Family Group Conferencing as culturally competent practice: Exploring the value of practicing Ubuntu when collaborating with children and families to keep children safe.

Family Group Conferencing as culturally competent practice: Exploring the value of practicing Ubuntu when collaborating with children and families to keep children safe

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Contents

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Definition of Terms

Treaty of Waitangi	A treaty signed in 1840 between representatives of the crown and Rangatira that the Māori invoked in the 1980s to challenge the government on their right to be heard and their way of life respected
Daybreak—Puao te Ata Tu	Governmental report published by the advisory group investigating the Department of Social Welfare's treatment of the Māori
Whānau	Extended Family
Iwi	Tribe
Hapū	Clan
Tangata whenua	Residents
Whakapapa	Ancestry
Taonga	Treasures
Turangawaewae	A place where one is anchored
Rangatira	Māori chiefs
Family Rights Group	A leading UK based charity that is widely credited for bringing FGCS to the UK. It is involved in policy formulation, training, and management of FGCs in most areas of the UK

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Abstract

The Family Group Conferencing model (FGC) is a child and family focused model that seeks to ensure the full engagement of children and families in decision making. This research explored FGC as culturally competent model of practice and through analysis of findings highlighted the merits of practicing Ubuntu when working together with families to safeguard children. Data was gathered from social workers, FGC coordinators and FGC children's advocates using qualitative data gathering methods of interviews and focus groups. The epistemological position taken was interpretivism. This thesis acknowledges inherent power differentials for children and families involved in social services. At the core of the thesis is the need to embody social work values and demonstrate 'Ubuntu' in working with children and families using culturally appropriate model like FGC. This thesis recognise that current approaches used by social workers are Eurocentric and Westernised and therefore potentially oppressive to children and families from minoritised ethnic groups, therefore a need for decolonising approaches used. It asserts that the best place for a child is with their family. Should reasons exist for that child to not be able to remain in the family, convening a FGC could help explore other options within the kinship network to both safeguard the child and keep them within the family. This thesis further explores how this is done, taking into consideration partnership working, the centrality of the voice of a child and power dynamics that exists between the child and family and family and authorities represented by social services. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice, the thesis argues for the importance of understanding the dichotomies that exist in the child and family's life and through their participation in the FGC process, the child is afforded a voice either directly or through using an independent advocate. The thesis deconstructs the care and control mandate and argues that through using the FGC model the need for control is reduced as families are at the centre of decision making about issues that affect their children. Key themes from findings indicate that FGCs embody Ubuntu and core social work values

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The family is usually the best place for bringing up children and young people: but difficult judgements are sometimes needed in balancing the right of a child to be with their birth family with their right to protection from abuse and neglect (Munro, 2011). This research seeks to explore the role of family in the protection of children through the prevention of intrafamilial maltreatment using the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model and the practice of Ubuntu. This research also aims to highlight the importance of cultural competence and aiming for cultural humility in working with families to address intrafamilial child maltreatment. Weaver (1999) states that cultural competence in social work is about social work that promotes cultural knowledge, cultural values and cultural skills. Furthermore, this research aims to provide greater knowledge and understanding of the role of the professional in the FGC process within the UK context - how they consider their professional role thus helps to answer the research questions about effectiveness, partnership and giving voice to children and families.

Using Bourdieu's theory of practice, it will look at the recurring theme of different dynamics of power between all role players in the FGC process i.e., within and between family members e.g., children and adults, between family members and the local authority represented by the social worker. Furthermore, it will look at the importance of the voice of the child in the FGC process. Bourdieu's theory of practice will be linked to the concept of Ubuntu through its relational nature and clear articulation of individual roles in keeping children safe from maltreatment. This link will be explored further in Chapter 6.

One of the themes of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2020 to 2030 is Ubuntu. The Global Agenda's theme for 2020–2022 was 'Ubuntu: Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness´. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) also picked Ubuntu as their theme for 2022.The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) picked the theme of Ubuntu (IFSW, 2020). Mugumbate et al. (2023) point out the significance of Ubuntu becoming the theme of such an important programme is in itself an acknowledgment of African knowledge that often receives low recognition in social work education, research and practice. Ubuntu will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3 The Children Act (1989) highlighted the need for a new relationship between the state and families. However, although FGC is not explicitly mentioned in the Children Act (1989) it is referred to in accompanying guidance such as Working Together (Department of Health, 1999) and instructs agencies to work in partnership with each other as well as with families to achieve best outcomes for children and families.

1.2 Relevance to social work

This research looks at the role of the family as partners in the prevention and addressing of child maltreatment as perceived by professionals. Whilst both academic literature and some practice examples from all over the world will be used and some comparisons made, this research focusses on families in the UK. In a paper on early intervention and child protection, Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) argue for the moral legitimacy of support and its difference from intervention and the need to engage with and develop a family support project for the twenty-first century. They assert that this should be located within a project that celebrates families' strengths as well as

their vulnerabilities often in the context of considerable adversities and locates workers as agents of hope and support. Throughout this thesis the term children will be used to refer to children and young people (YP), as YP are still under the age of majority, therefore are children. This research moves from a premise that we aim first to protect the children in partnership with families not necessarily from their families and that protecting a child in a culturally competent manner, open to learning from the family about the family is the ultimate goal. Ubuntu places the child at the centre of all processes engaged with by adults to keep them safe from maltreatment, the same way the Māori consider their children to be part of their treasures that need to be protected at all times as will be discussed in chapter 2. Working Together (2018) argues for a child – centred approach to maltreatment that advocates that children 'are best looked after within their families, with their parents (and wider family network) playing a full part in their lives, unless compulsory intervention in family life is necessary' (pg. 9).

I believe the family is the main hub for the protection of children. No matter what other decisions may be made regarding their care, children and young people have a fundamental right to maintain a sense of belonging and connectedness with their family and family group. This is echoed by Article 3 of the UNCRC (1992) which stated that the child's best interest must remain a priority in all the decisions that affect children. The FGC model looks at families as experts in the protection of their children and therefore power is handed over to families as it is about the child's welfare (Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014 and Sen and Webb 2019). Further to this, as in my own Zulu Culture and the Māori culture, where the FGC model originated, a child is

never seen in isolation from their family (Connolly, 2006, Skaale Havnen and Christiansen, 2014, Munro, 2011).

In Ubuntu terms the safety of the children is guaranteed when the whole village is involved, justice and empowerment of children is assured when the whole village coordinates and collaborates. This was also identified by the New Zealand Ministerial Advisory Committee (1986); which asserted ‘at the heart of the issue is a profound misunderstanding or ignorance of the place of the child in Māori society and its relationship with whanau, hapu, iwi structures’ (pg.7). Any intervention about the welfare of the child involves the wider family network thereby empowering families to take part in the decision-making processes regarding their children, therefore highlighting the embodiment of Ubuntu. Child protection legislation has tended in the past to reflect an emphasis on the protection of the child, rather than the preservation and strengthening of the family (Collins-Camargo, 2016, Mangold, 2001). One of the consequences of this undertaking has been that relationships between social services and families can be ambivalent and antagonistic, families sometimes feel overlooked and challenged (Khan, Miles, and Francis, 2018) Seen as a decision-making process that is always based on the workers’ perspectives not incorporating parental opinions and needs (Ayón, Aisenberg, and Erera, 2010). While the principle of helping families to remain intact is evident in the rhetoric of child welfare it is less apparent at the level of direct service practice (Hunt, 2010).

The terms child abuse and child maltreatment are often used interchangeably; I have chosen to use child maltreatment as this is the term used by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022). Research shows that child abuse and maltreatment are

more often committed by someone within the family rather than outside of it. Katz, Glucklich, and Piller, (2019) cite several researchers (McCartan, Kemshall & Tabachnick, 2015; Mejia, Cheyne & Dorfman, 2012, Weatherred, 2015), who concur that parent perpetuated maltreatment is deemed to be the most complex type of child maltreatment, both in terms of identification and intervention; this complexity stems partly from the sensitive and nuanced relationship that exists between children and their parents, who in these cases are both protectors and perpetrators. This thesis refers to minoritised ethnic groups, instead of indigenous groups or BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) As some literature use to refer to people from ethnic minority groups. I will therefore explain what this means. Selvarajah et al. (2020) argue increased reckoning over categorisations of people demonstrate that racial categories, while imprecise, fluid, time and context-specific, embody hierarchical power (pg. 1).

In the UK term BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) highlights decades of categorising groups of people referred to in the 1940s and 1950s as ‘coloured immigrants’; ‘New Commonwealth immigrants’ or ‘African, Caribbean and Asian’. In 2022, as a recommendation of Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities set up by the government review the causes for race inequality in the UK, the government decided not to use the term BAME anymore. Nygård & Saus (2019) have described the term indigenous to mean people who share a common identity with land, ethnic heritage, culture and a history of oppression.

While the research highlights that abuse is often perpetuated by someone within the family it also establishes that protective factors are often found within the family network. A study by Bailey, Brazil, Conrad-Hiebner and Counts (2015) asserts that using a protective factor angle has the capacity to overcome the shortcomings of a

risk model and significantly change the reach and potentially the outcomes of child maltreatment prevention efforts.

Ward, Brown and Hyde-Dryden (2014) identified that there are certain factors that can mitigate effects that come from parental problems and reducing the probability of maltreatment to take place. These include the presence of a non-abusive partner; the presence of a supportive extended family; parents' adaptation to their own experience of childhood abuse; parents' recognition that there is a problem and their willingness to take responsibility for it; and parents' willingness to engage with services (pg. 45) Recognition of the existence of the problem, taking steps to address it and being willing to engage with services is what the FGC model is about. Ubuntu is associated with the maxim of 'it takes a village to raise a child' this suggests that meaningful interactions among the child, family members and those outside the family circle are necessary for children to realise human excellence. It is also about collectively ensuring the wellbeing of the children and those who need support. Therefore, while acknowledging that abuse exists within families, this thesis promotes the notion that by using an FGC underpinned with the cultural practice of Ubuntu that these issues can be addressed in a culturally competent manner placing children at the centre of all intervention.

1.3 Positionality

In doing this research it is important for the researcher to declare their positionality to clarify their standpoint in relation to the research conducted. According to Warf (2010) positionality is about one's social position and worldview, which effects one's response to power disparities in various situations. In social science research, Throne (2012)

perceives positionality as an exploration of the researcher's reflection on their own place within the many contexts and subjectivities of viewpoints (pg. 56). This links to Hugman's (2003) assertion on the 'ethics of self' as central and founded on the practice of self-scrutiny. In determining where the researcher is situated, bias and pre-existing viewpoints can be brought forward into the research discussion and addressed from the many aspects of the researcher's perspective and positionality (Throne, 2012 pg. 58)

I am a black African woman who is a qualified social worker and a social work academic who immigrated to the UK over twenty years ago. I have worked in FGC for over ten years as a Senior FGC Coordinator and an FGC team manager; this included setting up and managing an FGC service for a number of years. I also approach this research with a view that FGCs work to improve outcomes for children. An approach like FGC is also something I have experienced in my Zulu culture. FGC is conceptualised as an embodiment of Ubuntu within the Zulu culture in particular and within African moral code in general (please see chapter 3). Whenever there are matters that need to be addressed in the family network, including decisions about the welfare of children when parents are deceased or are no longer capable to look after them. The family network would come together and make decisions about what is in the best interest of a child. Such meetings do not involve attendance of children, however their views are sought and expressed in that family gathering.

The guiding moral code I was raised with and taught at school was Ubuntu, which is the overarching philosophy of Black people of Africa is named differently in African communities and languages (Mugumbate, Mupedziswa, Twikirize, Mthethwa, Desta & Oyinlola, 2023). Mugumbate & Chereni (2019) argued Ubuntu is a collection of knowledges, values and practices that Black people of Africa view as making people

more human. It means ‘I am because we are’. I find the FGC model relatable as it acknowledges and respects indigenous decision-making processes that are embedded in her own culture and the concept of ubuntu. The model further values dialogue and hearing the voices of all those who are involved in the FGC. Ubuntu will be discussed further in chapter 3.

I am aware that Bourdieu’s theory of practice and other theories used in this thesis are part of colonial literature that has continued to shape the world from a Eurocentric point of view. I believe even the PhD process is part of a colonial process of the including those they see as ‘worthy’ of this level of education using their systems and standards – their cultural capital; unless you conform, you cannot get through this process. Lorde (1984) argued ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house…they may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game but will not bring about genuine change’. Whilst I acknowledge there is truth is Lorde’s argument, the researcher feels until we have our own tools to recognise knowledges from the Global South and other forms of indigenous knowledge acquisition, the people remain somewhat yoked to this colonial system of education. Decolonising, I believe is not about the obliteration of any values and knowledge from the Global North but about recognising and incorporating all knowledges including from the global south. It is for this reason that I have combined these theories with FGC – an indigenous model of addressing issues and Ubuntu which is an African moral code. Lorde (1984) herself argued for the use of means and methods outside the dominant system to dismantle and disrupt the dominant system and oppress it. I chose to do this research as it is informed by my professional values as a social worker, a FGC practitioner and as something that reflects my own culture of believing in families.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis will be structured as follows: Chapter 2 will review the literature covering key literature themes pertaining to some of the concepts covered by the thesis. This will include looking at the strategies used in reviewing literature, FGC model; definitions, application, ethos and some identified challenges pertaining to FGC research. Chapter 3 will look at the concept of Ubuntu, cultural competence and decolonising social work. As this research focusses on the experiences of children, the contested concept of childhood and the history thereof will be delved into. Chapter 4 will look at partnership working as keeping children safe from maltreatment requires participation from different agencies. Chapter 5 will look at the concept of power and empowerment in the FGCs process and the role played by power in the FGC process. Chapter 6 will analyse Bourdieu's theory of practice and its relevance to this thesis. Chapter 7 will look at how this research was undertaken; it will look at the process and the rationale behind data collection decisions made. There are two findings' chapters; Chapter 8 will be an overall summary of all the findings, Chapter 9 will focus on the voice of the child in this thesis. In Chapter 10 I will be reflecting on the process of this thesis and the findings - linking them to overall arguments made in the thesis Chapter 11 will conclude this thesis.

This thesis aims to answer the following research questions

> What are the perceptions of professional practitioners regarding the efficacy of the FGC model in safeguarding children at risk of intra familial maltreatment?
>
> How does the practitioner partnership with families using the FGC model work to improve outcomes for children who have or are experiencing intra familial maltreatment?

How is the voice of the child represented in the FGC process?

How does the concept of empowerment manifest in the FGC process?

What are the distinct attributes of the FGC process that differentiates it from other social services meetings?

How does this research contribute to our understanding of the role of the extended family in child protection?

In what ways does this research demonstrate how Ubuntu and cultural competency are embodied in the FGC process?

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Aveyard (2018) asserts literature reviews are important because they seek to summarise the literature that is available on any given topic. They make sense of a body of research and present an analysis of the available literature so that the reader does not have to access each individual research report included in the review. I have opted to use narrative literature review. Ferrari (2015) points out that narrative reviews are targeted at identifying and summarising literature that has been previously published, it avoids duplications and looks for new areas to be studied that have not yet been looked at. According to Greenhalgh et al. (2018) narrative reviews provide scope for deepening understanding of the topic, however interpretation and critique are still considered biased as they reflect the author's views and analysis. This suggests the researcher should reflect on their views and not seek to change the meaning but summarise available literature. Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2015) pointed out 4 different types of narrative literature review: historical, theoretical, methodological and the one I am using is general literature review. General narrative review provides a review of the most important and critical aspects of the current knowledge of the topic.

This literature review will cover definition of the key terms used in this research project i.e., Ubuntu, Family Group Conference (FGC), childhood, child maltreatment and partnership working all of which are part of the key themes of this thesis as stated in chapter 1. It will look at different definitions and identify working definitions that will be used in this thesis. It will further explore Bourdieu's theoretical perspective relevant to this research project. This literature review will be divided into two sections, the first one being the discussions around key areas relating to this thesis i.e., Ubuntu,

childhood, child maltreatment, social work interventions and advocacy. The second part will be looking at the FGC model, processes, and application.

2.1 Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using various search avenues such as sociology, social policy, and social work literature – both physical and electronic books, academic papers, internet databases, electronic articles, and search engines. I concentrated on search engines such as, ProQuest, EBSCOHost, Science Direct and other Social Care Online databases. I also ventured into other paper sharing platforms such as ResearchGate and Academia. Any books, journals and papers used were a valuable source of information through using their references to find more relevant papers. An alert system was set up in several academic databases so that I would be informed when a relevant new paper or article was published. I also attended several conferences both in the UK and abroad e.g., the USA to create networks that would help me access information in other ways.

Partnership Working – viewed through the lens of power, therefore a few distinct key words were used depending on the theme. To search for information on FGC, I used key words such as Family Group Conference, Family Group Conferencing, FGC, Family Group Decision Making, Family Group Meetings, Family Guided Decision Making or Family Group Decision making. Key words such as Child Protection, Child Abuse and Child Maltreatment and advocacy were also searched. Key concepts such as Partnership Working, working in partnership with families, and multi-agency working were also searched for. I also looked for literature on cultural competency Ubuntu was also searched for from the beginning as Ubuntu was one of the imposed themes of this thesis. As results came up, I became very aware that it did not appear

that there were a lot of recent publications on FGC within a period of time ranging from 2010 to 2016. In the earlier days of FGC i.e., 1990s and 2000s, there was a healthy representation of the FGC model, processes, outcomes, and evaluations in the literature, but interest seemed to have dwindled in the past few years. This was noted by Frost, Abram & Burgess (2012) in their literature review on FGC. This has also been alluded to in the Context of the Study in Section 1.3. I also found that post 2017 there appeared to be a renewed interest in FGC research and a number of new papers were published.

2.2 Defining FGC

There are several definitions of FGC but none of the countries that use it have a single agreed definition. What tends to happen is that different FGC projects within the country would use the definition they most agree with. According to the American Humane Association (2010) FGC is a decision-making process to which members of the family group are invited and joined by members of their informal network, community groups and the child welfare agency that has become involved in the family's life (pg. 8). The Family Rights Group (FRG), a UK based charity that was responsible for introducing FGCs to the UK, define it similarly and add that it is a decision making and planning process whereby the wider family group make plans and decisions for children and young people who have been identified either by the family or by service providers as being in need of a plan that will safeguard and promote their welfare (Ashley, 1996). The term FGC will be used, if any literature cited herein uses any other name, it will be substituted to FGC for clarity.

Not only are FGCs known by several different names and used in different countries, but there are also process differences, depending on the country and the organisation that runs them. Perhaps the most notable difference is between the original model – the New Zealand model which was adopted in Europe and FGC models that evolved in North America. There are variations in the North American model e.g., Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) has mainly developed into an approach called 'family unity meeting' (FUM) that developed as an alternative to FGC (Barnsdale & Walker, 2007). According to Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014), the main difference between FUM and FGC is that the coordinator does not leave the room as there is no private family time and that parents can prohibit the selection of any family member. The FUM meeting starts with an identification of resources that are present within the family group. All participants are asked to identify family strengths. Some professionals argue that FUM has been influenced by FGC in the course of time as more FUM conferences have added private family time. The FUM in some American states is therefore more like FGC-FUM. This suggests leaving families to make their decisions without any professional – including the FGC coordinator during private family time implies trust in a family's ability to make their own decisions.

2.3 Historical developments of FGC

FGCs are synonymous with the indigenous people of New Zealand – the Māori. New Zealand was originally occupied by the indigenous Māori. A document signed over 150 years ago – the Treaty of Waitangi is arguably one of the key milestones towards the birth of FGCs. When Europeans arrived during the 1700's, Māori Iwi (tribes) were perceived to be well-organised social systems, which generally, were open to interaction with European whalers and seal hunters. The Treaty of Waitangi is an agreement made in 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and more than

500 Māori chiefs. which yielded to the Crown the right to rule but also provided for the protection of Māori and the self-management of their lands, fisheries and other Taonga (treasures) of which children were regarded as one, (Doolan, 2010).

The Treaty promised that:

- The values of the Māori must be respected and protected.

- The Māori should form part of the new society and feel as much at home in New Zealand and its institutions as other New Zealanders (New Zealand Law Commission, 1999, p. 1). These treaty promises became important in the formation of FGCs and recognition on Māori way of life.

The social work importance of the treaty is summarised by the three commonly recognised principles recognised by the Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988) as follows: -

Partnership: interactions between the Treaty partners must be based on mutual good faith, cooperation, tolerance, honesty, and respect

Participation: this principle secures active and equitable participation by Tangata Whenua (Māori people)

Protection: government must protect Whakapapa (ancestry), cultural practices and Taonga, including protocols, customs, and language

Prior to the 1960s, Māori child welfare was mainly regarded as the obligation of the whānau (extended family) and there was no involuntary removal of children, as occurred in Canada, Australia, and the US. The movement of Māori to urban centres from the 1960s onwards brought whānau to the attention of mainstream child welfare services that did not recognise the role of the extended whānau in the care and

protection of Māori children (Duncan and Worrall, 2000; Libesman, 2004). The mono-cultural focus of the Adoption Act (1955), the Guardianship Act (1968) and the Children and Young Persons (CYP) Act (1974) alienated Māori beliefs and practices. The paramountcy principle in the CYP Act (1974), like dictating that those involved in child maltreatment investigations must "treat the interests of the child or young person as the first and paramount consideration" (s.4). This conflicted with the Māori belief system that stated that children should never be isolated from their Whānau (Pitama, Ririnui and Mikaere, 2002). They were concerns about the beginning of a medico/legal model of child welfare that relied heavily on forensic processes and the opinions of professionals

There were also concerns about the relative importance placed on professional and agency conceptualisations of child protection and welfare compared with those stemming from family, cultural and community perspectives (Renouf, Lagzdins and Angus, 1989). Power was therefore transferred into the hands of professional 'experts' (like social workers, police, doctors), with families considered, at best to be unimportant and, at worst, an interference to the decision-making process regarding the welfare of the child (Cockburn, 1995). As a result of this mono-cultural child welfare system and law during this time, Māori were seriously deprived (Connolly, 2001; Love, 2002; Ririnui and Mikaere, 2002). For a major part of the 20th century, the government of New Zealand had assimilationist policies in relation to the Māori people. Doolan (2010) believes although these policies were not eugenic in philosophy, they were unquestionably racist.

The social policy was underpinned by a white worldview and placed little worth on the customs, beliefs, and values of the Māori (Ibid). Historically, the role of the state in the provision of care for dependent and neglected children has reflected a Eurocentric philosophy undergirding the law and welfare services in New Zealand. At no time were Māori involved in the establishment of the child welfare system, and in no way were the cultural values or social needs of Māori respected, (Duncan and Worrall, 2000, p. 289). New Zealand society in the 1970s and 1980s was a time of reawakening and revolution on different fronts.

These developments were accompanied by an articulation of civil rights through both the feminist movement and what can only be described as a political and cultural insurgency amongst Māori, based on the mandate of the Treaty of Waitangi. While given less prominence overall, children's rights also began to be asserted in a new and different way, perhaps as a result of the focus on children during the 1979 International Year of the Child, and definitely by an increase in child legal advocacy (Pakura, 2005).

Moyle (2013) posits the variety of platforms created in the 1980s for Māori to vent their frustration produced instrumental documents imbued with the voices of insightful Māori minds (pg. 9). The Minister of Social Welfare established a ministerial committee to investigate and report a Māori perspective on the operations of the Department of Social Welfare). The outcome was a document called 'Daybreak—Puao te Ata Tu' (Ministerial Advisory Committee (1986). The committee commented on their findings of institutional racism within the organisation and across New Zealand society noting 'At the heart of the issue is a profound misunderstanding or ignorance

of the place of the child in Māori society and its relationship with whanau, hapu, iwi structures' (Ministerial Advisory

Committee, 1986, p. 7).

The report further exposed major concerns about New Zealand child welfare services as follows:

- The significance of the child in previous child welfare legislation was not in keeping with Māori understandings of family. The welfare of the child could not be set apart from the wellbeing of the family and children belonged to their *whanau* (or extended family) and not just their parents.
- Many Māori children in institutions and in foster homes were 'lost' to their extended families. Many had been placed by social workers who were ignorant of the ways in which the kinship network provided support to family members in difficulty.
- The placement of Māori children in the care of non-Māori families or in institutions triggered concern that the cultural needs of children were not being met, (Department of Social Welfare,

1998).

Among the many recommendations, the Committee strongly supported the maintenance of the child within the family; greater consultation with *whanau*, *hapu*, and *iwi*; and overall, the development of strategies that harness the potential of all people, especially the Māori (American Humane Association, 2004). Reform became possible when government recognised the harmful effects on minority populations of decision-making by professional agencies when extended family, cultural and community perspectives were excluded (Department of Social Welfare, 1988).

The objectives of law reform were established as:

(a) Safeguarding the wellbeing of families and the wellbeing of children and young persons as members of families and family groups.

(b) Making provision for families and family groups to receive support in caring for their children and young persons; and

(c) Making provision for matters relating to children and young persons who needed care or protection or who offended against the law to be resolved, wherever possible, by their own family and family group.

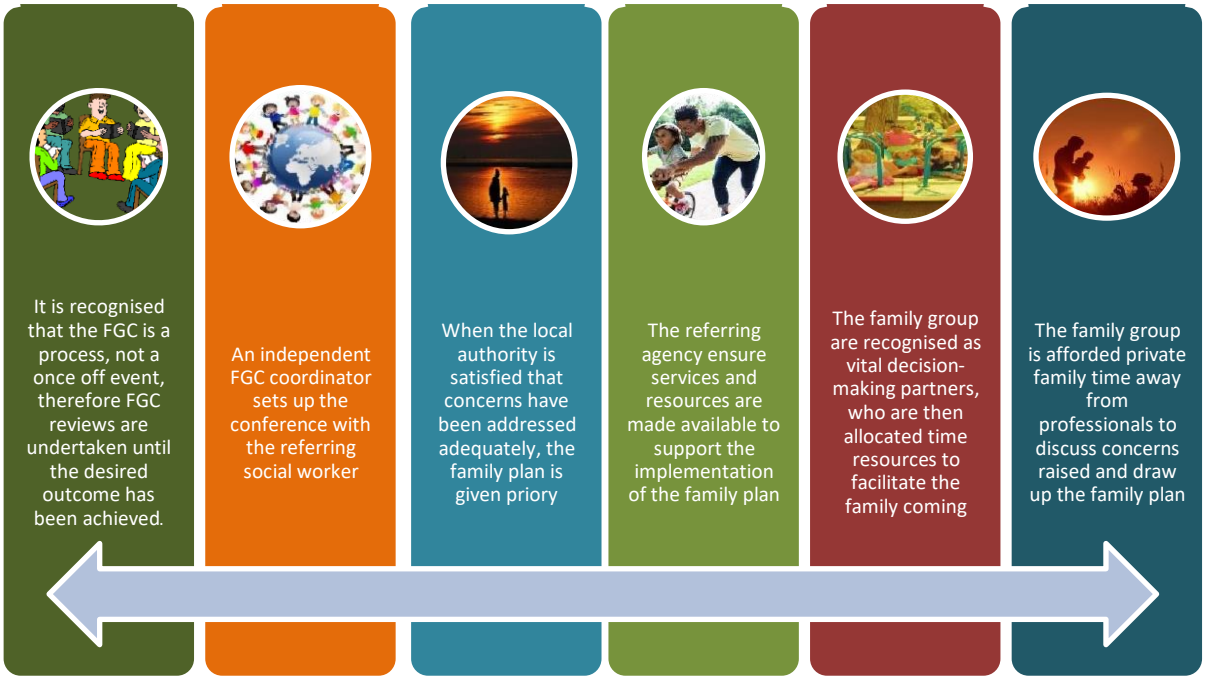
The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act (1989) reflected its commitment to greater family involvement, its principles pronouncing the primary role of the family in caring for children, and the need to support family, *whanau*, *hapu*, and *iwi*, and family group to undertake this role. The state was obligated to find the least intrusive interventions to further these aims. Once passed into law in 1989 all children who were assessed as needing care and/or protection were required to be referred to a Care and Protection Coordinator for a Family Group Conference. The FGC became the legal mechanism through which the dual principles of child protection and the strengthening and maintenance of families would be formally addressed.

FGCs first came to the UK in 1992 when FRG imported them from New Zealand. This was done through FRG inviting a group of practitioners from New Zealand to the UK to share information and their practice experience (www.frg.org.uk). According to Edwards and Parkinson (2018) FRG further assisted in developing the six first FGC pilot projects in England and Wales. After two of the original pilot projects did not continue with the pilot, only Hampshire, London Borough of Wandsworth, Hereford,

Worcester and Gwynedd projects continued. The very first FGC was held in Wales in 1991, facilitated by the Cwlwm project.

2.4 Key Tenets of the FGC Model

Figure 1 Core elements of the FGC model (American Humane Association, 2008)



Huntsman (2006) views FGC as a method of addressing or attempting to address, family issues in relation to child protection. He argues it involves bringing together three sets of people – the child or young person, members of their immediate and extended family, and child protection professionals – to air issues, come to a resolution and develop a plan for future action. Williams, Merkel – Holguin Allan, Maher, Fluke and Hollinshead (2015) stated FGCs have the following mandates:

- A **legal mandate**, where a prerequisite to use an FGC is enshrined in law.

- A **procedural mandate**, where authorities implement the use of FGC as a policy and

- A **best practice mandate**, where professionals who are convinced of the value of the model can set up conferences within their local system.

In 2000, FGC was described by Whittaker as 'the most intriguing child welfare innovation to arise in the last quarter century' (Burford and Hudson, 2000, p. xii). Brown (2005) holds that the appeal of the model lies in its apparent simplicity and its potential to empower families to work in partnership with social work agencies. FGC holds democratising potential to promote 'the sharing of power for decision making between family, kin, professionals, state and the community, while balancing responsibility and accountability among these groups' Merkel-Holguin (2004 pg.155).

The FGC model is based on the following assumptions:

- Families have a right to participate in decisions that affect them.

- Families are competent to make decisions if properly engaged, prepared, and provided with necessary information.

- Decisions made within families are more likely to succeed than those imposed by outsiders (Huntsman, 1996)

Huntsman (1996) believes there are values that are consistent with the original Māori principles that need to always be considered when developing or implementing an FGC intervention:

- Children's right to remain in their kinship and cultural connections throughout their lives.

- Belonging of children and their parents to a wider family system that both nurtures them and is accountable for them.
- Family groups know their own histories, and they use that information to construct thorough plans.
- The family group, rather than the agency, is the context for child welfare and child protection resolutions.
- Active family group participation and leadership are essential for good outcomes for children, but power imbalances between family groups and child protection agency personnel must first be addressed; and
- The state has a responsibility to recognise, support, and build the family group's capacity to protect and care for their young relatives (American Humane Association,

  2008).

Faureholm and Brønholt (2005) identified three commonly acknowledged cornerstones of the

FGC model which ensures the extended family will participate in the FGC:

- The extended family should be given the opportunity to discuss the concerns and prepare an action plan without professionals being present at part of the meeting. This aspect of the meeting is called Private Family Time
- The involvement of an independent coordinator to help the family plan and implement the conference and

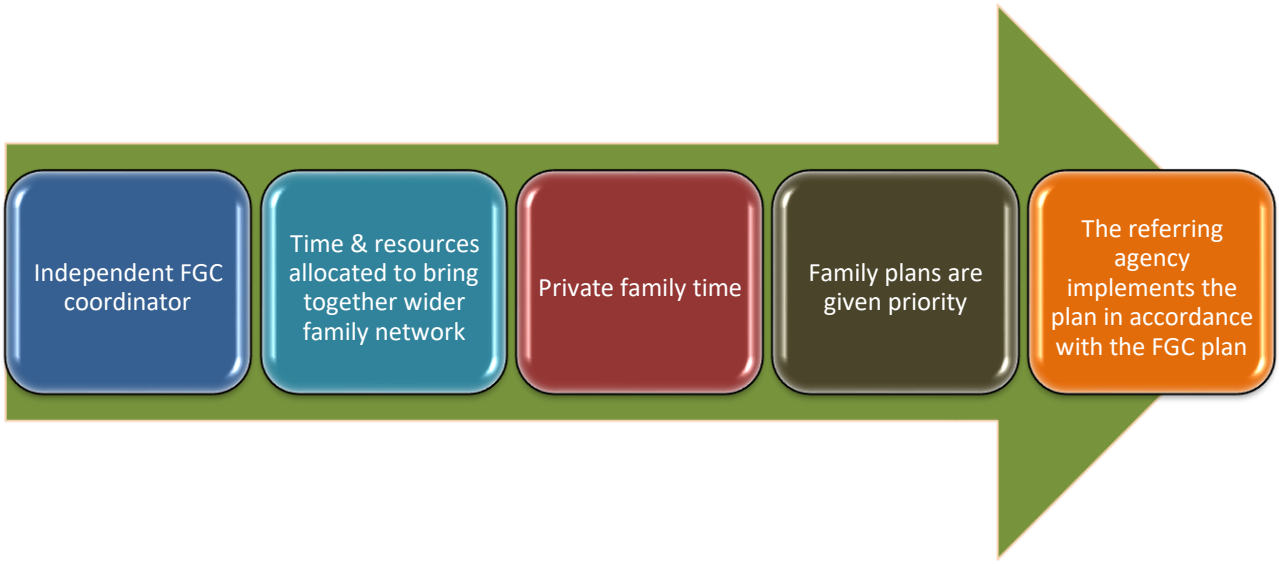
- The approval of the family plan that was formulated by the extended family provided the plan protects the child and attends to the child's needs and best interest. A key cornerstone missing from this definition is advocacy – which is also very central to the FGC process.

These values are often the cornerstones of the FGC programme. Empowering families, encouraging agencies to see children in the context of their family, helping to resolve conflicts within a family and between family members and professionals, and focusing on the rights of children to maintain family ties where possible are all hallmarks of successful child welfare interventions. Holland et al (2005) asserted that FGC as a welfare intervention represents a radical attempt to adjust power differences between families and statutory authority and it overtly requires its participants to examine definitions of the family, family care and relationships.

