The value of recognition theory to Family Group Conferencing and child-care and protection

Citation for published version:
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa207

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1093/bjsw/bcaa207

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
The British Journal of Social Work

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Abstract

Much has been written over the past thirty years within the international social work literature on Family Group Conferencing as a process of decision-making. Yet the theories which frame our understanding of how Family Group Conferencing contributes towards family outcomes are less distinct. This paper makes an original contribution to this literature by proposing the use of recognition theory as a beneficial lens through which to understand the Family Group Conferencing process. Recognition Theory contends that social relations acknowledge and validate personal existence and are pivotal to identity formation; a just society is therefore one where everyone gets due recognition. A retrospective qualitative study will be used to exemplify how Family Group Conferencing can create the conditions within which participants can experience different forms of recognition: care; respect; solidarity and, as such, experience a level of social justice (or not). It is argued that recognition within the Family Group Conferencing process can influence the identity and relationships of those involved in social work services. This article has significance beyond those with an interest in Family Group Conferencing as recognition theory can sheds light on the nature of relationships in social work practice more generally.
**Introduction**

Effective social work practice draws on core communication and relationship skills which are both technical and ethical in nature and include an acknowledgment of the multi-dimensional influences on an individual’s or family’s functioning (Milner et al., 2015). ‘Recognition and respect are crucial considerations’ when working with and developing relationships with individuals and families who are involved with social work services due to concerns about a parents ability to care for their children (Featherstone et al., 2018: 123). Hayes and Houston (2006: 1006) contend that one of the imperatives for ethical dialogue between social work service users and social work is that:

participants must confirm each other’s identity through different forms of recognition that (a) demonstrate positive regard, (b) acknowledge the other’s individual and social rights and (c) value the other’s abilities and traits (p1002).

Given that Family Group Conferences (FGC) are now commonly used as a process for child welfare decision making, they present an important site for exploring the nature of the relationship between the State and the family, with a specific focus on the State’s recognition of the position and views of family members. Family Group Conferencing is intended as a family led decision-making approach that, when there are concerns by the State about a child, brings the extended family network together to make practical plans to keep children safe.

Using the case example of FGC this article adds to our understanding about relational and strengths based practice by shedding light on the practical application of ideas arising from theories of recognition on the nature and conduct of the relationships between practitioners, State agencies and families involved in social work services. The ideas have merit beyond this, both in terms of general social work practice, and also FGCs for other purposes. While a number of interactions where analysed within the study the primary focus of this discussion is the experience of recognition within family systems, in a broader context of the state being involved with the family. A more in depth discussion regarding the interactions of professionals and family members is being explored in another paper. The article begins by briefly explaining FGC and the key ideas of recognition theory before considering links between recognition and FGC through evidence from an empirical study.
Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (also known as Family Group Decision Making) is an internationally recognised ‘family’ led decision-making approach. ‘Family’ in these contexts is considered to include the child and his/her immediate family members, extended family members and his/her wider social network. FGC, originating in New Zealand in the late 1980s has had a rapid growth internationally due to a combination of the principles underlying the model and the simplicity of the stages, making it attractive to apply in different settings and contexts (Corwin et al., 2019; Crampton, 2007; Dijkstra et al., 2016; Frost et al., 2014a; Frost et al., 2014b; Marsh and Walsh, 2007; Valenti, 2016). In Scotland, where this study is based, FGC has been used as a decision-making process since the late 1980s. The National Guidance for Part 12 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 states that families should be supported to make decisions to safeguard a child prior to children being admitted to the care of the State and that an example of ‘good practice’ is Family Group Decision Making (Scottish Government, 2016: 9-10).

