Family meetings: facilitators reflect on neutrality and family empowerment

Ona B. Belser

University at Albany, State University of New York, belserob@plattsburgh.edu

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/506

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
FAMILY MEETINGS:
FACILITATORS REFLECT ON NEUTRALITY AND FAMILY EMPOWERMENT

by

Ona B. Belser

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, The State University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Social Welfare
2012
Family Meetings:
Facilitators Reflect on Neutrality and Family Empowerment

By

Ona B. Belser

COPYRIGHT 2012
Abstract

Child welfare agencies continue to explore programs and services that afford families opportunities to be involved in decisions that may have long lasting effects on their lives. Participatory meetings that fall under the Family Group Decision Making umbrella provide families involved in the social service system an opportunity to design plans to keep their families safe and healthy. All Family Group Decision Making models insist that a meeting facilitator be independent and non-case carrying in order for families to be empowered by the decision making process, with little research to support this requirement. Family Meetings in New York State is a model of family inclusionary practice where some counties use a non-case carrying caseworker to facilitate while others use the caseworker that is assigned to the family who is having a Family Meeting. This qualitative study used focus groups from four counties in New York, where two employed unassigned caseworker facilitators and two utilized the assigned. Their perspectives on family empowerment, neutrality, and the definition of success were examined to uncover similarities and differences in their viewpoints. Facilitators revealed elements they believed enhanced or reduced family involvement that pointed to strategies that may amplify family empowerment. Both types of facilitators appeared to impact the process and content of meetings thereby rendering them non-neutral. The assigned caseworker facilitators offered a more expansive view of success both in terms of its definition and their contributions. This study exposes the multi-faceted role of the facilitator and calls for augmented training and consultation to better prepare them for increasing family empowerment.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my father,

Jack Belser

who encouraged his children to love learning
Acknowledgements

Many people provided me with support, encouragement, and love that enabled me to complete this dissertation. I would first like to thank Chris Allen who has influenced my interests over a number of years with her cutting edge ideas and philosophy. I may not have been exposed to Family Meetings without her commitment to participatory practices and ensuring that families are part of making decisions for the safety and well-being of their children. She reviewed many sections of this dissertation with true interest and enthusiasm and offered a wealth of insightful feedback.

I cannot thank my dissertation committee members enough for taking the time to read and review my materials throughout the various stages of this process. I truly appreciate Dr. Lynn Videka who did not hesitate to continue chairing my committee despite her gaining employment at a different university. She always pushed me to higher standards and provided discerning reviews that added to the depth and breath of this study. Dr. Nancy Claiborne was there for me in the early inception of this undertaking, offering astute questions that shaped the focus and design of this research. Dr. Lynne Soine was always available with suggestions and on-going encouragement and never hesitated to answer questions, regardless of how busy she was. These three women, who live in three different parts of New York State, worked together and exemplified an expanded definition of “distance learning.” Their positive and kind approach allowed me to believe that I could actually complete this dissertation.

There are several people I am indebted to who have contributed to various aspects of the final copy of this dissertation. Leah Taylor demonstrated a great deal of patience while transcribing the audiotapes. Jill Myer would drop whatever she was doing to assist me with any computer problem I was having. Her confidence and calmness reminded me continuously that any dilemma could be solved. Shelly Webster edited the entire dissertation more than once on a moment’s notice and is surely responsible for some of the actual words in this document. Vanessa Johnson came to my rescue during the
formatting stage with her competence and upbeat approach to an otherwise frustrating experience. The staff at the Office of Sponsored Research, the United University Professions union, and at SUNY Plattsburgh, contributed in different ways to enable me to complete my degree. I am forever thankful for their assistance.

Dr. Martha Frost, Jackie Oertel, and Nancy Hughes, all three my close colleagues at SUNY Plattsburgh, cheered me on despite some discouraging moments. Their interest and support was boundless. My dearest and oldest friend Colette never stopped checking in on my progress regardless of how mundane or repetitive the updates were. She exemplifies what a true friend really means. Thank you to my brother David whose daily phone calls helped me get through some long days and enabled me to keep up with the lives of my sister-in-law Sharon, and my nephew Jonah.

