demonstrates that the worker positions herself as an advocate for her clients. She expresses disapproval when school personnel, instead of speaking with a mother directly or offering some form of support, phone a social worker who is not connected with the school or the family and who could possibly be viewed as an intrusive threat by the parent. The worker speaks from a place of understanding when she suggests that school personnel are quick to judge parents without considering the challenges that they may be facing.

The worker's support for her clients corroborates strengths-based literature in that she focuses on their personal capacity, rather than seeking faults or blame (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009; Saleebey, 1996; Weick et al., 1989). A key method of practicing from a strengths approach includes collaboration and partnership between social workers and clients (Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Grant & Cadell, 2009).

Case Three: Family Experiences and Perspectives

The quotes selected for this family were from an interview conducted with the mother a few weeks after the FGC.

Theme One – Feeling Supported

INT: Was there anything about the conference that was not helpful, would you say?

MOM: Um, nothing that you can control, really. It was – what wasn't helpful was Auntie getting, dwelling on the problems instead of dwelling on the fixes... You know, and Auntie was told two or three times ok, that's enough. That's been addressed, it doesn't need to be addressed for an hour... You know, it's said, it's done, there's nothing that we can do at this moment but these are

the solutions... But you can't control what someone's going to say. You can only control how the meeting's going to play out...

INT: Ok. So what might you say to other families who are considering going into a family group conference?

MOM: It can help. It can help. You can get good plans. I mean, it's, generally it's a good thing just try not to get stuck on the problems. Try to get stuck on the solutions, not the problems.

In this quote, when the mom is asked about what was negative or not helpful in the FGC, her answer reflects dissatisfaction with a family member and not the Ministry, child protection workers, or the FGC process. She states that her aunt “*was told two or three times ok, that's enough*”, suggesting that those in the FGC were not supporting a problem-based view and instead were focused on working with the mother on solutions. Along with feeling supported and respected during the FGC, the mother seems to feel a sense of control and participation in the FGC process, as evidenced when she states, “*You can only control how the meeting's going to play out*”. Overall, this mother is satisfied enough with her FGC experience to recommend it for other families.

Theme Two - Working Together

In the following quotes, the mother talks about her relationship with her worker:

MOM: I don't like being involved [with the Ministry]... It's just the feeling of someone watching your every movement. Someone keeping tabs on you to make sure that, you know, see how clean your house is, to see if you're asking if you're, you know, going to your appointments, how much have you been drinking, if, you know, what's your relationships like.

...I've never gotten along with social workers. I hate social workers. Government in that area I steer clear. Do not come near me. I told [the worker] straight out when we started working together that I don't like social workers. It's just my experience, I don't, and I've never gotten along with a worker so well before.

INT: So you get along with [the worker]. What do you think explains why you get along with her so well?

MOM: I honestly can't tell you.

INT: From the get-go? Or has it just been since this conference?

MOM: Pretty much from the get-go. We've got along... I think part of the reason is that I told her straight out I don't like social workers. And so I think she kind of took that and went, ok, really got to work with this family and not just say you have to do this and this and this. She's working with us... Cause I just, like, I didn't mean to sound mean when I told her but I told her at the same time, this is my experience. This is why I don't like workers. Don't take it personally if you get attitude from me. It's not you specifically...

The mother does not like being involved with child protection services and expresses that she “*hates social workers*”. At the same time, she admits that she gets along with her worker and has since the beginning. She attributes this good relationship to the fact that the social worker is “*working with us*” rather than saying, “*you have to do this and this and this*”, indicating that the mother believes she has a collaborative relationship with her worker where partnership is valued, as opposed to having a relationship where she feels controlled or judged by a dominant expert.

Case Three: Worker Views of Client

Theme One – Strengths-based Lens

In the following excerpts, evidence is seen of the child protection worker holding a strengths-based view of her client:

CPW: ...Life unfolded well for her and she's really done well at this job which has boosted her self-confidence and a new partner... He's a nice guy... And [the mom] is a lovely girl. You've met her. She's lovely. She's very sweet. She'll go out of her way to help somebody. You know I was asking her, because she loves to feel helpful, I'm like I've got a mom who's looking for some blankets because she's starting to get overnights, where's the best second hand shop in town for this mom to get some blankets? Oh, well she doesn't need to do that. Here, I've got an extra blanket. Here you take this to your client. You know, she doesn't have a lot herself but she wants to help others... So, you know, she's got a good spirit.