It also raises questions about the role of the state in facilitating or imposing family decision making in relation to the care of children. Through these conferences, social workers learn much from the families and move away from a deficit functioning perspective toward a perspective that emphasises the families' strengths. Indigenous Māori social work practitioners consider Family Group Conferencing to be the turnaround point for the beginning of good social work practice in New Zealand (Walker, 1995). One of the key areas that have come up repeatedly in discussing the FGC model are different values that manifest in the FGC model including participation, collaboration and focus on strengths. The next section will now look at how the FGC model works in practice, looking at each of the stages and the relevance thereof in giving the voice to children, believing in family strengths, and achieving best outcomes for children.

2.5 Features of the FGC model

Figure 2 Core Elements of the FGC Model



2.5.1 Independent FGC Coordinator

Being independent implies the FGC coordinator is not directly involved in any decision making about the case and in some cases is not employed by the local authority. Sen and Webb (2018) argue their independence from social services is underpinned by the principle that suggests that discussions with families regarding an FGC are not recorded or shared with social workers, except for the family plan. Therefore, families are able to consider participation in an FGC without those deliberations potentially becoming part of later court or social work processes.

The only proviso is the duty to disclose if any information shared could put the child, their family, or any other member of the public at risk. Information gathered by FGC coordinators should not be used as part of the assessment e.g., if the home is untidy, there is no reason for that information to be shared with the social worker, unless the

level of disorganisation could potentially place the child at risk. The independence of the FGC coordinator also comes through during the actual FGC when they chair the meeting and ensure the families can get their questions answered by the social worker whilst ensuring they can diffuse any heated situations between the family and the social worker or amongst the family members themselves. Jenkins (2010) emphasises the importance of independence of the FGC coordinator, stating 'the coordinator can have no interest in the content and implementation of the family's plan, otherwise he or she may have dual and conflicting interests in the conference outcome and the family's confidence in the decision-making process may be threatened' (pg. 3).

2.5.2 Resources are made available to convene the FGC

When making a referral for FGC, it is the referring social worker's responsibility to ensure that the family can travel to the FGC. This is often done in cases where the local authority is parallel planning or when parents have been deemed unable to meet the needs of the child and the ultimate decision to remove the child is likely or has been taken. I have experienced occasions where family members travelled from other countries within Europe and as far afield as Africa and Asia to attend the FGC. Article 25 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) preamble, the 1993 Hague Adoption Convention preamble (Hague Conference on Private International law, 2011), establish that the family environment is essential for the protection and well-being of children who are out of parental care.

2.5.3 Family plans are given priority

According to the statutory guidance on pre-proceedings (DFE, 2014) an important part of pre-proceedings planning is to enable wider family members to partake in the decision making where there are child protection or welfare concerns, including where a child cannot remain safely with their birth parents. Wider family meetings, like FGC are an important method of involving the family early so that they can provide support to enable the child to remain at home or look at alternative permanence options for the child. Evans (2011) posits that the family plan produced at the FGC may be a document that is presented as a record of discussion between the local authority and children and their families.

Some judges in family courts have been known to refuse permission to local authority back if they could not evidence that they have consulted the wider family network before resumption of the PLO process, this is discussed further in Chapter 9. A study by Smith and Hennessey (1998) concluded that family plans prevented 32% of children from entering local authority care and they prevented 47% of cases from proceeding to court. This is further echoed by research by Morris (2007) and Smith (2010) which revealed a reduction in the need for a local authority to proceed with care and supervision orders after convening an FGC. More recently a study by Leeds City Council (2017) also produced similar findings.

2.5.4 The referring Agency implements the plan in accordance with the decision of a Family Group Conference.

The referring social worker has an obligation to accept the family plan if it meets all the safeguard thresholds. When a local authority makes a referral for FGC, they are effectively entering into a contract with the family to honour the family plan. If the FGC family plan does not meet the threshold or no suitable carers could be identified the local authority may go ahead with care proceedings. Whilst this appears to have been a failure, however the family would have had a chance to participate in important decisions about the future of the children. If the child ends up being placed outside the family, they will always know their family cared enough to come together to explore options and decide about their future. Contact issues can be dealt with at the FGC review. Evan (2011) contends this ensures accountability for professionals and family members.

One of the unforeseen developments of this research project was how I came to explore and apply the philosophy of Ubuntu to this research. It was not my intention to focus on this practice, but it became apparent that the use of FGC as a culturally competent intervention held great promise when underpinned by Ubuntu as a decolonising approach to social work practice which could embed an approach of cultural humility. Azzopardi and McNeill (2016) argued maintaining an ongoing, mindful awareness of culture and diversity, including the complexity of the ways in which they construct meaning and experience, promotes effective and ethical practice, this suggests cultural humility.

The next section of the chapter shall discuss the relationship between Ubuntu, cultural competence and the decolonisation of child protection practice.

2.6 Practical Application of the FGC Model

The following sub-sections address the practical application of the FGC model in the UK.

2.6.1 Referral

A referral is received from a referring agency, the social worker who investigates and assesses a case of child maltreatment, neglect or permanency planning refers the case to a Coordinator who convenes a meeting. A referral is made after receipt of a formal agreement from the family to take part in the FGC process, one of the key principles of FGC is that families should never be coerced to do the FGC. I delivered a paper at an International Conference on Innovations in Family Group Decision Making in Minnesota in 2015[1] where I argued the concept of choice is often not clear when the family is involved in the child protection process. Families often feel they are unable to refuse FGC involvement for the fear of being perceived as uncooperative and fearing punitive consequences. On the other hand, this may be the first-time families have been given the opportunity to contribute to the plan about their children and to air their views, wishes and feelings. A referral is made when there are concerns about a child's welfare that meet the criteria set up by the local family group conference service and when a parent or carer with parental responsibility or when a young person who is deemed competent agrees the referral and to information sharing (FRG, 2004).

[1] [1] International Conference on Innovations in Family Group Decision Making in Minnesota US in October 25 – 30 October 2015

2.6.2 Preparation

An independent coordinator explains the FGC process to participants and negotiates attendance and suitable times. All members of the family are invited to attend, but in certain exceptional circumstances it may be necessary to exclude a family member, like the evidence of violent behaviour or incapacity due to mental health problems. This is often based on the assessment made by the social worker or when family members express concerns about that family members' attendance. Absent family members can input to the meetings in alternative ways such as, through letters or tape recordings (National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) 2009). The FGC coordinator, wherever possible and agreed by the main carers contacts the child or young person who is subject to the FGC and explores their views on participating in the FGC to further establish if they need an advocate to help them express themselves in the FGC or even speak on their behalf. Vik (2009) argued whilst the core of FGC is the meeting itself, the FGC process also involves a planning phase prior to and a follow-up phase after the actual meeting. Based on my experience as an FGC Manager, I found that the success and the length of the FGC meeting itself depended largely on the preparatory work done by the FGC coordinator beforehand. This gives families a chance to deal with information beforehand, ask questions and prepare their response to the situation. When FGC coordinators have taken time to prepare families for the FGC, there were better outcomes for children and their families. The child often gets involved in designing invites, planning the menu and may send a letter or a video recording expressing their views, wishes and feelings.

2.6.3 The Family Group Conference

This section will consider how conferences are run, which is where the family plan is formulated and agreed.

2.6.3.1 Information giving

This part of the conference is chaired by the independent FGC coordinator, they will make sure that everyone is introduced, that everyone present understands the purpose and process of the FGC and agrees how the meeting will be conducted including, if considered helpful by those present, explicit ground rules being set. (Ashley et. al., 2006). Ground rules are set by the family to decide what will be acceptable or unacceptable behaviour in the FGC. The social workers and other service providers discuss both the strength of the family and the concerns about them and how they relate to the safety and wellbeing of the child. The goal is to provide the family with as much information, as possible, about how the family became involved with the child welfare system and the current situation. It is important for the family to hear all the information at the same time and be enabled to ask questions. This is also the time for the social worker to let the family know if there are any plans they cannot accept, due to safety issues that relate to the children and then to address those issues in the plan. It is important to share the report before the FGC meeting to give families a chance to digest information and ask questions. It is also important for the social worker not to introduce any new information that was not included in the social worker's report.

2.6.3.2 Private family time

During this period, the family group often lends support to members and challenges them to change their behaviours and almost always comes up with a plan (Pennell, 2004). Private Family Time is sacrosanct and should be protected at all times to give families a chance to express themselves and make plans for their children. Key literature on FGC identifies private family time as another significant component to the

FGC process (Doolan, 2010; Nixon and Ashley (2007); Mirsky (2003); Browne - Olson (2009) also noted that under the FGC philosophies, it is important that the family has private time away from the professionals to collaborate and develop their plan. Private time provides the family with many opportunities which they may not have if the professionals are always in the room. Family members may be unwilling to ask questions, reveal concerns, and generally participate with the professionals in the room. In private, the family members may be able to have realistic discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of the parents, alternative caregivers, or the child's needs.

The family must work together and make future plans without the interference or dominance of professionals who may feel they know best. Fox (2018) asserts that private family time is seen as empowering to families as the plan to assist one of their own is theirs. Axford (2007) further argues that family plans have a greater potential for success as there is more investment where it is their ideas for intervention not those levied by professionals at the end of the private deliberations, the family presents their decision to the social worker and the coordinator (Hardin, 1996). It is my opinion that Private Family Time is what sets the FGC apart from any other professional meeting. This part of the FGC has been identified in chapter 5 as one of the forums where different power dynamics play out. Both the social worker and the FGC coordinator should ensure proper preparations and risk assessments should be done in order to avoid perpetuation of oppression for different family members. Power dynamics should always be assessed, and plans made to ensure all family members are able to participate fully in the process.

2.6.3.3 Plan presented and agreed

According to Olson (2009) plans that are developed in private family time depend on the circumstances and are therefore unique to the family situation. They often include services for parents and children, temporary placement for the children, or for extended family members to move in to help with the children. The plan must be detailed with specific proposals to address concerns raised by the referring professional that led to the convening of the FGC. The discussions among family members may be heated at times and there may be exhibitions of annoyance and frustration. There may also be a failure by the family to reach a consensus on a plan. If there is animosity, the FGC coordinator may be able to help resolve the issues. The plan should be written clearly so that family members understand what is expected of them and for agency and court personnel to understand what is required of the system.

2.8.3.4 Implementation of the plan

This is the time when the family start implementation of the family plan that was agreed in the FGC meeting. It is also important that the referrer has enough resources to provide the family to facilitate the implementation of the plan. It is important for the professionals to acknowledge resource limitations early in the FGC process. Where resources are scarce, the parents and family need to know this before they go into family time, so that the parents may offer a realistic proposal. The implementation phase can vary in length, depending on the contents of the plan (Ashley et. al 2006, pg. 66)

2.8.3.5 Review of the plan

Families are offered a Review FGC meeting where the progress of the plan implementation is reviewed and any challenges that could impede the implementation of this plan are explored and addressed. Ashley, et.al (2006) stated there should be an opportunity as part of the process to review the plan implementation processes, therefore a review needs to be convened to look at how the plan is working and make necessary adjustments to the plan if needed.

2.7 FGC Research

Previous research has found mixed results in frequently measured child welfare outcomes. Some studies have found positive outcomes, such as achieving more timely permanency and exiting out-of-home care more rapidly, increased exits to reunification, increased child and family safety and well-being, and children remaining connected to their families of origin (Crampton and Jackson, 2007, Pennell and Burford, 2000; Pennell, Edwards, and Burford, 2010; Sheets, Wittenstrom, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann, and Rodriguez. 2009). However, other studies have identified negative or neutral effects, including higher rates of placement and re-referrals for child maltreatment (Berzin, Cohen, Thomas, and Dawson, 2008; Sundell and Vinnerljung, 2004). Conversely, relating to culture sensitivity FGC has been seen as an appropriate practice and process, empowering families in societies where family and culture are of paramount importance.

International research from the United States, United Kingdom, Norway and Canada, cite findings on FGC that have demonstrated positive outcomes for children, families, and communities (Litchfield, Gatowski, and Dobbin, 2003; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and

Burford, 2003; Pennell and Burford, 2000; Thoennes, 2003; Titcomb and LeCroy, 2003; Velen and Devine, 2005; Walker, 2005; Wheeler and Johnson, 2003, Malmberg-Heimonen and Johansen, 2014, Department for Education, 2017). “Moderator-analyses indicate that in studies using a retrospective design, FGC leads to fewer reports of child maltreatment and reduction of out-of-home placements when compared to regular care, whereas this effect was not present in studies using prospective research designs” Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković and Stams (2016, pg. 106). This suggests FGCs can affect change and subsequently produce positive outcomes for children.

Brown (2003) explored the role of FGC in child protection and concluded that despite growing interest internationally in FGC and the vast number of local evaluations that have taken place, there still remains a dearth of rigorous research evidence concerning outcomes for children of decisions made though the FGC (p. 336). A review by Norwegian academics, Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014) propounds that existing research findings on central child welfare issues is weak (pg.7). Sen and Webb (2020) also echoed findings of mixed evidence on the impact of FGC on child welfare outcomes. The limited extant studies are of variable quality, and most of them refer to American conditions that cannot be automatically transferred to another country’s context. I believe in the importance of model implementation fidelity to ensure that the model is implemented in the same way wherever FGCs are done. I further believe that Ubuntu is embedded in the FGC as FGCs are about partnerships, relationships and valuing individuality within a collective because it advocates for the voices of all individuals to be heard and taken into consideration.

2.8. Challenges with FGC research

In chapter 1 and in this chapter, background information about FGC is cited. Some may even argue the jury is still out for the FGC model as some studies say it works (Litchfield, Gatowski, and Dobbin, 2003; Merkel-Holguin, Nixon, and Burford, 2003; Pennell and Burford, 2000; Thoennes, 2003; Titcomb and LeCroy, 2003; Velen and Devine, 2005; Walker, 2005; Wheeler and Johnson, 2003, Malmberg-Heimonen and Johansen, 2014, Department for Education, 2017), others produce mixed results (Crampton and Jackson, 2007, Pennell and Burford, 2000; Pennell, Edwards, and Burford, 2010; Sheets, Wittenstrom, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann, and Rodriguez. 2009). Other studies have produced neutral findings (Berzin, Cohen, Thomas, and Dawson, 2008; Sundell and Vinnerljung, 2004). Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014) found whether the use of FGC in child welfare achieves these intended results is unknown, as they cited lack of high-quality research to provide robust evidence that FGC reduces the serious and complex problems that have resulted in the involvement of child welfare.

There are ongoing discussions about how the evidence is gathered in FGC research. Rogers and Weiss (2007) argued when social interventions are being implemented, it becomes crucial to explore what works, under a spectrum of different conditions. De Jong, Schout and Abma (2015) disagree with researchers (Schuurman and Mulder, 2011) who argue research projects on FGC which have been carried out so far to examine its impact are meaningless, as there are very few studies which incorporated a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design. They question qualitative evaluation methods that have been used to date to examine FGC outcomes.

Morris and Connolly (2012) cautioned when FGC is increasingly evaluated by outcome studies, it 'positions such meetings as interventions, a position that would not be attributed to equivalent professionally driven decision-making forums' (pp. 49 –50). De Jong (2015) challenges the notion that randomised control trials should be used as 'gold standard' and wonders '…how evidence-based actually is this type of research when it is conducted outside the controlled setting of the laboratory or clinic, in the social reality of families, especially when the sample sizes are rather small, which so far has been the case with RCTs investigating FGC' (pg. 1624). Further discussions on the research methodology adopted in the current research will be undertaken in Chapter 6.

In supporting the article by de Jong et al. (2015) Creemers, Sundell, Dekovic, Dijkstra, Stams and Asscher (2017) took it forward by highlighting the importance of conducting research that allows for unprejudiced conclusions about the effectiveness of FGC and to enlighten the public about the limitations of other research designs that are used to measure effectiveness. They further put forward that randomised experiments ought to be the standard to evaluate the effectiveness of FGC. If methods that lack empirical support are preferred, it is vital to inform the service user and, if possible, receive consent. Creemer et al. (2017) point out that some of the apparently discouraging results may be accounted for by services of poor quality, not a fault of the FGC model (pg. 1266).

De Jong et al (2015a) put forward arguments that using Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) in FGC is difficult because FGC practice is not easy to control, and it requires large samples to obtain evidence that can be demonstrated statistically. De Jong and

Schout (2018) further argue an assumption can be made about the underlying mechanisms that explain the (lack of) success of FGC. They argue where there is a large and well-functioning social network, they can distribute tasks and roles over several shoulders, where every actor knows what to expect from the other and when to rely on each other. Likely, in these cases there is no need for FGC, but families could still benefit from it. An evaluation tool is required that can detect these mechanisms (pg. 166). De Jong and Schout (2018) put forward an idea of programme evaluation theory to evaluate the effectiveness of FGC. They argue 'a distinction is made between programme and theory failure to understand why a social intervention was not effective' (pg. 166).

Regarding the effectiveness of FGCs de Jong, Schout, Pennell and Abma (2015) pointed out a successful outcome of the FGC model does not automatically lead to desired results. For example, an FGC could lead to children being removed from home either permanently or in the short term, this may appear to be a negative outcome, however it could be the best for the children as it ensures their safety, which cannot presently be achieved within the family network. To conclude, whether an FGC produced positive outcomes or not, the simple question 'was the conference effective, and if not why?' should be asked to every participant of the conference. They could have varying perspectives and various thoughts for describing the conference as a success or failure depending upon their expectation at the beginning of the FGC process.

2.9 FGCs with children and families from minoritised ethnic groups

In section 2.3 I have detailed the historical developments of FGC as a response to the overrepresentation of Māori children in social services' statistics in New Zealand. This had come about as a result of many years of assimilationist policies and oppression

of minoritised ethnic groups in society. The pattern of overrepresentation of minoritised children continues in other Western countries. This is echoed by Ahmed, James, Tayabali & Watson (2022) who noted that Children and young people of black and mixed heritages remain over-represented in the child protection system. Cenat, McIntee, Mukunzi and Noorishad (2021) additionally state that this trend is not only seen in the UK but in other Western societies as well including the United States and Canada. Nygård & Saus (2019) cite several researchers who pointed out the ongoing overrepresentation of children from minoritised ethnic groups in social services statistics and are placed in care outside the family network at higher rates compared to their representation in that population in high income countries (Carter (2010), Church Li, Gross & Baldwin (2005) Whenever a decision needs to be taken about the addressing identified needs in relation to the child, which may suggest a referral to FGC, this process will be detailed in section 2.8 below. This section will look at literature detailing the use of FGCs with minoritised ethnic groups and key narratives around it

Reflecting on the origins of the FGC model, it would be fair to assume that this model would be the best approach to employ when working with families from minoritised ethnic groups. Nygård & Saus (2019) state that they see the model is ‘culturally sensitive, democratic and empowering’ (pg. 79). Moyle & Tauri (2016) have criticised FGCs and what they called the ‘myth’ of being rooted in indigenous culture, stating Māori participants experience FGC as a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach that supports the construction of Eurocentric policy. This suggests minoritised communities may feel alienated from the FGC process. It is therefore important to consider cultural differences that exist in order for it to meaningfully accommodate variations in culture among people from minoritised ethnic groups in a non – tokenistic manner. Baltra – Ulloa (2013) identified that tokenistic cultural social work shows itself when social work

gives the illusion of being culturally sufficient, while in reality maintaining the differences between minorities and majority. Haresnape (2009) found it ironic that a model that transpired from a concern about the disproportionality about Māori children in the New Zealand public care system still has rather limited information about its use in relation to minoritised ethnic groups in contemporary Western multi-racial societies. O'Shaughnessy et al. (2010) state there is little or no adequate evidence of FGCs with families from minoritised ethnic groups in the UK.

Admittedly, the studies referred to are dated, there have been further studies that look at the FGC model with children and families from minoritised ethnic groups e.g. Barn & Das (2014), Omar (2023) Nygård & Saus (2019), however these studies have focussed on the importance of cultural competence which will be discussed in chapter 3. When looking at the use of FGCs in social work contexts it is worth bearing in mind that social work evolved from colonialist history of undermining knowledge from minoritised ethnic groups across the world (Iokamidis and Trimikliniotis, 2020 in Mohamed, 2024). The starting point is that in the FGC process the idea of 'a family' does not represent all cultures and context (Cohen & Gershon, 2015). I have experienced this when working as a social worker where some families would leave the child with 'a relative'. For social workers from different cultural backgrounds this suggests a close relative, whereas for some families from minoritised ethnic groups or immigrant communities, this could suggest someone from the same country. Research by Nygård & Saus (2019) suggests that FGC at the ideological and conceptual level places emphasis on the importance of rethinking social services. They assert that social services is required to be applicable beyond Eurocentric systems and comply with the requirements of international law. Their research further highlights how FGC

can overcome the imbalance of power between cultural groups and compensate for the adverse effects of colonialism.

2.9 Identified gaps in literature

Frost et al (2014) noted whilst there is an extensive literature relating to FGCs, relatively few studies relate directly to outcomes; explicitly, there are few longitudinal studies that track change over time. These identified gaps in research were further echoed by Malmberg-Heimonen and Johansen (2013) who observed that few studies estimate the longer-term effects of FGCs, as previous research has been mainly focused only on the shorter-term effects of FGCs. A study by Dijkstra et al. (2016) posit that robust research proving effectiveness of FGC is limited. Hollinshead, et. Al. (2017) argued the same, stating rigorous research on the efficacy of family group conferencing is rare. Brand et al. (2019) pointed out that the heterogeneity in social care systems and resource structures makes it difficult to understand the international relevance and transferability of evidence-based approaches, and the likelihood of replicating effectiveness in new contexts. There remains a gap in literature regarding FGCs with children from minoritised ethnic groups as asserted by Chand & Thoburn (2005), O'Shaughnessy et al. (2010), Barn & Das (2014), Omar (2023) Nygård & Saus (2019). This therefore suggests a scope for further research on the applicability of FGCs in different contexts.

Later in this thesis (Chapter 3) Ubuntu, cultural competency and the decolonisation of social work will be discussed in the context of their link to FGC and to the arguments presented in this chapter about FGC and prior FGC research.

This section has highlighted challenges associated with FGC research. It has put forward different schools of thought when it comes to the approach that needs to be taken when researching FGC effectiveness. Different researchers like Skaale Havnen

and Christiansen (2014), Creemer et al. (2017), De Jong and Schout (2018) and De Jong et al (2015a) have also suggested what they feel works in FGC research from their perspective – putting forward merits and demerits of different models. Like any intervention, FGCs may not always work or may not work for every family referred. Whichever evaluation model is used 'children's rights of protection from abuse and neglect should never be compromised' Creemers et al (2017, pg. 1266).2.7 The Family Group Conferencing Model

2.10 Chapter summary

In chapter 1, I made personal links between the FGC model and my own Zulu culture. When greeting someone in Zulu you say 'sawubona' which means 'I see you'. This is a profound way to greet someone, friends and strangers alike as it accords a status of importance to someone knowing that they are seen and heard by you. This is one of the reasons the FGC model and the Māori culture resonate with me as it highlights the importance of seeing someone, which is central to Ubuntu and the Zulu culture. The local authority needs to see the social worker for the social worker to be able to see children and families, families need to see each other for the FGC process to be fruitful – through individually and collectively acknowledging needs and how they can be met; furthermore everyone needs to see the child for the whole village to be able to safely raise that child – that is one of the key ways we can effectively link the FGC model to social work.

Chapter 3 Theoretical framework Ubuntu, cultural competency and the decolonisation of child protection practice

The guiding moral code I was raised with and taught at school is Ubuntu, which is the overarching philosophy of the Black people of Africa. It is known by different names in different African communities and languages, (Mugumbate, Mupedziswa, Twikirize, Mthethwa, Desta and Oyinlola, 2023). Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) argued Ubuntu is a collection of knowledge, values and practices that the Black people of Africa view make people more human. It means 'I am because you are'. Shambare (2021) states that Ubuntu is founded on the importance of collectivism, interconnectedness, cooperation, harmony, maintaining good relationships and sensitivity to the wellbeing of other people individually or collectively. Mbingi (2000), Mbiti (1969) & Mupedziswa et al. 2019) have all pointed out that despite the changes that have taken place in African societies due to colonisation as well as globalisation, urbanisation, Christianisation and Islamisation, the core elements of their founding philosophy have not changed. This suggests wherever they are, people of African descent will continue to hold Ubuntu close to their hearts as it is the lens through which they make sense of the world.

'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' is a maxim that articulates the core ethos of Ubuntu philosophy. It means "a person is a person because of or through others" (Moloketi, 2009:243; Tutu, 2004:25-26) or *'I am because you are'*. Buntu or bantu means a human being whereas Ubuntu refers to the view, process, content, and quality of being human. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019, pg.28). Bishop Tutu (2012) defined it as an ancient African spiritual belief and way of life that highlights the strength in the community of humanity. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) trace the concept to different

communities and ethnic groups in Africa. In Angola they call it gimuntu, Botswana (Muthu), Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Gambia Liberia, Sierra Leonne and Mali (Maaya), Burundi (Ubuntu), Cameroon (Bato), Congo (Bantu), Democratic Republic of Congo (Bomoto or Bantu), Ethiopia (Medemer), Ghana (Biako ye), Kenya (Utu, Munto or Mondo), Malawi (Umunthu), Mozambique (Vumuntu), Namibia (Omundu), Nigeria (Mutunchi, Iwa or Agwa), Rwanda (Ubuntu), South Africa (Ubuntu or Botho), Tanzania (Utu, Obuntu or Bumuntu), Uganda (Obuntu), Zambia (Umunthu or Ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (Hunhu, Unhu, Otho or Ubuntu) Mbigi (1997) and Ramose (2003) clarify that of all the prevailing names, Ubuntu has become the most popular. It was popularised in South Africa, often leading to the mistaken belief amongst the global audience that the philosophy originated in South Africa (country) or Southern Africa (region).

Tutu (2012, pg. 31.) posited "Ubuntu is very difficult to render in the English language. It speaks to the very essence of being human. … A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are." According to Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) Ubuntu is passed down from generation to generation through observation, experience, language and art (pg. 28). I can relate to this as Ubuntu was part of my socialisation as it was one of the subjects in the curriculum in every black primary school in South Africa as I was growing up under the apartheid regime. I also remember the fairy tales and folklore from the elders in the family and the community which all focused on teaching about Ubuntu, the moral

of every story was the centrality of Ubuntu in everything that we did from how we treated each other, how you treat a stranger on the street and always making sure the next person has eaten before you eat.

Ubuntu philosophy, commonly characterised by communal relationality, communal ideals and human excellence forms part of the knowledge and wisdom of how African communities and families raise children (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019 pg. 26). It is perhaps why it is inextricably linked to FGC philosophy as Ubuntu is about human relations. It places emphasis on relationality - the need to think about community before the individual (Chipango, 2023). The Māori culture upon which FGC is premised, is also communal and it can be argued they too practice Ubuntu principles through the embodiment of *'I am because you are'* principles. This is evidenced in how the Māori see the child as belonging to the community and therefore if there are concerns at home the whole community comes together to ensure that the child's needs are met. Metz (2017) posits that through Ubuntu, it is necessary to identify and exhibit solidarity with others. Identifying with others entails considering oneself part of the whole, being close, sharing the way of life, belonging and being bound up with others (inhabiting a sense of togetherness and coordination). Exhibiting solidarity with others means a practice of achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, advancing the common good, (aid and sympathetic altruism) (Etiyebo, 2015).

There are three maxims associated with Ubuntu: a) being human is about the affirmation of one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and therefore establish respectful human relations. b) If and when faced with a choice between wealth and life preservation of another human being, always opt for the preservation

of life c) The king owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him.(Samkange and Samkange, 1980) Linked to these maxims is the importance of ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ this suggests that meaningful interactions among the child, family members and those outside the family circle are necessary for children to realise human excellence. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) highlight the crucial role played by adults in the creation of relational conditions that enable children to realise their personhood. This therefore suggests that Ubuntu informs ideal child socialisation practices in African contexts i.e., children are socialised with Ubuntu; they are both seen and heard within the community they operate.

As mentioned above, Samkange and Samkange (1980) cite an African maxim that says “the king owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him” (pg. 7). They continue to analyse this saying the king here refers to a leader of a home, family, school, workplace, village, community, organisation, country, nation or international. It also implies professionals such as social workers because of the power they have when working with service users, community or clients. Munro (2008) highlighted the propensity of individuals to depend on intuitive instead of analytical reasoning in times of high uncertainty meaning that where there is equivocal or incomplete evidence, the practitioner’s judgement is open to personal biases, including those based on cultural differences. This highlights the importance of Ubuntu, cultural competence and humility in social work. Social workers are expected to demonstrate an understanding of the role of culture both as it relates generally to human behaviour and to professional practice considerations (Murray, 2020)

3.1 Cultural competency and decolonising child protection practice

The adoption of the UN General Assembly Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on 13 September 2007 (United Nations General Assembly, 2008) has served as one of the sparks that have led to the recognition of the need to improve situations for impoverished and marginalised Peoples throughout the world. For social work this has highlighted 'all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating superiority of Peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable, and socially unjust' (United Nations General Assembly,2008: 2).

3.2 Definition of cultural competency and relevance to the decolonisation of Social Work

'Until the lions have their own historians the history of hunt will always glorify the hunter'. This African proverb attributed to the late Nigerian novelist, poet and academic Chinua Achebe is a perfect depiction of what this section is concerned with – decolonising social work. This thesis argues that the social work knowledge base and practice are unfairly skewed towards Eurocentric knowledge and practice origins, without consideration of wisdom from the Global South and minoritised ethnic communities. As a result of this, indigenous knowledge and wisdoms are often not considered in interventions to address child maltreatment. It is also for this reason that the Māori expressed an outcry which led to the convention of the Ministerial Committee, which gave rise to the FGC model. Nygard & Saus (2019) discuss the inherent bias towards Eurocentric worldview in the sciences limits indigenous participation in the dialogue of knowledge production. As a result of this indigenous knowledge is given less value in social work, which Flicker (2017) calls epistemic

injustice. Laird, 2008 and O'Hagan (2001) argued in the UK, the social work profession has been relatively slow to include the concept of cultural competence into training and practice.

Cross, Bazron, Dennis and Isaacs defined cultural competence). This collection of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that converge in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989).This therefore suggests a process in which social workers engage in an ethical manner with service users from diverse backgrounds by conducting assessments and interventions that are appropriate to the culture, context, class, and identity of the client (Lusk, Chavez, Palomo, and Palacios, 2014; Fong and Furato, 2001). The definition further suggests attitudes and actions that highlight the recognition, appreciation, and respectful adjustments to cultural differences (Greene-Moton and Minkler, 2020). Danso (2018) stated there is a need to go further and demonstrate cultural humility and a need to focus on learning and analysing power systems in response to cultural differences. According to Lusk, Terrazas and Salcido (2017) cultural humility is the foundation of critical cultural competence. They cite NASW (2015) who pointed out that for social workers to be culturally competent there needs to be three major elements present:

(1) the awareness of how diverse populations experience their uniqueness in a larger context.

(2) an understanding of intersectionality that examines oppression, discrimination, and domination; and

(3) a recognition of the social worker's position of prerogative and entitlement in relation to the populations they serve and with a recognition of the need to exercise cultural humility (NASW, 2015)

Social Work England, states that social workers need to understand their personal values as they can influence professional judgement and actions. They highlight the importance of respecting other people's values even when they are different from your own.

At the time of writing this thesis the world is still reeling from the events in Minneapolis, Minnesota that led to the cruel and senseless death of George Floyd in the hands of the police on May 25th, 2020. Events that followed led to the uprisings that reverberated all over the world and brought to focus, once again on issues of power differentials in society, beyond police brutality and taking down of statues that represent glorification of colonial oppressors. The Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum in some parts of the world that one never imagined it would e.g., Iran. The spotlight was also shone on the UK and its link to slavery and their record of police brutality against black people and other ethnic minorities. BASW and Social Work England (SWE) both published statements. SWE acknowledged that the Black Lives Matter movement has prompted them to reflect on racism, on the role of social work in tackling inequality and on the values that are upheld by SWE - social justice, human rights, shared responsibility, and respect (www.socialworkengland.org.uk accessed 06/08/2020). This has also highlighted the need for decolonising social work as highlighted in this thesis. Social justice cannot exist in a climate where some sections of the community remain systematically oppressed.

In addressing decolonising social work practice, it is crucial to locate how colonial power is associated with the professional role. Cook, in Marson and McKinney (2019) cites Gorelick (1986) who describes colonisation as an exercise of sovereignty by a European nation over a non-European territory which is entrenched in subjugation and racism (Smith, 2014), it further allows for the 'othering' of Africans (and other minoritised ethnic groups) as inferior, worthy only as a cheap labour force for the expansion of capitalism and the empire. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, (2000) point out the main interest in the colonised countries is material wealth for the coloniser not the wisdom, knowledge, religions, and philosophies that colonised people created over thousands of years. Smith (2014) further observed that within colonisation lay the grounds for structural inequality in education and professional practice with coercive policies that legalised the exploitation of indigenous people. In recent years calls to decolonise social work have intensified, these calls have been mainly led by scholars like Hart (2002); Gray and Coates and Hetherington (2016)

Grosfoguel, (2009) posits that decoloniality is a long-term process of re-signification through strategies that promote thinking from Indigenous cosmologies and wisdoms. Decolonisation aims to address the effects of colonialism and establish opportunities for the promotion of traditional practices in current settings. Hart (2002) noted the condemnation of the exclusive application of Western methodologies. As an alternative the 'indigenisation' of social work has been suggested to 'address culturally relevant and context-specific problems' for culturally diverse populations (Gray, Coates and Hetherington, 2016, p. 27).