Most importantly, I could not have done this without the help of my husband and children. Jeff showed extraordinary patience and unwavering devotion over a number of years. I could never have completed this without him. My daughters Janna and Sarah were a motivating force that greatly added to my perseverance. They were always there to listen and assist in any way they could and to celebrate all the small successes along the way. I look forward to making up for any missed or forgotten moments throughout this lengthy endeavor and to more time spent with those that I love.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ iii

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................ iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................... vii

LIST OF TABLES ............................................................................................................................ x

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................... xi

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ......................................................................................... 1

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF STUDY ........................................................................... 1

RESEARCH QUESTIONS ............................................................................................................. 5

TERMINOLOGY .............................................................................................................................. 6

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY ......................................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................. 8

HISTORY OF FGC AND OVERVIEW OF MODELS ............................................................... 8

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONFERENCING ...................................................... 16

GENERAL FACILITATION .......................................................................................................... 28

MEDIATION ................................................................................................................................. 35

FAMILY GROUP DECISION MAKING ................................................................................... 41

FGDM – A REVIEW OF EXISTING STUDIES ........................................................................ 44

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................... 51

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .............................................................................. 53

DESIGN ......................................................................................................................................... 54
UNASSIGNED OR ASSIGNED CASEWORKER FACILITATOR? ...................... 217

DEFINITION OF SUCCESS ...................................................................................... 218

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK.................................................................... 220

CONCLUSION .........................................................................................................236

APPENDICES ........................................................................................................ 238

Appendix A: Agency Permission Agreement ......................................................... 238

Appendix B: Consent Form ................................................................................... 240

Appendix C: Focus Group Demographic Information ........................................... 243

Appendix D: Outline for Focus Group Discussion ................................................ 244

Appendix E: Summary of Focus Group – C1......................................................... 246

Appendix F: Definitions of Final Codes ................................................................. 250

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................254
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE

1. ELEMENTS OF FAMILY GROUP DECISION MAKING MODELS ......................... 12

2. ELEMENTS OF FAMILY MEETINGS .......................................................... 13

3. COUNTY CHARACTERISTICS.................................................................... 58

4. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS BY COUNTY ....................... 62

5. INTER-RATER RELIABILITY: PERCENTAGE OF AGREEMENT .............. 84

6. DEMOGRAPHICS OF EACH FOCUS GROUP........................................... 92-93

7. THEMES FOR FACILITATORS’ INFLUENCE ON DECISION MAKING..... 131

8. THEMES FOR FACILITATORS: NEUTRALITY .................................... 143

9. THEMES FOR FACILITATORS’ DEFINITION OF SUCCESS ............... 184

10. THEMES FOR FACILITATORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUCCESS ......... 191
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE

1. STAGES OF A FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCE ................................................. 10
2. FGDM – PHILOSOPHY AND GOALS .............................................................. 14
3. REGULATORY PYRAMID .................................................................................24
4. MEMO: CODING METHOD .............................................................................67
5. MEMO: DEFINITION OF CODES .................................................................68
6. RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT NEUTRALITY: WHEN EASY, WHEN DIFFICULT .................................................................................................................78
7. PRELIMINARY LIST OF CODES ................................................................... 81-82
8. MEMO: CODE REFINEMENT .........................................................................79
9. UNASSIGNED AND ASSIGNED CASEWORKER FACILITATORS – CONTRIBUTORS TO FAMILY DECISION MAKING .................................................96
10. UNASSIGNED AND ASSIGNED CASEWORKER FACILITATORS – DETRACTORS TO FAMILY DECISION MAKING ...........................................112
Chapter One

Introduction

Background and Context for Study

A paradigm shift in child welfare has moved practice from a provision of services deficit model to one of empowerment with a strengths-based and solution-focused emphasis (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999; Saleebey, 2002). This movement toward a family-centered approach often includes families in decision making and engages them as partners in planning for the safety and well being of their children (Kelly & Blythe, 2000; Sandau-Beckler, Salcido, Mannes, & Beck, 2002). One of the expected outcomes from this change is that families will be empowered and have influence over decisions that affect their lives. Due to this recent emphasis on family involvement, workers are expected to interact with families in collaborative ways (Briar-Lawson & Lawson, 2001). This requires social service agencies in general and caseworkers specifically to share power with families, despite an inherent power differential between these two groups. This disparity in power exists due to the mandated authority that caseworkers are given to ensure that children and families are free from abuse and neglect (Connolly & McKenzie, 1999; DePanfilis & Salus, 2003). Power can be shared between workers and families when workers use a strengths-based approach, work collaboratively with families, and allow them to make decisions.