...So [the boyfriend]'s lived there for a long time and... [the mom] moved in there initially as one of the roommates and then they hooked up and the other roommates have moved on and it's now just their kind of family setting. And they're trying it. It's still financially tight for them, but I think between the two of them they do the best they can.

These quotes demonstrate that the child protection worker views her client through a positive lens. Her talk throughout the interview is dominated by positive opinions and compliments about the mom. For example, she refers to her client as “*lovely*”, “*very sweet*”,

“she’ll go out of her way to help somebody” and “she’s got a good spirit.” The worker focuses on the positive attributes and qualities of the mother, rather than focusing on weaknesses or providing a litany of faults. This finding aligns with previous research on strengths-based perspectives as outlined in the literature review.

Theme Two - Collaborative and Participatory

CPW: ...She was a child in care herself. She had a good experience being in care, so she doesn't see foster care or the Ministry as the enemy. She sees us as a support. So she, you know, she's quite happy to phone me up and tell me what's going on and... we work it through with her and so that's one of her strengths. She's quite happy to reach out for support.

This quote highlights the worker’s approach as collaborative and participatory. She views her client respectfully and speaks about the ease of their communications, indicating a team-based approach that both worker and client share. The worker states that the mother does not see the Ministry as an enemy, yet in her interviews the mother states that she hates child protection services, the government and social workers. Of note, even with a strong negative view of child protection systems, the mother has a positive view of and relationship with her worker and also describes her FGC experience positively.

Summary of Case Three

Consistent with the first two cases, the child protection worker affirms a strengths-based practice philosophy. She endorses collaborative work and positions herself as an advocate for her clients. The findings for this family, however, diverge from the previous cases. The mother describes her FGC experience and her child protection worker more positively. She admits to having a good relationship with her worker and characterizes their relationship as collaborative. She supports and even recommends the FGC process for other families. Also opposite to the first two cases, the worker describes her client through a strengths-based lens. She emphasizes the mother’s positive qualities, strengths, and accomplishments and generally speaks kindly about

her. In this case, the child protection worker's descriptions about her practice philosophies are congruent with how she describes her client. This finding is contrary to the previous cases where the workers' explicit practice philosophies are dissonant to their views of their client family.

Section Two - Findings by Category

Category – Worker Practice Philosophies

Finding – The three workers describe their practice philosophies to be aligned with strengths-based principles.

The findings indicate that the three workers in this study describe their practice philosophies to be in keeping with the fundamental principles of strengths-based practice. They claim to value collaborative, participatory and inclusive approaches to practice and give a number of examples to support their endorsement. The descriptions from the workers are in keeping with the research describing strengths-based philosophies and FGC principles.

Category – Family Experiences and Perspectives

Findings – Two of the three families describe their worker and FGC experience to be negative and disempowering, while one family describes the FGC process and the worker more positively.

These findings were expected as they align with the extreme case sampling that was utilized - two cases where families described a negative FGC experience and one case where the family described a more positive experience. Conducting thematic analysis on the interview data however allowed a deeper exploration of the family experiences of these extreme case samples. The analysis revealed three over-arching themes for the families in the negative case examples: Loss of Voice and Power; Negative Judgments: Degradation, Resistance and Compliance; and Questioning Expertise. In general, the findings indicate that these families describe a negative, non-collaborative and disempowering FGC experience, perceiving their workers to hold a

problem-based perspective. The family members believed workers' opinions were not an accurate reflection of their situation and that their own views, parental roles and parenting decisions were not respected. The negative judgments parents experienced from their workers left them feeling powerless; they perceived workers as wielding power over them to control their family situations with rules, conditions and even threats to achieve compliance. Although intended to empower families, the FGC process reported by these two families was experienced as disempowering.

Also expected, and contrary to the negative family cases, the third family case reported a more positive FGC experience. The mother in this case described the FGC and her worker as supportive and collaborative and she recommended FGCs for other families. Emergent themes included Feeling Supported and Working Together.