Focusing specifically upon the practice of child protection it is worth acknowledging that generally social work and specifically child protection are practiced differently in different cultures. An example of this is the endogenous form of child protection discussed by Chilwalo (2020). This model is seen to be associated with the norms and values in society which are rooted in the pre-colonial African rural setting which illustrates how Africans are anchored within the community and connected to community members. Therein lies the concept of “togetherness/cohesiveness” or “Ubuntu”, that which binds local people together is reverberated. Many people in countries in the Global South do not hold the same world view and set of narratives, meanings, customs and social rules as those that underlie the formalised national or international child protection systems (Ibid). Mabeyo and Kiwelu (2019) and Wessells, (2015) argued, indigenous models are found to be more effective because they are based on local knowledge. This also means they are relevant to local realities and are highly supported and rich in potential child protection resource such as teachers, parents, traditional leaders. Imported concepts such as “child protection/safeguarding” and “children’s rights” among many others in that realm, represent contested areas in which international norms do not reliably coincide with local perceptions and realities. It is through such initiatives that social work can be truly decolonised.

It is therefore important to acknowledge other forms of knowledge in order to incorporate them when working with families from different backgrounds. Ngobese (2022) argues that cultural awareness is about taking time to consciously reflect on the similarities and differences between people from different groups. This awareness includes considerations of issues related to power, privilege, and oppression. Social workers are required to be particularly aware of the interplay between culture and the

concerns for which service users are seeking help. Cultural awareness on its own is not enough without cultural humility, sensitivity and responsiveness. Cultural humility is about social workers seeing themselves as learners, not viewing themselves as experts in other people's cultures. You can do this through researching and asking people themselves what you need to understand about their culture (Ibid)

Western perspectives, theories and models have a propensity to be subjective or individualistic or both and heavily legislated by governments or standardised by professionals (Ibid). Davies, Ross, Cocks, and Foote (2023) point out an international shift towards the recognition of children's rights to a voice, concurrent with an acknowledgement of the importance of family inclusion in child protection processes. (Gilbert, Parton and Skiveness, 2011; Munro, 2019) point out that child protection systems across Europe and in countries such as the United States and Australia have, in principle, sought to move away from punitive approaches towards family support systems that recognise that the needs of children and their families cannot be separated.

One way of addressing these concerns and promoting decolonisation is to provide traditional practices in current settings by combining the use of two traditional indigenous approaches, FGC and Ubuntu. The former provides the model of intervention, and the latter adapts the approach slightly to allow for a culturally specific and relevant method to address concerns in the African community. FGC as a model has the potential to reduce power differential, putting the decision-making process regarding the responsibility for protection of children firmly in the hands of the family,

3.2 Culture as contextualised childhood

Childhood is a changing social phenomenon; therefore, it is important to review how this concept has been shaped by history, culture and society (Chisnell and Kelly, 2019, pg. 3). Whilst I have opted to avoid discussing the discourse around the social construction of childhood in detail, there is a need to mention the idea as I believe it is important in discussing the child's voice or rights. I also acknowledge that there exists a significant body of research to demonstrate and support the perception that childhood is defined and constructed by society rather than determined by biology Recent research e.g., Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) also demonstrates that conceptions of childhood have changed over time and across cultures. Twum-Danso and Okyere (2020) further point out that historical constructions of childhood and the social location of children within different societies have resulted in this group being left out from decision-making at the family, civic, national, and universal levels, including those that relate mainly to children and young people's own lives.

The subsequent inclusion of participation rights with its emphasis placed on the paramountcy of children's voices in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) (1989) was aimed at addressing this shortcoming. This has radically changed the way social work operates with children and young people. Head (1998) posits the Convention as having fundamental implications for those who work with children or seek to represent their interests in court, education, health, and social policy arenas. Another point worth noting is that this literature on childhood is based on the ideas and milestones of a Western child. This suggests a child from other backgrounds may not be supported adequately as their needs may not be understood or their families deemed as neglectful. Understanding these informational disparities is important for decolonising social work practice.

3.3 Historical view of a child and childhood

Through the centuries, children have been deemed to lack capacity for consent or to make legal and welfare decisions, including where they would like to live and with whom, legal contracts and medical procedure. A Victorian adage held that 'children should be seen and not heard', this suggested only adults know what is in the child's best interest and not the child themselves. Aries (1962) believed that in medieval ages there was no concept of childhood. Deducing from the evidence drawn from European paintings and books of that time, he believed they revealed that children seemed to be viewed as tiny adults. Their clothing and bodily sizes are the same as those of adults. The suggestion that children deserve special protection and treatment did not exist at that time. They had no special clothing, food, social space, or time which amounted to a childhood culture. This is different from how a child has always been viewed in the African culture, children have always seen as such, and their needs addressed with such understanding. Ilias and Akter (2017) observed that theories that viewed childhood as a concept demonstrated the development of the psychological or emotional significance of childhood over time as viewed from the state of adulthood. Around the 18th century, perceptions of childhood in the west began to change, with children starting to be viewed as innocent and in need of protection. They were viewed as weak and vulnerable to inducement. It was only in the 19th century that institutions aimed at providing refuge to maltreated or neglected children were founded. Similar institutions continued to be established over the years.

It is my observation here that their aims were not as noble as they seemed, they were not totally sensitive to the welfare of children. They were not aimed at the protection

of children, but the prevention of children from becoming economic burdens and threats to society (ibid). Willems (2019) identifies this as the first wave of children's emancipation from the most important form of oppression, poverty. After the industrial revolution in the early 19th century, children were no longer required to contribute economically. The father, who worked outside the family home, was now the main breadwinner.

Up until the 1990s, theories of childhood tended to be determined in a "top-down" approach i.e., from an adult perspective. The 1924 League of Nations Declaration of the Rights of a Child and the 1948 United Nations Declaration of The Rights of a child did not make any reference to the child's right to participate in decision making. Willems (2019) identifies this as the second wave, which consisted of several developments in children's social and legal status that largely began after the nearly universal adoption of the UNCRC in 1989. UNCRC (1989) created an environment for re-examining this tendency and a subsequent focus on listening to the views of the child and children's rights of expression in general. The capacity to make these decisions and determinations that are deemed to be in the child's best interest were bestowed upon their main carer until the child reached what was deemed the age of legal majority. James and Prout (2015, pg. 7) argued 'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture. It is these 'facts of culture' which may vary, and which may be said to make of childhood a social institution. It is in this sense, therefore, that one can talk of the social construction of childhood…'

The world has since made a bit of progress from that stance and now there are greater efforts to keep the voice of the child as central in all aspects of life that affect them.

There is greater effort to both see and hear children, to apply Ubuntu in dealing with children. It is not regarded an acceptable order anymore that children remain under parental power until they reach a determined age. The child's competence to make decisions can now be determined though the Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines, which help workers who work with children to balance the necessity to hear the children's views, wishes and feelings with the responsibility to keep them safe or to determine whether the child is mature enough to make own decisions and understand the implications thereof (NSPCC).

Discussing the brief history of 'seeing and hearing' the children it is easy for one to forget that only in 1948 did the world put in place the first affirmation and protection of every individual's human rights through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the time of this adoption, the child was not mentioned as they were still seen as the property of the adults in their lives, like the parents and family, therefore, there were no specific provisions that focussed on this child. This was only rectified more than a decade later in 1959 with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of a Child. This was considered a counterpart to the UDHR specifically in relation to children. It referred to human rights and explicitly decreed that due to the child's lack of physical and intellectual maturity, required special care and protection and special judicial protection. One might argue that there have been considerable developments since then in seeing a child as a complete person with rights and opinions of their own.

In 1948 the UN General Assembly passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which refers to childhood as "entitled to special care and assistance". In 1989, the

Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted which was the first international human rights treaty to bring together the universal set of principles concerning children in a unique instrument, and the first to advocate child rights as a legal requirement imperative:

- Defined childhood as a separate space from adulthood and recognised that what is appropriate for an adult may not be suitable for a child.
- Called on governments to provide material assistance and support to families and to prevent children from being separated from their parents.
- Recognised that children are the holders of their own rights and are therefore not passive recipients of charity but empowered actors in their own development.

A central ethos of the FGC model and similar decision-making processes is the importance of the voice of the child being heard and considered in the decision – making process (Fox, 2018). The voice of the child in the FGC process has been discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8. According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) every child has the right to be heard and that they should be provided with opportunities to express their views, wishes and feelings. The Convention is premised upon four principles:

- the child's right not to be discriminated against
- the child's best interests as a fundamental consideration in all decisions that concern them.
- the child's right to life and development and

- the child's right to participate and to express their views.

Nelson Mandela poignantly pointed out ‘the true character of society is revealed in how it treats its children’ (Mandela, 1997). This again refers to the concept of Ubuntu as introduced in Chapter 1. Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) Convention decrees every child has the right to participate in matters affecting them, regardless of their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status. The Children Act (1989) echoes the same sentiments about children’s participation. Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez & Pastor (2017) argue the right of children to participate in decisions that impact their lives has been widely recognised but believe this is hardly present in the decision making processes within the child protection system in the UK. A case in point is how access was not granted to children as part of this research, when this research was meant to give voice to the children. This therefore echoes Balsells et al (2017)’s argument about the children’s right to participate being unrecognised, sometimes in the guise of ‘protecting’ them.

The Guidance from the UNCRC (1989) suggests, children’s participation involves ongoing processes, which include ‘information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are considered and can shape the outcome of such processes. Franklin and Sloper009) suggest flexibility in understanding of what counts as involvement when working with children with disabilities, with professionals working at whatever level of participation one can accomplish. Bouma, López, Knorth & Grietens, (2018) cite the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 2009) who state the rights of the children to participate is not constrained by the age of the child and neither are

children with disabilities, refugee children or other children who do not speak the majority language and should be enabled to participate. Hence why the UNCRC (1989) dissuades the use of age limits in legislation or practice and highlights the importance to respect non-verbal forms of communication and any modes of communication for children with disabilities.

'Working Together' (2018) suggests that children should be placed at the centre of the child protection process through developing a relationship and gathering information about their needs, views, wishes and feelings. Also, through providing honest and accurate information about what is happening and possible future outcomes. An independent review into child protection and social work practice testified on a submission by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, where children who had experience of the child protection system 'voiced the importance of being heard separately from their parents and being listened to' (pg. 26, Munro 2011). Furthermore, to contextualise the field Bourdieu will be discussed particularly his theories of capital and habitus – the systems within which the child exists. Bourdieu links this to how the world of the child is shaped – in other words; theorising the how of the village coming together to raise a child as one of the maxims of Ubuntu. The core aspects of FGC, partnership working, and cultural competency also connect the intervention with decolonising child protection practice and Ubuntu. In the next chapter I will discuss partnership work and its connection to the core elements of this thesis.

Chapter 4 Partnership Working

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the concept of partnership working between agencies as directed by the report *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2018). Furthermore, it will look at three different models of working with families under the banner of partnership working. It will explore how these models of working empower families to take part in the decision-making processes, in a similar way to that of the FGC model. The arguments made within this thesis relate to the importance of the maxim 'it takes a village to raise a child' which, as already stated is one of the central tenets of Ubuntu – the place of the child within the family and indeed the community. It is therefore important for that village to be placed in a position to achieve this by sharing information and involving them in making safety plans for the children as demonstrated through the FGC model.

According to Thompson (2015), simply expressed, partnership is about collaborating with service users and not doing things to or for them. It is a shift away from an outdated 'social medicine' model where social workers were perceived to be experts who diagnose the problem and prescribe a cure or a 'treatment programme' (Thompson, 2015 pg. 140). It is about involving service users in the planning of services and development of policy, which is referred to as a service user involvement approach. It also involves working in collaboration with other professionals in a multi-agency approach. Lack of understanding, poor communication, and misinterpretation of information between professionals were found to be the cause. The recommendation highlighted the importance of increased accountability and facilitation of multi-disciplinary practice (CM 5730, 2003:3). Partnership is about recognising that the best outcomes are to be achieved through working as effectively as possible with professionals from other disciplines (Thompson, 2015). Partnership working is marked by respect for one another, role divisions, rights to information, accountability, competence, and value accorded to individual input. Each partner is seen as having something to contribute, power is shared, decisions are made jointly, and roles are not only respected but are also backed by legal and moral rights (Tunnard, (1991) in Jackson and Morris 1994).

Thompson (2015: 140) further asserted that a partnership – based approach is one whereby the worker carries out the assessment of the situation working closely with the service user and their carers where appropriate, with the aim of establishing agreement on the identified areas of concern, desired outcome, and action plan to address the said concerns. Resulting intervention involves all significant parties working collaboratively to ensure that identified needs and concerns are addressed to the agreed objective. All parties then review the situation together at regular intervals

until the end of the intervention. For partnership working to succeed, it is important for social workers to identify protective factors within the family network. Protective factors, as already stated in Chapter 2 are situations or attributes of individuals, families, communities when in existence, promote well-being and reduce the risk for negative outcomes. These factors reduce the likelihood of maltreatment and neglect and help children achieve better outcomes in school, work, and life (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Ashley (2022) argued the majority of parents care about their children despite needing support and help, at times, to care for them safely or prevent the escalation of crises. Partnership working therefore gives opportunities for practitioners and families to develop a relationship. It gives opportunities for practitioners to get to know the family, to provide high support and of course, high challenge. Families often know considerably more about their children and their situation than the state ever will. If we don't work with families, we lose all that valuable knowledge and insight (Community Care, January 5, 2022).

Partnership working and multi-agency working are sometimes used interchangeably to mean working in partnership with families and professionals. *Working Together* (2010) explicitly mentioned the use of FGCs to work in partnership with families either before the threshold for a CP Case Conference has been met, or to develop the outline CP plan into a fully worked up plan. Literature on multi – agency working, like *Working Together* and all its revisions, is always aimed at professionals, not families. A policy critique for Working Together, would be that it is about doing to or for children and families but not doing with children and families, conversely Metze, Abma & Kwekkeboom (2015) pointed out the FGC model combines the call for equal rights and self-management coming from clients and client movements, as well as with the pressure towards organising more informal and less professional care coming from

the governments. Potentially, the FGC can represent a more social embodiment of the shift towards a liberal care model. It is therefore interconnected to core aspects of FGC as FGCs highlight the importance of family led solutions. It is also connected to aspects of Ubuntu as Ubuntu communal and relational. It is about decolonising because it looks at families and relationships in their traditional sense and address them according to how the family sees themselves and their culture.

Partnership can be explained through the inclusion of Bourdieu's key concepts of field, capital, and habitus. Bourdieu places emphasis on the social nature of interactions. He seeks to determine how people can exist as both individuals and social beings. Social capital operates in the structure of human relations and is therefore hard to define in words its effectiveness is understood in its capacity to facilitate productive activity. This is achieved through the formation of social relationships built up over time which enables individuals to achieve their interests over-and-above those that can only be attained independently. In the context of partnership working therefore, this suggests the importance of different agencies working together with children and families to achieve what cannot be achieved by one agency in isolation.

4.2 The importance of partnership working to the decolonisation of social work

When looking at decolonising social work child protection practice this thesis argues it is imperative to involve other agencies in supporting families to make safe plans for the children as part of culturally competent practice. Central to this is the importance of building rapport with children and families, this can only be achieved in the context where these relationships are based on respect and understanding embodied through the concept of Ubuntu.

Recent events that have brought the Black Lives Matter movement to world attention have highlighted the importance of partnership working with public officials. These events have also prompted questioning of how indigenous communities globally are treated in different aspects of their lives e.g., their land, language, culture and practices. Bourdieu (1977) put forward the concept of habitus to explain how social and cultural messages shape individual thoughts and actions (O'Brien and Fathaigh, 2005). Whilst the habitus is not wholly structured it is still strongly influenced by historical, social and cultural contexts. Bourdieu's theories will be discussed further in chapter 6.

O'Brien and Fathaigh (2005) argue it is a way to explain how social and cultural messages (both actual and symbolic) shape individual's thoughts and actions (pg. 68). In the context of unequal power relations as working with social workers is often experienced by families, the importance of families being able to trust social workers. The FGC is one of the ways this can be done i.e., leaving families alone to come up with their plans at private family time is one of the ways power is given back to families instead of it being rested in the hands of social workers. This is done through the understanding of the field within which the child and their family operate.

Partnership working has come a long way to be recognised as the key approach to ensuring that the child and family remain at the centre of all decision making. Partnership working involves cooperative working between agencies and partnership working with families. One is sceptical to use the concept of partnership as a straightforward concept, meaning – its application can be challenging at times as one needs to take into cognisance the need to protect the children and the inherent power relations that come from social work being the arm of the state. Presented herein, is

the evidence that social work continues to learn and strive to use the power assigned to the profession to give power back to families. Partnership working therefore becomes a reality only when social workers make a conscious effort to identify oppressive behaviour and change organisational cultures to put children and families at the centre of decision making.

The next chapter will look at the concepts of power and empowerment as they manifest in the FGC process. It acknowledges that the ‘need’ for power in the relationship between social workers and families, is in order to keep children safe from maltreatment. It further acknowledges that this power does not need to be oppressive.

Chapter 5 Power and empowerment in the FGC process

5.1 Introduction

Dalrymple and Burke (1995, pg. 67) asked a question “Can social work practice ever be based on equal power relationships?” (Dalrymple and Burke cited in Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005:439), they expanded on this to ask whether anti-oppressive practice can exist in relationships that are characterised by power differentials and this “top-down” approach. There is a potential for this power to be misused in the service of the social worker’s own needs or ego, which can leave children and families feeling de-skilled, disempowered, and reluctant to engage in future intervention if social workers do not fully appreciate the range of ways in which this power can be exercised” Howarth and Morrison (1999:41). I take these questions further to ask whether this power exists within indigenous cultures, therefore asking if within Ubuntu moral code and in decolonised social work practice there are no power dynamics at all.

Power is an important element in every relationship and key motivating influence. Milner, Myers & O’Byrne (2020) put forward that all relationships whether between two individuals, two different groups or between rulers and subjects can be said to be a result of power (pg. 21). This suggests societal structures are based on power in all aspects of life in society. It can be argued that all professions have power that results from their assigned responsibilities. Sometimes this power is real or perceived due to their positions as pointes of entry to services and resources. Whilst social workers may at times feel powerless in their position, they are still able to exercise different kinds of power that come from the legislative frameworks within which they operate (Beckett, Maynard and Jordan, 2017). An example of this is when social workers request a care order or an emergency protection order from court to protect children

who they feel are at risk of harm. Such orders give powers to social workers to ensure families are physically compelled to hand over their children and they can enlist the support of the police if necessary. Saar Heiman (2023) cites Dumbrill, (2006); Maiter, Palmer & Manji, (2006) and Damiani-Taraba, Dumbrill, Gladstone, Koster, Leslie & Charles (2017) who all argue parental perceptions of the use of power have been found to have direct impact on their responses to support and interventions as well as on the ability of social workers and parents to form positive helping relationships.

This chapter will look at and differentiate between power and empowerment in the FGC process, it will recognise the multi – layered nature and dynamics of power in the FGC process i.e., power between the social worker and their managers, power between social workers and families, power dynamics between different family members and dynamics of power between the child and the adults in the family. I argue that Ubuntu as well as the FGC process does not suggest the absence of power, but it is about collective responsibilities to ensure that even the weakest in that community are represented and their needs addressed in a non-oppressive manner. It links to previous chapters by highlighting the manifestation of power in working with children from minoritised ethnic groups. This includes power in decision making about their children, which could lead to the overrepresentation of these children in social services statistics as alluded to in chapter 2. A historical review of power and empowerment will now be discussed.

5.2 Power

Despite its centrality to social work, power is an elusive and at times difficult concept to grasp. Often, we may directly observe the effects of power, rather than the operation

of power itself (Hodgson and Watts, 2017 pg. 48). Power has numerous definitions and is consequently a contested concept the social work literature reflects shared assumptions regarding its nature, sources, and manifestations (Saar-Heiman, 2023). Cartwright (1959) pointed out rather obviously that power is a central feature of everyday life. Bourdieu argued the concepts of capital, field and habitus were ultimately embedded in relations of power (Burkett, 2004) and were part of a complex theory that sought to explain the way that social inequality is reproduced, it is also how colonial power has managed to thrive in society.

According to Max Webber (1979 pg. 53) power is "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." This definition suggests coercion or authority of the actor over other actors the actor will have his way without considering the views, wishes and feelings of the other actors. Webber's focus on power was how it is used to force your will on other people. Karl Marx (1977) applied the concept of power in relation to social classes, proximity to the means of production and social systems rather than individuals. He argued that power rests in a social class's position in the relation to means of production. This is supported by the ongoing intersectionality between race and class poverty (Bernard, 2020)

Talcott Parsons (1963) on the other hand, argued that power is not a matter of social coercion and domination, but instead flows from a social system's potential to coordinate human activity and resources in order to accomplish goals. He defined power as the 'generalised capacity of a social system to get things done in the interest of collective goals' (Parsons, 1960 pg. 181). He further spoke of 'institutionalisation of authority' (Parsons, 1968), which seem to come naturally for power to be bestowed

upon people who are in positions of authority, such as social workers, the police and the courts. This institutionalisation of authority is similar to Bourdieu's concept of cultural and economic capitals. Being a structural functionalist, Parsons was interested in how social order is maintained when all the individuals have different needs and self-interests, which are at times implemented at the expense of the others. In other words, economic subsystems need to carry out an adaptive function, whereas the political subsystem sets goals and means of attaining them, the community subsystem performs integrative work, and the educational subsystem transmits culture and values (Giddens and Sutton, 2021).

This is how social workers as an arm of the state are tasked with child protection functions that come with certain powers and responsibilities. Foucault (1998) believed that power operates through a discourse and influences public attitudes for instance the change in discourse has largely removed stigma on having children out of wedlock and has changed attitudes towards same sex relationships. Joseph (2020) expresses the understanding of power as nuanced in relationships and not always overt. The radical critique of social work suggests that when social workers use their authority they are primarily acting as agents of social control, policing the potential deviance of marginalised social groups on behalf of the state organisation that essentially reflects the interest of an already privileged section of society (Corigan and Leonard, 1978 cited by Tew 2006). A different view suggests that it becomes possible to distinguish how social workers may deploy power and authority in ways that may be productive rather than ways that may be limiting or oppressive and generally counterproductive, although negotiating this boundary may not always be easy within agencies in which social workers may themselves feel subject to limiting or oppressive forms of organisational power.

Moreau and Frost (1993;126) observed that the power differential between workers and clients in social work settings can be reduced by maintaining respect for the client's dignity and autonomy, validating strengths and articulating limits to the professional role, clear contracting, encouraging self-help and the use of groups and self-disclosures. Howe (2008) posits that relationship based social work is of paramount importance and should be at the heart of good social work practice. This is supported by the Ubuntu based practice that is based on improving and repairing relationships between people and communities. It is acknowledged that social workers are particularly busy however it is crucial that they take the time needed to build positive working relationships with children and families. This will help families to feel able to be open and honest about their circumstances and how they believe they can be supported. In restorative practice this is called building social capital.

Saar – Heiman (2023) argues power in social work is perceived in different ways:

- A multi - directional and non-linear construct (Mc Gregor, Devaney and Moran, 2021). It is interesting that McGregor et al. call it a construct, which suggests it is something that is created and elastic in its definition. It can therefore be considered a process, a product, and a practice. This can relate to social work processes like the CP process which is about creating safety plans and is part of the local authority's processes in line with national legislation.

- As both a social construct associated with social structures and contexts and a relational concept relevant to interactions between two or more people (Bundy – Fazioli et al, 2009). Power takes place within a context of a relationship for example a relationship between social work professionals

and families. The FGC is also one of the social work interactions where power can be seen in play.

- Can be exercised in various forms, such as referent power, expert power, reward power, coercive power, and legitimate power (French and Raven, 1959). This highlights that power can be exercised professionally, institutionally and legislatively, all of which can be exercised in the social work context.

- Tew's "matrix of power relations" (2006) demonstrates power in itself is neither good nor bad. Tew shares the same sentiments as expressed by Foucault (1998). rejects the prevailing notion that power is always about the strong oppressing the weak, the rich oppressing the poor, the monarchy oppressing its subjects. He suggests that in the modern world, power is spread throughout society and internalises societal norms and we end up policing ourselves and other people, whether consciously or unconsciously and act as unwitting enforcers of the power structure. Tew further infers different approaches of constructive and restricted use of power in social relations and social work practice.

- It is embedded in specific contexts and times. This suggests the content and forms of enactment of power will vary according to the setting (Smith, 2010)

Lonne, Harries & Featherstone (2015) point out an expanding body of important literature calls for social workers to be aware of their power, challenge power imbalances, and carefully manage and balance the tension between their care and

control/support and protection functions by using their power gently, mindfully, and judiciously. Social workers often deal with people whose difficulties are a result of circumstances that they feel powerless to change due to having no power. Social workers need to bear in mind that those who experience use and misuse of power are, people who are already, very powerless.

5.3 Power and culture

Growing up during apartheid in South Africa, I had a difficult relationship with authority and power. This manifested in negative feelings towards the police, despite growing up in one of the safest neighbourhoods in our township, where doors were literally left unlocked. When I grew older, I was able to reflect on those feelings and the irony of living in a well policed area yet lacking trust in the police. This helped with reflection on how other people's perception of the power held by social workers could be about perhaps the taking away of children or if looking at it another way, it could be about protecting children. Power is differentially expressed and experienced depending upon structural, systemic, cultural and other factors. Thus, many people who experience social work interventions may already have negative experiences of power, or they may be from a minoritised community, or they may be women and children. Dreyfus & Rabinow (1986) argues Bourdieu has taught us to ask in what field of power, and in what position in that field, any given author writes (pg. 252). There is evidence to suggest the negative ways in which power exercised by social workers in some situations impacts these groups. Foucault (2003) considered power and resistance to be interrelated, therefore when service users appear reluctant to engage, it could be how they exercise power in their state of powerlessness. Acts of resistance are sometimes how the powerless exercise their power.

Marx (1962) pointed out that it is in the realm of non-material culture that a minority can maintain unjust power over the majority. He reasoned that subscribing to mainstream values, norms, and beliefs keep people invested in unequal social systems that do not work in their best interests, but rather, benefit the powerful minority.

I have discussed my identity and the importance of the moral code of Ubuntu, through which I was socialised in Chapter 3. Cultural identity is therefore something that is very close to my heart not only in this research but more so since coming to the UK and experiencing being an ethnic minority. Neil and Neil (2011) argued power is synonymous with the concept of identity. Therefore, as it is with identity, it is essentially interpersonal. They continue to argue that this relational power is the most personal expression of power as it deals with direct acquisition and control. They believe it is often about conflict and always about change. When discussing the family, one feels it is important to acknowledge, the role of culture in how familial decisions are made. Thus, this is relevant because, as previously described in chapters 1 and 2 the concept of FGC itself came from a cultural decision-making process in recognition of the Māori communal decision-making processes. Cole (2020) argues culture refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life, like values, beliefs, systems of language, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a collective.

It also includes the material objects that are common to that group or society. Pöllmann, (2013) discussing Bourdieu argued cultures can be conceived as field-related inter-individual habitus overlaps that operate as “more or less consciously learned, and more or less closely “shared” frames of perception, thought, and

(inter)action" (pg.1) This suggests that when families interact either within themselves or within the social welfare sphere they will do so according to their shared understanding of their culturally transmitted values and how they see the world.

From its various definitions power is about inequality and hierarchy. I grew up in a very tightly knit Zulu culture. Interestingly the Zulu culture is generally perceived to be patriarchal and perhaps oppressive at times. As with any culture, there are aspects that could be perceived as oppressive, however the bulk of the decision-making lies in the hands of women. These are the core values of Ubuntu, that were passed down by my grandmother who often told the story of my grandfather working while she stayed at home to look after the children but who was never allowed to open his pay packet because only she as a wife, can open it and give him some pocket money. That culture, within which at some point women were not allowed to attend community meetings but the men who sat in those meetings always adjourned the meeting to allow time for them to get back home to consult their wives. Therefore, perception of any culture as only oppressive is not accurate in all situations.

The perception that power is handed over from social services to families is challenged by some Māori writers like Love (2002), Tauri (1999) and Walker (1996) who contend that the adoption of conferencing was not necessarily a victory, but that FGC has co-opted and incorporated Māori perspectives, leaving intact the structural power relationships that exist within the child welfare arena. Tauri (2014) further argues that much of the government sponsored research emphasises the co-operative nature of the FGC process and the disregarding of whanau (family) members and 'cultural experts' This suggests that government-sponsored research does not focus on power differentials and how the FGC process itself could be an

oppressive platform. In addition, the adoption of FGC did not give the Māori any power Wolf (2001) reflected on how anthropologists have relied heavily on ideas of cultural unity but did not pay enough attention to power structures. Conversely, other social and human sciences look to structures of dominance without paying attention to specific cultural configurations. Wolf (2001) felt that human sciences were unable or unwilling to come to grip with how cultural configurations intertwine with considerations of power (pg. 74). This concurs with Bourdieu's argument stated earlier in Chapter 6 about power being culturally and symbolically created.

This further concurs with Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (1984). Hofstede identified how societies acknowledge inequality among people. Inequality exists in people physically, intellectually and in societal standing, in terms of their status. Some societies allow these inequalities to grow over time e.g., through cultural practices. They grow into power and wealth inequalities; the latter may become hereditary and no longer related to physical and intellectual capacities at all. Despite this, it is acknowledged that no society has yet achieved absolute equality, as a result of strong forces in society that perpetuate an existing colonial status quo.

All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others. This degree of inequality is measured by the Power Distance scale, which also runs from 0 (small Power Distance) to 100 (large Power Distance) (Milosevic, 2019). Societies with a high-power distance ratio are more likely to accept decisions made by social workers without challenging them, unlike those with a low Power Distance ratio as they have a different perception on power and believe power can be challenged. In most households in the UK, power is held in the hands of men. According to a British Council report men remain over-represented in almost all positions of power and

decision-making in the UK (British Council, 2016). I also remain aware that there are other aspects of power dynamics that can play out in families between different family members.

These power dynamics are likely to play out in the FGC process thereby being potentially oppressive to those less powerful - often women and children (Connolly and McKenzie,
1999). Bourdieu (1984) calls these unequal power relations the dominant and the dominated. When the dominant and the dominated come together in the FGC setting, there is a chance that such unequal and oppressive dynamics can play out in the FGC process especially during private family time. The feminist theory argues the family has 'traditionally legitimated the commission of violence against women and children' (Kelly, 1988). Arnull and Stewart (2021) cite Kennedy (2018) who urges recognition that within many jurisdictions, including England and Wales, the law has historically legitimated certain forms of violence that could be used by a husband (male) to a wife (female). Robertson (1996) Lupton and Nixon (1999) echo these concerns about the FGC principles and practice. These concerns mainly relate to the reproduction and reinforcement of family power imbalances during private family time, particularly along dimensions of gender and generation. This suggests that if care is not taken to seek everyone's views; some voices e.g., women and children could be left out of these forums.

With the awareness of prevalent violence against women in families coming to the attention of social services and the frequency of male offenders in child maltreatment (e.g., child sexual abuse), many welfare professionals and potential family participants

have expressed worries about possible male dominance or aggression in the FGC (Holland et al, 2005). This is often addressed by a thorough risk assessment. Risk assessment helps to identify areas of concern to help decide if it would be safe to hold an FGC. A study by Connolly (2006) indicates the potential for confrontational dynamics in the FGC private family time to promote within family challenge and self-regulation. As families are more likely to talk freely with each other in the absence of professionals, the FGC avails a context within which family members can pressurise other family members. The findings of the study additionally indicated that pressure can also be exerted by more powerful members within the family and that decisions may reflect the distinct interests or beliefs of individual family members. This raises several issues with respect to power differentials in families and how they impact family processes. Connolly (2006) highlighted that the FGC coordinator is chiefly responsible for lessening the potential damage in an FGC. Therefore, it is crucial to have an experienced FGC coordinator who has an in-depth knowledge about family functioning and the impact of intimidating dynamics on processes of participation.

Parsons (1963) marvelled at the concept of power, stating that despite its long history, there remains a noteworthy lack of agreement both about its precise definition, and about many features of the theoretical framework in which it should be located. Intergenerational power can play out between adults and the younger generation in the FGC process. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1989) the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care.

When discussing the issue of power dynamics between the children and adults in the FGC arena, one wonders if children are in a position to assert any power in these relationships as the UNHCR (1989) declaration seems to assert categorically that they need special safeguards as a consequence of their lack of maturity. If they lack maturity, how then can they be expected to take part in the decision-making processes? Andersson and Bjerkman (1999); Horverak et al. (2002) and Strandbu (2007) have all identified the centrality of a child's voice on their views, wishes and feelings in the FGC process and have therefore incorporated this as a fifth cornerstone of the FGC process. Mainstone (2014) argued one can find clues within family life to understand the child's importance in the family and the parents' ability to understand what the children feel and think.

5.4 Empowerment

The word empowerment suggests giving power as argued by Sadan (1997). All definitions that will be mentioned below indicate how empowerment is perceived in social work and in the FGC process. Deliberations in this thesis highlight that in social work and indeed the FGC process itself, empowerment is at times not evident e.g., participation in decision making processes. Tew (2006) observed how within social work the concern with issues of power has become a defining feature in the past many years, particularly in relation to processes of empowerment (Adams, 1996; Karban and Trotter, 2000).

Cornwall (2016) suggests that the concept of empowerment has an extensive history in social change, which perhaps explains the significance of incorporating FGC into mainstream social work practice. Sadan (1997) asserted that the process of

empowerment suggests a transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one's life, outcomes, and environment. It is said to be aimed at changing three dimensions of a social condition, i.e., to bring about a change in people's feelings and capacities; the life of the collective that they belong to; and the professional practice that gets involved in the situation (pg. 13). McCallum (1995) suggests that within child protection, empowerment must be defined as being based on three essential values: self-determination, distributive justice, and collaboration and democratic participation.