Family Meetings in New York State is one model under the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) umbrella that aims to empower families through its participatory practice. Despite some deviations within the state, these meetings uphold the values and principles of FGDM and are considered “a family-led decision making
process that brings together individuals concerned with the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children to make the best possible plans and decisions” (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, 2009). An individual facilitator works with families and coordinates the meeting, which consists of family members, caseworkers, and service providers. They discuss concerns, strengths, and resources leading to the development of a plan. This strategy in empowerment practice is designed to let families gain control over their lives in a typically non-empowering situation.

The role of the coordinator has been described as the “face of the FGDM process” (American Humane, 2010, p.15). It is considered to be a critical position for successful family outcomes (Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006). The emphasis on the necessity of an independent, neutral facilitator for FGDM models is stressed by many experts (Burford & Hudson, 2000; Connolly & McKenzie, 1999; Doolan, 2009; Love, 2000; Nixon, Merkel-Holguin, Sivak & Gunderson, 2000) and is included in general practice guidelines (American Humane, 2008; 2010; Burford, Pennell, & MacLeod, 1995). According to the Oxford Dictionary (oxforddictionaries.com), neutrality is defined as “the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, etc.,” “impartiality” and “absence of decided views, expression, or strong feeling.” A review of Family Group Conferences (FGC) conducted by Helland (2005) concluded, “the literature was unanimous in espousing that the independence of coordinators is an essential element of all Family Group Conferencing processes because they need to have the confidence and trust of all parties involved” (p.27). An independent and neutral facilitator is required due to the belief that a worker assigned to the family cannot be objective and share power if he or she is facilitating the process. Though this key practice is considered
indispensable, a thorough literature review as well as direct contact with a researcher from the American Humane Society (personal communication, A. Horner, April 30, 2011) showed minimal investigation to support this view (Burford, Connolly, Morris, & Pennell, 2009; Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Authority, 2008). Authorities in the field of FGDM strongly encourage further studies devoted to exploring the professed necessary elements of the intervention (Crampton, 2004; Huntsman, 2006; Lohrbach, 2007; Mirsky, 2003).

Several County Departments of Social Services (DSS) in New York State under the Office of Children and Family Services domain are using the caseworker assigned to a family to facilitate meetings, contrary to suggested practice. Others use an independent person from either within or outside their agency. These variations provide an opportunity to compare the perspectives of facilitators and explore how they see their respective roles. This study gathered opinions, beliefs, and practices from both types of facilitators about their role, neutrality, empowerment of families, and success. Five focus groups were convened in four different counties, resulting in two groups of assigned and two groups of unassigned caseworker facilitators. Comparing these two categories expanded the examination of neutrality in general, and considered its importance specifically in relation to empowerment of families during Family Meetings. Facilitators’ viewpoints were revealing, in that their position is especially critical to ensuring the balance of power during a meeting, making certain that all participants have a voice, and keeping the family at the heart of decision making (American Humane, 2010). In addition, gathering information from facilitators who are facilitating their own cases is new to the FGDM arena.
While it sounds convincing that a neutral facilitator should be better able to balance power, in reality this may not be true. Two assumptions with this belief about the neutral facilitator are: that the assigned caseworker could never be fair and give power over to families, and that families automatically feel negative toward their caseworker as a result of the nature of the caseworker’s job (Barsky, 1996). Given this rationale, it would not be possible for families to feel empowered by someone they assume does not want to share power. Experts in the training of caseworkers point out that historically the caseworker’s relationship with families was one of exertion of power and exclusion from allowing families to resolve their own difficulties. These authorities advocate for an approach that is based on trust, respect and genuineness but that also acknowledges caseworker’s expertise (Berg & Kelly, 2000; DePanfilis, 2000; Rooney, 2000). These methods are in sync with the current trend in family involvement practice that is taught to both new and seasoned caseworkers and to students in programs of higher education under the human services umbrella. Although the role of a caseworker can be adversarial at times, working with families as collaborators from the very first contact may make it possible for an assigned caseworker to act as a facilitator of a Family Meeting. This justifies the examination of neutrality, specifically where caseworkers facilitate meetings for the families they are working with, and the subsequent comparison to those who are considered independent. Their definitions of neutrality and perceptions about empowerment and decision making are instructive.

