

# Toward a global perspective of family continuity

## The effects of international exchange on child welfare practice programs and policy

Emily Jean McFadden and Jill Worrall

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The International Foster Care Organisation (IFCO) has been a significant vehicle of change within the steadily evolving field of foster care. In two decades of international transfer of knowledge, the organization has examined critical and controversial issues such as the colonization of indigenous people, the insensitivity of 'Westernized' systems of care to the kinship networks of children of color, and the needs of families stricken by poverty, dysfunction or oppression. Concurrently, the exchange of knowledge and skill on case planning, dynamics of change, legal issues, foster parent training, and systems of administration led to greater understanding between people working in foster care systems of different countries. IFCO became a moving and reconstituting global village of committed individuals, families, groups and organizations that transcended national boundaries.

There are many child welfare issues involved in developing a global perspective that are broader than the typical boundaries of foster care. Concerns such as the fate of street children, the exploitation of child labor and child soldiers, the traffic in child prostitution, child victims of war and genocide can all impinge on the common international understandings related to foster care. This paper examines briefly some examples of the international transfer of foster care knowledge and practice technology, and traces some contributions of IFCO to this process.

The family continuity paradigm, evolving from conference to conference, incorporates many critical concepts about family preservation and kinship into the more traditional approaches to foster care developed in the dominant Eurocentric cultures. The changing consciousness of IFCO reflects demographic changes evident in many nations. In the American journal *Social Work*, Weaver (1998) reported the phenomenon 'the browning of America' by which persons of color will soon become the predominant group in the US. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the city of Amsterdam is home to more than 125 different cultural groups of color. Many of these persons are migrants from countries with historic colonial ties to Holland, and as such are citizens, not immigrants.

The contributions of New Zealand to a family continuity perspective are widely known. Starting in the 1980s with an initiative known Maatua Whangai, chronicled in the 1988 report 'Puao-Te-ata-Tu' and culminating with the Children and Young Person's Act of 1989, a philosophical shift has transformed the New Zealand child welfare system. The practice and program known as the Family Group Conference or Family Decision Making model has been transferred to numerous other countries. In the United States there are currently 49 projects using varied adaptations of the New Zealand model. In the United Kingdom there are dozens of initiatives. This approach represents for New Zealand a return to traditional Maori custom and practice. As adapted in other countries it

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*Professor Emily Jean McFadden, Grand Valley State University School of Social Work, Michigan, USA.*

*Jill Worrall, Lecturer, School of Social Policy and Social Work, Albany Campus, Massey University, New Zealand.*

becomes a method of respecting cultures of indigenous persons and other persons of color.

The international dialogue continues. A transformational process is underway which will dramatically change the shape and function of foster care practice and policy across the globe. This process will equally transform the nature of the International Foster Care Organisation.

## A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

It is difficult to establish a truly global perspective on foster care and child welfare because there are so many issues in the contemporary world affecting the well being of children. If the concept of child welfare is constructed in the broadest scope, thorny issues such as the fate of children in increasingly genocidal civil wars would need to be addressed. In some of the war torn areas of the world, child soldiers are required to fight, often after having been abducted and terrorized into obedience (Wessels 1997). Street children are a concern in many countries. These children struggle for survival against overwhelming odds of homelessness, poverty, abandonment and serious health problems (Walsh 1997). While many countries acknowledge the presence of intra familial sexual abuse, and danger from the stranger molester, only recently has the sexual exploitation of children through child prostitution been identified as a child welfare issue.

The first World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children was held in Stockholm, Sweden in 1996. Activists blame growing poverty in developing nations for much of the problem (Chidey 1996). Across the world families face dismemberment and dislocation from political and economic events, gaining media headlines or quietly festering. For many of these children, their families, and their communities, foster care as we know it might seem an unbelievable luxury. The notions about what conditions are adequate and necessary for child development vary across nations and habitats, and within social groups. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates adequate living conditions and the right

to be heard. Tools of the information age may now be used to measure the status of the world's children beyond survival (Andrews & Bern-Arieh 1999). For the purpose of clarity, this paper will focus on issues related to foster care in the formal child welfare systems of countries participating in the International Foster Care Organisation. It will address a significant international trend in foster care away from severing children's family and community attachments, and providing a wider range, including kinship care (Colton & Williams 1997). It also acknowledges significant international efforts to improve and enhance services for children and their families.