Category – Worker Views of Client

Key Findings – Two of the three workers describe their client families through a problem-based lens and position themselves as experts, while the other worker describes her client through a strengths-based lens and acts in a collaborative role.

The three emergent themes identified for the two negative case examples include: Problem-based Lens, Dissonant Worldviews and Adopting Expert Role. The two workers in these cases emphasize their clients' faults, weaknesses and disabilities; they highlight what the parents are doing wrong and what is not working, according little or no attention to any positive traits or qualities. A problem-based view does not support a collaborative and participatory forum for family group decision-making integral to FGCs. Although both workers explicitly endorse collaborative practice and claim to value and respect family input, negative judgments dominate their discussions about client families. The workers appear to discount the opinions of

their clients and deny them a participatory voice in the decision-making process. The workers take a stance and disagree with decisions made by the families and discuss how those decisions should have been made, reflecting an underlying difference in worldviews. Furthermore, both workers adopt an expert role in how they relate to the families. In this role, the workers impose their worldview and opinions of what good parenting looks like and demand that conditions and rules be met in order to meet their expectations. The talk of the workers indicates that they use the authority of their position to exercise power over their clients, even making threats to achieve compliance. Both workers seem unaware of how their adoption of a power-over expert role and a problem-based view negatively impacts their client families and perpetuates oppression and social marginalization.

The findings for the third case example indicate a divergence from the first two cases. The child protection worker in this case not only espouses strengths-based practice philosophies, but also describes her client through a strengths-based lens; there is consistency between her stated practice philosophies and her actual practice. This could suggest that her existing worldview comprises strengths-based principles and she is not simply talking the talk of collaborative practice.

Section Three - Addressing the Research Question

Answering the research question involves a comparative analysis between all three categories and appropriate juxtapositions to highlight the findings. For instance, comparing how workers explicitly describe their practice philosophies (Worker Practice Philosophies) with how their client family experienced the FGC (Family Experiences and Perspectives) and comparing how workers describe their practice philosophies (Worker Practice Philosophies) with how they

describe their client family (Worker Views of Client Family) may help to identify evidence of underlying dissonance faced by the workers.

There is an implicit assumption that when a worker believes in, advocates and practices strengths-based philosophies in child protection FGCs, that the client family will correspondingly experience the FGC as collaborative and participatory. Likewise, there is an implicit assumption that when a worker authentically practices from a strengths-based worldview then how they describe their client family would be in keeping with such principles – there would be a focus on strengths and positive qualities of the family and evidence of collaboration and participation. The findings of this study indicate that only one of the three cases is consistent with these assumptions and the other two cases are divergent to these predictions.

Comparing Worker Practice Philosophies with Family Experiences and Perspectives

When juxtaposing how child protection workers describe their practice philosophies with how the family experienced the worker and the FGC, there is evidence of contradictions in two of the cases. Even though the workers in these cases espoused strengths-based practice philosophies, the client families experienced the FGC negatively and disempowering, in contradiction to strengths-based practice. The findings support and align with previous research indicating that even though the discourse of child protection may have changed to include strengths-based talk, such as engagement, participation and collaboration, and even though workers may explicitly endorse these principles, some family experiences are described as dissonant to those principles (Buckley et al., 2011; Ney et al., 2013).

Comparing Worker Practice Philosophies with Worker Views of Client Family

When juxtaposing how the workers describe their practice philosophies with how they describe their client families, evidence of dissonance can be seen in the contradictory talk of the

workers in two of the cases. Although these workers explicitly describe their practice philosophies to be strengths-based, and perhaps believe them to be, their talk about families indicates a contradictory perspective; they view their clients through a problem-based lens focused on problem-finding and -solving, potentially indicative of a pathological worldview. These results are consistent with those of Saint-Jacques et al. (2009), who found contradictions between how workers describe their practice and how they actually practice; they describe their practice as strengths-based yet their actual practice contradicts those principles.