A query that centers on the role of the facilitator for this study is whether the presence of one that is independent and non-case carrying is necessary for families to feel empowered, or if the caseworker assigned to the family could accomplish the same goal.
The possibility also exists that an independent coordinator cannot guarantee that his or her biases will not influence the process. This examination will contribute to the field of participatory practices by informing casework and opening the door for a critical analysis of neutrality in facilitation.

**Research Questions**

This leads to the following five research questions that are listed in the order in which they are analyzed in the Findings Chapter. The questions fall under three main categories for the purpose of this study: empowerment, neutrality, and success.

**Empowerment:**

1) What elements of Family Meetings do the unassigned caseworker facilitators and the assigned caseworker facilitators believe are necessary for families to be empowered and for shared decision making to occur?

2) How do the unassigned caseworker facilitators and the assigned caseworker facilitators perceive their influence on decision making in a Family Meeting?

**Neutrality:**

3) How do the unassigned caseworker facilitators and the assigned caseworker facilitators perceive neutrality in their role during a Family Meeting?

4) What are the unassigned caseworker facilitators’ and the assigned caseworker facilitators’ beliefs about the assigned caseworker also acting as the facilitator of a Family Meeting?

**Success:**

5) How do the unassigned caseworker facilitators and the assigned caseworker facilitators define success in a Family Meeting?
Terminology

The necessary concepts for the benefit of this study are defined as follows:

*Family Meeting* – a meeting at which family members, social service workers, outside agency personnel, and other family supports come together to make specific plans for the safety and well-being of children or adults. The purpose is to share information, make decisions, and design a plan that fulfills the identified needs.

*Unassigned caseworker facilitator* – the person who prepares participants, conducts the Family Meeting, and helps obtain agreement to a plan. This person is a worker from the social service agency that is not involved in the case and is available to orchestrate such meetings.

*Assigned caseworker facilitator* – the person who performs the same tasks as the unassigned facilitator but is the assigned caseworker to the family that is having the Family Meeting.

*Caseworker* – the primary worker that the agency has assigned to the family.

*Non-service providers* – the immediate family, extended family members, and other friends and relatives that the family decides to include in the decision making process at a Family Meeting. These are often people who can act as resources for the family.

*Empowerment* – is having input into decisions that affect one’s life, specifically in terms of safety and well being of one’s children or adult family members during a Family Meeting.
**Decision Making** – the process of discussion and information gathering during a Family Meeting that leads to specific decisions that become part of a plan, which addresses the identified issues.

**Significance of Study**

This qualitative study offers informative views that are helpful to current and future facilitators in pointing out the many areas that require attention during facilitation. The field of social welfare, with its strong emphasis and time-honored values of self-determination and empowerment, is in need of additional information on how to maximize these principles for problem solving and social change. The area of neutrality is significant in the facilitator role as it is tied directly to beliefs about what is necessary for family empowerment. Although there is some research on neutrality of the facilitator in other arenas, there is little in the field of social welfare. This study opens the door to the debate around neutrality for all facilitators of participatory practices. Agencies that are considering these inclusionary meetings will find assistance when deciding what type of facilitator to utilize. Given these financially challenged times, more sites may have to consider caseworkers facilitating Family Meetings for their own caseloads. Although conclusions from this qualitative study cannot be generalized to other Family Meeting facilitators, it offers insights and suggestions for current practice along with directions for the future.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter begins by covering the history of Family Group Conferencing along with a review of the main models of Family Group Decision Making including Family Meetings in New York State. Coverage of values and principles fundamental to the practice are included, as they lay the groundwork for elements that are considered crucial for conferencing and demonstrate how Family Meetings qualify under the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) category. The next segment examines the underlying theories of conferencing and explains the mechanisms at work. It also presents a literature review in reference to neutrality from the fields of facilitation, mediation, and Family Group Decision Making. The final section covers the limited empirical studies on the role of the coordinator in the area of FGDM.