Since the media discovered the plight of children in Eastern European orphanages, a variety of efforts have been mobilised to provide assistance, including the United Nations' work through UNICEF, the international NGOs (non-governmental organizations), church relief agencies, and international child welfare groups. The International Foster Care Organisation has been active in the international transfer of knowledge with Eastern Europe. As early as 1989 representatives of children's services in Eastern European countries were brought to IFCO conferences. Most recently, the 1998 European IFCO conference held in Hungary was attended by significant numbers of foster parents, child care givers and other professionals representing Eastern Europe. A demonstration of IFCO's impact was evident at this conference in a meeting of trainers from many European countries including Hungary. These trainers had adapted for use in their own cultural and national context the PRIDE curriculum developed by the Child Welfare League of America for training foster and adoptive parents. In each country the basic curriculum has undergone a degree of transformation in a variety of adaptations, but an emphasis on the importance of the foster child's family remains.

While the impact of contemporary technology has accelerated communication between the nations of the world, it appears that there is more involved in the international transfer of knowledge than just the availability of written materials. The undertaking may

be fraught with difficulty due to differences in intellectual traditions and language. The meanings assigned to the key words 'care' or 'community' may vary widely from country to country (Colton & Williams 1997).

The exchange of knowledge occurs within a context which often includes personal contact between professionals of various nations. If an innovation is to be transferred from country to country it must be adapted and adjusted to fit the norms, cultural context and social conditions of the receiving country. The sending country must be aware of the unique needs of each nation and community which may attempt to implement new materials.

Although there have been attempts at the international transfer of knowledge and technology, few innovations have been as widely disseminated as the Family Decision Making model, also known as the Family Group Conference model, from New Zealand. This single model, as it has been transferred to the United States (Hardin 1996; American Humane Association 1996), Canada (Pennell & Burford 1994), Australia (Ban 1994), United Kingdom (Ryburn & Atherton, 1996) and beyond has gone through a variety of permutations once it left the shores of New Zealand.

## PEOPLE OF COLOR AND FOSTER CARE

The Family Decision Making model was clearly an example of innovation root in fertile soil – the right approach at the necessary time. With more children, disproportionately children of color, living in out-of-home care for longer periods of time, it was logical that the child welfare systems were looking for answers and were ready to review international practices (Merkel-Holguin et al 1998). There has been considerable impact on the contemporary foster care system by people of color in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Conversely, the child welfare systems of many countries impacted negatively on indigenous peoples and other groups of color. Many view foster care and formal child welfare as a strong force for colonization. In the USA both Native Americans and African Americans have

referred to child welfare removal of their children as 'cultural genocide' (Downs, Costin & McFadden 1996). In 'Westernized' countries and developing nations alike, there is recognition that child welfare must undergo a radical transformation if there is to be social justice for oppressed minorities and populations of color.

In the United States, the increasing awareness of the need for 'cultural competence' in child welfare work results from the interplay of many factors. Population demographics about the 'browning of America' – the increase of populations of color so that in the 21st century people of 'white' European backgrounds will be in the minority – have forced greater consideration of the need for American society to adjust to complex and diverse needs of its citizenry (Weaver 1998). A shortage of traditional non-related foster homes and the desire to respect culture has engendered a far greater emphasis on the use of kinship care (Scannepieco & Jackson 1986). Kinship care, the use of extended family members for both formal and informal foster care, keeps children within the context of their own cultural and familial roots (Hegar & Scannepieco 1999).

In other countries, the same sort of demographic shift and growing awareness of cultural issues is evident. For example, in the city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands, more than 125 different groups of color, with their own cultures and traditions, have immigrated to the city. Often they are persons with Dutch citizenship as they come from former colonies, but they have their unique situations and views of the world, so are not 'Dutch' in the sense of identifying with the dominant culture. As with persons of color in the United States, in Europe the immigrant or migrant population has strong values about the importance of family, extended family and even tribal groupings.

For all of the 'Westernized' and former colonial countries, a new understanding of family continuity is needed. Rather than thinking about the isolated nuclear family as is currently done in formal child welfare systems, professionals and law makers need to understand the importance of multigenerational

extended family networks. Respecting the individual as part of relationships to the family of past, present and future is critical.

### **FAMILY CONTINUITY AS A PHILOSOPHY OF CHILD WELFARE**

Family continuity is a unifying framework for all family and children's services in the 1990s and beyond. It is the contemporary approach to supporting families, protecting children, achieving permanence and providing for continuance of important relationships across the life span. Starting with the principle that children need to be embedded in family and community networks of continuing and caring relationships, the family continuity paradigm increases the engagement of the family and children's services systems with families, kinship networks and diverse cultures. The paradigm is family focused throughout the life course of children and their important relationships. It utilizes the strengths perspective, and incorporates many principles of family preservation (McFadden & Downs 1995).

In the two decades of IFCO's existence, the family continuity focus has steadily increased. From an earlier focus on the needs of the separated child and services to support foster families, a theme has evolved in IFCO conferences on the need of children to be part of their cultural and familial origins. In recent years, there have been many IFCO presentations on work with the child's family, family reunification, prevention of placement and even establishing a support network group for parents.

