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Perceptions of Family Preservation Practitioners: A Preliminary Study

Judith C. Hilbert, Alvin Sallee, and James K. Ott

This exploratory, qualitative study examined practitioners' perceptions about family preservation practice. Findings reveal a wide range of identified strengths as well as the limitations of such a model. Interestingly, the most frequently identified strengths were value based rather than practice based in perspective whereas limitations were practice based. Keeping families together was the most common perceived strength but concern about children's safety by keeping the family intact was a frequently reported limitation. Further, lack of support and a lack of theoretical clarity were identified as considerable limitations. Implications suggest these practitioners (mostly child welfare/mental health workers) believe in the approach for the sake of keeping families together but are concerned with endangering the child in the process and recognize the need for theoretical guidance.

Introduction

Family preservation services, developed to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements of children and preserve family bonds, are widely recognized and utilized in agencies across the U.S. Confusion prevails about the definition of 'family', the appropriate recipient and focus of care, the underlying theoretical framework, the outcome measures of service provision, and the techniques, skills, and competencies necessary for family preservation workers. Attention is being addressed to these concerns by academics and theoreticians. What is scant in the literature, is the perceptions of practitioners interested in and/or employed to provide such services to their clientele.

Family preservation services arose from a dissatisfaction with the traditional foster care approach to child welfare services (Tracy, 1995). Research conducted in the 1960's and 70's suggested that children were often removed from their homes as a means to avoid further abuse and neglect, but also because no other alternative method of practice with abusing and neglectful families was conceptualized (Pecora, 1991). The foster care movement, while attempting to protect children, in many respects harmed them however, with multiple placements, a lack of permanent plans, and little involvement with their biological parents (LeVine & Sallee, 1999). The psychological effects of family disruption and the cost of foster

care resulted in the need to develop alternative measures to assist children in family situations which were causing them harm. The family preservation movement was conceived upon the assumption that children could remain at home safely provided services were offered early and intensely and in the family's home (Tracy, 1995).

The driving forces for the creation and on-going development of the family preservation movement was clearly a philosophy and set of values about children and their families which assume that family is a powerful influence in one's life and that the biological family should be maintained whenever possible. Further, separation from one's family of origin is harmful to all family members. Moreover, society should be concerned with keeping families together rather than creating placement facilities for separated family members (Hooper-Briar, et al., 1995).

The philosophy and value base of family preservation as a movement was followed with the development of techniques and skills necessary for practitioners to become competent in the practice of family preservation. Several theories were suggested as applicable to the practice of family preservation. These included crisis intervention theory, family systems theory, and social learning theory--with and without an ecological perspective (Barth, 1990)

While the family preservation movement has begun to mature in its philosophy, theory, and methodology, the growing pains of confusion about several issues have surfaced among practitioners and educators alike (Hooper-Briar, Broussard, Ronnau & Sallee, 1995; Friedman, 1997). In particular, while originally intended to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements of children and to keep families together, questions arise about precisely what is meant by family. Does a family consist of two parents and children under the age of 18 or can this concept apply to an elderly widow who lives with a roommate and her pet? What constitutes family and to what length does a family preservation movement support services for maintaining any family member within his/her own home? Further, the critiques of the theoretical underpinnings suggest a need to more intensely examine theories which have been used to support this approach to practice (Grisby, 1993; Barth, 1990; Tracy, 1995;) While several theories have been identified as foundation for family preservation practice, no unified theoretical framework has been developed or tested to any degree. Finally, current research and evaluation of family preservation programs report mixed findings. Early evaluations, while reporting favorable results, were deemed methodologically flawed while current studies suggest contradictory findings (Rossi, 1992; Bath & Haapala, 1994; Tracy, 1995).

In the midst of this heuristic evolution of a movement and approach to practice, educators are refining family preservation curriculum (Hodges, Morgan & Johnston, 1993), agency

administrators are supporting continuing education training in this field for their practitioners and individuals are self-seeking direction and expertise in family preservation through attendance at conferences such as the one in Dallas, Texas in September 1995. Clearly the "need to know" this perspective has gained momentum over time and while "those in the know" recognize the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, one wonders the about perceptions of those who practice this approach. Our research question addressed the need to learn from those who conduct family preservation practice in order to better ascertain what the perceptions of the strengths or benefits of family preservation were, what the weaknesses or limitations were, and whether years of practice, type of agency, and focus of services impact the perceived strengths and weaknesses of family preservation practitioners.