History of FGC and Overview of Models

Family Group Conferences (FGC) began in New Zealand in 1989 when the government enacted the *Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act*, mandating conferences for all families with confirmed maltreatment in order to make decisions to prevent placement of their children into the care of the state. At the time, there was an overrepresentation of Maori children in foster care residing with non-Maori families (Pakura, 2004; Pennell, 2006; Hassell, 1996). This led to a proposal to involve families in the decision making process and thus was born the Family Group Conference which upheld the culture and traditions of these indigenous peoples. It is considered the main model from which all subsequent family inclusionary practices were designed. According to the American Humane Association, which established the National Center
on Family Group Decision Making, the primary goal of FGC is permanency, stability, long-term safety, and well-being for children within their families and their communities (Merkel-Holguin, Winterfeld, Harper, Coburn, & Fluke, 1997). Its approach is designed to strike a balance between state workers and family members in both sharing power and in acknowledging that parents have opinions and ideas regarding the best interests of their children. A conference consists of extended family, community members, and service providers sharing strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines to address the issues at hand (Burford & Hudson, 2000). It is assumed that this increased input from families will lead to improved and more constructive decisions.

The original Family Group Conference is divided into three distinct stages (Fraser & Norton, 1996; Pennell & Burford, 2000). The first is the preparation stage (see Figure 1) where a facilitator meets with family members to help plan the meeting and discuss whom will attend. He or she also speaks with service providers and any extended family to help prepare them for the purpose and process of the meeting itself. Once a date, time, and place are decided upon, the second stage of an FGC can take place. This is the actual conference, which is also divided into its own three distinct phases. In the first phase, the concerns of all parties are shared allowing time for questioning and clarification. This allows everyone to hear the same information at the same time and avoid any misinterpretation of the issues. This is often referred to as a way to “get everyone on the same page” (Macgowen & Pennell, 2002). In this phase, resources, both formal and informal, are offered from family members, service providers, and others. The time it takes to conduct an actual conference can vary from an hour to an entire day (Burford & Pennell, 1995; Robertson, 1996). The second phase mandates that all non-family
members leave the meeting and that the family convene privately to draft a plan that addresses the presented concerns. After a plan has been designed, the third and final phase of the conference takes place. This phase consists of bringing participants back together, assessing the plan, and determining if all are in agreement (Fraser & Norton, 1996; Pennell, 2004a). Plans can vary from a single decision about where a child might live while a mom is in a drug rehabilitation program, to a very detailed list of tasks and activities with names and deadlines designated for each item. At this point, stage two concludes and the final stage begins, which entails follow-up and oversight of the plan. This review of the original model of FGC is regularly thought of as the pure version of conferencing (Macgowan & Pennell, 2002).

**Figure 1.** Stages of a Family Group Conference

Approximately ten years after the implementation of the New Zealand law, conferencing arrived in the United States, where the practice evolved into several different models. These models arose from a combination of solution-focused work, partnerships between families and caseworkers, and policies at the federal level that encouraged inclusion of families in case planning (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). By the year 2000, FGC and its derivatives became a widely recognized practice in more than 150 communities (Mirsky, 2003). Support from the Child Welfare League, the American Humane Association, and recommendations from the United States Department of Health
and Human Services indicate how much this practice is endorsed. Family Group Conferencing also permits social workers to uphold the core values of the social work profession. The values of “dignity and worth of the person” where social workers “seek to enhance client’s capacity and opportunity to change and address their own needs” (Reamer, 2006, p. 254) and the “importance of human relationships” wherein social workers operate as “parties in the helping process” (Reamer, 2006, p.254) illustrate the commitment and importance of family inclusion and shared decision making.