An independent FGC coordinator works to support family members (and professionals) through the different stages of the FGC decision-making process: referral; preparation; family meeting; and review. The process, facilitated by the independent FGC coordinator, can take several months to complete. Space does not allow a full discussion of the process here but can be found in a number of papers and books (Burford and Hudson, 2000; Connolly and McKenzie, 1999). A central principle of the process acknowledges that families know themselves better than anyone else; encouraging family members to support each other and enabling them to take responsibility for themselves while also receiving appropriate help and support from professional support agencies (Burford and Hudson, 2000; Hill et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2019). Further, by ‘widening the circle’ to help address welfare and safety concerns for a child the process challenges professionally dominated decision making processes in child care and protection and adjust power differences between families and statutory authorities (Holland et al., 2005; Marsh, 2013; Hill et al., 2019; Corwin et al., 2019; Stabler et al., 2019). As Dijkstra and colleagues (2016:101) point out the model aims to ‘improve child safety within families and reduce the need for professional care’.

Recognition Theory

The concept of recognition is influenced by the Hegelian idea that subjectivity and identity are constructed dialectically, through a process of mutual recognition which holds the key to
determining the nature of justice within society (Houston and Dolan, 2007). Theories of recognition are primarily associated with the work of Taylor (1994), Fraser (2000; 2001; 2003) and Honneth (1996; 2004; 2007; 2010). Some versions of recognition theory focus on group identity and redistribution while others concentrate on ideas of common humanity alongside the unique attributes of individuals. Taylor (1994), in the most part, concentrates on the validity of recognition claims in multicultural societies that include groups with values and interests that are substantially different. While Fraser (2000; 2001; 2003) argues that cultural and social recognition should not be separated from economic redistribution and political representation. Honneth (1996) contends self-identity thrives in the context of social relationships characterised by reciprocity: where reciprocity suggests the recogniser and the recognised have crucial roles in mutual exchange which reflects successful acts of recognition (Zurn, 2015). Thus, by acknowledging and being acknowledged by a significant other/s an individual can gain self-realisation. A just society is one where everyone gets due recognition: thus feelings of misrecognition, where one is not recognised, is also pertinent when considering one’s struggle for identity (Thomas, 2012).

If recognition is denied, then social mis-recognition and disrespect occurs, which is an insult against the person and an injustice (Honneth 1996). Failures of recognition or acts of misrecognition by others can inflict harm and be experienced as oppressive, confining someone in a false, distorted or diminished mode of being (Thompson, 2006). It is Honneth’s conceptualisation of recognition that is the primary focus of this paper as relationships are central to interfamily relations, social work practice, and to the practice of FGC.

There are three forms of recognition where identity and self-realisation is formed and protected: love; rights; solidarity.

a) Love: human beings come from a web of interpersonal relationships where we are supported and free from domination. Recognition in the form of love suggests an interdependence of activities, where our different needs are acknowledged and met. If love and care is present, a secure self-identity is developed, and a sense of self-confidence achieved. The violation of autonomy and self-realisation in the child by way of child abuse and neglect can threaten and impair the developing child’s self-confidence (Houston, 2015a).

b) Rights: with a sense of moral authority and perceived respect individuals (and groups) are recognised as being human and of holding equal status by the other/s. Having
rights allows one to feel, in a fundamental way, that one is equal to everyone else and
give rise to self-respect, as to be accorded rights (both legally and personally) is the
validation of personhood. Misrecognition of rights is essentially a matter of denying
an individual the right to speak, participate, get involved, or to have one's views taken
into consideration, thus rendering their humanity unrecognisable (McBride, 2013).

c) Solidarity: arises as part of a felt concern for the other’s value (Houston and Dolan,
2007), here people are acknowledged for their contribution, strengths and abilities by
the communities / groups of which one is a part. This form of recognition builds self-
esteeem through appraisal as people begin to recognise their social relevance. The
converse however, where insult, disparagement and belittling are present, will lead to
an impairment of self, to a feeling that one’s dignity has been transgressed, along with
shame and a loss of honour (Husby et al., 2018).

