



THE OAXACA BOOK

Working with marginalized families and communities: professionals in the trenches

Trabajando con las familias y las comunidades marginadas profesionales desde las trincheras

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The families are the experts: collaborative methods of family program development in work with homeless families and poor immigrant families

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Overview and rationale

This chapter briefly describes the model that we developed in 1998 to create a support program for homeless families in the South Bronx who were being forced to negotiate the transition from welfare to work, and which we then applied to create a program for poor first-generation immigrant Latino families. This model is described in greater detail in several publications (Fraenkel, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2006; Fraenkel, Rodriguez, Kruk, Oakes, Savage, 2003). The model has as its main guiding principle "getting it right" by the families we serve. As our appointed task was not to develop a therapy approach per se, but rather, a family-centered support program, we could not simply take our family therapy skills into the shelter and start seeing families. Instead, we needed to do careful qualitative research to find out exactly what the issues were for families who are homeless and attempting to move from welfare to work. We needed to turn to the true experts, the families. Homeless families have the reputation for being difficult to engage in any programs, never mind jobs. Some welfare to work programs have taken a military training camp approach to engaging persons, often involving verbal criticism that borders at times on abuse. It occurred to us that if any program we developed was to be both effective and humane, it would have to start from a quite different premise: families needed to be engaged as collaborators in developing the program itself, rather than being put into a program or forced into a program designed by someone who had not lived their situation. So we developed the Collaborative Family Program Development model to make as

sure as possible that from the first contact with a family until they left the program, we heard and understood them and gave them the kind of support they thought useful, not what we thought useful based only on existing theory, research, and clinical practice.

Steps in collaborative family program development

There are ten steps in the collaborative family program development (CFPD) model:

The first step is forming collaborative professional relationships and engaging senior mentors as cultural and methodological consultants. From the beginning of program development and at each of the following steps, it is critical to engage senior mentors both as cultural and as methodological consultants—especially if the program developers are from a different and less privileged background/group (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation) than the persons for whom the program is being developed. The next step is intensive interviewing of family members for whom the program is being built. Family members are explicitly engaged as experts on their experience and as consultants in constructing the program. After meeting with several families, the next step is to intensively interview agency professionals who also offer expertise and who are stakeholders and collaborators in mounting the program. It is important to interview at least a few families prior to interviewing agency staff, so that the families' perspective provides the foundation for appreciating the perspectives of front-line and more senior agency staff. The next step is

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Although about half of the women were married or in cohabiting relationships with the father of the children, men were working during the hours available at the "Head Start" program for the groups and research interviews.

phrase-by-phrase qualitative coding of interviews to locate themes of challenge and resilience, and to capture families' and staff members' suggestions for the format and content of program. Based on what is learned from families through careful study of the research interviews, program formats and contents (group discussion themes, exercises) are created and an initial manual is written. The group is piloted, with session-by-session written and oral evaluations by participants. Participants' evaluations and professionals' observations of what seems fruitful and what does not form the basis for revising the program and manual. Different from traditional needs assessment, in which only an initial group of participants is interviewed to create the program, in the CFPD model, intensive interviewing of families occurs for each subsequent group cycle. We conduct the same program development interviews with each new potential participant even after the program has been created, and revise the program as needed based on their comments. Evaluating the effectiveness of the program in matched comparison or randomized designs. We give a comprehensive pack of self-report questionnaires pre-group, post-group, at 6-months follow-up, and when possible, at one-year follow-up. We also track actual employment outcomes. Disseminating and adapting the program to other settings. We conduct entire new sets of interviews for each new agency that wants to bring in the program.

Description of the program "Fresh Start for Families"

Our work has been in collaboration with HELP USA, one of the nation's largest providers of services to the homeless. The program, named "Fresh Start for Families" by one of the participating family members, has occurred at three shelters: a general family shelter called HELP MORRIS in the South Bronx, housing 212 families; another general family shelter in the South Bronx housing 96 families (HELP Crotona); and a domestic violence shelter in Upper Manhattan called HELP Harbor, housing 52 families. We have interviewed almost 250 families about their challenges, coping approaches, what they desire in a program, what they think about the program being developed, and about the research process itself. All interviews and groups occurred in the shelters where families lived. So as not to end up inadvertently talking only with the most resilient or least resilient families, families were randomly selected to participate.

The core format of Fresh Start is the multiple family discussion group, or MFDG. This format seemed well-suited to meeting the need that many families named of providing a safe, nonjudgmental context in which they can connect with one another and benefit from one another's support and wisdom, as well as decrease their sense of being the only ones experiencing challenges endemic to being in this situation. The challenges described by our families also guided us in terms of assembling what we call a "community of care" — other servi-

ces and programs including childcare and employment assistance that we linked to the MFDGs so that families could get the most out of the groups.