Conferences are used at multiple points of intervention: for prevention; during a CPS investigation; for determining placement decisions; or at key transition times, such as a child returning home. The stages for most models are similar, each beginning with the referral, followed by preparation and planning, then the conference itself, and lastly the follow-up (Merkel-Holguin, 1998; Mirsky, 2003). Local agencies may vary the format to meet the diversity of their participants. Although it is not easy at times to differentiate one model from another, there are clear characteristics that distinguish each one (Adams & Chandler, 2002; Merkel-Holguin, 1998). These include the amount of preparation before the conference, the format of the actual conference, the facilitator’s role and qualifications, and at times, the focus of the conference (See Table 1). The majority of conferences has private family time and has a facilitator who is not the assigned caseworker. Despite variations in categorization, most researchers and agencies would agree they fall under one of the formats in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Facilitator Role</th>
<th>Key Features</th>
<th>Follow-Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Group Conference</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>Independent/ non-case carrying</td>
<td>3 Stages</td>
<td>State approves plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meets all participants</td>
<td>Private family time</td>
<td>Caseworker and/or family monitor/implment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Highly trained</td>
<td>Family devises plan</td>
<td>plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepares and facilitates</td>
<td></td>
<td>May have follow-up meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Unity</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Independent/ neutral</td>
<td>May start with cultural activity</td>
<td>Caseworker monitor/implment plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trained</td>
<td>Strengths emphasized</td>
<td>May have follow-up meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepares and facilitates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Decision Making – FDM</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>Independent/ neutral</td>
<td>Culture important part of meeting</td>
<td>Caseworker and/or family member monitor/implment plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prepares and facilitates</td>
<td>Strengths emphasized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private family time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Combination of FGC and Family Unity models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Team Conference</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Assessment of strengths and needs</td>
<td>Meeting starts with “family story”</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Often caseworker / may be agency</td>
<td>No private family time</td>
<td>Updates and adaptations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>staff/community members/ outside agency personnel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caseworker or community member monitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family to Family (Family Team Meeting – FTM)</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Non-case carrying caseworker or supervisor</td>
<td>Held within days of placement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Works to bring birth and foster parents together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family to Family (Team Decision Meeting– FDM)</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Independent/ neutral</td>
<td>Family shares perceptions</td>
<td>Meet as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior staff, not assigned caseworker</td>
<td>CW reviews history</td>
<td>Assigned caseworker implements decisions; others supporting roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Highly trained</td>
<td>Decisions about placement, transfers, reunifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Remains for life of case</td>
<td>Family time not routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Family Support Meetings (CFSM)</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Independent/ Neutral</td>
<td>Strong emphasis on building community relationships – formal and informal</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trained in CFSM</td>
<td>No private family time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 stages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Elements of Family Group Decision Making Models*

Family Meetings in New York State (see Table 2) are considered to be a reduced form of the Family Group Conference and have commonalities with the other models. According to the Family Meeting Toolkit (2009), during a Family Meeting “parents, children if age appropriate, and relevant extended family or others identified as important to finding solutions, come to the table for protecting the children and keeping them safe.” Many of the counties conducting Family Meetings have a history of using the original Family Group Conference model, but have abandoned its use as they found it too cumbersome to implement and gather the necessary resources (C. Allen, personal communication, January 5, 2009). As a result, the Family Meeting Toolkit was developed for training counties to use a model that still enables families to be involved in planning, but is reasonable for them to deliver in terms of cost, time, and manpower.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Family Meetings</th>
<th>Preparation</th>
<th>Facilitator Role</th>
<th>Key Features</th>
<th>Follow-Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Minimal</td>
<td>• Independent/neutral</td>
<td>• May/may not have private family time</td>
<td>• Assigned caseworker/monitor implement plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Non-case carrying prepares and facilitates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several researchers and organizations have tried to define the values and processes that are integral to all family decision making initiatives thereby helping to add consistency to implementation, research, and evaluation. The American Humane Association has identified values that seem consistent with all models, including: respect for families’ strengths and knowledge of their own families; need for distribution of power in decision making; maintenance of cultural connections; respect and support from the state; and the family group as the place for child welfare decisions (American
Family Meetings in New York State work to uphold these same values. Most models share distinct elements in terms of philosophies and goals (See Figure 2) and are represented in all variations under the FGDM umbrella, including Family Meetings in New York State (NYSOCFS, 2009). Perhaps it may not be critical how the goals and philosophy are achieved, but only that they are.