The findings also indicate that the workers adopt a power-over expert role in how they conduct practice and relate with their clients, also indicative of a problem-based view. This aligns with Holland et al. (2005) who found that even though workers explicitly endorsed strengths-based philosophies, and most workers and families were positive about the FGCs, workers still behaved in controlling ways in the decision-making. Consistent with this perspective is Healy et al. (2012) who found that workers, although espousing strengths-based practice, assumed a dominant role in the majority of the meetings, contrary to a collaborative approach. These authors conclude that such contradictions between theory and practice reflect the underlying dissonance between two fundamentally divergent philosophies - strengths- and problem-based. The dissonance creates barriers for workers and families to engage in a truly collaborative forum. The findings of this study support and enrich that research.

In considering these juxtapositions and in answer to the research question, this study indicates that when FGCs are implemented in a culture like child protection, some workers exhibit evidence of an underlying conflict or dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies in how they talk about their practice and how they describe their client family. Even when explicitly espousing strengths-based philosophies, a problem-based worldview more

aligned with problem-based child protection practice may unknowingly override their practice, potentially impacting client experiences.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the thematic data analyses, making connections to the literature where appropriate and presenting relevant quotes to highlight the themes, while keeping in mind the research question and goals. It compared the child protection workers' perspectives with those of their client family and this juxtaposition highlighted divergent views of the same FGC process. It also juxtaposed the interviews of each child protection worker between how they describe their practice philosophies with how they describe their client family. This is where the most interesting findings were discovered. Triangulating the divergent perspectives between and within groups and the divergent talk within an individual worker is what makes this study unique. The next chapter presents the conclusions for the study and discusses recommendations for social work research and practice.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses conclusions drawn from the study as a foundation for further research and exploration. It also includes recommendations for child protection work, with a focus on critical reflection and worldview awareness. The chapter ends with final remarks and reflections.

Drawing Conclusions: Here and Forward

The results of the study indicate that workers are experiencing tensions and challenges to implementing FGCs at the intersection of two divergent practice philosophies: strengths-based and problem-based. This tension is reflected in the contradictory talk of the workers and the impact in practice is reflected in the client stories of problem-based FGC experiences. The three workers in the study explicitly espouse strengths-based practice philosophies; however, two of the three workers describe their client families through a problem-based lens, seemingly unaware of the contradiction. The third worker's descriptions and views of her client align with her espoused philosophies. It is of interest that some workers' practice philosophies align with their actual practice while others do not. These divergent and individualistic results suggest both systemic and individual factors may be at play - systems influence workers' practice, worldviews influence workers' practice, and the two influence one another. It would appear there are interrelated connections.

As this study shows, there are fundamental challenges to integrating family group conferences (FGCs) into child protection. The deep historical roots and long-standing tradition of positioning workers as experts may seem insurmountable to obtaining truly collaborative work. Workers face direct and indirect pressures from a paternalistic system built on hierarchical structures of power. Even when given the opportunity to practice collaboratively with families

facing difficulties, the system's inherent problem-based philosophies may override the social worker's good intentions. The findings of the current study support these views and may help to explain why some workers, although claiming to endorse collaborative work, position themselves hierarchically as an expert, commanding cooperation and compliance with client families and aligning with a problem-based approach. The systemic philosophies may have overridden the workers' described, and possibly believed, strengths-based practice.

Considering that one worker aligns with strengths-based practice while the others do not speaks to the importance of individual differences. Research indicates that the identity or worldview of a worker impacts their practice approach and relations with clients. In the context of child protection, this has profound implications for it suggests that how a worker thinks about and views the world may impact decisions that can have a life-altering impact on vulnerable families. In relation to the current study, the underlying worldview of a child protection worker may be an important consideration when assessing the findings. Some of the workers expressed critical assessments and expectations of the choices and decisions made by their client families suggesting the workers held dissonant worldviews, not accepting of their clients' worldviews.

Worldviews are multidimensional constructs that continually develop from a variety of sources such as family, culture, and religion; they are shaped by life stories within the context of cultural history. A social constructionist perspective indicates that worldviews are comprised of malleable cognitive structures that are formed and re-formed from experiences throughout one's life. Thus, workers come to their professional practice with pre-existing constructions of what constitutes good parenting and these constructions are further developed from their exposure to, immersion in, and engagement with a problem-based system. The influence of a problem-based child protection system may contribute to what Grant and Cadell (2009) have defined as a

pathological worldview where the focus is on what is not working, rather than what is, and where workers are positioned to find and fix problems. A pathological worldview may negatively impact client-worker relationships and perpetuate power imbalances. The findings of this study suggest that some workers may hold a pathological worldview and this worldview influences their perceptions and behaviours in relating to their client families.