Recognition and social work
Honneth’s recognition theory promotes a focus on respect and appreciation of difference
which should be at the heart of social work practice (Ridley et al., 2016). However, Garrett
(2010) considers Honneth’s over ‘psychologization’ of intersubjective relations limits its
application in social work theory. He has argued that Fraser’s emphasis on a dualist
understanding of the concept as redistribution and recognition has greater resonance with
social work discourse on social justice, and the need to move beyond the individualisation
of social problems. Further, those considering recognition theory in social work tend to under
theorise or ignore the state’s influence to generate and sustain patterns of othering and
(mis)recognition (Garrett, 2010). Thus, ignoring the possibilities of oppression and use of
power by the state in social work practice. Despite his critique Garret (2010) sees merit in a
broader discussion on recognition theory and its incorporation into discussions on social
work ‘ethical themes and preoccupations’.

Recognition theory has over the past decade begun to be considered a helpful theory to
understand social work practice and the practise of social work. Recognition theory has been
used to provide a frame (and language) through which relationships and social work practice
can be understood (Husby et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017; Houston, 2015a; Thomas, 2012;
Warming, 2014; Turney, 2012; Houston and Dolan, 2007). What these proponents for
recognition theory have in common is the belief that strengths-based and relational social
work practice lies in the co-construction of identity through mutual recognition between
individuals and/or individuals and social work professionals (representing the state). The
implication of using this lens suggests that interactions within social work settings can
impact on whether a service user feels empowered in his/her interactions with the state or overlooked (Hansen, 2018). The next section of this article explores this thesis through a study involving the case study of FGC practice.

Methodological Approach
The intention of this retrospective qualitative study was to explore what contribution FGC made to the longer-term outcomes for children and families involved in social work services where a child in the family is at risk of being placed into State care. This doctoral research was funded by the ESRC was initiated by the Centre for Research on Family Relationships at the University of Edinburgh and Children 1st – a national charitable organisation. As the study aimed to obtain a deep understanding of the different perspectives of those involved in the FGC process, a qualitative case study research methodology was used (Yin, 2013). Due to the sensitive nature of the study and the involvement of children the research had a Level 2 Ethical Review undertaken and approved by the University of Edinburgh. Children and adults involved in the study were given information sheets prior to involvement and all those interviewed signed consent forms. Actions were taken to ensure all children, family members and professionals in the study remain anonymous and the use of synonyms in this paper reflects this ethical concern.

The National FGC Steering Group and Children 1st assisted the researcher access the families involved in the study. Eleven (n=11) case examples of FGC across five Local Government Authorities in Scotland agreed to be involved. Families involved in the study were purposefully selected on the bases of their involvement in FGC and their willingness to shed light on FGC outcomes. Inclusion criteria were that the family had been through all the stages of FGC and a family meeting had taken place; the child/ren, who were the focus of the FGC in the study, had been referred by their social worker because they were at risk of being removed from their home and accommodated under the care of the State; the meeting had been completed twelve months or more prior to March 2014 (thus a longer-term outcome focus was ensured); core family members were willing to participate; and professionals and core family members were still accessible and able to participate.

Each case included the perspectives of different stakeholders in the FGC process and included: children (including siblings) aged 10-18 years (n=10), members of their family and social networks (n=22); and professionals supporting the family and child (n=28). Sixty
(n=60) people were interviewed in 44 discrete semi-structured interviews between in 2014-15. In addition, ninety-four (n=94) FGC documents (including FGC referrals and family plans) were reviewed across the eleven case studies, providing data which was created at the time of the FGC.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between forty and ninety minutes and were carried out primarily in the home of the child or at the offices of the professionals involved. The interview schedules were designed based on the initial orientation of the topic and literature review. The interview schedule was discussed with the research supervisors as well as piloted with a young mother, who was approached through her FGC Coordinator and agreed to assist my study. Piloting helped test not only the information sheets and consent forms but also provided an opportunity to test the demands of the interview process and make changes required at an early stage in the research study.