Methodology

This exploratory, qualitative study used a survey design, whereby upon registration participants who attended the Family Preservation Conference in Dallas were given an instrument to complete as part of their conference materials. Participants were instructed to return the completed questionnaire to a collection site at the conference. A total of 206 subjects responded. This sample is not representative in number (40% response rate) or in randomization of the total population who attended the conference. It simply reflects the opinions of those who took the time to complete the instrument.

The instrument was designed for simplicity and ease of response. No personal identifying information was requested in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. Five questions were asked. The first three related to years of practice, type of agency, and focus of agency service. Using a qualitative approach, the final two questions addressed the subjects perceptions about the strengths or benefits of a family preservation approach to practice, and the weaknesses or limitations of such an approach. The researchers assumed the definition of family preservation would be frequently addressed throughout the conference workshops and therefore deliberately did not define family preservation for the participants. The goal was to determine the respondents' perceptions about family preservation and to discern if these perceptions were in any way associated with years of practice, type of agency, or focus of service. Questions were clear, concise and simple. Participants were competent to answer these items. Consequently, attention was paid to issues of internal validity (Grinnel, R., 1997). The open-ended nature of the questions regarding strengths and limitations allowed for respondents to indicate their range of understandings and perceptions about family preservation.

Data Analysis

Practice Variables

The length of practice variable was coded from less than 1 year (0) to the actual number of years specified by respondents. The type of agency was coded as State, private for-profit, Tribal, private non-profit, County and other. The focus of service variable was coded as mental health, developmental disabilities, children and family (child welfare), criminal justice and other.

A content analysis was performed to determine the categories of concepts for the open-ended questions related to the strengths and the limitations of family preservation practice. Subjects identified 13 strength categories and 9 limitation categories which appeared to be mutually exclusive.

Univariate analysis was performed on all categories of variables. Descriptive statistics revealed 49.3% of the sample were employed in family preservation practice for 2 years or less (n = 205). The range of years in practice was from 0 - 33 years and the mean was 4.7 years. The type of agency and focus of services responses were rank ordered. Forty five point one per cent of the sample reported working for the State while 27.5% indicated they worked for a private for profit agency. The remaining responses were distributed among private non-profit (9.8%), other (7.8%), Tribal (5.4%) and County (4.4%). Children and family (child welfare, CPS) accounted for 58.9% of the focus of agency service. Another 21.8% indicated the agency focused on mental health, 15.8% other, 3% criminal justice and .5% developmental disabilities (See Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Analysis: Practice Variables

Variable: Length of years in practice			n = 205		
r = 0 - 33 years			mode = 1		
x̄ = 4.7			median = 3		
Type of Agency	n = 204	%	Focus of Service	n = 202	%
1) State		45.1	1) Fam/Children, Child Welfare		58.9
2) Private for profit		27.5	2) Mental Health		21.5
3) Private non profit		9.8	3) Other		15.8
4) Other		7.8	4) Criminal Justice		3.0
5) Tribal		5.4	5) Developmental Disabilities		.05
6) County		4.4			

Perceived Strengths

Thirteen categories of perceived strengths were identified by the participants. Almost one third (30.8%) of the respondents indicated keeping families together as the most frequently reported strength. Recognizing the family as expert (20.5%) and using a strengths based approach (20.5%) while focusing on the family rather than an individual family member (17.8%) were next frequently reported categories. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Perceived Strengths of Family Preservation: Rank Ordered by Frequency of Responses

Variables	# of Responses	%	Valid n = 185
1) Keeps Families Together	57	30.8	
2) { Family Is Expert	38	20.5	
\ Strengths - Based	38	20.5	
3) Family Focused	33	17.8	
4) Facilitates Change	25	13.5	
5) Systems Perspective	24	13.0	
6) Family Turf, Comfort	20	10.8	
7) Cost Effective	15	8.1	
8) Prevents Trauma of Removal	13	7.0	
9) Holistic	10	5.4	
10) Good for Society	8	4.3	
11) Hands on Training	3	1.6	
12) Non-Judgmental	2	1.1	

Perceived Limitations

Nine variables were identified by respondents when asked about limitations of family preservation. The most frequently cited limitation was lack of support (28.4%). This variable included all responses related to a lack of funding, lack of designated staff, lack of intra and interagency resources and lack of community resources. The second most frequently reported variable was that children were endangered by this approach (21.3%). Lack of family cooperation (17.5%) and theoretical ambiguity (16.9%) were the next most frequently identified categories. It is interesting to note that the response "none at all" was specified by 6% of the participants. (See Table 3)