Slettebø (2013) defined empowerment as a reduction in self-reproach and development of self-confidence. Rappaport (1987) on the other hand argued 'empowerment is a process by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them.' (pg122). Van Regenmortel (2002b) perceives empowerment as 'a process of reinforcement in which individuals, organisations and communities acquire a grasp of a situation and their surroundings by gaining control, heightening critical awareness, and stimulating participation' (pp. 75–76). De Vries (2007) asserts empowerment is the central goal of social work. Empowerment focuses on vulnerable people or groups, with special attention to their strengths and their vulnerabilities.

As one can see from above that empowerment remains a contested concept, without any consensus on what it means or its application. Cornwall (2016) defines it as elastic, Gentles – Gibbs and Zema (2020) acknowledge there exist considerable uncertainty about what it all means and how it is specifically applied and supported, especially in a bureaucratic and problem-focused child welfare system (pg. 1) This is

further echoed by Pekonen et al (2019) who cite several scholars who also concur about the multidimensional nature of the empowerment concept without a single widely agreed upon definition.

Empowerment, therefore, should incorporate practices that help people to see themselves as competent to engage in decision making so that concerned people can perceive themselves as having capability and the right to act and have impact. Beckett et al (2017) pointed out if social workers take words like ‘empowerment’ as being, of themselves, badges of virtue, then all any government needs to do to secure their co-operation is to sprinkle policy documents with words of this kind. Given the intersection between power-empowerment-decolonising practice-Ubuntu within the FGC intervention it seems appropriate to examine the literature on FGC regarding how power and empowerment issues are transmitted and addressed. This will be discussed below.

5.5 Power in professional practice

In the FGC process dimensions of power play out. Power between social services and families, power between family members – perhaps the male/female dynamic and intergenerational power between children and young people and adults in the family like the dimensions of power proposed by French and Raven (1959) and was discussed earlier in Section 5.2. Foucault (1998 pg. 63) professed ‘Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure’; this suggests where there is a relationship there is power. Bourdieu’s view on power is that it is culturally and symbolically created and continuously re-endorsed through a relationship between agency and structure.

Ortner (1989:12) contends that there is no such thing as 'practice on an equal political playing field', 'asymmetry, inequality, domination and the like" are intrinsic to the relations imperative to practice theorists. This dialectic of structure and human action is always set within a certain temporal and spatial context which demands an awareness of issues of empowerment. Social work can be perceived as an ambivalent profession, which is aimed at providing people with assistance as well as exercising a degree of control over them (Janebová and Truhlářová, 2018 pg.1.). Social workers are said to have a dual mandate of care and control (Lyle, 2012). This refers to social workers' powers and responsibilities to use interventions to support children and their families to help them keep the children safe whilst also using the legal powers to enforce safeguarding and promote the welfare of vulnerable children, 'inevitably this contradicts power-sharing practices' (Connolly and McKenzie ,1999 pg. 66). Powell (2001) defined the dual mandate as the role and task of social work as promoting the interests of both the State and of the Service User whom they are intended to help. Fook, (2022) argued that all the frameworks that involve the use of power in child protection acknowledge that despite varying in terms of emphasis and focus, power can be used 'to control and restrict, to form and transform' (pg. 71).

This dual mandate makes social work – a politicised activity. It is politicised because social workers are agents of the State carrying out political mandates and implementing the State agenda. Clarke and Yellow Bird (2020) point out that, social workers are required by the state to use surveillance tools like investigations, documentation, and case management to monitor whether individuals are entitled to receive benefits or services or in violation of their bureaucratically approved activities and obligations. Regardless of whether they want to or not and if the rules go against the social work's core values of service, dignity, and the intrinsic worth of a human

being, it is obligatory for social workers to apply professionalised techniques of boundary setting and rapport building to ensure clients' compliance (a code word for obedience, submission, and subordination).

Faced with these incompatible demands, the social worker is expected to serve two masters: the state and the client (pg.3). The need to balance their professional responsibilities whilst seeking to empower families is ever present in their responsibilities. Trevithick (2012) called it 'conflicting responsibilities' (pg. 253), she further argued the exercise of coercive power is not necessarily an uncaring act and, in social work and in life generally, care and control are not necessarily in conflict. This suggests at times decisions have to be made that whilst in themselves they may appear uncaring e.g., removing a child from situations where there is severe maltreatment is actually an act of caring as considerations are made about the best interest of that child.

Through the dual mandate options of care and control (power) are both available for social workers to consider when working with families. This then raises a question of where the social worker stands in relation to the children and families. A question of whether they stand with them, stand for them or stand against them remains present. These mandates accord social workers with sizeable power which can be interpreted in ways that can be oppressive to children and families. Foucault (2003) posits that the truth itself is a product of power therefore the mandate that social workers hold accords them considerable powers over service users as they hold the definition of what is right and truthful. Milner et al (2020) highlight that social workers too can experience lack of power; through this they can understand service users' experience

of lack of power better. They further argue the biggest concern for social work is when power is used to exclude and marginalise in practice (pg. 21).

The FGC has been criticised for reinforcing power dynamics in the family especially during private family time. There is concern that it could re-victimise women and children in the family (Holland et al. 2005). Pitcher and Arnill (2014) argued private family time presented both an opportunity and risk. Opportunities are established through a family-led creation of a plan without the contents being shaped by professionals. Whereas there is a risk that influential voices within the family may disregard the best interests of others. Connolly (2006) identified opportunities for family members to challenge each other during private family time, subsequently developing greater family self-regulation.

These dynamics produce conflicts and difficulties, especially where relationships are already tense as a result of circumstances and the stakes are high. Pressures from professionals combined with those of family members will certainly influence who feels able to speak and who is heard through the process Pitcher and Arnill (2014). The dilemma that will always plague any social work intervention would be working with two seemingly conflicting social work roles of care and control. It is crucial for the balance between care and control to be properly managed with families. Too much control may lead to oppressive practice, disguised compliance, and failure to form empowering relationships. Too much optimism about families' abilities and intentions may lead to uncontainable risks to children.

5.6 How Families experience power in their involvement with social services

Merkel-Holgun (2002) argued in a democracy, supreme power lies with the people, all of whom have a right to freedom, equality, and a voice that will be heard and respected. Featherstone et al (2014) posits that families involved with social services are marginalised by both the lack of political will to be seen to interfere with private matters and by virtue of their need for help. Krummer- Nevo (2003) labelled them as 'defeated families' defeated by both their needs and the services that are meant to be helping them' (Morris and Burford, 2009). The paradox of care and control is further compounded by ongoing risk assessments that social workers need to carry out in order to keep the children safe.

Ruch, Turney & Ward (2010) concur with this argument, stating, when you are constantly assessing risks, have a high workload and at times take decisions that the family may not agree with to protect vulnerable people, building relationships with service users may be challenging. This means that service users end up experiencing mostly the control aspect of social work and less of the care aspect. The FGC process aims to afford children and families a chance to be heard in a culturally appropriate manner whereby their cultural capital can be recognised as it did with the Māori after the introduction of FGCs. Dickens-Swift et al (2007) argued the challenge for social work being to continue to show care even when exercising control, or to explain the exercise of control in terms of care.

Such experiences of unequal power relations have been evident in families involved with social services. Many families report a fear and stigma of being involved with social services like having statutory child protection services involved and of the

‘shuddering feelings’ as they enter child protection conferences, where they have no say, there are too many people and decisions have already been taken (Dale, 2004). Previous studies on the families’ perception of social services, found that parents perceived social workers as being judgemental, uncaring, lacking in understanding, denigrating, labelling, or treating them as guilty until proven innocent (McCallum (1995). Stabler, O’Donnell, Forrester, Diaz, and Brand (2019) point out that there exists significant evidence pointing to the fact that, regardless of children’s social care meetings with professionals and families being a main forum for making decisions (Healy and Darlington 2009), many meetings such as child protection case conferences do not appear to symbolise or encourage principles of self-determination for parents and children. Consequently, they are often reported to be very difficult for parents and, when they attend, children (Bell, 1999; Corby, Millar & Young, 1996; Hall and Slembrouck, 2001).

A study by Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that among families involved with social services and in the child protection system over two thirds lived ‘on the margins of the society’ and faced serious problems. Within the child protection system, social workers are often prompted to use their power in a productive (‘power-with’) rather than oppressive (‘power over’) manner. (Saar – Heiman, 2023). Further postulates ‘power over,’ operates as a form of control and is coercive and authoritative. ‘Power with,’ on the other hand, is used mainly as a form of care and support and involves a mindful and judicious use of power through relationship-based and participatory practices (like FGC can). Dumbrill (2006) found that when parents perceived child protection professionals as using power ‘over’ them as a form of control, they were more likely to either openly oppose them or simulate cooperation. Conversely, when parents felt that power was used “with” them, they tended to collaborate. Respondents

to this research alluded to the same situation of families engaging more when they feel they are part of the decision-making process through FGC. This will be discussed further in chapter 8.

Maiter, Palmer & Manji (2006) argued that many parents who come to the attention of social services, have been maltreated or rejected as children, and/ or marginalised by society as adults, for example, by classism or intolerance; therefore, forming good working relationships may be challenging for them. Thompson (2003) asserts it would be naïve to assume that professionals can make remarkable differences at a structural level. However, by helping people to take greater control of their lives, it can have a significant impact at the personal level, which contributes to the cultural level and in some small part reduce inequality at a structural level. The FGC model seeks to do exactly this Bredewold and Teonkens (2019) argue FGCs can be a good way to overcome embarrassment and reluctance to ask for help and offer support, thus promoting social cohesion and solidarity (pg. 2186).

Studies by Lynch, Newlands and Forrester (2019) and Boutanquoi, Ansel and Bournel-Bosson (2020) highlight challenges involved in collaborating with parents in a participatory manner. Exchanges between parents and professionals in child protection have been observed to be demonstrated by a dynamic of control, with professionals speaking much more than parents, who often lack initiative during discussions. Additionally, social workers have been found to take confrontational rather than listening stances, privilege closed questions and encourage little reflection during these interactions (pg. 2). Research conducted by Gupta and Blumhardt (2018) Gibson (2020) into the experiences of parents involved in child protection

interventions has revealed that interactions with social workers are often experienced as intimidating, confusing, shaming, and humiliating. They have also shown that in such conversations, social workers tended to dismiss parents' points of view, confront them in a threatening manner, and minimising their concerns (Smithson and Gibson, 2017; H¨ojer, 2011; Buckley, Carr and Wheelan, 2021).

5.7 The role of FGC in neutralising the power of social services when working with families.

Lupton and Nixon (1999) asserted that some of the basic goals of FGC are the reduction of power imbalances between family and social services, the appreciation and valuing of knowledge and resources within a family and helping parents and children feel that with some help and support from their own network they will be able to change their situation. The FGC process 'turns the tables' on power as social workers are often outnumbered by family members who are often outnumbered by professionals in other social services meetings. Social workers also have to wait and listen to the family while they take all the time they need to make a plan in the private family time. In FGC there are often more family members than professionals, which is less threatening for family members.

Skaale Havnen and Christiansen (2014) cite a 2005 study by Holland et al, conducted in Wales that focused on what it is like for social workers to implement the basic democratic and empowering philosophy in a child protection context that also has other agendas. The study found that taking on the role of the facilitator and informant in a system that is characterised by a professional power structure and

empowering the family is challenging. They discovered a tendency among social workers to exert influence over the wording of the assignment, the agenda of the private meeting and the final content of the action plan (Holland et al., 2005). Thompson (2015) suggested that in order to reduce further oppressive forces in service user's lives, it is imperative for social workers to empower them to make informed decisions by avoiding patronising terminologies and encourage partnership working. Sometimes families may need help and support in making decisions, however it does not mean they are incapable. Morris and Connolly (2012) cited studies by Cameron (2006) and Desmeules (2003) that indicated that professional practices needed to be responsive to traditions within families and communities. They warned about a danger (for example, in the UK procedural positioning of family decision making) that 'official' ways of family decision making may be imposed and overlay existing family-based approaches (pg. 52).

5.8 Power in family decision making.

Oosterom (2018) reflected on society decision making processes and notes that in many societies, social norms require young people to listen and be compliant to adult authority and adults infer any form of disapproval or even alternative viewpoints as disrespect. I can relate to this as it is the same in my Zulu culture as well. Bell and Thomas (2006) cited Kirby et al. (2003) who argue that the term 'participation' covers a variety of methods, levels, and activities, therefore participation can contrast from simply attending to a genuine power transfer. Another challenge is in effectively handling the process. They further argue that professionals have genuine concerns about how participation can be enacted without detrimental effect on the child, considering their age, capacity, culture, and safety. These concerns are especially appropriate in a decision-making arena in which professionals are absent, such as

FGCs. This further suggests that while participation is encouraged in principle, children are still dependant on adults in the FGC to implement their suggestions, views, wishes and feelings. Whilst this does not suggest they will not be heard taking the next steps in the process still will rely on the adults and professionals.

A democracy will not be a democracy unless it builds in checks and balances against tyrannies of the majority, especially when the majority are adults and the minority are children (Braithwaite, 2004 pg. 203). Archard and Skiveness (2009) observed that we often hasten to make a child's view factual and reliable when it is to our advantage, but if the child says something else, it is not received the same way. We then explain this opinion by referring to circumstances that reduce the validity of the child's view, therefore children's views end up being compromised. The failure to listen to children and to make sure their views are considered in child protection cases was highlighted in an Ofsted report of 67 serious case reviews (Ofsted 2010). The report found that professionals did not ask the child about their views and feelings; did not listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of the child and could provide important information about the child and that they focused too much on the needs of the parents and overlooked the implications for the child. Issues concerning the 'Voice of the Child' will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 8.

Hollinshead, Corwin, Maher, Merkel-Holgun, Alan and Fluke (2017) argued that FGCs are intended to elevate the voice and the role of participants in the decision-making process and address the power differential between agency staff and families inherent in child welfare practice. Using Ubuntu ensures that the FGC is not only empowering

but also culturally appropriate. In acknowledgement of these power differentials, this research will look at the representation of the voice of the child in the FGC process.

I find the FGC model relatable as it acknowledges and respects indigenous decision-making processes that are embedded in my own culture and the concept of Ubuntu. Furthermore, the model values dialogue and hearing the voices of all those who are involved in the FGC. In relation to practice, Mushunje (2017) lamented that colonial welfare-based social work, where the social worker is central to the process, is no longer acceptable to address the wellbeing of vulnerable children. This system speaks to the overwhelming power vested in the hands of social workers. He suggested social workers position themselves in unpleasant situations where they use models they are not fully acquainted with or that go against their own values. Whereas if families do not have any choice but to adopt values that they do not believe in, and which they do not even know. (Please see Chapter 5 for further discussion of power). He further argues that the application of Western models in social work leads to the diminishing of strengths, leading communities to feel powerless to meaningfully contribute to children's growth and development. Ubuntu, manifested through the FGC process on the other hand; represents communitarian ideals, communal rationality, spirituality, and excellence (Rankopo and Osei – Hwedie, 2011). These are some of the ideas that are put forward when arguments are being made about the importance of decolonising social work.

In discussing power and other themes that come up in this thesis, it will be important to challenge the assumption that 'West is Best' (Cook, 2020) and movements to standardise social work based upon Western methods and approaches necessitate resistance and a call for culturally relevant social work pedagogy, episteme, and

practice (Ibrahima and Mattaini, 2019). The existence of Ubuntu has always been a shield to protect children from maltreatment, the same way as the FGC did for the Māori children. Mushunje (2006) highlighted that in the traditional African society, children were just as vulnerable, however they could get relief from the extended family and the whole community as a result of the strong value system that existed and extended to child protection.

This further highlights the importance of decolonising education, practice, and knowledge in social work. One of the key outcomes of this thesis is that central to the process of achieving partnerships with families for the protecting of children from maltreatment, is the concept of power. The child protection model accords power to professionals and sees them as 'all knowing and all-seeing experts' who can tell families what to do and focus only on the child. It also highlights that by applying the principles of Ubuntu, best outcomes for children and families can be achieved. FGC is an increasingly applied approach to working with families involved in child welfare, it incorporates the immediate and extended family directly in the case decision-making process (Sheets, Wittenstrom, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann and Rodriguez, 2009). FGCs are based on principles enshrined in the principles of the Children Act (1989) (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989).

Chapter 6 Applying the Theory of Practice (Bourdieu, 1977)

6.1 Introduction

The FGC model is about empowering children and the whole family network through participation in the decision making, this suggests a holistic approach to understanding problems and working collaboratively to solve them. It is also a practice deeply rooted in the cultural practice of the Māori and other cultural communities' decision – making processes like Ubuntu. In locating this within a wider socio - theoretical context I applied the Theory of Practice conceived by Pierre Bourdieu (1972). I have chosen to use Bourdieu as this model came from the research done on the Kabyle people in Algeria, during their war of independence against the French in 1954 - 1963. Whilst I am aware that it came from colonial roots as Bourdieu was a White French man his conception of this model, however, came from his fight to liberate those oppressed by his French government. I therefore consider it a model that was born out decolonial ideology. This theory further contextualises children and families in different spheres of society and positions them to be seen and understood in their own contexts as Ubuntu also sees people and accords them holistic respect taking into cognisance their different intersectionality. It seeks to move beyond the dichotomies of 'subjectivism and objectivism' i.e., how individuals, with diverse motivations and purposes, create and transform the world in which they live (Bourdieu, 1991). It further aims to explain the relationship that happens between human action, on the one hand, and the global systems on the other (Otner, 1984). 'Every usage of the term 'practice' presupposes a question of the relationship between practice and structure."(Otner,1989, p194).

Bourdieu (1977) asserted that previous human action theories have been inadequate as they do not acknowledge human action as a practical matter. He believed this failure results from the theorists being unable or unwilling to acknowledge that theorising about human action is, itself, a form of practical human action. Bourdieu's theory aims to bridge the gap between conformism and determinism and agency and structure rejects the concept that rules determine social action as those rules and the situations in which they apply (or do not apply) always require conscious interpretation. This means an understanding of how people can conform to rules and still be able to express their individual thoughts, wishes and feelings. Their actions cannot possibly be determined by rules, practical actors engage in what Bourdieu describes as the "art' of necessary improvisation." Peillon (1998) argued when evaluating the overall helpfulness of Bourdieu's key concepts to contemporary research and theory it is important not to forget that Bourdieu intended capital, habitus and the field to be tools used to aid such empirical research as it is used in the current research.

This is admittedly not an easy approach Sulkunen (1982) argued that Bourdieu's style is complex, literary, and difficult. While Garrett (2007) agrees with Sulkunen's argument, he on the other hand asserts that whilst it is an often complex and difficult approach, Bourdieu's work should be critically engaged in by social professions. Lizardo (2012) hails Bourdieu as undoubtedly one of the main figures in the sociological study of culture today. Bourdieu's Theory of Practice does not constitute a cohesive theory within itself but rather represents a flexible theoretical approach whose main elements must never be considered detached from each other. This makes it almost impossible to explain one element of Bourdieu's Theory without referring to the others (Hermann, 2004, Golsorkhi and Huault 2006). It is because of

the intricate articulation of human relationships and how power and inequality interweave between all the aspects of human relationships that this approach was chosen because it is within the FGC process that these complex human relationships, power dynamics and equality play out. Bourdieu's point of departure is the domination and relative strength which results from unequal power relations and unequal allocation of resources within society. This thesis has located these unequal power relations in many aspects of life including between children and families and social workers. Bourdieu asserts that daily, social agents (people) are involved in endless interactions which could come in the form of dialogue, negotiations, and disagreements. Understanding the social space within which these take place is therefore crucial (Accardo, 2006). Bourdieu introduced several key concepts to explain his approach: *field, capital, and Habitus* (Bourdieu, 1972)

6.2 The Field

Social agents operate within a social *field* which can be further subdivided into subfields. They are based on 'an historically generated system of shared meanings' (Lellatchitch et al, pg. 732). I contextualise these shared meanings through symbolic interactionism – a sociological perspective that emphasises the importance of using symbols within human interaction, with speech being considered as particularly important in making sense of these interactions (Ingleby, 2017). The social *fields* within which the child operates is the family, the wider family network and the community which includes learning, health, and religious institutions. These are the fields that social workers explore when assessing the needs and protective factors of children during the FGC process.

Each *field* of practice contains an array of assumptions on values, risks and uncertainties that are available to social agents. Bourdieu contends that it is within these social *fields* that agents and institutions integrate and interact with each other according to *field* specific rules (Bourdieu, 1997). Wacquant (2011) points out that these rules are not formalised but rather implicit in nature and need to be internalised by agents in order act as expected. If you are not part of that social *field,* how then are you to understand these rules? I understand these *field* specific rules to be learnt through socialisation – a lifelong process through which children and adults learn the values and norms of the society in which they live and learn to identify between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For example, it was through the process of socialisation that I learnt about the concept of Ubuntu.

Bourdieu (1977) himself reflects on primary and secondary socialisation and the continuation of learning and modifying our knowledge to adapt to situations. I will elaborate on this further later in the thesis when Habitus is discussed. For instance, gender roles in the family. Through internalising these roles agents can anticipate future tendencies and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1983a) such as traditional gender roles that can at times be oppressive to both men and women. Findings from research by Holland et al (2005) suggest that despite the commitment of social workers to the principles of FGC practice, they can find it difficult to change the power relations and to have confidence in the families to come up with their own plans as these assumptions on values/risks/uncertainties could interfere with their understanding of the other agents' real circumstances. McNay (1999) argued 'as a relational concept the field yields an understanding of society as a differentiated and open structure and provides a framework in which to conceptualise the uneven and non-systematic ways in which subordination and autonomy are realised' (pg. 115)

Social *field* is where power relations play out Bourdieu calls them 'locus of struggles' (Bourdieu, 1975, pg.19). I locate the family within the *field and* contend that it is where families are expected to live by the rules, they neither made nor necessarily understand and at times are opposed to. Moreover, in a colonial system where structural and organisational power rests with authorities and not families, it means some rules imposed are contrary to their culture and values systems, but they are unable to challenge them due to lack of power. Earlier the importance of symbolic interaction was mentioned, with the speech and language being fundamentally important. This highlights further, how families involved in social services are systematically oppressed using language and jargon they are expected to understand despite having no field specific knowledge that will help them to understand and at times being inhibited to ask questions. Foucault (1975) suggested that authority over language and knowledge could be a channel through which the state centralises power and thereby, excluding or oppressing those people whose knowledge was delegitimised in this process. This links with Bourdieu's argument on the social field as the family is the social field.

For children and families from black and other minoritised ethnic groups involved with social services, they are expected to play by the rules that are created by the government on how to raise their children, which are not necessarily in line with their own value systems. Like the role of a child in the family and what is considered acceptable in instilling discipline on the children. These tacitly held assumptions are part of what Bourdieu calls a *'doxa'*, which we refer to as cultural codes (Bourdieu, 1998). These *doxa* are what is believed to be the absolute truth of what is possible

and what is not. Cultural codes comprise principles and values embedded in a social field that serve two key functions: first, they limit the space of inquiry to a manageable level to make decisions; and second, they provide legitimacy to authoritative relationships. This further links to how Ubuntu philosophy is socialised into the children so that they grow up understanding cultural expectations when it comes to the treatment of people.

6.3 The Capital

Bourdieu, (1984, pg. 114), defined capital as “the set of actually usable resources and powers”. Social capital was first defined by Hanifan as ‘those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people’ (1916 pg. 130). Coleman (1993) looked at social capital as ‘features of social organisations, such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (p.35). Bourdieu viewed social capital as an asset of the individual rather than the shared. It permits a person to exercise power on the group or individual who mobilises the resources. For Bourdieu social capital is not uniformly available to members of a group or collective but available to those who provide efforts to acquire it by achieving positions of power and status and by developing goodwill (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu focused on how continual transmission and accumulation of cultural capital perpetuates social inequalities.

Having identified the three forms of *capital*: social, cultural, and economic, he asserted that the possession of social *capital* did not necessarily run alongside that of economic capital, but it still was, in his view, an attribute of elites, a means which powerful networks held onto power and advantage. The issue of power was discussed in

greater detail in Chapter 5. Bourdieu (1986) further argued that social *capital* represents a person's entirety of social relations. It is one's network of actual or potential resources that can be rightfully claimed by the family, group or class membership. It further allows access to material and immaterial resources, information, and knowledge (Gretzinger, Hinz, and Matiaske, 2010). Robbins, 2005, asserts that the theory of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu and Passeron, in an attempt to clarify differences in educational achievement according to social origin and to show 'that social exclusion is a continuous process' (pg. 23)

Social capital is at times mutually misunderstood such as perceptions of social workers may be based on past experiences, on messages from the media, factors of class or race and on primitive fears and social services may on the other hand have misconceptions about working with black and other ethnic minority families (Pitcher and Anill, 2010). A 1987 serious case review into the death of 21-month-old Tyra Henry from the London Borough of Lambeth who was murdered by her stepfather highlighted that a white social worker had operated on a false stereotype of a black grandmother who was assumed to be 'endlessly resourceful, able to cope in great adversity, essentially unsinkable' (ibid). Tyra was placed with her but to the contrary the grandmother who was the main carer was overwhelmed and struggled emotionally and financially with little support from social workers who had stereotypically believed she would cope as black families are believed to have a strong support network.

Grandmother offered Tyra to her stepfather who ended up biting, scratching, and hitting her, ultimately fracturing her skull and killing her. BASW instructs that 'social workers should recognise and respect the diversity of the societies in which they

practice, consider individual, family, group and community differences' (BASW, 2012, p.9). 2010 research by Pitcher and Anil on wider family involvement in FGC identified that a significant characteristic of the successfully engaged families was the presence of a strong family member, who was central to the family and who had positive attitudes. Some families lacked this centre (pg. 25); however, it is often erroneously assumed that families from ethnic minority population groups have this central figure that bonds the whole family together thereby missing out on possible support from the social worker and at times rendering the FGC referral impossible to progress. Cockburn (1994) and Mackenzie (1995) acknowledge that frequently families who are involved with social care do not often come from intact and supportive groups, they are not necessarily deficient or dysfunctional but originate from a context where they may lack either emotional, practical, or material resources.

Relating to FGC, this highlights the need for holistic exploration of the child's situation in order to understand the manifestation of the maltreatment and how it can be addressed appropriately. Burnham, (2013) suggested using the Gender, Gender identity, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Caste, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality (GGGRRAAACCCEEESS) model, where practitioners explore further understanding of who the child is through the influences of their gender, race, religion, age, ability, class, culture, ethnicity, education, sexuality, and spirituality. This will ensure understanding of the children and families in the social field within which they operate. The process of generating understanding of peculiarities with people about differences and diversity can be misplaced when practitioners see the framework as an identified characteristic Glaze (2017). The value of creating a multiverse of likely accounts and meaning to any presenting situation brings about opportunities for a more positive relationship to form

meaningful support. Oslo (2009) asserts that FGC encourages the professionals to highlight the families' strengths and to help families recognise and work on their weaknesses. FGC helps caseworkers become a support for the family and not focus on their short comings. They get to be in a more helpful and supportive role with the family than in a traditional adversarial setting (pg. 66).

Another key Bourdieusian concept is symbolic capital, which is established when diverse, yet intimately linked forms of capital (economic and cultural capital) (Glover, 2010, pg.491), are socially perceived and recognised as legitimate bases for claiming esteem, honour, prestige, respect and recognition within a particular social setting (Bourdieu, 1985, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1997) contends symbolic capital is not an autonomous type of capital within itself but rather entails the acknowledgment of capital by the whole of the peer players on a specific field, hence why Bourdieu (1972) contends that it is a conversion of field, economic, social and cultural *capitals*. Bourdieu's notion that positions on social *field s* are relative is interesting as this implies that they depend on interpretation not necessarily reality. Holders of symbolic power are therefore enabled to perpetuate symbolic violence.

The concept suggests this type of violence is gentle, undetectable, and invisible even to its victims, often exercised via strictly symbolic channels of communication, perception, acknowledgement and even feeling (Bourdieu, 2001). This extremely normal social interaction presents a chance for both the oppressed and oppressor to understand the logic of the domination exerted in the name of symbolic principle known and recognised by both (pg. 2). For instance, the core values and principles of protecting children are well understood and accepted however, parents bring up their

children according to their own socialisation and family practices. The government continues to be increasingly involved in private decisions about child rearing practices that leave parents feeling disempowered and unable to discipline their children with the fear that social services will get involved.

6.4 The Habitus

Bonnewitz (2005) identified that the concept of Habitus is central to Bourdieu's theory. Maton (2008, pg. 49) is of the opinion that the Habitus is an 'enigmatic concept' and also 'one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested of Bourdieu's ideas. Habitus has been described as a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways (Bourdieu, 1997, pg. 12). In his earlier work, Bourdieu (1984, pg. 82) had described it as the system of dispositions as a product of history that "produces practices in accordance with the schemes engendered by history". Rehbein (2011) argued at the core of Bourdieu's Habitus lies the tendency to always act the same way in similar situations. It is for that reason that Asimaki (2014) surmises that it gave rise 'to misunderstandings, was used incorrectly by many scholars, was acutely doubted, received criticism, and provoked great disagreements and discussions in the field of the social sciences' (pg. 122). Crossley (2013) appears unsure about Bourdieu's own definition of the concept of Habitus. He feels it is a 'somewhat ambiguous concept', without a single commanding and enduring definition.

Bonnewitz further argued that Bourdieu himself continually revised the definition to 'both address criticisms and meet the demands raised by his successive empirical projects' (pg. 137). Earlier Bourdieu (1977) was cited arguing that this theory aims to

bridge the gap between conformism and determinism and agency and structure rejecting the concept that rules determine social action as those rules and the situations in which they apply (or do not apply) always require conscious interpretation. This leaves one with a dilemma as to whether this is a contradiction – if we always act similarly in situations (conformism), how do we express our free will in our actions (determinism). One wonders if humans are slaves to their socialisation and therefore cannot think for themselves as their thoughts and actions have already been predetermined. In such situation one wonders how diversions in behaviour can be explained.

To explain this Walther (2014) brings forward Bourdieu's argument about the importance of socialisation – both primary and secondary socialisation. Billingham (2007) and Clausen (1968) defined socialisation as a perpetual process in which people, learn the norms, culture and belief systems considered important within a particular social context through interactions with one another and social institutions. The family are the main agents of socialisation. Through responding to the approval and disapproval, mirroring the behaviour of parents, the child learns the language of many basic behaviour patterns of its society (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). Walther argues that the outcome of this process is the primary Habitus. It is the "embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten as history" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 56), however its impact remains constant and affects the development of the secondary Habitus.

To explain the concept of Habitus, Panagiotopoulos (1992) and Romanos (2007) consider the dichotomies of objectivist and subjectivist approaches that are used to explain the social world. They argue the objectivist approach reflects on the structure

(which means unseen relationships and entrenched institutions) that exerts force on the individual and affects their socialisation and integration into the social world. What this means for the children who have been uprooted from their primary Habitus is that they lose their identity. Where children live, how their environment affects them is no longer clearly defined.

During the second habitus phase, a child internalises their own Habitus, the parents' social status in the society, their value systems, opinions and conduct that are linked to their standing in society. Bourdieu (1977) (cited by Walther, 2014) calls this class Habitus*,* it reflects the diverse positions people have in society and that result in diverse lifestyles tastes and interests among social classes. Secondary Habitus on the other hand, is a combination of one's school and tertiary education plus life experiences. The primary and secondary Habitus end up as a single Habitus that is continuously reinforced and adapted by life experiences giving it a dynamic quality (Chudsikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). Bourdieu reiterates that he does not see agents as slaves or puppets to their socialisation or external forces. He does, however, see them as "bearers of capitals and, depending on their trajectory and on the position, they occupy on the field (…), they have a propensity to orient themselves actively either toward the preservation of the distribution of capital or toward the subversion of this distribution" Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, pg. 108f.).

6.5 Critique of Bourdieu's theory

In Section 3.1, I have cited Hermann (2004), Golsorkhi and Huault (2006) and Lizardo (2012) who all argued that it is impossible to explain one element of Bourdieu's Theory without referring to the others, in summary I will reiterate the relationship between

Bourdieu's key concepts. Interplay between field, capital and Habitus leads to strategy or practice. We behave unconsciously in conformity with our interests with an aim of achieving our objectives through investing and fighting for the capital. Practice stems from field specific social structures with distinct rules that apply and the Habitus. The Habitus guarantees the shared belief in the rules of the social game and that actors act in accordingly in relation to their field position (doxa). This depends on their relative amount and structure of economic, cultural (and social) capital (Waltham, 2014).

I feel Bourdieu has been unable to explain how the concept of *Habitus* works in those cultures where children do not receive formal education. This is based on mainly Eurocentric and colonial cultures, and I feel it does not take any other backgrounds into account. It is my opinion that this therefore discounts the learning processes of non – Eurocentric families and can be interpreted as systematic oppression. Lahire (2004) also disagrees with the idea of Bourdieu's *Habitus* based on empirical evidence. He asserts that most people have 'dissonant' cultural tastes straddling cultural boundaries. The importance of disparities in perception for individuals (intra-individual variations) and the 'impurity' (against homogeneity) of perceptions counteracts social determinations of class/origin in the *Habitus.* This stresses the need to recognise the collective formation of personhood and the existence of more heterogeneous individuals. *Habitus* restricts actions and plans and "entertains with the social world" by making sure that that we act "intentionally without intention" (Bourdieu, 1990b, pg.12). *Habitus* further ensures that we act according to field specific rules that we discussed.