Audio tapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Bryman, 2012). NVivo software was used to manage data and assisted in the collation and coding of the data. The researcher developed initial codes while transcribing the interviews and then further codes were refined and identified as each interview was analysed in more depth in NVivo. Analysis was undertaken on an intra case and across case basis, with the data being read and re-read closely as themes emerged (Bazeley, 2013). Conceptual categories emerged from the interview data as information was thematically analysed from across the data set (Bazeley, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2003). The interviews, coding frames and the interpretation of the data were discussed at length with the projects supervisory team to help ensure an overview of data collection and interpretation.

The researcher acknowledges the limitations of this small qualitative study. That is, appreciating that the participants who agreed to be involved in the study may have had a more positive perspective of FGC than those who did not agree to be involved thus creating the potential for positive bias of cases studied. This, however, does not negate the value of the data collected and the purpose of the qualitative study being to shed light on the complexities of the participants experiences. The small number of case studies in the research inhibits the generalisation of the evidence however, as stated, valuable insight into the experiences of those involved in the FGC process and how these experiences might
contribute to outcomes was gained. The number of children in the study limits the capacity to fully interpret their experiences as being either similar or different to adult respondents. Further study would be required to draw any conclusions regarding this matter. Finally, the analysis of the evidence was an iterative process for the researcher. That is, the project was not established or designed to consider recognition as a lens to understand experiences of those involved in FGC. Rather, it was through the coding of evidence that ‘recognition’ as a concept iteratively emerged. As the researcher transcribed and coded respondents evidence several themes began to emerge from respondents experiences. They included: being seen, being supported, being heard, being acknowledged. Thus ‘recognition’ emerged as one of the overarching themes around which the researcher understood change to occur during the FGC process. These findings influenced the author to seek a theory to aid explanation and frame analysis and theoretical discussions. The following finding, discussion and concluding sections of this article focus on the data that emerged regarding recognition.

**Findings**

As stated above, the concept of recognition was not the focus of the research reported in this article, but families accounts of interpersonal interactions and their experience of FGCs were infused with references to aspects of both recognition and misrecognition. In experiencing a degree of emotional support, respect and solidarity, often facilitated within FGC relationship spaces, some participants felt a (re)affirmation of their self-identity. Further, because of the conditions created within the process participants were able to reflect on their own and acknowledge others’ experiences. Feeling an increased confidence, self-respect and self-esteem contributed towards improved social relations and a sense of control over their own lives. These recognising experiences appeared to be important contributing factor to improving relationships between family members and between family members and professionals. In contrast to the majority of evidence collected there was also an outlier in the data: Glenda, whose evidence highlights a number of issues in relation to misrecognition and FGC. The intension of this section is to offer a cross section of the evidence which aid an enhanced understanding of interfamily relations involved in FGC with the examples provided (family 10, 8, 3 and 4). These cases provide a general reflection of responses across the study as well as the outlier case. An initial examination of recognition theory in relation to FGC is provided by first considering an example of misrecognition and then a brief analysis of each of the forms of recognition (love, respect and solidarity).
Misrecognition
The experience of FGC is not always easy for either family member or professionals involved in them, nor is it a panacea for all complex child welfare decision making. Much depends on the effective practice, resources and supportive policies (Maxwell and Pakura, 2010). In case 4 one of the primary family members (Glenda) did not consider the FGC process assisted her to resolve issues she was experiencing regarding the decision-making to safeguard her son (Callum). This evidence was in stark contrast to her ex-partner Leanne, who felt the meeting provided her with a ‘platform to be heard’. As stated, Glenda’s evidence is not typical of the respondents involved in the research, but it does offer an important perspective on the possible experience of some family members within the FGC process. Glenda reflects on how she found the FGC meetings she was involved in:

I honestly don’t know, it was like I felt worthless; I felt useless (voice cracking with emotion) ehh… I was probably scared to even talk as well at times and it got worse as every meeting went on. It got harder for me …. She (Leanne) came back in at one point, there was no body there…and she said, ‘this is me getting you back for all the times you’ve no let me see him’ (her son Callum) and then she walked out… I really didn’t know how bad or relapsed I was .. ehh it made me worse. (Glenda: mother FGC, family 4; my italics)

Without recognition feelings of disrespect, shame, anger, frustration and injustice are experienced (Honneth, 1996; Honneth et al., 2012). Glenda’s evidence suggests that she experienced a level of denigration from Leanne (her ex-partner) and was threatened in a manner that had impact some eighteen months after the event. Glenda’s comments also imply that she did not feel safe to express her feelings and thoughts within the meeting and that as a result of her experience she felt ‘worthless’. The harm caused by such forms of misrecognition occurs when the subject internalises the others’ negative attitude as part of their own internalised account of themselves - since others despise me, I despise myself (Thompson, 2006: 23). Glenda’s example from this study supports Thompson’s (2006) contention that failures of recognition or acts of misrecognition/disrespect by others can inflict harm and is a form of oppression, confining somebody (in this case Glenda) into a false sense of being. Experiences of denegation, exclusion and limiting or ignoring Glenda’s contribution are forms of misrecognition resulting in a lack of confidence, self-respect and impoverished sense of self-worth and dignity (Houston, 2015a).
Love

Many family members who were interviewed spoke of the increased level of care and support they felt from other family members throughout the FGC process and often afterwards. Many interviewees, like Carla below, spoke positively of their extended family members’ involvement in the process:

*It definitely raised awareness amongst my family of what was happening. I felt I had a wee bit more support from my brothers and sister. Until that point, I think they thought Sylvie was a brat and spoilt. They didn’t realise there was some much more deep-seated problems. For me that was quite good because I feel that if I wanted to, or if I had to, I can have other people that I can speak to, which at that point it was just my mum…. It is important to have someone to speak to and that opened the net for me a wee bit, which was good….I have a better relationship with my family now.* (Carla: mother, family10).

Involving her family in her daughter, Sylvie’s FGC made Carla feel supported and cared for. A strength of the FGC process appears to be to be widening the circle around a child as extended family are invited to, and get involved in the process, with individuals experiencing a form of recognition where they are cared for by others. Further, as Carla learnt, family members had a new understanding of her circumstances and would offer additional support if needed. Carla’s brother Stan confirmed Carla’s observations:

*I guess it gave Carla the impression that she is not on her own, that she must feel sometimes. You know she has been a single mum and has brought Sylvie up as a single mother…. ‘ (Stan: Sylvie’s uncle and Carla’s brother, family 10)*

An impact of Carla’s experience for her is that she and her children are less isolated and that she feels significantly more supported by her extended family – not just her mother. The experience of her family’s care, reflected in part by their attendance at Sylvie’s meeting but also a new understanding of her and her daughters circumstances, increased Carla’s confidence to ask for help, ‘if necessary’. In turn, Carla’s perception of herself changed. She no longer felt alone, misunderstood and judged as a single mother; rather she was a person whose individual needs and emotions were being recognised by others who were important to her and this appeared to raise her confidence and contribute to a more positive self-identity. This in turn appeared to impact on her capacity to act (ask for help) and improved her relationships with her extended family over the longer term.
Rights
The reciprocity of being heard by and listening to others within the FGC process was considered by respondents’ in the study as being important. Evidence from this research shows family members welcomed an opportunity to talk about the issues and concerns affecting family members in a safe and respectful space. Some individuals in the study reflected that they had been able to safely express their feelings and concerns in the FGC process where previously they had found it difficult. Carol (a single mother of Justine and Kate) said she thinks an impact from her involvement in FGC was learning to talk about problems and being listened to without feeling judged:

I think it’s not keeping things inside, just get them out. If you’ve got problems or if you’ve got something …say if Justine is in a mood or Kate is in a mood – I’ll say what is it? Somethings wrong with you, just tell me and get it off your chest. Before I would have just kept ranting and raving and kickin off and shouting. But now, I’ll say just say what is wrong and then we can sort it out and that is down to them meetings. Because we would just sit and just talk…they made you feel so at ease you could say lots…cause they are no judging ya, your tellin’ and mores coming out… they are just listening to ya and it makes ya feel more confident. (Carol: mother of Justine, family 3)

An important element of Carol’s experience was being able to express her feelings alongside hearing how her children were feeling in a safe and respectful space. Asking for her daughters opinions suggests Carol has learnt to recognise and respect the validity of her daughters (and her own) unique experiences and opinions, something that may not have previously been acknowledged.

The experience of being able to speak up and to be heard was apparent throughout the study. For example, Dillon who was referred to FGC when he was 15 years old because of concerns over his increasing physical and verbal violence towards his mother, reflected that prior to the meetings he had found it difficult to express his feelings to his mother and father:

Like if we were, just like me and mum were trying to talk about it we would just start arguing or like if I tried to talk to my dad then we would fall out as well. But in the meeting, everything was said that needed to be said so we all talked to each other then…(Dillon: young person, family 8)
An important element of Dillon’s FGC experience was the feeling that he had expressed his views to his parents and extended family. Dillon’s observations might suggest a level of recognition and respect within the family at the time of the meeting, not previously experienced. No longer ignored or overlooked Dillon found himself (as others did) recognised within his extended family. His opinion was equally important to others and his contribution within the family appeared to be given validity through the process. Dillon alongside his mother, father and extended family, was valued in the meetings as he provided new and important information regarding his emotions and thoughts that was not previously known or acknowledged.

Many of the children and adults involved in each of the families had similar experiences, saying they felt heard and respected by the wider family network and professionals during the FGC process. This would suggest that FGC supports family members to express their feelings in a space that was respectful and comfortable for them, where they feel recognised. Further, Carol, Dillon and others in the study, learnt to use this knowledge beyond the confines of the meeting; learning to value listening to each other whilst also understanding the need to speak about one’s own concerns.

**Solidarity**

The FGC process is underpinned by strength-based principles and a desire to include the extended family in decision-making (Walton et al., 2004). As such, the FGC process aims to support and value relationships held within the wider family network and community in a way that acknowledges the strength of family solidarities and practices while also allowing individual struggles, solutions and contributions to be acknowledged and recognised by family members. Evidence from this study suggests in practice this form of recognition does affirm individuals’ sense of identity. Jill (a single mother of Dillon) speaks of her experience of involving key members of Dillon’s family and what impact it had on her and her son:

A lot of the time Dillon’s dad wasn’t interested, and I think he learnt a lot at these meetings as well ‘cause there were a few things that came out that Dillon had wanted kept from him. I mean, there are parts of Dillon’s past he is ashamed of. I am not going to go into detail, it was a rough time for everyone, and I think his dad was thinking I was making it up or exaggerating. But working through all that at the meetings with everyone involved, it really helped to open people’s eyes and see. He’d say I didn’t know it was that bad and I said well
you never asked. A lot of things were sort of hidden because Dillon was ashamed, but it just got everything out into the open and we were able to work from there. And I still keep in touch with his dad and his dad’s partner now. So that has helped keep the communication channels open if things were to start going wrong again (Jill: Dillon’s mother, family 8).