Constructivism in theories of learning argues that new knowledge cannot simply be communicated from one person to another; learning is an active and interactional process. When involved with FGCs in child protection, workers may be told the fundamental principles and instructed on the conference processes; however, it does not ensure that the strengths-based philosophies have assimilated into their worldview. One could hypothesize that a worker holding a pathological worldview would face more tension and dissonance when implementing divergent philosophies, such as with FGCs, into his or her child protection work than a worker holding a worldview more aligned with strengths-based philosophies. In her qualitative study involving interviews with workers and managers about their experiences with child protection FGCs in Ontario, Canada, Sherry (2008) argues that child protection practice is shaped by the principles rooted in workers' own worldviews, and that the strengths approach needs to fit the worker's own personal philosophy, or worldview. Wilcoxon et al. (2010) argue that some professional roles are more congruent with one's personal worldview than others and when one's professional role (or aspects of it) conflicts with their existing worldview, an internal conflict, or worldview dissonance, is experienced. These views may help to explain the mixed results of the current study and offer a springboard to future studies.

As this study is an exploratory secondary analysis, it is inappropriate to make generalizations beyond the context of the current study participants. It is likewise inappropriate

to make causal statements; however, the results indicate that there are interrelated connections between the worldview of the worker, the system of child protection, the delivery of an FGC and the experiences of family members, that play out when workers are faced with the dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies in practice. Being positioned at the nexus of two divergent practice philosophies may trigger an internal dissonance for some workers if their own worldview is not aligned with the intended practice principles of family group conferencing.

Future Research

Although the culture of child protection is evolving to include strengths-based philosophies in practice, challenges and barriers still exist and workers face tensions in navigating their complex role with families. For this reason it is important that future research addresses the barriers to authentic delivery of FGCs in the sensitive and important area of child protection. Workers in child protection have significant power to impact a family facing difficulties and further understanding into the influence worker worldview may have on child protection practice and the experiences and outcomes of FGCs is critical. Relatedly, further research on the underlying dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies and its role and impact on practice outcomes is important. The challenges that workers face at the junction of two very divergent practice philosophies has not been fully explored in the child protection literature. In particular, further work is needed to explore the tensions of these opposing practice philosophies within the workers themselves and the construct of worldview dissonance may play a role.

Further insight may be gained with studies employing different research designs or methodologies. For instance, a content analysis could be employed on transcripts of conference proceedings or interviews of conference participants to identify strengths-based versus problem-

based talk. Focus groups could be conducted with both family members and child protection workers to explore more deeply the dissonant tensions that exist in practice and perhaps to explore the worldviews that participants hold. Worldview assessment studies could also be conducted with participants of child protection FGCs.

Recommendations for Child Protection Work

Saleebey (1996) argues that the bureaucracies and organizations formed to help clients are often diametrically opposed to a strengths-based philosophy. In the context of FGCs, Merkel-Holguin (2004) contend that power can be usurped from families and relocated within child protection bureaucracies denying the democratic and collaborative principles of FGCs. Issues of power in client-worker relationships need to be addressed. In order to transform a problem-based culture to a culture of collaboration and participation, with practitioners and families working together as a collaborative team, workers must be given the appropriate supports and resources that will ensure that FGCs are implemented as intended. Support should be available at all levels within the organization. As noted by Connolly (2006), “protecting [FGC] preciousness becomes an ongoing training task relying on the combined efforts of educational providers and all agencies working within the child protection system” (p. 538). Adams and Chandler (2004), in their comprehensive look at the barriers to implementing FGCs in the United States, argue that shifting the role of a child protection services system away from controller and enforcer of families to one of collaborative partner with them is extremely difficult and necessitates a restructuring of bureaucratic functioning.