Ernst (2001) acknowledges that learning about a culture other than your own, and then sensitively applying the knowledge to individual clients, presents challenges even for skilled social workers (pg. 170). This highlights the importance of cultural competence and humility in working with people from other cultures. Citing research done in New Zealand around FGC, she argued that imparting cultural competence to all workers is a constant process. Ramsay (2017) explored the experiences of African migrant women in Australia who, through state interventions lose their children. She concluded that 'child protection interventions are not neutral encounters, but (are) shaped within the disciplining imperative of a state-administered legal mandate of child protection that diffuses logics of "whiteness" to treat resettled refugees as either "deserving" or "undeserving" citizens' (pg. 766). This suggests that migrant women in the study lost their children in the child protection system that was not only unprepared to understand their child rearing practices but also only looks at them from the perspective of the Australian rules of acceptable child rearing practices.

A study by Phenice and Griffore (2000) found that when families differ significantly from familiar and acceptable norms as they make their contributions to society and interact with other systems, they are perceived as dysfunctional systems. When actions have been identified as dysfunctional or as a social problem, the local authority steps in to 'save troubled children' and to reduce risks for families. However, if an intervention fails, it is often blamed on the service user. Their interventions are considered faultless; however, it is often argued that those who are "helped" have, failed to cooperate (ibid). Arnull and Stewart (2021) argued that in cases where there is domestic violence in the family, the focus is not on the perpetrator of that violence, but it is often on the mother. This is often used against her, and the focus placed on her perceived failure and ability to protect the child (pg. 114)

Thus, children and families involved in social services are required to continue with their lives despite failed interventions. It is evident from the origins of the FGC detailed in the literature review in Chapter 2 that this is how the Māori experienced interventions that saw their children being systematically removed from their community and moved to a different culture the resulting objection thereafter eventually started a chain of events that led to the adoption of the FGC model. They were concerned about the impact the top-down decisions had on their families and did not want to tolerate legal or professional systems that did not consider Māori customs, values, and beliefs. The cultural capital they held, which relates to how their children are socialised and how that accords them status and power in the field was not recognised therefore they lacked any power to influence the dominant culture when it comes to issues relating their children.

Chapter 7 Research Methodology

7.1 Research Philosophy

My epistemological position is that of interpretivism, i.e., knowledge related to human experience differs from that in the physical sciences because human beings interpret their world and then act based on this interpretation while the physical world does not (Hammersley, 2013, p. 26). Interpretivism is about subjective perspectives and is not value free; it considers influences, such as social realities, culture, and circumstance, to add richness to a researched insight into the reality experienced by others (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). Bryman (2016) suggests interpretivism is about grasping subjective meaning of social actions (pg. 692). Seale (2018) concurs with this and adds that it highlights the meaningful nature of participation in social and

cultural life, and it is about the meaning people confer upon their own actions and those of others (pg. 596).

I approached this research and analysis thereof from a symbolic interactionist perspective. The symbolic interaction school of thought centres on the meanings ascribed by people to actions and things. These meanings derive from a process of social interaction that involves symbols such as language. These symbols are not static but dynamic and can change over time based on experience (Gray, 2016) as an illustration, your self-definition changes over time from when you were a student to when you qualify as a social worker and this change may lead to a different consciousness perhaps about how you treat other people.

To study this as research one needs to capture the essence of the process of how meanings are encoded and intentions through language and other symbolic systems. What makes it particularly relevant to the FGC is how through the process of FGC meanings are derived from different interactions towards the other person regarding that object like the meaning ascribed to different child-rearing cultural norms and understanding of what family is, for example when doing an FGC with some communities, the definition of aunties and uncles extends beyond immediate blood family and could also mean elders in that community, who are key in handling the affairs of people from that community.

Therefore, I considered it appropriate to use this approach for the gathering and analysis of the data required to answer the research questions identified. Furthermore,

this research will use an interpretive approach to explore and critically analyse the process and outcomes for children and families who have been referred for FGC. It aims to interpret findings from interviews and Focus Groups with Social Work professionals, in order to make sense of the meaning attached to the approach of working together with families to protect children from maltreatment within the family setting.

7.2 Research positionality

In doing this research it is important for me to declare their positionality to clarify their standpoint in relation to the research conducted. According to Warf (2010) positionality is about one's social position and worldview that is it effects one's response to power disparities in various situations. In social science research, Throne (2012) perceives positionality as an exploration of 'my reflection on their own place within the many contexts and subjectivities of viewpoints' (pg. 56). This links to Hugman's (2003) assertion on the 'ethics of self' as central and founded on the practice of self-scrutiny. In determining where I, the researcher, am situated, bias and pre-existing viewpoints can be brought forward into the research discussion and addressed from the many aspects of my perspective and positionality (Throne, 2012 pg. 58). I have elaborated further on this in section 1.6 where I go deeper into my personal philosophies and how they link to my research

7.3 Qualitative research Methods

I started this research as a result of my passion for FGCs as evidenced by being involved in FGCs for over a decade. I started this research as I believe in the efficacy of the FGC model in working with children and families. My point of departure is being

a social worker and recognising the importance of carrying out accurate and empowering research that reflects values that are both key to social work and the values of Ubuntu. Krysik (2018) posits that social work research is conducted with a specific focus that the aims of research are linked to improving social conditions of other people: "…It is aimed at the creation of applied knowledge; meaning, social workers use research to develop knowledge that will inform social work practice" (p. 10). Rubin and Babbie (2015) on the other hand perceive it as being aimed at the provision of scientifically grounded knowledge applicable for evaluating or improving programmes, performances, interventions; assessing client or community needs; evaluating effects of social policies or solving specific problems. Engel and Schutt, (2010) summarise the function of research for social work as follows: acquisition of scientifically grounded knowledge that can be used with confidence. Approaching research as a logical and systematic process reduces the risk of errors common for everyday reasoning. I believe all the definitions provide an important aspect of research and highlight the importance of authentic knowledge acquisition in social work.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p.26) suggested qualitative research is 'difficult to define' because of its multifaceted nature underpinned by different paradigms. Shank (2002) defines qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning" (p. 5). Ospina (2004) explained that by systematic he means "planned, ordered and public", following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By empirical, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. Inquiry into meaning says researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience. Qualitative research involves closer attention

to the interpretative nature of enquiry and situating the study within the cultural, political, and social context of and the reflexivity or 'presence' of in the accounts they present Creswell (2012, pg. 45). This was echoed by Bryman (2016) who stated the emphasis is on words and experiences rather than quantities in the collection and analysis of data. This made it an ideal choice for this study as it too is about experiences i.e., the process and outcomes of the FGC process.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further claim that qualitative research involves an interpretive approach: "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). This approach complements the current research as I am trying to make sense of the use of the FGC model from an Ubuntu approach. This research looks at both the FGC process and the outcome – both of which cannot be better expressed through qualitative research. This suggests, while one can provide statistics about the FGC, it is still not adequate to give an account of the human experiences in the FGC process. Numbers are also impersonal and do not humanise research participants.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) asserted that qualitative research helps us understand experiences and create events in which we did not participate, 'from becoming a fundamentalist Muslim to organising a mine workers' union, from participating in a beauty contest to fighting war in central Africa' (pg. 3). They further assert that qualitative research 'can extend your intellectual and emotional reach across age, occupation, class, race, sex, and geographical boundaries' (pg. 3). According to Friedman (2012), qualitative research is cyclical and characterised by the following

features: open inquiry, induction, description and interpretation, multiple perspectives and focus on the specific experience. It was for these reasons that I opted for qualitative research over quantitative because its strength is in uncovering more about people's experience (why things may be the way they are). Quantitative research on the other hand is better at looking at things statistically. The questions that underpin this research are not suited to the collection of statistical data. The Researcher is aware that qualitative research collects data about what your select group of participants feel, think or experience in a given situation or phenomenon. One cannot necessarily use this data to make assumptions beyond this specific group of participants. As this is a small-scale research project this will be addressed as the findings from this study will not be generalisable to the wider population, but what is found and how it is found may be transferable to other contexts. There is also an opportunity to explore this issue further in future research.

7.4 Research design

An interpretative approach was used. Participants were interviewed using open questions in face-to-face interviews and focus groups to enable them to elaborate in their own words in order to seek further clarity on their narratives about their experience of FGC. The qualitative research method selected utilised two types of interviews, one on one interviews, and focus group interviews. I chose these qualitative research methods as they were most readily available given the type of opportunistic sample available. They were also chosen because they were considered the most relevant method to gather data for this research. Giddens (2021) states that these methods attempt to gather detailed rich data allowing for an in-depth understanding of individual action in the context of social life. The subject matter of this research project needs this rich data as the research project is about the

experiences and opinion of participant Social Work Professionals on the use of the FGC model in child protection.

7.5 Sampling

This study recruited a convenience sample made up of professionals involved in the FGC process i.e., social workers, FGC Coordinators, and children's Advocates. Seale (2018) observed that carrying out a random sample of the population to be studied is sometimes neither possible nor desirable. Therefore, an opportunistic sample of purposively selected Children Service's professionals, including social workers, FGC coordinators and children's advocates who have all had previous FGC experience was recruited. The study was not based in a particular local authority; however, I received support from two London boroughs based north and south of the river, FGC teams and from the London Consortium Accredited Programme through a pool of independent FGC Coordinators and children's Advocates. Opportunistic sampling is one type of non-probability sampling. In non-probability sampling it is not important to the select research sample randomly as subjective methods are used to decide which elements are included in the sample (Etikan, 2016) therefore not all the people in the population have an equal chance of being selected. In this case only professionals currently involved in the FGC process had a chance of being picked. This type of sampling is aimed at sampling participants in a strategic way to ensure that the sampled participants are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2016).

As participants were all sampled because of their involvement in FGC, their demographic information was not collected as it had no bearing on the actual findings of the actual outcome of the study, instead their length of service and experience was

gathered as this was deemed more pertinent to the research. This information is presented in chapter 8.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local authority social workers from a London borough and a group interview was done with social workers from different local authorities. Semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted with FGC coordinators who are all freelance workers and work with different local authorities across London. Semi structured interviews were also conducted with children's advocates, who are all involved in FGCs and work with different local authorities around London.

The snowball method is used for finding research subjects where one subject gives the name of another, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on (Vogt, 2005: 300). All participants were recruited through my extended professional connections in FGC networks in London and from social workers discussion groups, hence creating a snowball process of recruitment. Snowball sampling could also be called a volunteer sample as this entailed an internal email asking for interested people to respond if they wished to participate. Social workers were recruited via the FGC team manager sending an internal email to all social workers in children's services asking if any of them wished to participate in the research. Seven social workers responded and took part in the research. In this way the sample grew like a rolling snowball (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). This recruitment method resulted in 11 one to one interviews, and two focus groups. (See Table 1)

FGC coordinators who participated were recruited via their manager who informed them about the research and invited those interested to a team meeting, this sampling process is often referred to as key informant recruitment, (Peek and Fothergill,2009, Bryman, 2016). Those who wished to participate were asked to arrive an hour earlier for the team meeting. Recognising the unequal power relations between the team members and their manager and that there is potential for this power to be misused in the service of the manager's own needs as she and the Researcher were well acquainted. Sometimes this can be in ways which are barely perceptible but none the less have great effect, to the extent of being considered actively harmful and certainly oppressive (Howarth and Morrison 1999). The Researcher confirmed with the team before starting the focus group that they were willing to take part in the research and reiterated that there will be no implication if they do not wish to do so. They also signed consent forms. This was a conscious attempt to give power to choose whether they wanted to consent or not as considerations of addressing power imbalances remain crucial in line with the ethos of this study.

7.6 Participants

Table 1 provides details of all participants and their collective experience in FGC for clarity and rigour and indicates the type of interview they took part in either one to one interview (Int plus number 1-12) or focus group 1 or 2. All names have been anonymised.

Table 1 Participants' experience

	Advocates/FGC Coordinators one on one Interviews	Social Workers one on one interviews	Focus Group 1 Advocates/FGC Coordinators	Focus Group 2 Social workers
Participant ID	Kairo (Int 1) 7 years	Lydia (Int 7) 15years	Emily 16years	Jacinta 5years
	Nicky (Int 2) 14 years	Rohini (Int 8) 15years	Njabulo 4years	Simeon 7years
	Elizabeth (Int 3) 6 years	Khanyo (Int 9) 8 years	Naomi 5years	Norma 6years
	Graham (Int 4) 15 years	Scelo (Int 10) 8 years	Kathleen 9 years	Gill 10years
	Vusi (Int 5) 5 years	Nondu (Int 11) 15 years	Abi 10years	Kofi years
	Ade (Int 6) 5 years	Agatha (Int 12) 10 years		
Years of FGC Experience	**52**	**71**	**31**	**44**

Table 1 Key

FG 1	Focus Group – FGC Coordinators and Advocates
Int = C/A	One on one interviews FGC Coordinators/Advocates
Int = SW	One on one interviews Social Workers
FG 2	Focus Group Social Workers

7.7 Ethics

Ethical awareness and practice are fundamental to the social worker's professional practice and research. Their ability and commitment to ethical actions is a key characteristic of the quality of service offered to those who get involved with social workers (British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2019). Ali and Kelly in Seale (2018) posited that ethical decision making is part of all social research however, they also acknowledged the complexity in defining and working with ethical issues. Working ethically extends to all aspects of one's life including research. It should be therefore argued there should be no apprehension about the nature of ethics of a qualified social workers' research as ethical issues are inherently intertwined at the heart of social work practice. As already stated, even in conducting this research the concept of Ubuntu remained a guiding force. In research, Ubuntu is distinguished by its specific focus on explicitly identifying and aligning shared, core values as well as building positive interpersonal interactions between community and academic researchers such that all partners are and feel included, connected, and respected (Denyse, Martin, and Stanton, 2022, pg. 1)

Mc Laughlin (2011) Smith (2009) pointed out that research design, especially in social work should consider the impact of research on vulnerable families which is investigating sensitive issues which have already been subject to examination from outside agencies. This was an initial consideration when the plan was to do primary research with children and young people and their families, when this could not materialise an even bigger ethical consideration became apparent. De Laine (2000) described gatekeepers within the research process as the individuals, groups, and organisations that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants. According to Clark (2010) the aforementioned individuals, groups and organisations

do not provide the technical expertise or financial support to conduct research Similarly, they are not ‘researched’ in themselves. Instead, they support the research process by providing an efficient and expedient conduit for access between researchers and participants. I had the same experience of gatekeeping when attempts were being made to access children and families directly to conduct this research. After two years of making such attempts, I had to explore a different way of gathering the data to proceed with this research.

Holland and Ramazanoglu (2014) argue reflexivity is simply about unpacking the power relations and making explicit the use of power in the research process (pg. 118). They further argued this involves critical reflection on four key areas: attempting to identify power and power relations, a theoretical perspective on power in research, making moral judgements and responsibility for knowledge produced (pg. 119). FGC is about empowerment, power and Ubuntu, however due to being unable to gain access to children and families, the research had to change direction and instead look at the perceptions of professionals.

This is an ethical dilemma as it appears to be opposed to the ideal of empowerment i.e., as the research is seeking views on FGC and how it empowers families, but they are being sought from the people whom we have already identified could be systematically oppressing them through colonised power structures. As the researcher, I addressed this by picking an opportunistic sample made of people who are practitioners of the FGC model who believe in the model and therefore understand the importance of empowerment and the ideals of the FGC model.

I am aware that choosing this sample does not absolve one of further ethical issues as this in itself presents an issue of bias among participants as they may only express positive attributes of the model and not mention any negatives. This has been considered in two ways: as participants are advocates of the model, they are also keen on maintaining its fidelity and therefore trusts they will be able to express themselves in a way that is honest, reflective and forthright. Whilst social workers who are involved have all made a referral to FGC, they may have done it as part of the organisational procedure, therefore they are likely to express themselves honestly. As a qualified and registered social worker and member of BASW, this research was conducted within their ethical guidance. However, as I believe that BASW's ethical guidance is quite limited regarding research, I have also used the Social Research Association's guidance regarding research ethics. I am committed to remaining reflexive throughout this process.

Beauchamp and Childress (1994) set out a number of key principles for research, namely: **beneficence** – balancing benefits against risks, **non-maleficence** – avoiding causation of harm, respect for **autonomy** – respecting individuals as autonomous and their capacities to make decisions and acting **justly** and fairly to distribute benefits and risks (pg. 3). I worked according to these principles, which helped to identify even my own values and ethical position in this process. First and foremost, I sought to explain and establish informed consent with all the participants. As previously disclosed, I have worked many years in the FGC field and am an advocate of the FGC model, and I feared going into this research process wondering what it would mean if research findings proved contrary to my actual convictions about this model. Seale (2018) argued that social research is about pursuit of objective truths, therefore

implying the researcher's responsibility to act as one would in any professional practice.

I was guided by the Ethics Approval form from the Nottingham Trent University where I started this doctoral programme, and the research ethics were approved. The process was further guided by BASW's Economic, and Social Research Council (ESCR) Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) aimed at protecting all groups involved in research: participants, institutions, funders and researchers throughout the lifetime of the research and into the dissemination process and keeping integrity central to all research (BASW, 2012) that ensured that had already explored the areas of conflict and possible ethical breaches that needed to be explored.

I was subjected to a strict ethics approval process that took over a year as the university needed to ensure that the ethics had been adhered to as this was initially primary research on potentially vulnerable children and families. I was uncomfortable with the notion that service users are necessarily deemed as vulnerable, as I believe that notion could contribute to their disempowerment. Hey (1994) echoed these sentiments stating that the assumption of vulnerability can have a disempowering effect on the autonomy of the respondents. Seale (2018) conversely argues that when looking at the question of power differentials, we can see that almost any group may be potentially disadvantaged and therefore deemed vulnerable.

I ensured that all the information was kept securely and planned as follows: identities of respondents and their data were always kept separate, so as to not link them to their responses. There were no records held of their personal information and all the

information will be destroyed after the project is complete. Information was not kept on a USB stick as they can get lost. The personal computer where information is kept is password protected and there were no paper files made available.

Whilst I was aware that participants i.e., FGC coordinators, advocates and social workers already understood and worked under the confines that confidentiality requires, I still explained confidentiality requirements to them. I reiterated under research conditions, as with anything else, I could not guarantee confidentiality in cases where new information has been shared that leads one to believe that a child or anyone else may be hurt by their disclosure or if there were admissions to anything relating to hurting a child or other criminal undertakings. If that kind of information were disclosed, it was explained that the interview would be terminated immediately, and relevant authorities informed. It was further explained to participants that they would not be receiving any payment for participating in this research.

7.8 Method

The following sections will describe the methods used to gather data.

7.8.1 Semi – structured one to one interviews:

Kvale (1983, p.174) defines the qualitative research interview as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the lifeworld of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena". Polit and Beck (2021)

define it as a system of collecting data in which one individual (an interviewer) asks questions of another individual (a respondent). May (2011) credits interviews with yielding rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes, and feelings (pg. 120). Among the four types of interviews (structured, semi-structured, unstructured and group interviews) I have chosen the semi-structured interview. In semi-structured interviews "the interviewer, who can seek both clarification and elaboration on the answers given, can then record qualitative information about the topic. This enables the interviewer to have more latitude to probe beyond the answers and thus enter into dialogue with the interviewee" (May 2011, pg. 121).

I found this important when conducting interviews – there are a few times when I needed to follow up a response with a question as the argot the participants use is hard to understand, without the benefit of a semi structured interview I would not have been able to seek clarity if answers given were not understood. This method is characterised by flexibility and the discovery of meaning, rather than standardisation, or a concern to compare through constraining replies by a set interview schedule (May 2011 pg. 125). This flexibility made the interviews flow as there was back-to-back communication where I was able to both speak and listen to the interviewees.

I am aware that the key to the success of the interview is the interviewer's ability to get the relevant information in an appropriate manner. Holloway and Wheeler (2017) pointed out that it is important to build trust and establish rapport, because the person needs to be comfortable answering questions honestly. A position of equality and mutual respect is central to the relationship between researcher and participant. Hove

and Anda (2005) advised careful carrying out of interviews as this will determine the quality of collected data. They further stressed the importance of ensuring the interviewees' comfort, to ensure their motivation to share their experiences with the interviewer.

I opted for open ended questions as they are "specific in indicating the topics on which they are seeking feedback but make no assumptions about what the feedback might be" (George and Cowan, 1999: 74). As this was a semi structured interview – the following questions were used as a guide; however, I could ask further questions to aid clarity and prompt response: o How long have you been doing FGCs for?

- Why did you initiate the FGC process? o Do FGCs work in safeguarding children? o What makes them work? o You talk about families being empowered, what does that look like in practice? o What do you think make FGCs different from other social services meetings? o What does an advocate do in this process? o How do you ensure that the voice of a child is heard in this process?
- Do you have any examples of when they have worked and can attribute it to the FGC process?
- Why FGCs not any other processes? o How do you balance what the families need and keeping the children safe?

These were not asked in any order, and the conversation could flow according to the answers given by the respondents. This flexibility is one of the key characteristics of qualitative interviewing. Interviews lasted about 35 minutes on average. They all took place in council offices; participants arranged the venue themselves as we were

meeting at different times, and I was not permitted to book the venue in their workplace.

7.8.2 Focus groups

According to Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998), a focus group is a "purposive discussion of a topic or related topics taking place between nine to twelve people with similar background and common interests... it further enables me to develop new concepts and theories." (pg. 3) Barbour and Kitzinger (2012) define focus groups as group discussions exploring a specific set of issues. Frisina (2018) argued focus groups allow us to understand the process of creating consensus and dissent via interaction. A paper by Gaižauskaitė & Mikėnė (2014) looks at the use of focus groups in social work research, she cites several key researchers who focus on the importance of social work research and the importance that it should be conducted to a high standard to ensure the applicability of results that can be used in social work interventions.

The group is 'focussed' in that it involves some collective activity – such as viewing a video.... or simply debating a set of questions. Crucially, focus groups are distinguished from the broader category of group interviews by the explicit use of group interaction to generate data (Kitzinger, 1994, pg. 103). Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another, asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. Gaižauskaitė & Mikėnė (2014) cautioned that this is not a type of a group interview where a session of questions and answers with a group of people is processed. The objective is discussion among participants.

Active interaction of participants is an added value of the focus group method in comparison to individual interviews or survey research answers. At the very least research participants create an audience for one another (ibid). Participants were asked a question and left to discuss it. I found that this was a challenge in the beginning because participants at first expected to lead in asking questions and keeping the flow of the focus group going, however it appears that on all occasions, the group started getting into conversation without the necessity of my direction. Frisina (2018) advises it is important for the moderator (the researcher) to maintain low directivity, therefore I came in only to redirect the conversation if it diverted from FGC related content, I also found that the participants answered a number of the planned questions at the same time through layered conversations within the focus groups.

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, such as observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys. These attitudes, feelings and beliefs may be partially independent of a group or its social setting but are more likely to be revealed during the social gathering and the interaction which being in a focus group entails (Gibbs, 1997). I took advantage of these attitudes and feelings by opening this platform for them to discuss as it was understood that they all had may years of experience in FGCs and therefore were able to objectively and critically reflect on the FGC model. I was interested in finding qualitative information that included real life examples of their experience in running FGCs. I also included questions about feedback from children and families about their experiences in the FGC process. The focus groups allowed them to reflect, debate

and thus provide a richness of data about the daily professional practice of FGC coordinators, an opportunity to express how and what they believe they do to empower and enable the voice of children and families in their practice. Some members of the focus group took out their phones, laptops and tablets and started reading out some of the feedback they had received from children and families while relating stories about the FGCs they were reflecting on.

MacIntosh (1993) recommends the number of people per group to be usually six to ten; although other researchers have recommended eight to twelve (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1998). Barbour and Kitzinger (2012) further remarked that group size and composition in existing guides about focus group research is always didactic. This can often hamper imaginative – or even appropriate – application of focus group methods. In the current research two focus groups of 6 participants were run. Rubin and Babbie (2015) cited a variety of participants' reactions, dominance or passivity, potential conflicts or other unexpected outcomes as some of the disadvantages of focus group interviews. They further identified that there may develop group dynamics which may create pressure for participants to say things that may not accurately reflect their feelings or needs. The moderator must therefore be prepared to efficiently deal with these emergent issues.

While the group was in progress, as a moderator I kept in mind the disproportionate power relations that exist in groups and had made creative plans to deal with them if they appeared. In the first focus group conducted there were no obvious unequal power relations, perhaps it was because all the participants worked freelance, therefore they were all in equal positions. The team manager gave time for staff to

participate in the research and shared information that enabled them to set up the focus group. Furthermore, the manager did not attend the focus group to ensure that all participants were comfortable enough to participate. The manager only took part in a one-to-one interview.

7.8.2.1 Interview and Focus Group Procedure

A similar procedure was used for both one to one and Focus Group interviews. The first question asked to all participants was an ice breaker ‘how long have you been involved in FGCs?’. Some researchers would call this a filter question as answers given for this question would filter out respondents to whom subsequent questions do not apply (Seale, 2018 pg. 253). In my Zulu culture, whenever you meet someone, you follow the initial greeting with ‘unjani?’ meaning how are you? This is a similar thing as this question is a temperature check for the respondents. All participants who had a prior FGC involvement were also asked an icebreaker question about the length of time they have been working in their current positions, all of which are related to FGC. While this is called an icebreaker question, it by no means suggests that it is less important in the findings of the study as it places into context the experience which the respondent brings to the research process and how it influences their responses. Participants were asked some basic questions but at times there needed to be extra questions for clarity. This was particularly the case when social workers were discussing their perceptions of power in the FGC process, what makes FGCs work and how FGCs are different from other meetings, a few more follow up questions were asked to aid clarity.

For me, the importance of this first question is the ability to establish rapport. Miller (2017) cites Duncombe and Jessop (2012) and Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong (2007) who argue that making an effort to establish a sense of rapport – or some respect, with regards to someone giving their time and engaging with our questions – in a qualitative interview may be or needs to be different to the more commercialised commodification of research skills used in other forms of information gathering. This further establishes their expertise and therefore their suitability to respond to the questions. This is further reiterated by Youell and Youell (2011) who also contend that rapport is a vital starting point for effective communication. When rapport is developed successfully, trust and mutual respect will grow, and communication will be more effective.

As already stated in Section 2.6.1, social workers make referrals to FGC, via the FGC managers who allocate to independent FGC coordinators, who then pick up the referrals and contact families and enlist the contribution of child advocates to help them to speak to the children in order to bring their views, wishes and feelings to the FGC. In total all the professionals who took part collectively held considerable professional experience, just two years shy of two centuries.

7.8.3 Recording

All individual and focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed. Consent was obtained prior to recording for recording to take place. Two recording devices were used at any given time to ensure that there was back up should one method of recording fail. A battery-operated audio device and an iPad were both used simultaneously. The audio recording device has a USB input which is used to transfer

the audio recording to a computer. Bryman (2016) observed that qualitative researchers are often interested in both what and how something is said. All these nuances of expression form part of the analysis. He further suggested that the interviewer needs to be alert to what is being said and asking further questions if needed or even challenging any of the inconsistencies in the answers. This could be lost in the process if I had had to spend time taking notes.

7.4 Transcription

All interviews, focus groups and group interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcription has been the most challenging and time-consuming task during the research process. Bryman (2016) echoes these concerns about transcribing interviews being time consuming. He suggests that one allows five to six hours to transcribe one hour's recording. I found this task particularly challenging especially for the focus group interviews as there were many voices and at times respondents spoke over each other. I listened to each recording a number of times and went over the transcription to ensure all the voices were captured. I used a combination of self-transcription and transcription software, Trint and otter.ai. Lofland and Lofland (1995) cited by Bryman (2016) advised that qualitative data analysis be left until all the interviews have been completed and transcribed. Whilst the process itself is tiring and cumbersome, I was able to gain deeper insight into what the respondents were saying and was further able to listen to other aspects of the interview that were not heard during the recording, and it enabled me to begin reflecting on the data in a way that is meaningful and helps to feed into the process of analysis and coding.

7.5 Data Analysis Strategy

Marshall and Rossman (1990) described data analysis as “the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. Data analysis is a search for answers about relationships among categories of data." (pg.111). This is for me the most accurate representation of how one feels about this data analysis process. For me it truly felt messy, ambiguous time consuming and a fascinating process. Qualitative data analysis is about reducing data, without losing its meaning (Adu, 2019). This therefore suggests that qualitative content analysis is about development of themes to capture underlying meaning.

Schreier (2012) suggested the process involves identification of relevant data, coding text, generating themes to represent underlying data meaning and using these themes to address research questions. This constituted the identification of themes through thorough reading and re-reading of the data (Rice and Ezzy, 1999) to identify patterns that emerge from the data which then form categories of analysis. As both a social worker and a researcher it was very important to ensure quality assurance in the research process in order to ensure credibility, transferability both being important factors to ensure that research has been conducted with appropriate care and control. I used a nonlinear method of data presentation, which suggests that data will not be presented in an organised and linear technique. A hybrid process of thematic analysis which involved inductive and deductive thematic analysis as suggested by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) was used.

In summary this is qualitative research that used an interpretivist approach throughout. Snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. Data was gathered through using one to one semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. The one-to-one interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, coded and analysed to find themes. In analysing data, I considered a symbolic interaction perspective as I focussed on the individual meaning respondents ascribed to events and phenomena. Analysis of the emergent themes are discussed in chapters 8, 9and 10. Throughout, I was guided by social work ethics and the Ubuntu moral code in conducting this research.

7.6 Qualitative Data Coding and Categorisation

Perhaps the most fitting depiction of the coding and data analysis process, was articulated by Adu (2017) who observed that coding is like using Lego Bricks to create art: it always begins with using meaningless pieces of bricks to create a meaningful piece of art. The data was coded and categorised using NVivo 12 – a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CASQDAS). (Bazeley and Jackson, 2019). Whilst CASQDAS aids with taking over the labour-intensive tasks of creating marginal codes, creating copies of transcripts and field notes, linking parts of data to a code, linking them all together, the researcher still needs to interpret the data, code, and retrieve the data. The researcher is therefore responsible for ensuring that the information they input on NVivo is accurate as it cannot assist in coding decisions or findings interpretation of the findings if it is not (Sprokkereef et al, 1995 and Weitzman and Miles, 1995 cited in Bryman, 2016).

There remains an open verdict about the use of CAQDAS, with different researchers stating its merits and demerits cited by Bryman (2016, pg. 602 and 603). Bryman further notes that some of the detractors of CAQDAS are pre 2000 and there have been a lot of changes and updates in these software technologies since then, therefore some of the stated concerns may have been addressed. I feel it is a useful transferable data management and analysis skill to have, and it helps store all the information in one safe area so that they can be used throughout the research process.

After the data was transcribed, I read the transcripts a number of times to start to make sense of what the participants were saying Seale (2018) described coding as placing like with like so that patterns can be found (pg. 338). Although some writers prefer to call it indexing (Bryman, 2016) the wording coding will be used for the purposes of this study. The raw data from the interview transcripts was looked at and relevant sections were highlighted and coded according to their respective research questions. When empirical indicators were identified and dropped into the nodes that were created. These nodes were labelled to aid clarity when analysing the data. Taking into consideration the research approach, purpose of the study, research questions and data, interpretation focussed coding was chosen (Adu, 2019, pg. 237).

In the process of coding, nodes are created. Nodes are defined as a route by which coding is undertaken (Bryman, 2016, pg. 606). They combine references to sections of the documents in which the codes appear, they are therefore specific references about a theme, place or person or any other area of interest. The researcher sees nodes as containers that contain different treats, in this case, there is a node for each

open-ended question and all participant responses associated with it. Coding happens by applying nodes to segments of the text.

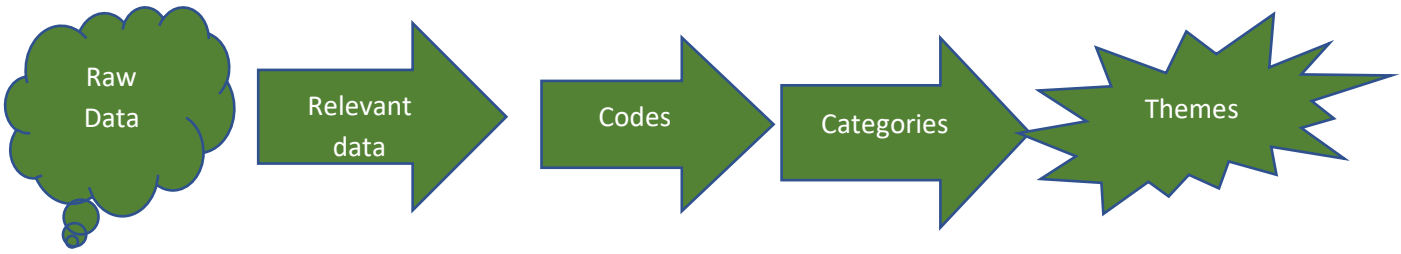


Figure 3 Qualitative data reduction process. Adapted from Adu (2019)

In summary the data analysis process followed the following steps (adapted from Adu, 2019)

- Data cleaning in this instance was done by ensuring all the spellings and information were correct and by removing all the data that could lead to participants being identified therefore ensuring their anonymity.
- The data was uploaded on NVivo for coding and analysis.
- The data was reorganised into respective codes.
- Data exploration was conducted using query command for example to make a word cloud or a word tree.
- Start coding relevant information on the data.
- Generate themes to address research questions.

The next chapter will consider the qualitative findings. Whilst all the chapters are presented individually, they are all derived from the same data set. The next chapter presents the generic findings of the whole thesis and the summary of the key themes that arose from the data. Chapter 9 has been focused on the voice of the child in the FGC process.

Chapter 8 Findings

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of all the themes that emerged from the data. It will discuss the data specifically in relation to the voice of the child in the FGC process respectively. The research in this thesis has taken an interpretivist approach using qualitative interviewing methods in considering the FGC model in relation to its effectiveness in keeping children safe from intra familial maltreatment and embodying the Ubuntu philosophy. The process and the outcomes of the FGC process, the

importance of the child's field, capital and Habitus and the exchange of power in this process have been reviewed in earlier chapters. Research questions covering both the exploration of qualitative experiences of the FGC and the perception of how the outcomes are experienced by children and families have been
delineated earlier in the thesis.