Jill’s evidence suggests her family’s action of coming together and showing interest in her and her son’s situation supported her experiences to be acknowledged by significant others. This validation, particularly by her estranged partner (Dillon’s father), supported her capacity to move forward and improve communication between family members. This FGC experience appeared to enhance her sense of pride in herself and her family. Honneth argued that an individual’s sense of being valued depends on their being recognised by one’s social networks for one’s contribution and this builds pride and competence (Honneth, 1996). A sense of solidarity, it is argued, arises from a felt concern for the other’s value (Houston and Dolan, 2007). I would argue that this feeling of solidarity contributes towards family members working together to achieve their common goal to safeguard the child – an important element of empowering experiences. The acknowledgement of a person’s strengths, attributes and accomplishments seem critical for Jill to feel empowered - where ‘people have strengths that should be recognised and built on’ (Funnell and Rogers, 2011: 333). A distinction between other forms of recognition and the recognition of strengths and contribution to community is the suggestion of solidarity being created within a network or community of people who have a common connection, interests or goals (Mitchell, 2018). Applied in FGC, this might be exemplified in the experience of the extended family social networks coming together to create a family plan and undertake commonly identified goals.

Discussion
Using the example of FGCs, this study highlights the potential benefit of recognition theory as lens through which to understand the experiences of children and family members (and by extension professionals). It will be important to move beyond considering how the forms of recognition categorised by Honneth link with respondents experiences towards how recognition theory can aid analysis and critique of social work practice and outcomes for family members (Thomas, 2012).
Evidence indicates that when appropriately undertaken the FGC process can create the conditions within which children and family members may experience different forms of recognition. The findings from this study highlight that all three forms of recognition are required for individuals to fully participate in the FGC process and experience a level of justice. The interlocking experiences of recognition in the form of love (care and support), rights (respect), and solidarity (acknowledgement of contribution) are seen to assist and family members build the skills and capacity to make decisions and take control over their own lives, making a direct link with empowering social work practice (Payne, 2014). Research suggests (Mitchell 2018) an increased certainty that one is valued and important alongside believing oneself capable of making decisions and acting to make change happen, appear to support family members self-identity and relationships. The dialogical features of the FGC process through which individual family members experience the three forms of recognition, appear to be particularly important to defuse hostilities, not only at the time of the meetings but in some cases in the longer-term.

There appear to be two important factors highlighted in Honneth’s theory which aid the conditions for recognition within the FGC. The first is one’s ability to ‘perspective take’ with others in order to influence actions and maintain social bonds. This, Honneth suggests, is essential for social life and moral behaviour (Houston, 2015b). ‘Perspective taking’ (as suggested above in the evidence provided) is the capacity as a human being to carry out an internal dialogue, which enables an individual to reflect on one’s own behaviour in relation to perceived expectations from others and society (Houston, 2015a). Honneth argues that recognition is more than an internal monologue but requires both an internal dialogue and external communication with another. This condition is attentively facilitated through the FGC process where families are supported by an FGC coordinator throughout the staged process to come together to share and consider concerns and make plans with the wider family network and professionals.

The second factor supporting the conditions for recognition is ‘reciprocity’. Honneth contends that human subjects encounter each other within the parameters of a reciprocal expectation that they be given recognition as moral persons (Honneth, 2007: :71). As Turney (2012: :152) points out this ‘suggests a relationship where there is a certain amount of ‘give and take’, each person has something to offer and to receive’. Reciprocity becomes an important element in the struggle for recognition and is exemplified in the intersubjective relationships discussed in
the cases in this article. An important element for Dillon, for example, was his feeling that he could express his views. A contributing factor, assisting the defusing of hostilities, was the experience of feeling respected by others - being listened to and heard by significant others. This evidence supports the contention that FGC’s talking strategies may enable some family members to express their concerns and feel respected and comfortable doing so. Without this sense of respect impacting on his own sense of self-worth, it could be argued, that Dillon’s autonomy and agency (capacity for independent thought, action and accomplishment) would be diminished as one’s sense of entitlement and capacity to pursue one’s own needs depends (in part) on self-respect (Barry, 2016). Family members’ experiences, like Carol, Jill and Dillon above, appeared to be different from their previous narratives about family arguments, hostility and (at times) violence.