While each IFCO conference has had its own unique perspective and sub-themes, at no conference was the plea for preserving cultures and families of color more eloquently stated than at the New Zealand conference, held in Christchurch in 1985. Maori participants in the conference and plenary sessions made a strong case regarding the history of colonization of their people, and the desire to restore traditional and cultural aspects of providing care and protection for children. For many attending the conference, this was the first time they

began to understand the child welfare system as a form of colonization of people of color and indigenous peoples. When children are removed from their own people, and placed in foster homes or institutions in which their language is not spoken, their traditions are not observed, and their culture not known, not only is the individual psychologically and emotionally destroyed but also the culture from which the child came has lost one of its children to assimilation. A critical link to the future is gone. Reversing this destruction of individual identity and cultural heritage is a cornerstone of the family continuity philosophy.

### **INTERNATIONAL TRANSFER OF FAMILY CONTINUITY CONCEPTS THROUGH IFCO**

In New Zealand, the original Maatua Whangai initiative attempted in the 1980s to rebuild kinship networks and culture for Maori children in the foster care system. A ministerial advisory committee of the Department of Social Welfare developed the report 'Puaotē-Ata-Tu' (Department of Social Welfare 1988) which established that Maori families were systematically disadvantaged in a service system predicated on pakeha (white, Eurocentric) norms of family life. Legislative change occurred with the Children and Young Person's Act of 1989, which allowed children's family groups to make decisions for their care and protection. This transformation was discussed at several IFCO conferences. In 1989 a group of New Zealanders, pakeha and Maori, presented to the IFCO conference in Michigan. Their presentation, and their participation in the first IFCO caucus for people of color, were seminal in beginning the international transfer of knowledge and sounding an urgent call for respect of culture and undoing the oppression of colonization in the child welfare systems of the world.

Although, as discussed earlier, there was a degree of historic readiness, the rapid reception of information on the Family Decision Making model in other countries was a result of the willingness of New Zealanders to share their expertise. As early as 1991, a group of

New Zealand practitioners published a monograph on family decision making (Smith, Featherston et al 1991). An example of the importance of IFCO relationships follows. In 1993 a team of Americans working on a federally funded kinship care project went to New Zealand to study the Family Decision Making model. This visit was facilitated entirely through relationships established earlier at past IFCO conferences. Mark Hardin, of the American Bar Association, wrote his comprehensive work on family group conferences (Hardin, 1996) facilitated through IFCO relationships.

At a later IFCO conference (Vancouver, 1997) a plenary speaker from the Netherlands delivered an address regarding the importance of working within the cultural context of families, and utilising a wide focus on multigenerational and extended families. This speech, which illustrates the changing emphasis of IFCO in moving to a family continuity focus, was enthusiastically received by conference attendees. Much of the international exchange of knowledge at IFCO conferences occurs in informal, but highly important after hours conversations. In one such conversation, a conference presenter from New Zealand, two from the United States, and several from the Netherlands agreed to work cooperatively to translate family continuity concepts to Holland. As a result of IFCO contacts, there is now a Family Continuity training and research group working in Holland.

Another example of the transfer of knowledge is that research findings related to the support needs of kinship caregivers presented at IFCO in 1997 (Worrall 1996) were later used in the United States to further document needs of families who had participated in a US family group conference project. These critical issues were additionally explored in an article on kinship care in the United States written for a British audience (McFadden 1998).

While there are countless examples of how practice, program and policy knowledge has been shared internationally through IFCO conferences, one only need examine the past decade and a half to see the

dramatic changes in child welfare systems to incorporate concepts of family continuity. From the 1985 conference in New Zealand, which occurred before the development of the Family Decision Making model, to the present, there have been vast changes. In the United States there have been 49 different projects implemented using family group conferences with families of color and others. This methodology is now being used in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and other countries. It is increasing the commitment to the use of kinship care as an alternative to formal foster care which places children in non-related homes.

While IFCO continues to have ongoing dialogue about the importance of culture, the centrality of family and kinship networks to foster care practice, and the nature of foster care itself, the international transfer of knowledge continues. The conceptual shift involved in family continuity thinking moves the practitioner from a Eurocentric, linear and dichotomized set of processes to a style which is inclusive, synthesising, multicultural and systemic. In this mode, the foster care practitioner becomes a cultural explorer who honors multigenerational traditions and voices united in a common concern for the child – the family's future (McNitt 1999).

As the transformational aspects of a family continuity philosophy impinge on foster care systems around the globe, it is inevitable that every aspect of contemporary foster care service delivery will be called into question and re-examined. If foster care policy and practice thus continue to be transformed, what will be the outcome for the International Foster Care Organisation? As the 'browning' of Eurocentric countries continues exponentially, it is equally inevitable that the demographics and focus of the organization will change. The incorporation of family continuity philosophy into the global perspective on foster care may only be a first step.

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