The research aimed to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of professional practitioners regarding the efficacy of the

   FGC model in safeguarding children at risk of intra familial maltreatment?

2. How does the practitioner partnership with families using the FGC model work to improve outcomes for children who have or are experiencing intra familial maltreatment?
3. How is the voice of the child represented in the FGC process?

4. How does the concept of empowerment manifest in the FGC process?

5. What are the distinct attributes of the FGC process that differentiates it from other social services meetings?
6. How does this research contribute to our understanding of the role of the extended family in child protection?

7. In what ways does this research demonstrate how Ubuntu and cultural competency are embodied in the FGC process?

8.2 Findings – Emergent Themes

All participants in both individual interviews and focus groups were asked if they believed FGC was an effective model to safeguard children from maltreatment, all responded emphatically in the affirmative, therefore further explanation was sought that led to participants elaborating on their answers. The findings have been grouped into the following themes:

- Empowerment of children and families
- The role of the extended family
- FGC process efficacy and family cohesion
- The use of family strengths and resources
- Family taking back control

Keeping the voice of the child at the centre (This theme will be discussed in Chapter 9, which has been dedicated to discussing the voice of the child in the FGC process)

- Distinct attributes of the FGC process that differentiate it from other social services meetings
- Challenges of the FGC Model

Analysis of these themes and related sub themes will be analysed in the sections that follow.

8.3 Empowerment of children and families

All respondents believe that the empowerment aspect of the FGC model supports partnership working because children and families are empowered to come up with their own solution as to what they think works in relation to the safeguarding issues in their families. This was one of the main emergent themes revealed by all respondents at different points in their respective interviews and in the focus groups.

Kathleen (social worker) felt

> ‘giving families a chance to construct a plan and are not being told what to do, the ideas, implementation and monitoring thereof is about empowering families to be able to make their own plans and address their family challenges for the future as they would have been given the tools to do so’. (Kathleen FG2)

This suggests families will recognise the strengths they already have within themselves to be able to help themselves and their children in the future and taking control of their lives. Jacinta, also a social worker echoed these sentiments arguing for the importance of empowerment.

> I think what makes them work is that the family are empowered through the FGC process, empowered to come up with their own solutions as to what they think would work within the context of their own families. Whereas in the professional perspective, it may be considered that the family should do this that and the other and how they should do it etc. it’s not that the family cannot make changes but really it should be in the context of their family dynamics, what works for them. I would say that in a large number of families they work.

FGC coordinators and children’s advocates shared these sentiments about the empowerment aspect of the FGC model. (Jacinta FG1)

Scelo (advocate) stated,

> ‘I find that it's a service that empowers families to have a say and to feel that they are making a real, positive, contribution to their child or children within the family’ (sic). (Scelo Int.10)

Nondu (advocate) also linked empowerment with FGC highlighting:

> ‘..it's a process that gives families a voice, also it’s a process where they are taking actually the lead of that ‘meeting’. (Nondu Int. 11)

Khanyo (coordinator) focussed on the importance of the family going through the final report and expressing their concerns if the report does not accurately reflect issues going on in the family. She also highlighted the importance of the plan reflecting the family’s views, wishes and feelings

> ‘I also think its empowering because the final report is what the family wants not what the social worker wants and that can be uncomfortable to some social workers and are not happy with it because it doesn’t reflect what they want but your role is independent and that’s key to the process and remaining objective throughout it because even if you do not agree with the plan, that the mind-set of the family at the time and you need to agree with it that’s the empowering bit’. (Khanyo Int.9)

Nicky (advocate) looked at the FGC process a transfer of power from the hands of the social workers to those of the family.

‘In those processes social workers have powers to do so because of the powers that come with their positions, however in FGC that power moves to the hands of the families as they have the final say in how the plan will look like’. (Nicky, Int.2.) Nicky’s comment links to both the literature review (Chapter 2) and discussion on social work power as detailed in Chapter 5. This was an important

reflection as it showed that social workers do not necessarily seek to exert their powers on children and families in Social Services processes e.g., Child in Need plans and Child Protection plans, but see FGCs as a way of sharing power with families. One might call this an expression of Ubuntu when working with families.

Kairo, an FGC advocate described this process of how empowerment in the FGC process might be expressed as that in which the family is given scope within which to make decisions that are going to help the sought outcomes for the children.

> 'I think that is what makes the difference. Instead of being told you have to come up with this that and the other, obviously there are goals that are set to be achieved but they decide how they can be achieved, who will do what within the family, who are the stronger people within the family to take care of 'something'. (Kairo Int.1.)

How does the concept of empowerment manifest in the FGC process? All participants shared their opinions of what they deem to be how empowerment works in the FGC process. There were two sub- themes that emerged highlighting different ways in which empowerment manifests in the FGC these were:

- Empowerment through participation
- Family Led Planning Meeting

8.3.1 Empowerment through participation

Nondu (coordinator)

> ‘I think I've seen lots of evidence that it works, I mean it’s like any other thing else, you get one or two occasions where you know it’s not going to work and you might know that from the outset because the social worker is using it as a tick box exercise but overall, I think it is a process that works well. It's a process that gives families a voice also its a process where they are taking actually the lead of that meeting and also I've seen it where it works, rather than a child going into care the family were able to come together and speak to mum to encourage her to allow that somebody in the family be assessed to be put forward rather and for them to come together and use the process of the Family Group Conference to have that conversation however difficult it is you know and for mom to kind of say yes I agree these are who I'm going to put forward because now she's changed and she doesn't want her child you know to go into care. She's decided to have a family. I think it is a good process.’
>
> Nondu (Int.11)

Ade (FGC advocate) argued:

> ‘It means they (the family) are gathering the strengths within their own families. This suggests empowerment is about families taking the lead and showcasing their strengths through their participation in the FGC process’.
>
> (Ade Int.6)

Nicky (FGC advocate) also felt that empowerment is about giving the family the opportunity to do things for themselves.

'…that is what I'm talking about, empowering families because everybody has to now come together and take on their roles, to provide that support, to safeguard that child within the family fold. So, I think what's unique is the empowerment of the family to do for themselves, primarily obviously with support because they still get the support from the local authority, but what' happening there is the risk of the children being removed is being reduced'. Nicky (Int.2)

Elizabeth (FGC advocate) had similar views on what she perceived as empowering for the child to be heard and seen in the process.

'(Empowerment) it's something that is not easy to pinpoint it is easy to be talking around the child but that is just talking around the child, but what is the child themselves saying or not saying'. Elizabeth (Int.3)

Scelo (advocate)

'For me how I know they are working is like at the end of the FGC or at the review stage or second review stage I use the evaluation form to see the feedback and its always been positive so we know we get the results the family is usually happier going through the process' Scelo (Int.10)

8.2.2 Family led meeting planning.

The family led meeting planning, was in itself considered an aspect of empowerment, and a few respondents identified this as one of the reasons that make FGCs work.

> ‘They do, I think because, well – I find them when I do them it’s not just the family coming up with a plan, I think (it) also helps me with my risk assessing because I get the understanding of the family. Do they share the concerns, what is their understanding around that? You are confident if you are thinking about the closing and not working with the family anymore, if it’s a really good plan there’s that reassurance. I think for the family it’s a focus meeting which perhaps I imagine if myself as a family with my family we wouldn’t necessarily talk that way discussing the concerns or the protective factors so I think it can be helpful format for families because they are very much family focused – they are at a time and place that suits the families it’s about giving them a voice – it’s a shift of the power back to them a little bit. In my experience they have been positive even perhaps when what’s said in the plan is not necessarily carried out, they are still a useful forum’ (Emily, social worker, Focus Group2)

Agatha (coordinator) stated:

> ‘So, this is for me…somebody coming saying (sic), so it is going to be me, what do you want, when you want to do it, not the social worker who will be making decisions. If it is in the evening, we will do it, if it is convenient for you. That is actually giving the family a lot of power. Even on the day, you come to realise it is not the social worker that is telling me what to do. I’ve also been told it’s voluntary, so it is up to me. It is up to me really to feel that being part of organising it’. Agatha

(Int.12)

Nondu (FGC coordinator) pointed out:

> ‘Families choose who is going to be invited, they will say to the FGC coordinator,
>
> I want this person or that person, they make that choice – not any professional. Sometimes we get the child to write the invitation that will be sent out to all participants of the FGC, help create the menu for the meeting, so they have the opportunity to have a feel that it is their own meeting, and they are organising it themselves’. Nondu (Int.11)

This is a departure from other Social Services led meetings where families are given the time and venue for the meeting without any consideration for their convenience in reaching that meeting or time convenience. This may pose a challenge for families as they may be deemed as not engaging if they are unable to make the meetings during working hours. Khanyo (coordinator) stated

> ‘The final report is what the family wants not what the social worker wants and that can be uncomfortable to some social workers and are not happy with it because it does not reflect what they want but your role is independent and that’s key…remaining objective throughout it because even if you do not agree with the plan, that the mind-set of the family at the time and you need to agree with it that’s the empowering bit’. Khanyo (Int.9)

This further suggests that when the family makes their plan and there are no compelling reasons why the social worker cannot accept it as it meets the bottom

lines. It is about treating families with Ubuntu and believing in their abilities to make decisions that are the best for their children. Families lead the meeting, although the coordinator is there, their role is to simply coordinate it, make sure everyone shows up, everyone knows the role they are playing and when all the professionals exit the room that is when the families begin to make their plans, that is very empowering for families. As Khanyo has stated above, for families to be able to veto the final report is an important aspect of empowerment as they are deciding how they want their views to be represented in that report.

Kairo (FGC advocate) concluded,

> 'Yes, I think the family have been empowered by the very fact that they have been given control of the 'process' Kairo (Int.1)

8.3 The role of the extended family in understanding of concerns.

In deciphering the role of the extended family in understanding concerns, it became apparent from all respondents that central to extended family engagement in the FGC process is their understanding of the concerns that Social Services have about the child. Up until that point, the extended family is often not aware of the ongoing concerns, and therefore has not been involved in restorative processes like the FGC to address the situation as discussed in Section 2.5.1.

Gill (social worker) emphasised:

> ‘When it becomes obvious that parents cannot cope or cannot do it on their own - as safeguarding workers we need to explore and see other family members or friends who can support and help parents to be able to care for the children. So, with Family Group Conference when a family support plan is formulated with support from practitioners, they'll be able to help them, they do work’. (Gill, FG1)

Furthermore, Agatha an FGC coordinator pointed out that:

> ‘The realisation by the family that they may lose the child awakens their inner will and desire to try and do something to change things. This is how the FGC model manages to reach out to families and achieve outcomes that other models have not been able to achieve in terms of getting families to engage in decision making processes. It is about understanding why Social Services are involved and the outcomes for the child if the concerns are not addressed’. (Agatha, Int.12)

Kofi’s opinions as a social worker are in line with this as he stated:

> ‘It is about the exploration of viable options because social workers work with vulnerable families and sometimes chaotic parents. At times it becomes obvious that parents cannot cope or cannot do it on their own so as safeguarding or frontline workers social workers need to explore and see other family members or friends who can support and help parents to be able to care for the children’. (Kofi, FG1)

Through the FGC, a family support plan is formulated with support from practitioners they will be able to help families. Khanyo (FGC coordinator) added

> ‘That moment the whole family recognises the concerns that have been raised by Social Services is the moment when the process gets into motion’. So, with Family Group Conference when a family support plan is formulated with support from practitioners, they'll be able to help them. And sometimes it's very helpful because with a support plan then you can see that a serious case you are considering PLO, LPM or whatever because of the family support plan, you'll be able to work with them. With families you step the case down to child in need’. (Khanyo, Int.9)

This suggests that it is not extended families’ lack of interest in the welfare of the child that often leads to children not achieving outcomes, but it is about the information that they have to trigger those processes needed to keep the child safe. This finding is powerful and suggests that families have a role to play in supporting other family members and finding collective solutions.

Jacinta, (social worker) reflected on why the family is more likely to accept the FGC instead of any other interventions.

> ‘It was about families who have problems that come to the social work threshold. Part of the problem is the family functioning and history of Social Services involvement, when people do not feel supported and safe within their own families, they are justifiably reluctant to share information with

their families. ‘It is when families have been quite involved in the process that they are likely to accept the FGC, often when the case is in proceedings. It can be positive because most of the family members will step up, it would be good it could happen sooners but sometimes it is not possible’**.** (Jacinta, FG1)

One of the recurring observations about the families’ understanding of the concerns is how some families would only get involved at a later stage when the family is in proceedings. Perhaps understandably given the details of the difficulties they may have been experiencing will be shared within that setting as Elizabeth (FGC advocate) stated:

‘Only when the case is in proceedings do they realise that their chances of getting involved and keeping the child within the family network might fade away if they do not get involved. That way FGC has a potential to give the family insight about what is going on and the seriousness thereof because families may minimise the concerns. In comparison to the CIN and CP process, FGC is for the family. In other meetings it is very easy for the parents to become overwhelmed because they are surrounded by professionals constantly making judgements on you so within that space, they are surrounded by people they are comfortable around the family they might be able to share a bit more’. (Elizabeth, Int.3.)

Ade (Advocate)

‘Yes, it (FGC) does work, but in terms of the aim like when you are thinking of the child in need you do sometimes explore the wider network, so that’s similar but also with CP they sometimes require that you look into extended family who

could potentially take on the child if there's an idea that the child is going to be removed'. (Ade, Int.6)

Respondents have highlighted that at times family members may not be aware of the concerns or the extent of the concerns social services have for the children. Upon understanding these concerns, families are often able to come together to make safe plans for the children. Respondents suggest this is what make the FGCs work. Whilst some families lack trust in social services having a FGC helps the families understand presenting concerns and work together with social workers to make plans for the children.

8.3 FGC process efficacy and family cohesion

In Section 5.5 and in other parts of this thesis, it has been discussed in detail that some families have had negative experiences with social services, feelings of being treated without Ubuntu and exertion of power, specifically from social workers, who may be seen as the face of the policies that families sometimes deem oppressive. These sentiments were also expressed by respondents on this research, as one of the emergent themes was the assertion, that unlike other Social Services processes, FGCs often lead to better outcomes for children and families.

Vusi (advocate)

> '100% it really works when I say 100% it depends on how you look at it, it works in the sense that it brings families together, you are able to make a plan, but it does on some occasions bring out concerns that often people are not aware of, so it doesn't have to be that you have done an FGC and the child is taken off the plan – a CIN or CP plan. What I found is recently the FGC I meant that

having an advocate we were able to see the risks. The social worker made a referral, where they were looking at stepping the case down and possibly closing. As a result of the FGC the family members have come forward and expressed the level of abuse that has been going on in the home, which had been hidden from the social worker and other professionals by the family. And the children in particular, there has been real concerns raised by the children through advocacy work, now this case has been escalated to CP. There's a review coming up where they are, they are thinking of going into pre proceedings, if the dad is let back into the family home again, these children will be taken into care. I think it has raised the level of risk and I think if we hadn't had the children involved in the FGC process and the advocacy work there, this we wouldn't have known.' (Vusi, Int.5.)

Elizabeth (FGC coordinator)

'I believe (FGCs) they do; I believe they do, it's an alternative to the mainstream, I believe they do, from my experience they do. I've been lucky enough to have some children say to me years later – thank you for what you did. I believe it works, it is different, but it works.' (Elizabeth, Int.3.)

Giving a chance to families to express themselves, is one of the most important aspects of the FGC process, and a key contributor to empowerment for families.

'Through the FGC process and the family feeling empowered to express themselves, feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness may change into

something positive. When families can challenge the social worker during the FGC and receive answers to their questions, not only does it improve the family's relationship with the social worker, but it helps improve outcomes for children and families'. Vusi (FGC advocate Int.5)

Rohini (FGC coordinator) felt:

'The FGC process gives the family the opportunity to think about their strengths because a lot of times in the court and CP process the focus is on weaknesses'. (Rohini, Int.8)

This is one of the main strengths of the FGC process as it differs from other social work interventions FGC appears to operate on a strength rather than a deficit basis. Whilst there are reasons why families are involved with social services, it does not suggest those families do not have any strengths about them, that is what the FGC process is about.

Nicky (FGC coordinator) reflected on the aspect of the family as a unifying force offering family members who have not worked together an opportunity to do so.

'It gives them (children and families) a chance to think about who is there and who is not. There are things other family members may not know

about. Coming together, for things to come to light and then work trying to deal with it together. The family may not have come together to discuss issues in the past because they did not know things were happening'. 'FGC therefore help family members who were previously not linked to be linked. That is why outcomes are positive with the purpose of finding better outcomes for children and families'. (Nicky, Int. 2)

These sentiments were echoed by Elizabeth (FGC advocate), who highlighted the importance of information sharing and having the opportunity to read and agree with the report beforehand.

'they feel the report that the FGC coordinator shares with the family has been checked by the main carers and the child (subject to age and understanding) and they can decide what information is shared and if there is anything they do not like about the (social worker's) FGC report they can work together and change the report or they can leave it there if it needs to stay. Having a report beforehand sets a precedent that this is the only information that will be shared in the meeting'.

(Elizabeth, Int.3)

Some respondents, like Kairo, Khanyo, Naomi, Emily and Abi felt that the fact that this is a voluntary process, means families have the option of taking part or not. Jacinta observed

that:

‘Even when the FGC is court directed and the family want to say no, they can still say no. It enables the independent FGC coordinator to go off and meet different family members and then bring them all together. The idea is that the family will lead this, and the FGC coordinator coordinates it, so it is a family led process rather than the Social Services – led involvement’. (Jacinta, FG1)

8.4 Use of family strengths and resources

In Chapter 6 Bourdieu’s theory of practice was discussed encompassing the field, the capital and the habitus. Family resources that are referred to are the family’s different forms of capital that can be used in this process to make safe plans for the children to address intra familial maltreatment. Bourdieu (1986) pointed out that the capital enables the individual to exercise power and to mobilise the resources.

Khanyo (coordinator)

‘I think it's also important especially where if a child is to be removed it gives a chance for the family to sit together for them to decide who in the family, they feel they want to (sic) put forward to be assessed and for them collectively to have a discussion around that harm within their families so that they're working towards keeping a child within the family’. (Khanyo Int.9)

Vusi (advocate) spoke at length on the point of how families need to be trusted within this process, despite imperfections within their families. He emphasised:

> ‘it is about having a support network. What families then do in realistic terms, are (be) able to see how things might look like if they come together and make those changes. It gives families that opportunity to really be open and honest with each other. Often, they do not know what is going on in each other’s lives, about internal difficulties. Maybe, because families have fallen out, or maybe because of the stigma and shame, whatever purpose there is. What the FGC does is bring families together and give them an open platform to discuss their problems
>
> together’. Vusi (Int.5)

This is the fundamental aspect of FGC as the process can only proceed if there are family members to be part of the FGC process. It has been argued in Section 2.12 that in FGC you define your own family, therefore people who come to the FGC are people you consider family. It is not about the convention of what the family is perceived to be, but it is about your perception e.g., immigrant communities are able to have FGCs as they invite their support systems from their communities. This ensures inclusivity and non – discrimination of different family types and embodiment of Ubuntu in practice.

Ade (advocate) suggested that:

> ‘we’ve seen it work and we’ve seen it really work, so there is research and there is evidence to prove that it does work. Thinking about its history and then again, it’s about thinking about what we are really looking for from that

> family, can they really deliver it and then that's up to children's services to assess and make those decisions'. Ade (Int.6.)

Without going through the family and helping them in supporting the implementation of the family plan, these family resources will not be able to be used to effectively safeguard children from maltreatment. It is also important to start with the family, this means the expectations and the standards are only about that family, it depends on their strengths and weakness and how they can be harnessed to make a workable plan to safeguard their children. The whole FGC process should always be an exercise in recognition of the family strengths. By virtue of making the FGC referral you are stating that you trust the family to come up with workable plans to safeguard their children from maltreatment.

When social workers work with families, they may not be aware of other family members that could be drawn in to make a plan, but the FGC process often finds those family members come to the fore.

Kairo (FGC advocate) stated that:

> 'Social services may not know because they may not have had that person included. I think what sometimes surprises social services its these families that come out of the woodwork, they are there, but they are just now aware of them because their direct involvement is within the immediate family, mum, children etc. When these additional family members come out of the woodwork, some of them bring some really valuable strengths to the table'. Kairo (Int.1)

Kairo further discussed how families may have not been involved at an earlier stage

> ‘In many cases family do not always know what is going on, they do not know the severity of the situation. They may know about the involvement, but they may not know how much at risk the children are to enter the care system. Bringing a family like that together - with all the different members and friends - as well as to come up with their own solutions in the context of their lives. What makes the difference for families is that instead of being told what to do, obviously there are goals that are set to be achieved but the family decide how they can be achieved, who will do what within the family, who are the stronger people within the family to take care of something’. Kairo (Int.1) Norma (Social work) reiterates this:
>
> ‘The FGC is not a social services meeting, it is a family meeting, the family have been given ownership on the process once that has been stressed to them that they are the ones that have to come up with a solution, that is the power of the FGC process’ (Norma, Focus Group1)

Discussing a case that she referred for FGC, Norma continued in respect of a mother she had referred for FGC,

> ‘I think it was empowering for the mother to see that there are all these people who are there for her and care about her and that is not on the strength of these people but there is something about her that she is worthy of this support in all these people even the time that they took out to take part in the FGC which takes some time, I think it was empowering for her to feel supported and loved there are people she can turn to who care for her and her children. I also think it was supportive and sort of encouraging

for the family to think about wow these are all the resources we have and these children…' Norma (Focus Group1)

Agatha a Co-ordinator describes how certain interventions can sap family confidence.

'When families are in court proceedings or have child protection concerns, it makes the family as a whole feel like they have done wrong, they are doing things really badly, things are really negative' Agatha (Int 12).

FGC on the other hand, according to Naomi (social worker)

'Makes them feel even though things are not going so well there are a lot of strengths, there is a lot of power, there is a lot of resource we just need to link in and pull on them and use them'. Naomi (Focus Group 2)

Kathleen (Social Worker) referring to one of her cases that used FGC stated, 'I really thought we've got to bring the power back when the family have things they need to change otherwise it Is going to be a different outcome for a child'. Kathleen (Focus Group 2)

This suggests FGC gives families an opportunity to be open and honest with each other. Sometimes they could have fallen out with each other, or maybe stigma and shame made it hard for the main carers to express their internal difficulties. The FGC brings families together and give them an open platform to discuss their problems.

8.5 Family taking back control.

The findings of this research have suggested the manifestation of empowerment comes about in the FGC process. Empowerment is one of the key themes in the findings when answering different questions posed by this thesis. All participants weighed in on the issue of taking back control. This stems from discussions that suggested the control and power that is used on children and families as manifested in the care and control mandate discussed in Chapter 5.

Simeon (social worker) pointed out that:

> ‘it is about them feeling in control, it is about them (families) feeling they have choices and that it is no use telling them what to do it is not us social workers forcing them, because social workers haven’t got a best reputation and some families are afraid there is this myth that we are going to take the children away and that we get bonuses, so I understand why people are so scared of us. As a social worker I think how we work with families as much as you want it to be cooperative – to work in partnership families by virtue of you being children’s services it can be very directive especially when there is a child protection plan in place, they feel they are being told what to do, even though you may not work that way as a social worker I think it its often how its felt intrusive – they do not want the social worker there all the time’. Simeon (Focus Group1)

Gill – also a social worker fully concurred with this and stated

> ‘I suppose by having an FGC is something that they do together as a family and make their own plan without children’s services so involved so they feel like they are taking back that control that they feel is gone and also for

the extended family to be brought in is more inclusive – the paternal and the maternal sides of the family'. Gill (Focus Group 1)

Taking back control is about families reclaiming their rightful place at the centre of decision making about the matters that affect their children.

8.5 Keeping the voice of the child at the centre of the process

This theme will be discussed in Chapter 9, which has been dedicated to discussing the voice of the child in the FGC process.

8.6 Distinct attributes of the FGC process that differentiate it from other social services meetings

Different sub themes came up to explain how FGCs are different from any other social services meetings and by the virtue of those differences lends itself to better protect children from maltreatment and help family members feel heard in social services processes.

Respondents' responses have been themed as follows:

- The process
- Private Family time
- Focus on family strengths.
- Partnership
- Independent FGC coordinator and child advocate

8.6.1 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: The process

All respondents acknowledged that FGCs are vastly different from other social services meetings. Having more family members than professionals is what makes it different from other meetings. It has been stated in previous sections how the FGC gives back power and control to families, helps families acknowledge existing strengths within families and keeps the voice of the child at the centre of all deliberations, albeit in this thesis through other professionals. The FGC process is also different because it is facilitated by independent FGC coordinators that are not part of the local authority.

Lydia (FGC coordinator) stated

*'C*hildren and their families do not see the FGC coordinator 'as a professional'

(making inverted comas sign in the air) in that sense. They obviously see them as

someone with a job to do, whose job it is to make sure that their voices are heard'. Lydia (Int.7)

FGC coordinators like Agatha and Nondu highlighted other key differences:

> "Other meetings are task orientated and are very much focussed on what needs to be achieved, which box need to be ticked and what timescales need to be in pace. It is about professionals talking at families". (Agatha Int. 12).

> ‘With the FGC, the beauty of it’ is that professionals are not telling families what to do, they are being open and honest about what the concerns are, but they are also explaining to families what might happen if things do not change. What families then do; is show in realistic terms how things might look like if they came together and made those changes’ (Nondu, Int.11).

Njabulo (social worker) stated:

> ‘What I find one of the reasons why I sometimes recommend the Family Group Conference is because sometimes when there is an official process the family take it much more seriously. Automatically and feel almost as if it's a legal binding document for them to sign…’ Njabulo (FG2)

FGC is a solution focussed way of working with families that empowers them. Bredewold and Tonkens (2021) argue FGC focuses on the positive; what is going well and might be expanded. It gives families ownership, unlike any other meeting. Families give the local authority timescales that are realistic for them they are being realistic about what they can do and what they cannot. It brings family networks together, rather than relying on services, whose professionals can change anytime and if those professionals leave the service, leaving families going back to the state of distrust when they do not know where to go from there. With the FGC, the meeting is family oriented, families take a lead in the meeting, families lead discussions and lead the plan, so it often works because they have ownership of it.

8.6.2 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Private Family Time

The most unique aspect of FGC as identified by respondents in this research,

> 'This is the highlight of the FGC and the empowerment process. What I like about the FGC is when the family goes into private family time, on their own, without professional involvement – that is why it is called private family time. The family sits together as a family, discuss each question and come up with their responses' (Graham, FGC child advocate, Int.4.)

Private family time can be seen as a sacred time for families it is where they move from being recipients of services to participants in the services.

Simeon (Social Worker) stated

> 'This is where the planning and the preparation by the FGC coordinator play the most crucial role. The tone taken by families at that time is mostly dependent on the family having had the opportunity to digest the information and therefore less chance of explosive discussions. Voices are sometimes raised but families often manage to identify that person who keeps order within the family (e.g., a matriarch or a patriarch of that family keep order during private family time). The family comes up with a plan that shows their commitment to making things work for the benefit of the children within the family'. Simeon (FG 1)

8.6.3 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Focus on family strengths

Graham – FGC advocate pointed out that

> 'in the CIN and CP meetings, friends and family would not be invited, so having them involved is important for parents as they will hear them cry out for support in a formalised way, which the FGC offers them'. Graham (Int.4)

Simeon – (social worker) stated

> 'As a social worker observing how the family worked together, how they were speaking to each other and how they managed themselves in the FGC, I felt they needed an independent coordinator, but it shows they already have structure among them. I feel confident that when the FGC process is complete, the family will be able to sustain the strengths they already have, that the FGC helped them identify'. Simeon (FG 1)

This is one of the key differences that set FGC apart from all the other social services processes. The findings in this thesis show that FGCs focus on what families can do instead of their deficits and how this is one of the key strengths of the FGC model. People are not a sum of their shortcomings, but they are made of both strengths and weaknesses and the FGC process sees them as such.

8.6.4 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Partnership

The theory of partnership was discussed in great detail in Chapter 4 where partnership was positioned in the context of families and professionals working together to safeguard children. Findings in this thesis show us the links between partnership working and success of the FGC process. Some respondents identified partnership as one of the key differences between FGCs and any other social services meetings.

All respondents acknowledged that the whole FGC process is a team effort.

> 'I believe the agenda before the FGC is about the family being clear about what outcomes need to derive from the FGC meeting. The family also inputs to the agenda by stating what support they need to address the concerns raised. All parties contributed to the agenda'.
>
> Simeon, social worker (FG 1)

Kofi (social worker) stated

> 'There was a FGC meeting where both the family members and the local authority contributed to the outcome. At the FGC family members have flipcharts writing what they will do to support the main carer and to keep the children safe. This is a noteworthy departure from other social services processes where 'it is only the professionals who can even touch the flipcharts', they are more in control than any other meeting where there is chair and a minute taker – FGC is different from all that' Kofi (FG 1)

Emily (social worker) further highlighted:

> ‘Without the FGC you cannot go to court as part of the (Public Law Outline) PLO process. Unless it is a new judge or a judge who does not know their case, no judge will ever give you a court order to remove the child without evidence that you have explored all the options within the family before considering any care outside the family network. If the family do not engage, you still have the evidence that you started with the family to see if anyone could look after that child but there was no one. Only an FGC, not a family meeting can do that’. Emily (FG 2)

According to Graham (FGC advocate) FGC is about partnership,

> ‘It is definitely a team effort, from the FGC coordinators to the advocates, the social worker, the whole family - everyone is involved’. He further believes that ‘when everyone is on the same wavelength, once everyone understands that it is nothing personal against anyone it is not about what has already happened’. Graham (Int.4)

Graham (FGC advocate) continued

> ‘Partnership is about moving forward together, acknowledging that the past may not have been perfect, but the future can be a lot better for the children and their families. It is about the recognition that different parties and family members bring something unique to process, which enhances the opportunities for keeping the children safe within the family by finding solutions together’. Graham (Int.4.)

Scelo (coordinator) suggested that:

> ‘FGCs that work best are the ones where everyone has recognised their role in the process and is open to listening to the opinions of both the professionals and family members, not the ones where the family is still trying to see what the concerns are, then you have a lot of toing and froing’. Scelo (Int .10)

Vusi (advocate) echoed these sentiments and highlighted the importance of commitment from all parties involved.

> ‘It is about commitment from all sides, having FGC coordinators and advocates who are passionate about their work and wanting to do this with the family, really helps’. Vusi (Int. 5)

Rohini (FGC coordinator) warned:

> ‘People, both family and professionals who put their feeling and emotions in front, so, they do not always make the right decisions for the child, it could lead to selfish decisions being made, it needs to be about the child’. Rohini (Int.8)

This was an outlier comment that came as warning to families and professionals who make decisions that are not based on the best interest of the child but on their own feelings and emotions. Rohini warned that such decisions may end up not helping the child but instead harming them. This also links to the importance of ensuring proper preparations are done before the FGC to address such situations.

8.6.5 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Independence of key role players

Respondents identified that they are not aware of any other service set up like restorative justice and similar kinds of practice that has independence attached to it. According to Lydia (FGC coordinator)

> 'All the services seem to be under the local authority or funded by the local authority, so children and families have the sense of 'I know you guys are all the same' as they tend to say. They recognise that advocates are only there for them, to help them express exactly how they are feeling so that their voices can be heard even when they are not confident enough to speak for themselves'. Lydia (Int.7) Rohini (FGC coordinator) reflected on her independence as a FGC coordinator when they are paid by the local authority.

> 'Since we are not in the same team, their files are not kept by social services and do not need to share all the information with social service – within the confines of responsible information sharing. The independence of the FGC coordinator is about being commissioned by the local authority to coordinate the family coming to an agreed plan and then stepping back again, therefore there is no vested interest except for the purposes already stated'. Rohini (Int.8)

Kathleen (social worker) gave her opinion on the importance of the FGC coordinator being independent from the social worker and the local authority.

'… Social workers haven't got the capacity to start searching extended family members, they are very busy people. They are really busy and families as well because and they are not independent. Social services are not seen as independent, and it is difficult for them (families) to give you their names (details of their family members and support network) because they are worried. Most families really, we don't get involved with social services particularly if its child protection seriously. So, if you think about it, we know you have an independent FGC coordinator who makes up time because that's the job. They will search for extended family members; they will interview them. They will then convince them to attend a meeting. That's the first step. The second step is in that meeting they are aware, they become aware of the situation what the local authorities are worried about…' Kathleen (FG 2)

8.6.6 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Independent Child Advocate

Independent child advocates saw themselves as the main pillar of the FGC process that keeps the family steady and enable them to come together

Nicky (FGC Advocate) stated

'For me as an advocate, it is important to know how a child sees things. Adults have their own beliefs, ideas, and opinions about what is good for the child, what is right and wrong. I am not taking anything away from them, but it is still best to know how a child feels, how they see things from their vantage point, how do I empower a child to feel that they matter and not

that it is just the adults who matter because of what they are saying or what the court is saying…'. Nicky (Int.2)

Comparing this to the CP meeting Ade (FGC advocate) highlighted

'In CP meetings children do not really play any role, it is all about professionals, all the child wants is to go home'. Ade (Int. 6)

According to Agatha (FGC coordinator) also, the key is really about a child feeling empowered…

'For once in their lives, from what they have said to me, in a normal social service meeting they get shadowed over, they could say, 'I have said that to the social worker' or 'I haven't said anything because even when I say it nothing happens'. Once they start to feel let down by the system, naturally they will start to shut down anyway. It is therefore important to have an advocate who is independent so that they are able to tap into those feelings that have been wrapped up and no longer want to be expressed…' Agatha (Int. 12)

The only time a child could be allocated an advocate in a CIN or CP meeting would be when they make a complaint against the local authority or when they are a child in care so their voice would be heard through the professionals in that room or the parent, only in the FGC is there someone to represent their voice or help them express themselves in the meeting.