In social work practice reciprocity and the capacity to perspective take are not only relevant for inter family relationships but also for family and professional relationships and it is to this final point we turn regarding recognition theory and FGC. It is the presence of misrecognition within the process which may provide the most significant learning for FGC practice and social work theory development. Involvement in child and family social work services assumes that those receiving the service are under a certain level of stress and difficulty, with the State taking a paternalistic approach to helping. This suggests the possibility of negative and hostile relationships between family members, and potentially also directed towards professionals. Turney (2012) argues there is an identifiable link between reciprocity and recognition to relationship-based practice in social work within child care and protection. I would argue that acknowledging and studying (mis)recognition can support a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges of FGC in practice. As highlighted earlier, Garrett (2010) provides an important critique on the understandings of power and oppression in social work practice when focusing on the application of recognition theory. Without Garrett’s (2010) work it might be suggested, for example, that in Glenda’s case interpersonal misrecognition is largely responsible for conflict between Glenda and her ex-partner Leanne. However, as Garrett suggests, there is a need to consider issues beyond the psychologization of individual encounters in social work practice to fully understand the injustices experienced. To begin, Glenda’s evidence raises questions about what a Family Group Conference is? It may be significant in this case example that no extended family members were involved in the FGC. The principle of ‘widening the circle’ was not fulfilled by a lack of extended friends and family. Given the principles were not adhered to, in this case, the FGC process was not followed, and
it is the process which has instigated the level of impoverished self-worth Glenda experienced in part because of her involvement in FGC.

Secondly, what role does the State play in any FGC process? Questions have been raised in literature about the extent to which the FGC process services to ‘empower certain more dominant and perhaps abusive members of family groups at the expense of those who are less powerful’ (Lupton, 1998: 125). It has been argued that the power of certain individuals can be diminished by ‘widening the circle’ and drawing on ‘collective power’ of the wider family network (Doolan, 2010). The evidence from case 4 might suggest that widening the circle did not occur and subsequently the preconditions for recognition were not established and that those factors may have had an impact of the effectiveness of FGC (Mitchell, 2018). Do we blame the individual (Glenda) for the failures of the process? If an interaction is systemically generated (as in this case of FGC) are the structural inequalities of the encounter obscured if interpersonal conflict is the only consideration of any conflict which has arisen from an encounter?

Finally, can FGC process aid the recognition of multiple and intersectional oppressions of individuals involved in the process (Crenshaw, 1990)? In Case 4, for example, Glenda had a number of intersecting issues which might in and of themselves oppress; mental health difficulties, a history of substance misuse; being a member of a LGBQi family; living in a low income household. The effect of multiple oppressions coupled with the institutional expectations to engage in the process may shape and ultimately limit the opportunities to be fully recognised. With further study recognition theory could aid social work understanding of the implications of (mis)recognition and as such has an implication for improving practice.

The findings suggest recognition theory has the potential to provide a useful lens or frame from which to consider the experiences of family members and professionals involved in FGC. For those positively involved in the FGC process the experience of sharing information; being listened to; and jointly making decisions – appeared to assist family members to better understand different perspectives, improve communication and find solution’s together. Over time, new skills and confidence can emerge which sustains relationships, communication and problem-solving skills within families, supporting positive outcomes for children. Further work to explore and test recognition as a theory which is helpful to understand FGC and social
work practice more generally would appear warranted. Further, children’s experience of recognition may be significantly different to adults.

Conclusion
This article has focused the concept of recognition to understand the contribution the FGC process has on families involved in social work services. Improved understanding of recognition in social work practice can help us understand how being seen and heard (or not) can affect social work service users and their relationships with family. Applying recognition in this manner draws attention to the FGC process. A process that allows and facilitates love, rights and solidarity may be as important as the achievements of certain outcomes for the family despite being less obvious or tangible. Using recognition as a lens through which to understand why change occurs (or not) can shed light on family members experiences and what helps when involved in helping processes (Mitchell 2019). This paper has provided additional evidence that relationships do matter for effective social work practice providing some understanding of what it means to be recognised.
References