**Philosophy**
- Families have a responsibility to provide for the care and protection of their children.
- Families have the most complete information about themselves to make decisions.
- Children have the right to safety, the knowledge of their heritage, and a voice in the decisions.
- Child safety plans are most effective when developed with the strengths of the child’s culture and community in mind.
- The long-term protection and welfare of children are best served through collaboration among agencies, community, and agency supports.

**Goals**
- Recognition and respect for families, their communities, and their cultures.
- Increased support, including mobilizing extended family and community resources.
- Increased family, community, and agency collaboration in child welfare decision making and service provision.
- The inclusion of children in the process.
- Empowerment of families to form their own plans to protect their children.

*Figure 2. FGDM – Philosophy and Goals*  
*Sources:* (Berzin, Thomas, & Cohen, 2007; Grabor, Keys, & White, 1996; Hassall, 1996; Maluccio & Daly, 2000; Moore & McDonald, 2000; Pennell & Burford, 1994; Ryburn, 1993; Walter R. McDonald & Associates, 2000).

Even though flexibility is inherent in the FGC model, Merkel-Holguin (2004) questions whether some of these variations hold true to the values and principles of true Family Group Decision Making. Experts in the field have expressed concern for model drift, which occurs when variations stray too far from the original (Merkel-Holguin, 2000; Merkel-Holguin, 2003; Pennell, 2007). A survey carried out by Nixon, Burford, and Quinn (2005) had 170 programs identify program drift as the largest obstacle to
maintaining the use of family group practice. Merkel-Holguin fears the drift will be so considerable that the model could be hijacked for agency purposes and conducted without the best interest of families in mind. In fact, she identifies preparation, facilitation, referral practice, predetermined outcomes, and community involvement as areas where differences may be problematic (Merkel-Holguin, 2003).

Although variations may be regarded as compromising core principles, they can also be viewed as inventive adaptations for specific contexts and cultures. This study not only looks at the Family Meeting, which is a variation, but also interviews facilitators who are caseworkers assigned to the family and facilitating the family’s meeting. Most FGDM experts would object to this practice, but just because a model deviates from the original that does not necessarily mean that it is of no value. Oftentimes, alterations are a result of learning what does and does not work. Criticism about agencies covertly changing the model to meet their needs rather than those of families, contributes to suspicions about the motivation for making such changes. Yet, oversubscription of a model may undermine the very philosophy of conferencing that identifies with flexibility and change.

Family Meetings may be one such version that is a positive adaptation, satisfying both family and agency needs while remaining true to identified principles. This study assumes Family Meetings are not too far a departure from FGDM, maintains the focus of sharing decisions with families, and offers them an empowering opportunity. Family Group Conferencing in its original form is considered to be time-consuming, expensive, and labor intensive (Adams & Chandler, 2004). Given these financially challenged
times, answers are critical in order for agencies to know what programs and approaches are truly worthwhile, necessary, and cost-effective.

The remaining parts of this chapter cover the theoretical underpinnings of conferencing, a review of the literature, and an overview of pertinent research studies.

**Theoretical Foundations of Conferencing**

Several theories are used to justify the use of all Family Group Decision Making models. Empowerment theory is considered the foundation along with ecological theory, bolstered by principles of democracy helping to enhance its base. Approaches borrowed from the restorative justice movement, with the regulatory pyramid as a core model, add an important layer to explain this innovative approach. Some experts recommend an increase in research on outcomes to prove that conferencing produces positive results. Yet, others express concern that the practice is moving too quickly with little time devoted to theory (Braithwaite, 2002a; Burford & Hudson, 2000; Crampton, 2006).