8.6.7 How is the FGC different from other social services' meetings: Independent FGC Coordinator

Social workers expressed appreciation for the separation of roles in the FGC process allowing them to step away and let the family take the lead in the process. They felt the FGC coordinator plays a key role in consulting family members the social worker may not be able to contact.

> 'She has the time and the flexibility to speak to the family and friends before the
>
> FGC that takes the pressure off me' Simeon, social worker, (FG 1)

Emily, social worker stated

> 'There is something about the environment when you are in the FGC… having someone who is independent from you who chairs the meeting, makes it more about the family and you can be a bit removed from it as a social worker.' Emily (FG 2)

This stems from the awareness from some social workers that at times children and families may feel the social worker is both a player and a referee. The independence of the FGC coordinator makes it more of a level playing field, helping families express themselves better.

Naomi – also a social worker was of the opinion that

> 'The role of the coordinator is that of managing conflicts within the FGC process, to make it clear what the rules are, that everyone understands their role in the FGC process… they also need to remember to remain objective and not get caught in the emotions of it all'. Naomi (FG 2)

It is interesting to note that it is the social workers here who are advocating for the importance of the independent FGC coordinator.

> FGCs that worked very well are the ones where everybody wants to have it and it is not because it has been directed by the courts, where social workers are clear about what they are hoping to achieve for the children and families, where it is not just a tick box exercise, where families have cooperated, where they have taken part and have genuinely wanted to be part of the process.
>
> Kofi, social worker (FG1)

8.7 Some challenges of the FGC model

Looking at the responses given by respondents there are three distinct themes that emerge and suggest that FGC may not be suitable for all families: - bureaucracy; family's willingness/ability to engage and resource considerations over family's needs. At times social workers themselves do not feel the FGC is or the only suitable intervention. There is no approach or medicine that works for everyone all the time and there may be reasons why the FGC is not appropriate for that particular family or situation. The sub-themes were not articulated by respondents themselves but came about as a result of analysis of the information provided so they can be considered as latent.

Some respondents qualified their answers.

> 'FGC on its own is probably not the way forward but need to work in conjunction with another good model like Signs of Safety (SoS) so that by the time social workers get to the decision to make a referral to FGC or not,

the family have a sense of the concerns the local authority has.' Simeon, social worker (FG 1).

'If the family accepts an FGC, it is better because it walks the path with you, up to the point where they themselves are ready to understand the concerns and the identified risks to the children'

Norma, social worker, (FG1).

Below some of the sub themes that emerged suggesting FGCs may not be suitable will be discussed.

8.7.1 Bureaucracy

Respondents argued that some FGCs become important when it becomes clear that there are ongoing concerns that cannot be addressed outside formal processes to keep the children safe from maltreatment. Some social workers felt the FGC process is not initiated from the point of empowering families, but from a bureaucratic standpoint when local authorities have been compelled by the courts to evidence that they have consulted the wider family network. It also means the referral may be done as part of the procedure i.e., in the PLO process the courts often need to see evidence that all family options have been explored before going ahead with the process. Some social workers see this as process led and a tick box exercise – a sentiment that cut across both FGC coordinators and social workers. This also becomes problematic at another level as social workers are made to do an intervention that may not be suitable for that family, at times leaving the family feeling like they have failed – when the intervention was not suitable for them.

Simeon (social worker) expressed concerns about the likelihood of success for the court mandated FGCs

> ‘If you're going to the judge and you want an order to place a child in care one of the questions they barristers or the judge will ask have you done an FGC and I have seen late referrals when the case is already in court final hearing and then there are saying go and do FGC at that moment, is it really going to work?’ Simeon (FG 1)

Another social worker Jacinta echoed the same concerns about the FGC referral being a part of the court process, no longer about empowering families to make decisions.

> ‘When going to court on the PLO. We just need to do it to evidence that we've done this otherwise we'll be asked to go and do it again because family meeting unfortunately is not recognised. If you're going to a judge and you want an order to place a child in care one of the questions the barristers or the judge will ask, ‘have you done an FGC’ and I have seen late referrals when the case is already in court final hearing and then there are saying go and do FGC at that moment…’
>
> Jacinta (FG 1)

Norma (social worker) expressed the same sentiments about the FGC process being tangled into the legal process.

> ‘I just think to be honest with you, Family Group Conference has become a process led. So is kind or more or less on that PLO that we are seeing as how a kind of a procedure that needs to take place if you’re thinking about going to court to get a court order, so you need to evidence that that has taken place most of the time it is driven by process and procedures, that's my experience.’

Norma (FG 1)

Rohini (FGC advocate)

> ‘…but yes, there has been some that is just completely process led and people haven't really thought through it. Nobody has thought about outcome is just that go and get it done we are just going to court. It has to be done. That is when we begin to look at FGC as an outcome led, we will begin to take it more seriously and that's my view. Rohini (Int.8)

This section highlights the complexities relating to power in the FGC process. Social workers are at times disempowered by the process as they may feel compelled to take a direction on the case they would have not taken. This highlights that the decisions to make a referral to FGC may not rest entirely with them and this feeling of being disempowered may lead to their own alienation with the process of working with families. This suggests that social workers may deem the FGC inappropriate for some families but through bureaucracy end up doing the FGC anyway and thereby possibly setting families up to fail and doing an intervention that they know may not be appropriate for that particular family.

8.7.2 Family motivation/ availability to engage

Agatha (FGC advocate)

‘They definitely work, obviously not in all cases because in some families it is too far gone, and some may be too isolated without any support around them. Where there is support, where there is lack of isolation it is very possible that they will work’. Agatha (Int. 12)

Simeon (social worker)

‘…Some which are not successful are mainly those I think as one of my colleagues pointed out. That's the family are not serious and the social work as well because a lot of time if we see as a process, it will remain a process. If we see it as an outcome led it will become an outcome led. A Lot of times we do it for wrong reason as you know my colleague has said earlier on, we do it for the wrong reasons for example when going to court on the PLO. We just need to do it to evidence that we've done this otherwise we'll be asked to go and do it again because family meeting unfortunately is not recognised.’ Simeon (FG 1)

Elizabeth (FGC advocate)

‘…that's my view to it, sometimes again as well. I mean you know when you're doing Family Group Conferences you need family and friends to be serious about it. I've had experiences where not all the time have, they been serious about it, and they haven't completed the task that they said that they were going to do, and which made the children continue to be vulnerable’. Elizabeth (Int.3.)

It is important that there are structures in place for the FGC to be implemented successfully i.e., there should be a family that is available to take part in the FGC. That family needs to be willing to play a role and be given resources to do so.

8.7.3 The need to use FGC with other models

FGCs can be used with other models and some participants felt that they needed to be used in conjunction with other interventions and processes. Some respondents, like Simeon – social worker believe a model like Signs of Safety (SoS)can be used to start cultivating information from the family to start looking at concerns and finding ways to address them alongside the FGC process or as precursor to the FGC process. SoS seeks to identify and hold a discourse on child maltreatment in early stages and to establish child safety and therefore can be used alongside the FGC process, however this is not a process that is recognised in the court process when it comes to making sure that views, wishes and feelings of the family are sought. Some of the SoS processes can tend to have more professionals than families, which may undermine the very principles of the FGC. At the end of the process, is the success or failure attributed to the SoS or FGC

Kofi (social worker) echoed those sentiments citing.

‘I worked on a case where they employed the SoS model to start reflecting on the concerns the local authority had about the children. The mother

organised a family meeting where the concerns were discussed, and the family came up with a plan without the FGC. He reflected further stating ‘then again, the FGC would bring family members who would have otherwise not known about the concerns because of the work of the FGC coordinator – which is a great job, I have been on the other side too, when they get a referral, they have time social workers do not have, they have a privilege to do so’. Kofi (FG1)

8.7.4 Sometimes referrals to FGCs are influenced by resources considerations.

Some social workers wondered if money could be saved by doing family meetings instead of FGCS. It is concerning that social workers are concerned about resources when working with families, but this is the reality of working in organisations. Social workers are aware of resource implications and at times alternatives to FGCs are used in order to save the money. Some local authorities therefore explore family meetings to avoid doing the FGC to save on resources.

Discussing budget constraints in her local authority Abi (social worker) argued

> There's a lot of money that they are cutting back on. There are so many services that they are cutting back on. So, I'm just thinking maybe family meetings instead of going straight to a Family Group Conference possibly a family meeting beforehand at least to try and see, you know, who is -who is there to safeguard the child’. Abi (FG 2)

8.8 Analysis of findings

This chapter has presented findings relating to the questions of whether and how FGCs work in addressing child maltreatment. Themes emerged that also identified key features of the FGC model that make it work and that provide further evidence of its efficacy. It has also located power within the FGC process and how it changes hands between the local authority and families. The analysis was aimed at contextualising the research findings. The findings of this chapter can be summarised into eight main overarching themes which have come up at different points all wrapped together in the welfare of a child, surrounded by the question of power and seven of these are presented in Table 2. The eighth theme concerning the voice of the child will be discussed in chapter 9.

8.9 Table 2 Emergent themes, sub-themes and reference quotations

Theme	**Sub – theme**	**Illustrative quotes** **FG = Focus Group** **Int = Interview** **GI = Group interview**
Empowerment of Children and Families	Empowerment through FGC Empowerment through participation Family Led planning Meetings	Kathleen (Int C/A), Scelo, (Int SW), Nicky (Int2), Khanyo (Int.9) Nicky (Int 2), Nondu (Int.11), Scelo (Int.10) Emily (Int C/A), Agatha (Int.12) Khanyo (Int9)
Role of the Extended Family	N/A	Jacinta (GI), Khanyo, (Int.9) Agatha (Int.12) Kofi (FG1)
FGC Process leads to better outcomes	N/A	Vusi (Int 5), Rohini (Int 8), Jacinta (G1)
Use of Family strengths and resources	N/A	Khanyo (Int.9), Ade (Int.6), Kairo (Int.1) Norma (FGI)
Family taking back control		Simeon (GI) Gill, (GI)

Theme	Sub Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Attributes that differentiate FGC from other social work Processes	Focus on Family strengths Partnership Independence of FGC Co-ordinator and Advocates	Graham (Int.4.) Simeon (GI) Kofi (GI), Emily (Int SW) Scelo (Int 10) Rohini (Int 8), Kathleen (FG2) Agatha (Int.12)
Challenges of FGC	Bureaucracy Family motivation/ availability to engage Need to use FGC with other models Resources	Simeon (FG1), Jacinta (FG1) Rohini (Int.8) Agatha (Int.12), Naomi (FG2) Koji (FG1)

This research has revealed some good examples of how FGCs work toward keeping children safe from maltreatment, the outcome does not have to be children remaining in the family home, but it should be about the children being kept safe from child maltreatment. Family members have been brought into the fold and they are able to express their concerns about the safety of the children and are now positioned to put themselves forward to care for the children.

Gathering from the findings of this research, it has become evident that some of the main evidence that FGCs achieve more in keeping the children safe from maltreatment is the identification of family strengths through the identification and activation of intra familial protective factors. Identifying protective factors forms part of a greater shift in the field of prevention by developing awareness that maltreatment can be prevented (Counts, Buffington, Chang-Rios, Rassmussen and Preacher (2010). Kurevakwesu and Chizasa (2020) pointed out that in the context of Ubuntu, in cases where the immediate family is not able to provide care the child had readily available safety nets in the form of the nuclear family and the community. When more family members are aware that there are concerns, they are likely to pay attention to some of the cues that they could have considered unimportant, had they not been aware that there were concerns.

It has been stated in chapter 5 that the concept of empowerment remains contested. One of the themes explored in this thesis is empowerment, it is the centrality of power in the relationship between families and social services and between social workers and the management, and how the FGC model helps to neutralise social services' power for the benefit of the family. This is important as the central theme of this study

was researching respondents' perceptions of how the empowerment aspect of the FGC process plays out. Connolly and Mason (2014) make a compelling point, with which I agree with, that the resonance of FGCs in terms of Māori cultural practices, and their use with marginalised communities serve to highlight the FGC's potential to reduce the imbalance of power between 'service users' and professionals, and thus avoid the disempowering or oppressive aspects of state intervention. It can also be said that this is about decolonising the practice of social work with families. However, it cannot be assumed that the availability of FGCs simply increases the power of families or necessarily reduces the power of the state (Pitcher and Arnill, 2020). The Thesis findings herein have suggested that professionals who participated in the research believe that a family participating in decision making makes them feel empowered.

Bourdieu's writings have indicated his preoccupation with power in relationships. Among these writings on power Bourdieu (1996) sought to understand the complexity characteristic of the exercise of power and control in different social, cultural, and political domains of everyday life. The findings of this research have highlighted the complexity of the power and domination in the relationship interplay within families, between families and with social services. An example of this is the absence of the voices of children and families in this research as access was not granted by social services to interview them directly. This thesis has made a suggestion that families are given their power back through the process of FGC, by being able to come use their strengths to come up with their solutions through the creation of a family plan.

Applying the child welfare approach, which one can argue shares the core ethos of the FGC model, demonstrates that solutions about the welfare of a child rests within their family network. This is also in line with Ubuntu It is important to see child protection and family preservation as complimentary as protecting the family creates a strong base for a child to be in a safe environment. Maluccio (1994) asserted family preservation and child protection can and should co-exist in our complex, imperfect, and fluid world: they are two sides of the same coin. Through the FGC model, they exist the same way, complex because of placing the child's welfare at the centre of all interventions Imperfect and fluid because the family needs to be challenged in order to ensure the child's safety within it but also need it to implement these safety plans, but it all means the same thing – a child at the centre of all interventions.

The findings have also highlighted that the FGC is different in a number of ways from other social services' processes through private family time, focus of strengths, partnerships and independent role players. In Chapter 2, the reviewed literature looked at some of the milestones taken in the journey of present-day child protection practices. The literature revisited serious case reviews that found failures in communication and partnership working that lead to child fatalities that brought about the lessons that have been used to make changes in the procedures. The FGC ethos that has already been argued is consistent with Ubuntu is very relevant as both are about focussing on strengths and partnerships.

The role played by an independent FGC coordinator and FGC advocate have been found to be unique in the FGC process as other social services processes are conducted by social workers and not independent role players. Respondents

highlighted that families feel reassured when there are workers that are independent from the local authority this makes them feel the process is conducted fairly. This does not suggest that social workers are not able to do this however as detailed in Chapter 5, some families have had a challenging experience of social work power that has lost their trust in the process. What is also worthy of note is the private family time that I believe is the ultimate act of giving control back to the family.

Chapters 9 will focus on the ‘voice of the child, whilst chapter 10 will be reflecting on the findings

Chapter 9 The voice of the child

9.1 Introduction

The last chapter examined and analysed the overall findings of this research. It focussed on the key themes that emerged through the data analysis of this research. This is a second findings chapter that will focus on the themes that emerged in relation to the voice of the child during the participants' experience of the FGC process. As mentioned in the Chapter 2, the analysis of the voice of the child will be done in consideration of its key underpinnings in Article 3 (1) UN Convention on the Rights of a Child and Children Act (1989). It clearly states that *"In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authority or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration." Article 3 (1) UN Convention on the Rights of a Child.*

The themes from findings analysed herein transpired from the data collected from one-to-one interviews and focus groups with the sample of FGC professionals interviewed. Analysis in this chapter applies and develops the centrality of the voice of the child in decision making in the FGC process as has been referred to throughout this thesis. The concept of the voice of the child was imposed on the research, meaning this was a direct question about how the voice of the child is represented in the FGC process. Building on the findings already presented in Chapter 8, this chapter will continue to facilitate the reader's understanding of how the FGC process plays a central role in protecting the children against maltreatment through hearing their voice and making plans that keep them safe. Bourdieu (1990) looked at power as either individually possessed ("subjective") or structural ("objective").

One of the questions that respondents were asked was about how the voice of the child was represented in the FGC process. Due to the challenges experienced in

gaining access to children and families directly, the voice of a child in this instance is represented by the adults.

Whilst the adults who represented the voice of the children expressed passion for the voice of the child in the FGC process, their voice is still represented by adults, it also speaks of the overwhelming power over children and controlling what they can say and how they say it.

The said challenges have been discussed in Section 5.6 and will be contextualised further in Section 9.6 both as a research challenge and a moral dilemma as I believe, having done necessary checks on the research and the researcher, children and families should be able to express themselves in research. Abi (social worker) in the group interview expresses this very strongly as did all the participants, that the voice of the child should be represented in all decision making. She stated,

> ‘The whole FGC is about the children, their needs are the key, implicitly and explicitly that is why we are there’. (Abi, FG 2)

Elizabeth (FGC coordinator) reiterated that

> ‘Children do have their voice heard in the FGC, even if it is via the advocate, or a professional they work with or a family member or they can be present themselves and be supported within the meeting as part of the FGC. The bottom line is that the child’s voice needs to be heard in the FGC process’. Elizabeth (Int.3)

Kario (FGC advocate)

> ‘Depending on the age of the children, if they are 7 up, their wishes and feelings can be obtained by the advocate, an independent advocate who

> will meet with the child, who will find out their understanding of the FGC is, who will explain to them that their wishes and feelings are very important, who will invite them to attend the meeting if they are willing to come, who will give them an opportunity to speak if they want to and support them or alternatively speak for the child entirely so the involvement of the children's voice in that process is very powerful. I often see when the family hears the feedback from the advocate, I can see how the family responds to that and they are normally quite impacted by what the child has said in terms of what the child wants, because the child tends to want to stay at home or stay within the family, whether it's the negative circumstances, whatever the case may be, they want to stay at home, it's about looking to see how they can stay at home. When the family hears the child's voice, I think it makes them want to do everything within their power to make the changes that will allow that child to stay within the family'. (Kairo Int.1)

The voice of the child is of course central to the thesis concerns about whether FGCs offer an opportunity to interrupt power dynamics and enable the voice of the child to be heard. Findings about this offer opportunities to consider how new or different discourses can be privileged and supported in such a way they can emerge and influence the outcomes of proceedings, in this case those regarding children and families' lives.

Critically analysing all respondent's responses, the following sub-themes came up regarding the eighth overarching theme 'The voice of the child in the FGC process':

- Advocating to hear the voice of the child

- Age appropriateness
- Addressing Risk
- Child focussed decision making

These sub-themes will be discussed in the sub-sections that follow.

9.2 Advocating to hear the voice of the child

There was an overwhelming consensus among all the respondents about the centrality of the child's voice in the FGC process. All respondents felt it was important for the child's voice to be heard in the process. Some respondents felt the need to first explain the role of the advocate in the FGC process. According to Vusi (FGC advocate)

> 'An advocate is a friendly face, a friendly voice and a system of getting their views across'. Vusi, (Int 5)

Elizabeth (FGC advocate) stated,

> 'An advocate meets the child first, so they get to feel at ease around them, that here is an opportunity for them to build confidence and some kind of a relationship'.
>
> Elizabeth (Int.3)

One of the key areas of significance that came up from these respondents is the importance of building rapport with the child to enable them to express themselves and fully participate in the FGC process. This relationship building is the foundation

upon which the success of the FGC process is based as the child can develop trust in the advocate to know that they have their best interest at heart. Children may require special assistance at times when something unpleasant needs to be communicated, this might include an adult expressing their views, wishes and feelings on their behalf. This is often the case in FGC, hence the need for an advocate. An advocate must be led by the views and wishes of children and champion their rights and needs and should further ensure children are not discriminated against (Department of Health guidance, 2002)

> ‘As any meeting can be daunting and intimidating, the advocate will meet either with the child, sometimes a couple of times before the FGC to explain the process and that you can sit with them and ‘hold their hands’ while they speak up in the meeting, ‘it is just moral support, so they do not feel overwhelmed in speaking’.
>
> Kairo (Int.1)

This is what Kairo (FGC advocate) perceived as a role of the advocate in the FGC. Vusi, also an FGC advocate on the other hand put forward a different perspective where he focusses on the aspect of choice when it comes to attending the FGC.

> ‘If they want to speak, it is about giving them assurance that they have a right to have their voice heard. You can speak on their behalf while they are in the meeting or if they choose not to attend you can ascertain their views, wishes and feelings and bring them to the meeting’. Vusi (Int.5)

Graham (FGC advocate) emphasised the relationship of trust as an important aspect of the advocacy relationship.

> ‘As an advocate you need to allay the child’s fears about the process and that what they are saying is confidential’. Graham (Int.4)

Elizabeth (FGC coordinator) added the importance of explaining the limits of confidentiality.

> ‘The limits of confidentiality are explained to the child in a way that helps them understand what the advocate can or cannot keep confidential. This on its own help with forming boundaries which help the child being represented to understand that aspect of the process’. Elizabeth (Int.3)

All respondents concur that for children to better participate in decision-making processes they need to be made ready, given sufficient information, and supported through the process. Some respondents concede that it may take a while for a child to meet with you and open to you, hence the importance of building rapport with the child. (Nicky, Kairo and Ade – all FGC advocates).

Advocates expressed the importance of the need to manage a child ‘s expectations in the process. Elizabeth, (FGC advocate) stated.

> ‘I always encourage the child to speak up despite knowing that what they are asking for may not be delivered, I advise them that despite the possibility of not getting what you are asking for at least your views will be noted on record, what you said, how you felt, what you wished for, what you would want to see happen, even if it does not happen, it is there on record, forever’. Elizabeth (Int.3)

Agatha (FGC coordinator) stated

> ‘I always say to them, you cannot promise that there will be change following what you’ve said, but you promise that everyone in their family network who attends the meeting will hear what they say. That is in essence what we are doing, we are making sure that the local authority, the parents and extended family hear what you are worried about and what you would like to see changed and they can act on it. They use that information to make changes, or the social worker can implement those changes for them’. Agatha (Int.12)

This highlights the importance of being honest when talking about the children and not raising their expectations unnecessarily. Dalton, Rapa, Ziebland, Rochat, Kelly, Hanington, Bland, Yousafzai & Stein (2019) suggest there is evidence that children are often aware that something is seriously wrong and want honest information. This was further echoed by Nicky (FGC advocate) who further stated

> ‘…in my experience, I have come to realise that children are living it, so they know what is going on already, it is very rare that a child living within that environment does not already know what is going on’ Nicky (Int. 2)

This suggests the need to create opportunities that allow children’s voices to be heard, giving others the chance to respond or engage should always be created. Creating a culture of advocacy that values the voice of the child and gives children meaningful opportunities to respond as part of their everyday lives changes a pervasive dynamic of social interaction. Rather than children being merely the objects of adult concerns, children become partners, whose voices are not only openly heard and respected in their authentic state (without the need for an adult interpreter or guide), but whose participation is welcomed as a key ingredient for positive change and an embedded sense of shared communities in all the settings in which children live their lives.

9.3 Age appropriateness

Practitioners emphasised that the techniques used had to be appropriate to the child's needs based on age and maturity. For many practitioners, this included the use of activities such as play, storytelling and creative arts. This was echoed by Ade (FGC advocate) who put forward

> 'I have recently started working with younger, non – verbal children and I got their views through using words and pictures'. Ade (Int.6)

Central to many of the respondents' views is the age of the child and whether it was appropriate to involve that child. Njabulo (social worker) stated:

> 'I worked on a case where younger children aged five months and eighteen months old, in that case I had to do it by observation looking at their needs and what is their best interest'. Njabulo (FG 2)

This also refers to the children's attendance at FGC, a determination needs to be made regarding their ability to understand and participate in the FGC process. This further relates to the risk assessment identified in the next section.

9.4 Addressing risk

Some of the respondent social workers expressed that they need to do this risk assessment to ensure that a child is not harmed by being in a difficult position with their families. Norma (social worker) stated

> 'if I thought it was going to be heated, I would not involve children. I would have discussions with the FGC coordinator and make a joint decision'. Norma (FG1)

Citing an incident at the FGC when they had to end the meeting due to violence breaking out between family members:

> ‘As a result, I have felt reluctant to involve children in the FGC in families who have a history of violence’.

Graham (FGC coordinator) felt strongly that children should be involved

> ‘The children are living it, so they know what is going on already’.

To echo the same sentiments Kofi (social worker) stated

> ‘It is very rare that a child within that home environment does not know what going on. I have heard people telling stories of when they think they have been protecting the child, the child themselves are coming out with it themselves (sic). So, it is just about preparing them to attend the FGC meeting if they want to’. Kofi (FG 1)

9.5 Child focussed decision-making.

Earlier in this Chapter (9.1) and in Chapter 2, (literature review) it was suggested that most children experience either limited or no opportunity to participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives, with the FGC being the one exception cited. These findings are relatable to respondents who were consistent in their passion for child focussed decision making. Naomi (social worker) stated:

> ‘Children are the most important person (sic), it is the whole focus of why we do FGC, I think if we can get their understanding, their voice, their wishes and thoughts heard, it is very powerful’ Naomi, (FG 2)

Scelo (FGC coordinator) added about the importance of focussing on the child

> ‘It says a huge amount about why we are doing something. ‘I think when you hear a child’s perspective on how they feel their life is, their take is often very different from what adults see’. Scelo (Int.10)

FGC coordinators related how all adults in the FGC were often taken aback and quite emotional about what the child had to say about the situation in the family home.

> ‘Lots of feelings come because often families just do not know because they have never asked. It also makes the child feel really empowered to say what is important to them’ Rohini (FGC coordinator, Int.8).

> ‘Often the child in the centre in not being listened to, that is why we do this job, we are passionate about what we do for the children’ Vusi (FGC advocate, Int.5).

Frankel (2018) expresses similar sentiments and states that the moment you recognise that there is a process, that children do not passively absorb what is going on around them but rather filter it, interpret it and then use it, then children’s emotions, memories, experiences, sense of identity and, consequently, voice become of absolute relevance. One of the social workers Abi, responded by expressing their understanding of the importance of child centred decision – making. She stated

> ‘It is all about being child – centred and I think it is one of the things we are required to do nowadays to get an advocate for a child depending on the

> age of that child. So, it is really a law around child – centred even though it is a process that social services have to go through, but it is all about the child'. Abi (FG 2)

Vusi FGC advocate felt

> 'Having a child in the FGC may affect the outcome and behaviour of family members. Children often want to remain at home no matter how negative the circumstances or whatever the case may be. When the family hears the child's voice, I think it makes them want to do everything in their power to make changes that will allow that child to stay within the family.' Vusi (Int.5)

It is worth acknowledging that being involved with social services can be challenging for the children. Whilst Lorenz (2015) argued that children access services through adults, like parents, teachers, and social workers. This puts children in a potentially vulnerable position and potentially limits their ability to act as independent citizens and service users. My opinion on this is that whilst involvement with social services may be daunting for the children, having their voice can be a positive experience for the children,

9.6 Summary

Findings in this chapter have indicated the need for a child's voice to be the loudest in the FGC process. They have also raised an important matter to consider how the best interest of the child is determined by the social worker. This thesis argues FGCs or a requirement to hear the voice of the child is important but does not mean that their voice is heard, or they are not over-ruled by social workers who can use their power to decide not to include the child and their voice or because they think they can decide the child's best interests. It was not clear how some decisions are taken by social workers. An example of this is a social worker who discussed finding out views,

wishes and feelings of children aged five months and eighteen months old. He described how ‘he had to do it by observation looking at their needs and what is their best interest’. It is in these instances that the social worker can decide what is in the best interest, this could be a decision based on the existent care plan.

This also opens up the possibility of the misuse of power and infliction of symbolic violence. As already stated in Chapter 6, symbolic violence is a gentle form of violence imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, recognition, or even feeling. By a social worker deciding on the best interest of the children they could be using existing structures and legal avenues to push forward decisions that support their ideas of what a child wants without considering the wider family network. This could also be more challenging for families from minoritised ethic groups where their culture and way of raising children is not widely recognised by social workers from perhaps a white background as the intersectionality of race, culture and class could lead to families feeling disempowered on different levels. It is therefore important to have an FGC as this decision would be taken collectively by the family. This ensures that decisions are taken in culturally competent manner through the FGC process.

One of the highlights of this chapter and indeed this thesis is how the voice of the child has been represented or not represented. Bourdieu (2005b) stated that contemporary social hierarchies and social inequalities, as well as the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination. He refers to the results of such domination as symbolic violence. I equate this to the

symbolic domination and gate keeping in accessing the children's views, wishes and feelings to contribute to this research.

This thesis has looked at the voice of the child through different chapters and specifically in Chapter 9 as it is central to the core ethos of participation and addressing the needs of the children. Central to the 54 articles in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1989) are both the best interest of the child and the rights to participate in decision making. Article 3 discussed the best interest of the child, to ensure that all decisions taken by adults need to consider how those decisions will affect the child. This is also expected of governments who also need to ensure the protection of children and for them to be looked after by their parents or someone else who will take over that responsibility should parents be unable to do so. Article 12 on the other hand ensures that children are given a voice – a right to be heard in matters that affect them and that adults should listen to the children and take their opinions seriously. Offering an FGC and providing an advocate are all in line with the UNDRC (1989) declaration and the ideals of Ubuntu.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009)'s asserted that it is only possible to act in the best interests of the child and to protect children against violence when children are involved in the decisions that concern them. This involvement means the child's voice should remain prominent in all decisions that affect them. This is in line with the key FGC ethos as suggested throughout this thesis. However, sharing power is not about handing over control of the household to the children, but it is about simply responding to the children's unspoken request: "Treat me with respect and give me a say". As stated in Section 2.3, the UNCRC Guidance proposes, participation of

children encompasses ongoing processes, which include sharing of information and conversation between children and adults founded on shared respect, and where children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into consideration and inform the outcome of such processes.

The power that adults hold should not merely be viewed as negative as it is the law that accords adults those powers and responsibilities to make decisions they deem right for the children. This is in line with the FGC practice as the child contributes to the family plan, but adults make the family plan deciding on the best interest of the child and considering the ideals of Ubuntu. Social workers tend to prefer Western models and theories (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011) Unlike Ubuntu which represents communitarian ideals, communal relationality, spirituality and excellence, Western perspectives, theories and models tend to be subjective or individualistic or both and heavily legislated by governments or standardised by professionals. Arguably, such perspectives fail to match the aspirations and ideals of the African communities, within which children grow up and realise their personhood. Mushunje (2017, p. 108) states that, ‘colonial welfare-based social work, in which the social worker is central to the process, no longer suffices for the wellbeing of vulnerable children”.

The next chapter is a reflective chapter where I reflect on the process and link it to the findings of this research to make sense of it in my own context.

Chapter 10 Reflexing on the research process

Mortari (2015) argued researchers should be able to reflect deeply to avoid being simply technicians but competent research practitioners This implies researchers need to reflect not only on the practical acts of research but also on the mental experience which establishes the meaning about practice. Reflection is one of the cornerstones of social work and therefore this process feels natural. This section is about my reflection on the journey towards obtaining a PhD. I will also use this section to voice out mental processes and other connections I made on this journey. I will also pick up on some of the themes I have already touched on in this process

The journey through this process has been fraught with difficulties and uncertainties at different parts of the process. There was a time when I became very disillusioned

about my own research due to a negative input from some academics. I feel somewhat estranged from my own PhD since then as I have been writing to satisfy such people. I also recognised the power held by certain people in academia. This left me feeling hopeless recognising some of the reasons behind the underrepresentation of people of colour in general and black women like me in particular. According to Women's Higher Education Network (WHEN) of 23 000 UK professors, only 66 are black women. This means we still have a very long way for voices of black women to be heard in HE and therefore we will for the foreseeable future continue to modify our views to accommodate sometimes ignorance of those who are in power.

Dune (2020) described epistemic injustice as forms of injustice which undermine, undercut, disvalue, curtail, exclude, outright dismiss or in some cases gaslight a person in their capacity as potential knowers (pg. 1). I experienced this profoundly when a very senior white academic criticised my understanding of Ubuntu, whilst it was very clear that they had very little – if anything understanding of Ubuntu. They said all this fully knowing that this was my culture, and I was socialised in Ubuntu.

Through this process I have also established many important relationships with practitioners and academics from all over the world. In 2015 I presented at the International Conference on Innovations in Family Group Decision Making in Minnesota. At that point I had not yet started gathering data and was not aware of the challenges that saw me spend over two years without any significant progress on data gathering. This also fell at the time when there was a was a slump in publication of FGC related materials. I have discussed this in chapter 2.1, and it was echoed by Frost, Abram & Burgess (2012). During this time, I considered the possibility of changing the research topic, however I did not feel able to do so as my heart was set

on FGCs. I felt doing anything else would not do justice to honour the indigenous model like the FGC and what it can do for children and families.

10.1 FGCs under the lens

In my Zulu culture we have people who are called praise singers who walk in front of an important person like a king and sing their praises at every opportunity – talking about their bravery and conquests, I reflect back to how I began this research and I see myself as a praise singer for FGCs. In chapter 1 I discussed my positionality in relation to FGCs and my belief in the FGC process. At that point I was seeking to show that FGCs work, I lacked objectivity that would have enabled me to consciously critique the model and highlight perceived shortcomings of the model. This is not something I did consciously but was pointed out by my supervisors. At the time I did not realise that my proximity to the research subject was impacting my ability to remain objective in this process. I also felt like emphasising the merits of the FGC model would bring added value to my research. It was only through interrogating the model that I could link it properly with Ubuntu and understood better how Bourdieu could be used to enrich understanding of the FGC model and cultural humility

Reflecting on this process I consider the FGC model is good ‘on paper’, but it needs to be implemented with great level of fidelity to ensure best outcomes for children and families. FGC is synonymous the values of Ubuntu and decolonisation. In chapter 2 I went into detail about how FGCs came about as a result of the Māori taking a stand against a system that subjugated them and removed their children without consideration for a child’s position in the family. FGCs therefore work even better when professionals’ values are in line with the ethos of the FGC model. It therefore suggests

it is not so much about delivering the model, but about how the model is delivered. There needs to be clear guidance to ensure that FGCs are implemented the same way. This is an area which needs to be revisited for future research. This will also ensure that future research will be able to look at outcomes in an equitable way as the model will be implemented the same way.