Child protection education needs to address the dissonance between strengths- and problem-based philosophies and offer guidance to students to help them navigate these contradictions before they embark on professional careers that deal with vulnerable families in

difficult situations. Child protection workers themselves need to critically reflect on how their own views of the world may influence their practice and their relationships with client families, being cognizant of stigmatizing and oppressive approaches. If workers learn about critical reflection and worldview awareness in their academic careers, they will be more equipped to continue such reflection in their professional practice.

Reflection and Awareness

The results of this study indicate that some workers may not be practicing in the way that they believe they are and this inner dissonance may negatively impact client families and further perpetuate social marginalization. In light of this, workers need to engage in critical reflection, or critical consciousness. Research on anti-oppressive social work practice and critical consciousness, from Sakamoto and Pitner (2005), offers some important perspectives. For instance, in discussing critical consciousness, a process of continually examining and reflecting on how biases, assumptions and worldviews influence perceptions, they argue that it challenges workers to be cognizant of how power imbalances may inadvertently make their practice an oppressive experience for clients. Critical consciousness includes goals of eradication of oppression and working toward social justice, and is likened to reflexive or reflective practice or other forms of critical self-knowledge.

In her work on self-reflection in critical social work practice, Heron (2005) discusses subjectivity in the context of social worker-client relations of power. She argues that critical reflectivity, essential to anti-oppressive practice, integrates the practitioner's sense of self, or identity, into their practice and involves examining how power and oppression have infiltrated interactions with one's clients. Reflecting on how power and oppression may shape their sense of self and identity and its impact on practice approach is important for workers to consider. Heron

argues for a deeper reflective examination of one's worldview, such as its social and historical underpinnings.

Mandell (2008) explores critical reflection, the use of self, and power, in child protection work. The author warns that working in child protection calls up every aspect of the self; "personal, social and professional dimensions cannot be separated, either in the worker's own experience or in the parent or child's experience of the worker" (p. 244). Therefore, it is critical that the individual worker be highly vigilant about the power inherent in their role. She upholds that critically reflexive practice allows practitioners to attend to the ways in which their interactions with clients - in the context of relations of power and differences - construct their identities. She maintains that critical awareness of self, identity and power, are essential in working in child welfare and argues that anti-oppressive practice requires cultural sensitivity and, importantly, requires a commitment to recognizing and addressing power imbalances.

Final Remarks

The perspectives of family members and child protection workers presented in this study highlight the complexities and challenges of implementing strengths-based practice in child protection work. It is important that families experiencing child protection interventions, such as FGCs, be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their history. They need to feel empowered and hopeful about their situation and future and to be involved in positive decision-making concerning their children. Instead of viewing a family through a problem-based lens, with a pervasive focus on deficits, the strengths perspective offers a beneficial alternative. A strengths-based approach promotes the humanitarian view that all people are equal and deserve equal respect; that all people are worthy of dignity and all possess many positive attributes and

capabilities. Focusing on families' strengths and positive qualities and resources can inspire a sense of self-worth, agency and empowerment.

According to Noble et al. (2000), a central belief in strengths-based practice is that clients are trustworthy, and this can be a difficult and emotional task for the child protection worker. For instance, a child protection worker “who discovers a 4-year-old girl and a three month-old infant alone in a filthy, unsanitary house at 2:30 a.m. is not inclined to trust the parents. The worker must continue to find and develop a basic belief in the goodwill of parents and the integrity of people. Linked to this basic faith must be a sense of hope in the ability of people to change for the better” (p. 149). In order to fully adopt the principles of a strength-based approach, workers must critically assess their own judgements and biases – or worldview. Since our worldviews are embedded within our cultural history and reside within our subconscious, it can be challenging to look at child protection families through a different lens. Practitioners must move away from problem-based approaches in order to fully embrace the fundamental principles of the strengths perspective. When power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed, we can move forward to building (or rebuilding) genuine and respectful relationships between workers and client families. Poonwassie and Charter (2001) argue that it is essential when working with marginalized populations to critically examine one's role as expert and be willing to surrender the power and control of this position to accept worldviews that are different. The message I hope comes from this research is that to truly work authentically and collaboratively with clients, child protection workers need to let go of the expert role, assess their own worldviews and biases and trust in the potential of families however dire their circumstances and challenges may be.

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