Table 3. Perceived Limitations of Family Preservation: Rank Ordered by Frequency of Response n = 183

Variable	# of Response	%
1) Insufficient Support	52	28.4
2) Children Endangered	39	21.3
3) Family Uncooperative	32	17.5
4) Theory Ambiguity	31	16.9
5) Time Limited	19	10.4
6) Limits # of Families Served	13	7.1
7) None at All	11	6.0
8) Worker Endangered	9	4.9
9) Worker Not Culturally Sensitive	4	2.2

Limitations

Clearly, this study is limited by the non-representativeness of the sample. However, to have 206 participants at a Family Preservation Conference voluntarily complete the instrument does attest to an interest and commitment to family preservation and a need, perhaps, to have input about this approach to practice.

Discussion and Implications of the Findings

The strengths identified by our respondents reflect their ideological positions regarding an approach to practice with families (Ronnau & Sallee, 1993). This is in keeping with the understanding that “family preservation is not a service..., it is a way of thinking” (Stepleton, 1992, p.281). It “embodies an optimistic, tolerant attitude toward both family structure and family functioning” (Mac Donald, 1994, p. 46). In fact, this hopeful, optimistic, strengths based, ‘family as expert’ view is one of the major distinguishing characteristics of family preservation from traditional social welfare services (Sallee, 1991). Ideologically, not only are practitioners embracing this position, but also we find the nation is politically and legislatively supportive of family values, and the mission of child welfare agencies has become to keep families together (Mac Donald, 1994).

It may well be that while keeping families together is a frequently perceived strength by our respondents, at the same time a concern for the lack of support workers receive is a major limitation. Moreover, the children’s safety is considered a major concern as well. While contradictory at face value, these findings may reflect the disparity between the ‘ideal and the

real'. Ideally, practitioners subscribe to the power and value of family cohesiveness. In reality, however, the children's safety must always be of primary concern. Finally, this disparity may reflect the need to move from an ideological perspective to an approach to practice based on a sound theoretical foundation.

Barth (1990, p. 98) suggests "the value of theories can be determined by whether the interventions they spawn produce results that are superior to other theories or no theory at all." Outcome research on family preservation is flawed in many respects. For the purposes of this discussion, we posit the atheoretical or mixed theories nature of family preservation may account for the confusing and often contradictory findings of family preservation research. One might suppose that issues about research and theory are of concern only to academics and theoreticians. Hardly would we expect that practitioners, often overwhelmed with large and/or intense, difficult caseloads, burdened by agency demands to document and complete enormous amounts of paper work, and frustrated with the never-ending needs of their clientele, would have little time to consider the importance of theory in application to family preservation practice. Common sense suggest this is particularly true among practitioners in public non-profit agencies that focus on services for children and their families. Yet in our study, practitioners from public non-profit and private for-profit in child welfare and mental health focused agencies concerned about family preservation identified theory ambiguity as a major limitation. These findings suggest a need to further develop a family preservation theory base that can serve to direct practice in a purposeful yet responsible manner and can lend such practice to the rigors of research for evaluation of practice effectiveness.

Our findings did not include any mention of partnering among family members and workers-- a key practice competency espoused by family preservation educators (Ronnau & Sallee, 1993). Nor was the concept of mutuality between family members and workers in plan development and implementation mentioned. While families were perceived as the expert about their situation, recognizing and identifying family members as crucial partners in the helping process was missing (Family Preservation Institute, 1994). Although it is impossible to make inferences about what respondents did not include, it is interesting to note that a keystone of practice competency and a cornerstone of the value base of family preservation was overlooked.

Not as surprising an omission is the lack of response to the strengths or limitations of family preservation related to policy issues. Given that most of the respondents had 3 years or less of family preservation practice, one might assume that these respondents were the line workers, not supervisors or administrators. Perhaps it is a function of their job position that resulted in this omission to policy issues.

A need for further research is evident as we continue to define and refine family preservation as an approach to practice. Fraser (1991) indicates that agency based research comprised of small, modest studies with a variety of designs, involving workers and clients in all phases of the evaluation are needed to best understand the strengths and limitations of family preservation as a major focus of intervention with families in trouble. Certainly the respondents in our study imply a willingness and a need to become better grounded in family preservation practice as they endeavor to honor the ideological perspective of 'keeping families together'.

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