Being a proponent of FGCs I have asked myself about certain aspects of the FGC i.e. I ask myself if cultural competence can only be achieved by matching FGC coordinators with the family's demographic. I question if this is in line with families' wishes in terms of the allocation of the FGC coordinator. Does the family even want someone from their country or ethnic background working with them? I have also asked myself about the identified issues with private family time. I have discussed this in chapters 2 where I discussed private family time and in section 5.3 where I discussed power in the FGC process. I share concerns raised by Robertson (1996) Lupton and Nixon (1999) about possible reproduction and reinforcement of family power imbalances during private family time, particularly along dimensions of gender and generations. Whilst social workers can do risk assessment, they cannot eliminate risk. I am also wary to view people as possible victims by virtue of being young and being females. It is an ongoing dilemma in my head as I am aware of the power of women even in my own family.

10.2 Ubuntu values in context

When I decided to write about Ubuntu I felt conflicted as it almost feels like Ubuntu should be hidden from the world than to see some academics recolonise and misappropriate the concept for their own use and taking what they want from it and even distorting it. I also say this being aware that Ubuntu has been written about since

time immemorial, but it is only in recent years that this moral code has received wider ‘recognition’. I have also reflected on the importance of providing knowledge and narratives from the Global South to address colonisation of knowledge and to give a voice to disenfranchised voices and confront epistemic injustices already elaborated upon. Through this research the importance of practitioners to understand Ubuntu, not in a passive way, but to actively demonstrate understanding of the values of Ubuntu in their application thereof.

One of the ways understanding of Ubuntu can be developed will be education. Unless Ubuntu features in social work education it will remain misunderstood by practitioners. I have already started doing this in my institution by incorporating it into social work curriculum. Two years ago I organised a conference around Ubuntu, which helped the students and participants understand the concept and how it links to social work in general. This was explained by linking it to core social work values and the values held by individuals that led them to pursue a career in social work. An example of this is the maxim that says it takes a village to raise a child as expressed in chapter 3 – this speaks to the core values of partnership working and FGC. Professionals will therefore need to recognise this village and give them a chance to raise the children in the way that suits their cultural values – taking into consideration risk assessment.

When I was still in practice, I found that some practitioners struggled with allowing families enough time for private family time – one would find them pacing up and down and suggesting someone should go in and ask them to ‘start wrapping up’. This example speaks of rampant lack of empathy, power over families and definitely lack of Ubuntu on the part of the practitioner. A simple consideration of the family’s plight

in trying to keep the child within the family network or address safeguarding concerns that affect their children should not be interrupted at all. If anything questions about support would be more appropriate in that situation. In chapter 3 I cited Mushunje (2017) who argued that the wellbeing and needs of vulnerable children can no longer be satisfied by colonial social worker centric social work. I have seen approaches being widely advertised as answers to addressing key social work issues e.g. Signs of Safety, Every Child Matters and Working Together. If resources can be put in place for these approaches, it means the same can be done for Ubuntu

10.3. Locating Bourdieu

I have gone into great detail in chapter 6 to link Bourdieu to my key arguments in this research. I have also done this throughout this research. I acknowledge that Bourdieu did not appear to be an obvious choice to link with arguments on Ubuntu and FGC. Of course I do not agree with that suggestion. I argue it is a rather good model when looking at taking a stand – like FGC and considering cultural competence. As I continued reading available literature on FGCs I began to see how Bourdieu was a good fit as a theoretical model to link the to the FGC model. In chapter 6 I explained my motivation for choosing Bourdieu and how it links to the FGCs model. At the time I felt that Bourdieu would highlight the different dichotomies and in family life and in the FGC model through identification of the field, the capital and the habitus. If a child's field - where they operate is unsettled, it is not likely that they will have any usable capital, and their habitus will also be affected. I have explained the domino effect of removing a child from their primary habitus often strips them of their culture, language and familial connections. This is exactly what was happening to the Māori children and protesting this led to the wider recognition of the FGC model. In understanding Bourdieu and linking his ideas to Ubuntu and FGC model, I feel I am able to highlight

the need to understand the role of power and the need to holistically consider every aspect of the child's life.

10.4 Reflections on FGC research findings

This thesis has revealed findings that are overwhelmingly positive toward the FGC model. Some might argue that this is due to the profile of the respondents or the positionality of them which could suggest bias. Despite this being a small sample, the data points towards findings that maybe usefully transferred to further research or other professional service contexts. Nonetheless, this does not take away from the findings made within the thesis.

In contextualising the findings, the thesis compares the findings of this research to other studies concerning FGC and acknowledges that there is insufficient evidence to determine if FGCs are effective. Systematic reviews conducted by Nurmatov, Foster, Bezeczky, Owen, El-Banna, Mann, Petrou. Kemp, Scourfield, Forrester and Turley (2020) and Dijkstra, Creemers, Asscher, Deković and Stams (2016) have come up with insufficient and inconclusive evidence regarding the efficacy of FGCs. The studies themselves were also rated as weak in terms of the design and prone to a high risk of bias (Nurmatov et al. 2020). However, I found it interesting that although there did not seem to be significant differences between placements where FGCs have been involved and regular placements, where there are cultural differences, FGCs have been shown to work, which suggest that in the UK we are getting cultural placements right. This links to the idea of the need to decolonise social work practice and link children to their Habitus which runs throughout this thesis.

In Chapter 7 findings and verbatim discussions by different professionals have been discussed and these concur with the evidence from the systematic reviews, it does matter where a child lives. If children are to grow up knowing their culture, we need to have a CP system that supports and is able to work with and across all cultures – and helps to keep children in their Habitus, which is what the findings of this thesis suggests the FGC model is able to do. It also shows a fidelity to Ubuntu values about keeping the child within the extended family network. As elaborated on in Chapter 2, Māori children who came to the attention of authorities were often removed from their primary Habitus and consequently fell behind as they did not have a sense of belonging to their new Habitus and this led them to be called 'the lost generation' (Human Rights Commission, 2017)

One of the key areas that could account for some differences between the studies outcomes is the differences in implementation as noted in both Dijkstra et al (2016) and Nuratov (2020). In section 8.8 this thesis has identified several attributes the FGC model that differentiates it from other social services meetings such as child protection conferences and family meetings. These are detailed in chapter 8 Section 8.8. This therefore calls practitioners to focus upon the importance of implementation fidelity. Breitenstein, Gross, Garvey, Hill, Fogg and Resnick (2010) describe implementation fidelity as the extent to which an intervention is delivered as intended and is crucial to successful interpretation of evidence-based interventions into practice. Variations in the implementation of the FGC model open it up to different interpretations, which could be some of the reasons for the inconclusive or unclear evidence. The reality is if it is not delivered using the FGC protocol, then it is not an FGC.

10.5 Approaching future FGC research

At some point in my research, I recognised that I now know much more than I knew at the beginning of the process. In the summer of 2020 during the Black Lives Matter arising throughout the world I had the opportunity to attend many online events, some of which included academic debates about decolonising research - among other things. I had always wanted to use decolonised research methods that reflect knowledge from the Global South, but I did not feel it would have been understood and therefore I ended up not using them. If I were to do this research again, I would definitely made it more decolonised e.g. I would have not used Bourdieu so extensively, but I would have made Ubuntu the headline. I understand this could have caused me more challenges as I have already alluded. I also understand that this would have made a difference between acceptance and non-acceptance of my research. I feel this would have made my research have a stronger impact.

I consider I could have used an African approach called Indaba.in the Zulu language Indaba refers to oral storytelling technique. It also means narration, contemporary broader meanings include dialogue, meeting and/or conference (Mutwa, 2003). It also refers to something similar to what is popularly known as a focus group in the social sciences (Edwards. Holdsock, Nzima and Edwards (2020). In Indaba approach the researcher is part of the discussion as it would have been done under the tree in the community. This approach is now used increasingly in research, and I feel this would have been a good approach to consider.

I consider the main limitation of this research is the lack of the voice of children and families. Given the challenges I had in gaining access to children and families, I would seek a community organisation or a local authority to collaborate with to ensure access to children and families so that my research will be based around their voices. This is still something I wish to explore for future research.

Chapter 11 Conclusion

This research sought to explore the role of family in the protection of children through the prevention of intrafamilial maltreatment applying the FGC model. It has discussed the need for social work to be decolonised in order to address the inherent power differentials contained within every day social work practices and the privileging of certain types of knowledge as articulated in Chapter 6. In respect of decolonising social work and ensuring practice is culturally sensitive, it has suggested the use of indigenous knowledge systems such as Ubuntu and has shown when they are used in the practice of social work with children and their families, they empower them. Critically, the thesis has examined the role of the family as partners in the prevention and addressing of child maltreatment as perceived by professionals. Central to this thesis was the positioning of the child within the family and the implications for a child being taken away from what Bourdieu called their 'Habitus'. This chapter concludes the thesis which has established the professionals' perceptions of the role of the family in the protection of children from all forms of maltreatment. The starting point for the thesis was the acknowledgement of the family in all its diversity as partners and key resources working together with social work professionals towards the protection of children. This research has made key findings that have been discussed in findings chapters 8 and 9.

This research has addressed all the research questions as previously stated in section 1.2 and identified key themes that have emerged from the data to answer them. The following section will summarise these findings in respect of the research questions.

11.1 What are the perceptions of professional practitioners regarding the efficacy of the FGC model in safeguarding children at risk of intra familial maltreatment?

This thesis has shown that the perceptions of professional practitioners regarding the efficacy of the FGC model in safeguarding children at risk of intra familial maltreatment are that it is important to involve families in decision making in matters that relate to the welfare of their children. Professional practitioners further stated that this ensures that their voices are incorporated in the decision-making processes. Furthermore, they state that families have an investment in the child's life that professional systems are unable to achieve for the child and therefore FGC achieves better outcomes for the children.

In addition to this, risk assessment is crucial to ensure that the FGC process is safe for the children. An example of this is how child protection is considered differently in different cultures This gives an insight into Munro (2011) and Hardy's (2017) work into how social workers consider they do this and the limits within which they operate. This thesis acknowledges that risk assessment is an important aspect of social work. It is within the parameters of risk assessment that social workers determine if the FGC family plan can be adopted by the local authority. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that increasingly social work takes place in a very defensive climate and that defensiveness takes on particular forms from differing vantage points. Social

workers have, for many decades felt caught between a rock and a hard place, damned if they do not remove the children and damned if they do (Featherstone et al, 2014, pg.1).

Recent events that have brought the Black Lives Matter movement to world attention have highlighted the importance of partnership working with public officials. These events have also prompted questioning of how indigenous communities globally are treated in different aspects of their lives e.g., their land, language, culture and practices. The FGC model was born out of protest against the issues of inequality that existed for the Māori and their children, who are indigenous people. Findings in this research showed how contested and debated risk assessment might be and this enabled professionals to reflect on their own assessments and consider the viewpoint of others. This enables professionals to reflect on how risk is not an objective process. It depends on the assessor's view of what is deemed correct and acceptable. This therefore highlights the importance of cultural awareness among social workers and other professionals working with families so that they can understand decisions made. These reflective practices are critical to the decolonisation of social work knowledge and embedding anti-oppressive practice; the findings indicate therefore that the FGC process is a practice which supports these steps.

11.2 How does the practitioner partnership with families using the FGC model work to improve outcomes for children who have or are experiencing intra familial maltreatment?

The findings give rich, descriptive evidence of how and in what ways and on which occasions the FGC model achieves better engagement with children and families as

detailed in this section. Whilst professionals who responded to this research were involved in FGC, they were also enabled by the questions and process of the research to reflect and be critical of their own and other professionals' practices. Despite this they remained in agreement that the FGC process enabled families to remain experts on matters relating to them and their children and families. Professionals working with them to support the implementation of the plan with a view to step out of the families' lives, for them to continue keeping the children safe in the long term. This research has presented evidence such as presented in chapter 8 8.8 to show that highlighting the role of the extended family in understanding presenting concerns, using family strengths, family taking back control of the decision making in matters that relate to them directly lead to better outcomes for children experiencing intra – familial child maltreatment. It further suggests that in doing all it is a culturally competent way of dealing with matters as it uses the family's own culture and strengths. Both FGC coordinators and social workers shared these views on the merits of partnership working with families.

This research has also demonstrated how some social workers view and undertake their role in the FGC process. Social workers who make referrals to FGC appear to understand and respect the family's expertise in solving their own challenges and making decisions about issues that affect their children. One of the most striking observations was made by a social worker as stated in chapter 8, in stating…'at the FGC family members have flipcharts writing what they will do to support the main carer and to keep the children safe. This is a noteworthy departure from other social services processes where 'it is only the professionals who can even touch the flipcharts. This is demonstrated by their views They understand that 'writing on the

flipchart' is the family's right as they need to be able to articulate their views, wishes and feelings on matters that affect their children.

11. 3 How is the voice of the child represented in the FGC process?

Findings from this thesis have suggested how the FGC process ensures that the child remains at the centre of decision making. Paramountcy of the welfare of the child is enshrined in the Children Act (1989) and UNCRC (1990). The Children Act (2004) stresses the importance of involving children in decision-making, particularly in child protection cases. Perhaps the most important decision any social worker will ever make is deciding if a child can remain with their parents or within the family network. When making such decisions, a social worker must wrestle with what is based on the information at hand, is in the best interest of a child. Through the FGC process the child should be both seen and heard, and their views, wishes and feelings taken into paramount consideration in the decision-making process about their welfare and their future. Whilst this is one of the key ethos' of the FGC model, this research has also found that at times children are not given this voice in matters that affect their lives, it is still up to the adults to decide what they consider best for the children. In recognising the child as central in all decision making is further embodiment of Ubuntu. This moral code is based on the shared responsibility of the whole village to raise a child as the FGC model is about exactly this radical act of coming together to build protection around the child.

Respondents have shown how the voice of the child is heard and embedded into the FGC process, but it is not always given weight as already stated in Chapter 9. This thesis has shown that while the voice of the child is central in the FGC process the

child's voice is heard through the adults, in this research it was through the FGC coordinators, FGC advocates and social workers. This in itself is an exercise in power, as it is not the child who speaks but an adult, this also means the adult can put forward their views contrary to those of a child. In experience of the FGC process and finding from this research FGC coordinators, advocates and social worker speak of the child being involved in all the preparations, including designing invitations to the FGC, choosing the menu and refreshments to be served and deciding how they would like to be supported in the FGC meeting.

Through using an advocate, the social worker and the FGC coordinator, the child is supported to keep the focus of the meeting upon them and their needs. This is unique in all social services processes. The richness of the evidence describes how the FGC process is suitable and a process that seeks to ensure that the child remains at the centre of all decision making; it keeps the spotlight on the child. This was expressed by the adults who were respondents in this research. In this sense FGC is in keeping with practices of Ubuntu by enabling people to be individualised, unlike the colonial system that is about grouping people. In this sense individual needs can be met while still honouring that they are members of group. It is also a practice which has decolonising effects and can contribute to that body of practice by providing alternative voices, opportunities for those voices to be heard. It is in keeping with Bourdieu's understanding of the concept of Habitus, introduced in Chapter 6 which can be likened to the Māori word Turangawaewae, which means a place where someone - a child in this instance - is anchored.

The thesis has further found that whilst the principle of child involvement is sacrosanct, the execution thereof may be challenging at times. Knowing children's views, wishes

and feelings does not mean they are necessarily translated. This has been expressed by respondents who argued that families in the FGC process take the views, wishes and feelings into cognisance but the final decision lies with the adults who have the maturity to understand why some decisions need to be taken e.g., if a child wishes to live with a parent who lacks parental capacity to care for them, in consideration of their welfare, this is not a wish that can be granted. Through the FGC, the family may then support the child to maintain contact with the parent while they are being supported to address the concerns with a view to rehabilitation if that is possible. This speaks to the maxim that it takes a village to raise a child – in a system of Ubuntu, everyone has their place within the family and extended family system ensuring that everyone – regardless of any of their characteristics are seen and heard.

11.4 How does the concept of empowerment manifest in the FGC process?

One of the key aspects of empowerment in the FGC process that has been highlighted by this research is the choice made available to families – for voluntary engagement in the FGC process. FGC is the only process in social services that gives families this choice which in itself is an empowering step. The research has also highlighted how the FGC process helps to neutralise power imbalances by giving families a seat at the decision-making table. Sampson (2020) argues that FGCs take place within a political context as does all social work, which means these power relations are inherent in the social work process. This research has highlighted the centrality of the FGC process in supporting the sharing of power with families. This research has also shown through its' findings how power is enshrined in organisational practices and how the thesis findings help to explicate how this can be decolonised and changed by exploring how families are empowered (or not) by FGCs; this is one of the key contributions to knowledge made by this thesis.

In section 3.2 the African saying ‘until the lions have their own historians the history of hunt will always glorify the hunter’ was introduced. This thesis has also shown how the children and families may in this instance be like lions if they are not afforded the chance to tell their own stories their way. For many families involved in most social services processes as explored in Chapter 3, a lack of power when combined with the social worker’s lack of understanding of the child rearing practices of minoritised ethnic communities may lead to the overrepresentation of minoritized children in social services statistics. The FGC model aims in some part to give lions their own historians who will write their family histories and tell their stories of bravery and triumph. The FGC process gives families that opportunity to tell their own stories in their own way and using their own language. Families’ contributions cannot be understood until their point of departure in the decisions they make for their children and families, and these may be different from those social workers would have devised, but this does not necessarily mean they are wrong.

In discussing the merits of the FGC model, Lupton & Nixon (1999) argued that FGC characterises families as competent and focuses on their strengths, aiming to empower them. It changes the focus of the child protection service from one headlined by powerlessness to one of strength and collaboration. One of the highlights from the findings from this research has also been the shift in power dynamics from the hands of professionals to the family, and thereby the empowerment of families. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) argued Ubuntu inspired models of social work (like FGC) view children from family, community, environmental and spiritual perspectives. Western or colonial models, on the other hand may be inspired by individualistic values, governmental policies and professional viewpoints.

This suggests that there needs to be meaningful change starting from the most basic level in how things are done in social work. Such changes could include ensuring the voice of children and their families remain at the centre of all decision-making. Changing power dynamics will emanate from the mind-set where conscious efforts are made to acknowledge all forms of knowledge and practice as legitimate. Merkel – Holgun (2013) identified some research that evaluated the FGC model and concluded that FGC results in improved both intra and inter – familial relationships, communication, and stronger community capacity to respond to significant societal concerns. This highlights the importance of recognising family members as experts in their own lives, who may at times need support to address issues, but remain experts and should be treated as such. The findings of this thesis therefore support previous findings in terms of highlighting the important role that can be played by FGCs in contributing to a family's empowerment.

11.5 What are the distinct attributes of the FGC process that differentiates it from other social services meetings?

This research has found that there are five key areas that make FGCs unique to any other social services meetings and processes: the process, Private Family Time, focus on family strengths, partnership, independent FGC coordinator and child advocate. The importance these key areas has been discussed at length in chapter 8 and have been supported by the findings that highlight how the FGC process affords families more power as already discussed. In chapter 6 I argued the reason I chose Bourdieu’s theory of practice is because it articulates how human relationships, power and inequality interweave; I therefore chose to use because it is within the FGC

process that these complex human relationships, power dynamics and equality play out.

Respondents identified that they are not aware of any other service set up akin to FGC and other similar kinds of practice that have independence attached to it. Therefore, this increases confidence in the process and the outcomes of the FGC and directly shows professionals working directly in partnership with families. As previously discussed, the FGC achieves this by presenting an independent person (independent FGC coordinator) who does not come from social services to facilitate the process to help the family recognise their impartiality. Families may have had experiences that lead to mistrust of social workers and therefore an independent FGC coordinator helps the family feel confident in the process. The process also gives the child an empowered voice through the role of the child advocate and again this is different from other CP processes.

11.6 How does this research contribute to our understanding of the role of the extended family in child protection?

This question has been answered throughout the thesis and summarised in the sections. above, different sections in this chapter have also answered different aspects of it. This thesis has shown that professionals involved in FGC processes who were respondents said that when families are aware that there are concerns about the welfare of the child, they often step up to come and make a plan for the children. This thesis acknowledges that at times, remaining at home may not be in the best interest of the child and therefore decisions may need to be made to explore other options for the long-term care of the child. The findings presented and discussed in chapter 8 and 10 showed how respondents said that the FGC gives families the

opportunity to contribute to those plans and therefore, findings from this research are compelling in showing us the importance of maintaining the child's 'habitus' in this context and therefore why the use of Bourdieu's theory of practice as a theoretical framework is helpful. The importance of these findings and how they help us to uncover and thereby understand the powerful inter-play of power dynamics, empowerment, CP and a better-informed perspective on risk is that this helps to construct Bourdieu and his work as a theory of practice in child protection social work.

11.7 In what ways does this research demonstrate how Ubuntu and cultural competency are embodied in the FGC process?

This thesis has further argued that families need to be given these opportunities to participate in the decision making on matters affecting their children, this is a demonstration of Ubuntu and of culturally competent social work. It is Ubuntu because of the recognition and respect given to families and it is culturally competent because it is led by families using their cultural capital as discussed in Chapter 6. This has further highlighted the importance of the child's Turangawaewae (a place where one is anchored) as the Māori themselves expressed in the development of the FGC model.

It takes a village to raise a child – this Ubuntu maxim speaks to the need and the importance of everyone to come together to care about the welfare of the child. The FGC model ensures that the village (in this case the family as it is constructed and discussed in chapter 3) is given the opportunity to influence decisions made about the welfare of the child. This therefore suggests this is a social work practice that resonates with all cultures and families. It further suggests that empowerment, habitus, respect, and strengths apply to all and the FGC process allows that cultural

competence to come through because the family are empowered to share it. This is one of the reasons the FGC model and the Māori culture resonate with me as it highlights the importance of seeing someone, which is central to Ubuntu and my own Zulu culture.

11.8 Contribution to knowledge

For me, this has been both a professional and spiritual journey to contribute to knowledge and to recognise the problem-solving practices of indigenous communities, who have had so much taken from them. The data reveals that this research contributes to knowledge in the following ways:

11.8.1 Bringing Ubuntu philosophy to the forefront of social work practice

One of the key arguments made by this thesis is that social work and academia continue to be conducted in a very Eurocentric and colonial way. Knowledge from the Global South continues to be less considered and therefore a definite need to continue decolonising knowledge to address these systemic injustices. There have been some indications that there is an appetite to explore knowledges from the Global South and other minoritised ethnic groups. Based on the assertions made both in the introduction and in chapter 6 Ubuntu needs to be introduced and promoted in social work as the values espoused by this approach are compatible with social work values. This research therefore is making a profound contribution in highlighting this model and advocating for its widespread use, the same way FGC, Signs of Safety and Working Together were introduced widely. On the back of this research, I will continue to present at conferences and write on this philosophy so as to continue dissemination of these findings.

11.8.2 Centrality of family decision making

The FGC process disrupts the colonial system of looking at the child as an individual and promotes a sense of the child as a valued member of a family. It further starts from a premise that, unless proven otherwise – the family wants what is best for the children and they are best placed within the family for their needs to be met.

This research has highlighted that FGC is about the recognition of strengths and optimism that people will change their lives for the better with support. It takes social workers back to the core of social work practice – putting families firmly in the driving seat and empowering them. It is about the acknowledgement and understanding of family dynamics e.g., recognition of intra familial protective factors. It writes 'families' in capital letters and 'professionals' in small letters in the child's life. When you place professionals in the background as supporting acts, it brings you back to the core – families as experts in their own lives. Families are professionals in their own lives and investors in their own bank, they need support to highlight their strengths and recognition that in the majority of cases they want what is best for their children.

11.8.3 The voice of the child

Keeping the child at the centre is one of the core ideals of Ubuntu and thus we should always take heed of the voice of the child. It is also in keeping with UNCRC Article 13 which advocates for the right of a child to be able to express themselves. In chapter 9, this research demonstrated continued systematic oppression of children if they are unable to have their voice heard. The direct voice of children in this research is silent as adults refused to grant permission for the child's voice to be heard (see chapter 9), and so instead the children's voice was heard by proxy through the voice of the professionals. In particular the voice of the child advocates were able to evidence and

bring rich, descriptive insight into how they were able to bring the child's voice into the process. Using the FGC process, child advocates bring the child's voice into the room either by working alongside the child who is empowered to be in the room, or by bringing the child's views, wishes and feelings into the FGC process by proxy and as detailed in chapter 9. Either way, by expressing their experiences of working with children to me, I was enabled to bring children's indirect voices into the thesis.

11.8.4 Development of a link between FGC and a theoretical perspective

Within the thesis I have utilised Bourdieu's Theory of practice to contextualise FGCs and understand how power, empowerment and habitus might be conceived of in that context. I have sought to show how it helps us to establish a theoretical framework that can provide academics, FGC coordinators, child advocates, social workers and social work students with a clearer understanding of the role of the FGC model used in practice with children and families and how this can be understood as also supporting and facilitating culturally grounded social work practice. Bourdieu's theory of practice has highlighted the importance of understanding children and families using the theoretical concepts he put forward, the field, the capital and the Habitus. Bourdieu (1984) proposed that social practices should be postulated as the central question for social scientists in analysing social reality. In discussing the three main tenets of Bourdieu's theory, this thesis puts forward that if a child is separated from their primary habitus this will strip them of their identity as it is a disruption to their socialisation. It is also important to understand the child's social, economic and cultural capitals and transmission to be better able to support children and their families.

Whilst it is understood that at times, removal of a child is the best option for that child, this action should only be taken after exhausting all possible family options. As we have seen through professional testimony the FGC model offers that possibility, because as the professionals I gathered evidence from said, the FGC process starts where the family is and works with them in their environment drawing on the wealth of knowledge and expertise found in that family. This process challenges accepted power structures within CP practice and empower families to find self-generated solutions. Utilising Bourdieu as a theoretical framework thereby helps to theoretically contextualise FGC practice and is also in keeping with Ubuntu, moving away from the way of making families operate in a field they have no understanding of, using field specific rules – the 'doxa' that is foreign to them (see chapter 6).

11.8.5 Understanding of how the FGC process is conducted

One of the key contributions this thesis has made is the opportunity to look in detail at professional FGC practitioners' perceptions of the different processes that take place in the implementation of the FGC model. It enables academics, professionals and practitioners to understand the rich descriptive detail of what it is like to commission, plan, structure and undertake an FGC within a UK CP context. This is important because the model and the way it works can be hidden within the language of FGCs, social work and CP practice. It can be hidden within the expectations that practitioners, policy makers, academics and other experts set around it and the detailed understanding of those engaged in this daily practice can go unseen and misunderstood. This is also an important contribution, if for example there is a potential for fidelity to impact the efficacy of FGCs.

Some of these daily processes have been broken down in preceding chapters see Chapters 1 and 5. One of the aims of this thesis, as elaborated on in Chapter 1 was the examination of the process and the outcomes of the FGC model. This thesis has argued for the importance of model implementation fidelity to ensure the outcomes are applicable in all situations to achieve the very best outcomes for children and families In chapters 7, 8 & 9 the perceptions and words of those involved in making FGCs happen give us a rich understanding which enables the reader to see how the model works within a framework of culturally competent practice. By applying Bourdieu's theory of practice to this context we are also enabled to see not only that the theory is practically applicable, but also that Bourdieu's theory can be grounded in empirical research and that utilising it in this way helps us to understand and account for why culturally competent practice matters both theoretically and in terms of policy and practice.

11.9 Limitations of the study

11.9.1 Voices of children and families not represented in the research

After being granted ethical approval to conduct this research and speak directly to children and families, I explored this option for almost two years but none of the local authorities allowed direct contact with children and families. I therefore had to change. I was fortunate in that I was well-known in and familiar with the world of FGCs and could consider different ways of understanding and investigating empirically the work of FGCs. Nonetheless, my sample, whilst made up of a good number of FGC and social work professionals, has not been able to reach people with lived experience of

FGC. For me this was not only a limitation but also a moral dilemma I mitigated this by recruiting different groups of practitioners who have had previous FGC involvement and have thereby gained multiple perspectives.

11.9.2 My proximity to the subject of FGC

In Chapter 1 I professed my belief in the efficacy of the FGC model and further highlighted this in the ethical approval process. Whilst this is a strength that ensured that the model was respected at all times, it is also a short coming as I sought to be objective at all times in communicating the research findings. I have made every effort to represent the findings as accurately as possible but recognise my own positive viewpoint may be considered a potential limitation. I have reflected on this in chapter 8 and I recognise at least at the beginning of the process, I struggled to look at FGCs objectively. Later in my research I did not find myself facing the same conflict about critiquing the FGC model. I have reflected on my role bring good practice to ensure the use of the FGC model

11. 10 Recommendations

11. 10. 1 Local authorities to foster a culture of access to researchers

One of the main challenges of this research process was gaining access to children and families through the local authorities. One fully understands the need to protect children and families and to share information responsibly however it also begs the question of who or what the local authority is protecting – children and families or their practice. By allowing access to academics to study processes like FGC, it may lead to families expressing their views about some of the negative practices they may

experience. Research which is able to access families is therefore important as it could lead to the exposure of potential flaws and thereby support the development of best practice. There is also another side where the local authority could use the information gained from the study to improve their services and seek further funding. Featherstone et al (2014) argue that academics may see that is their responsibility to highlight the good work that is being done by social workers, but that local authorities also need to give academics the opportunity to examine practice and so advance knowledge.

11.10.2 Local authorities need to put in place programmes that will ensure the voice of the child is heard in all their work with children

This thesis has highlighted the significance of the voice of the child and the findings have demonstrated that FGCs can be a mechanism by which this is achieved.

11.10.3 Social workers – focus on power disparities

FGCs are useful in enabling the voice of the child to come more clearly through CP processes. Furthermore, FGC co-ordinators and proper family time are important in rebalancing power and allowing that voice to emerge. Recognising this could strengthen and improve social work practice. I find Ubuntu and more culturally aware and centred practice can by adopted through FGC for that reason because the family/child voice is centred in the process, in using Bourdieu alongside FGC and your evidence you can create a theory of practice to show how in combination FGCs, cultural awareness, centring of voice and Bourdieu can not only illuminate how and in what ways social workers may over-exercise power and how they can use practices such as FGC to re-balance that within the CP process. This also enables them

opportunities for reflecting on and changing their practice and thereby improving practice

To some service users, a social worker may as well be a police officer or a judge as they see them as a representation of power and authority – as previously mentioned 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2000). Bar-on (2002) points out that social work is fundamentally political and is all about power and, therefore it is crucial that social workers understand the effects of power within the structures in which they work and the society as a whole. The symbolic power as expressed by Bourdieu (1972) that has already been elaborated on in detail on Chapter 5 comes with authority, both perceived and real and is a reality for service users. This thesis has also discussed how perceptions of service users and their realities within the Child Protection arena differ from the core values of social work. This highlights Joseph (2020) who argues that 'p*ower* is visible and palpable at all levels of human relations and is exercised not so much with chains and guns as with subtly condescending speech acts and withering glances – the effect of which can be experienced as *violence* more enduringly painful and effective than the lash of a whip, and not different in kind from the class violence by which the bourgeoisie extracts labour from the workers . This power was discussed in chapter 5 and again in the findings chapters (8 & 9) and throughout section 11 in the discussion of the findings.

In chapter 9 the voice of the child was discussed, and it was sometimes argued by participants that whilst there is clear need for the voice of the child to be heard in the FGC process, this was not possible and a proxy spoke for them in the room, the child advocate. In this thesis therefore the presence of the FGC coordinator and the independent advocate are also important in representing the voice of the child and the

family and thereby balancing the power and allowing those voices to emerge. I find Ubuntu and more culturally aware and centred practice can by adopted through FGC for that reason because the family/child voice is centred in the process.

Foucault (1978) argued power is not only a structural phenomenon that oppresses but it has capacity to be productive as well. Social work could choose to use power in ways that empower service users. This thesis has found evidence that one of the ways this can be done is through FGC. This research has shown how FGCs can help to neutralise or share power and empower families by enabling their voice to come through the process, not in a tokenistic fashion, but by playing meaningful roles in the decision making in matters that affect them and their children directly. This research therefore recommends that using the FGC model enables an understanding of power differentials within the CP process and thereby confronts social workers with the need to be aware of their power and thereby improving outcomes for children and families.

11.11 Areas for further research

This thesis has provided research which has given a clear understanding of the professionals' perspective on both the process and the outcomes of the FGC process in line with original research objectives. There remains a need for further research which will look at the same matters from the perspective of children and families who have a direct experience of FGC. This would provide a 360˚ opportunity for understanding incorporating children, families and professionals' perspectives, most importantly it would ensure that the voice of the child in the FGC process is heard directly from the child.

Further research should be conducted to explore factors that lead to the levels of success of the model. This will help local authorities, academics, FGC coordinators and other practitioners involved in the FGC process to focus on those factors to ensure the success of the application of the model.

FGCs are one of the services that fell victim to austerity measures, with some local authorities. Further research will need to be done to explore if there is a difference in outcomes when FGCs are done in house or commissioned out. This is not about questioning the independence of the FGC coordinator or the advocate, but it is about looking at resources and processes.

11.12 Conclusion

In Chapter 5 a question by Dalrymple and Burke (1995) was posed asking “can social work practice ever be based on equal power relationships?” This thesis has sought to engage with this question – whilst social work is unlikely to ever be based on an equal power relationship, due to the nature of work for instance in the CP arena and the need to protect the children, it is possible to positively engage with families in the child protection process through employing an emancipatory form of practice and Ubuntu and working in a culturally competent manner. In putting into practice, the principles of partnership like FGC, social workers may be perceived as having a mandate to develop relationships of co-operative power wherever possible with service users, families, professionals, communities, and other agencies (Tew 2006). FGC helps neutralise that power by giving the family their due right to participate in decision making.

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