There are a number of specific activities included in the group sessions designed to provide families with opportunities to experience, express, and discuss emotions; to share experiences about challenging aspects of being homeless as well as their coping approaches; to recover positive, preferred aspects of their family and individual identities; to increase a sense of future and hope for success. Several of these are briefly described in turn. (See the above-listed references for more of the activities).

The Card Sort

One way in which we bring information learned from research interviews with each new family into the groups is through the Card Sort activity. On each card is written one of the codes we created that summarizes a challenge described by at least one family during the interview. Families sort the cards into 3 categories in terms of how much of a challenge a particular item is for them, and these items and where families placed them become the basis for many group discussions.

The "What's My Challenge?" Game

Teens clearly told us that they did not only want to talk in the group; they wanted activities, too. One activity we created utilizing the Card Sort is a kind of family game show called "What's My Challenge?" In the first round, each parent guesses in which envelope their teen placed each of the cards — for instance, the parent guesses in which envelope her or his teen placed the item, Feeling Embarrassed about Living in the Shelter. Then for 10 more points, the parent guesses what emotions the teen feels about each challenge. Parents are also asked to sort the teen cards in terms of what they think their teen's challenges are.

Then, teens are asked to guess where their parents placed the cards about them. For instance, does a teenaged son think his parent thinks he feels Embarrassed about Living in the Shelter — Not at all, Somewhat, or Definitely? Next, teens are asked to guess what their parents think they — the teens — feel about that challenge.

Putting Homelessness in its Place

Being homeless affects both individual and family identities in negative ways. To address this, we created an exercise called "Putting Homelessness in Its Place". We introduce families to the narrative therapy ideas about how problems come to dominate family stories, and provide them a handout to guide them in the steps of mapping the influence of homelessness on their lives, mapping their influence on homelessness, coming up with a name to capture the impact of homelessness, and taking steps to minimize and escape, at least temporarily, the effects of home-

lessness. Names families give to homelessness have included The Lost World, The Assessment Center, Violation, Kindergarten, and Lifestyles of the Poor and Unknown.

Writing Letters to (or from) the Future

Families are asked to write a letter to themselves two years in the future, and are asked to imagine positive outcomes – e.g., having a permanent residence, the parent(s) having a job they enjoy, the children doing well in school, and so on. Alternatively, they can elect to write a letter from themselves in the future to themselves in the present. These letters typically express gratitude to the “present-day” family for their resilience, perseverance, faith, and fortitude.

Creating a program for first-generation latino immigrants

To respond to a request from Columbia University's Head Start and Early Head Start programs in northern Manhattan, we utilized the CFPD model to create a program to support first generation/immigrant Latina mothers and their families in adjusting to life in the United States. Interviews with 30 mothers identified a wide range of challenges, including (in comparison to the situation in their countries of origin), a sense of limited public and private space, and long winters, which limited socializing, informal childcare networks, and reduced sense of physical well being; unexpectedly strong sense of nostalgia for, and loss of, family and country of origin; fewer family meals; experiences of feeling let down and unsupported by family members who settled in New York earlier; and a sense of isolation from the larger, English-speaking community (Fraenkel, Marrero, Cabral, Perez, & Diaz, 2006).

Like “Fresh Start”, the eight-week multiple family discussion group program created on the basis of the research with Latina mothers (called “Fortelacerse,” or “strengthening ourselves”) included opportunities for sharing challenges and coping skills, as well as activities designed specifically for this community. Two of these activities are:

The Dream of Life in the U.S.

Group co-leaders explained the idea that all persons planning to come to a new country had some hopes and

expectations, as well as some fears, about what life would be like in the new country. The women were asked over the next week to talk together as a family (as much as possible with young children, but certainly, a conversation among the adults in the family) about what their hopes and dreams were as a family, and for each of them individually. They were asked to talk together also about their fears and concerns.

The Cashew Tree of Life

Group co-leaders noted that persons who move to a new country have important “roots” in their countries of origin. Roots can include family, community, culture (including language, foods, music and other arts, particular ways of interacting with others, secular and religious practices and customs particular to that country, and many other things), politics, a shared history, love of the land itself, and many other things. In addition, in their lives up until the time they moved here, they may have produced a number of “fruits” – a career, children, and so on. Likewise, in moving to a new country, people typically want to establish some new roots and produce some new fruits. Sometimes this is relatively easy and often it is somewhat challenging. Sometimes, people feel that their lives in their countries of origin are completely separate and cut off from their lives in the country of immigration. It's as if the two sets of roots do not belong to the same tree.

Following this introduction, group members were given a diagram of a cashew tree with roots stretching from one place to another – visually representing a bridge between the country of origin and the country of immigration. They were asked to write into the “roots” the connections they sustained with their countries of origin, and that they had begun to grow in New York City and the U.S.

Summary

We have found that by approaching poor families as experts on their situation and on what they want in a program to support them, families engage readily in such programs. This approach to families provides a re-humanizing relationship, fostering a restored sense of family pride, cohesion, and resilience.

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