**Empowerment theory.** The historical roots of empowerment theory began in the time of Jane Addams and the settlement movement (Turner, 1996). Although empowerment has been applied to a range of disciplines, there is broad agreement that it refers to people gaining control over their lives. Barbara Solomon, credited for bringing empowerment theory to the social work arena in the mid 1970s, defines it as a process by which those who are marginalized are helped to improve their skills to advocate on their own behalf (Barsky, 1996). According to Boehm & Staples (2002), “the concept of empowerment has been accepted widely in recent years and is now used extensively in the field of social work” (p.450). It has also been defined as “a process by which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources, and control over their own lives.
In doing so, they gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals” (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998, p.91). The relationship between families and professionals is structured in a way that allows workers to share information with families, thus making them partners in planning (Simon, 1994). In 1989, The Cornell Empowerment Group wrote “Empowerment is an intentional, dynamic, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain access to and control over those resources” (p.2). These definitions fit directly with the principles and values of Family Group Decision Making.

In the context of child protection, McCallum and Prilleltensky (1996) define empowerment by identifying three necessary values: self-determination, collaboration and democratic participation, and distributive justice. Self-determination as defined by Merriam-Webster Online (2010), is “free choice of one’s own acts or states without external compulsion.” It is the ability to follow one’s goals without constraints. Workers can help instill this in families by building on their strengths and communicating that the workers believe in the family’s capacity for change (McCallum & Prilleltensky, 1996). Collaboration and democratic participation consists of citizens having the right to take part in decision-making processes that affect them. Distributive justice refers to a fair and equitable distribution of goods and services (Facione, Scherer, & Attig, 1978). All models of FGDM, including Family Meetings, qualify as empowering under these definitions. Empowerment for this study was defined as “having input into decisions that affect one’s life, specifically in terms of safety and well being of one’s children or adult family members during a Family Meeting.” Empowerment can only begin according to
McCallum and Prilleltensky, when families are willing to accept some responsibility and are open to receiving help. Since there is no legislative mandate in the United States for a FGDM, it is assumed that most families voluntarily agree to participate, although a look at power later in this chapter shows that this assumption may be questionable.

Studies on the effect of service-provision on families’ sense of empowerment have started to increase as services are shifting to a more family-centered approach. Empowerment theory can be looked at in terms of both process and outcomes (Boehm & Staples, 2002; Nachshen, 2004). Process refers to how people become empowered, whereas outcomes are defined as the consequences of the process and identify specific measurement operations that can be used for studying the effects of specific interventions (Zimmerman, 1995). The process of empowerment is more difficult to measure with its intra and interpersonal components, while outcomes are somewhat easier to operationalize. One main focus of this study is to examine facilitators’ perceptions of what factors during a Family Meeting enhance family empowerment. This qualifies under the process category, although there are times when the facilitators do touch on outcomes.

Zimmerman (1995) identifies three levels of empowerment: individual, community, and organizations. This study is concerned only with the individual level, as the focus is on participants in a meeting and not on a broader subject as a community or organization. Since empowerment may vary from person to person, context to context, and it can change over time, Zimmerman (1995) concludes that it would not be sensible to try to develop a universal measure for empowerment because of this elusiveness.
Types of power.

Central to empowerment is distribution of power and the acknowledgement that those with less power, often the disadvantaged, must be part of strategies to gain more. French & Raven (1959) offer five categories of social power that are referred to often in the literature and are particularly relevant to this paper. Social power refers to the relationships between people and consists of two positions. One is the capacity to influence other people for one’s own self-interest, while the other is the capability to resist the power of others. This shows two sides to a relationship where one has more power than the other, consisting of attraction or resistance to it (French & Raven, 1959).

These five categories of power are presented here, with examples to show their applicability to Family Meetings.

**Coercive power** withholds rewards and uses punishment for gaining obedience. An example of this could be when a family is threatened with legal interventions if they do not agree to drug testing. It could also occur if a family feels pressured to have a Family Meeting despite their lack of interest.

**Reward power** offers compensation when someone acts in a way that is desirable to the person with more power. A caseworker may offer gas coupons, bus tokens, or personal transportation to a family that is cooperating with recommendations for mental health services. Or agency personnel may be more willing to offer services to a family during a Family Meeting when they demonstrate their desire for change.

**Expert power** results when one person has skills or information that the other does not. An agency could withhold certain information from a family about some expected legal action against someone they are close with. Or a facilitator could present parenting
information as a “specialist” during a Family Meeting, where he or she knows more than the family as to what is appropriate for their child.

*Legitimate power* is when a person, group, or organization has the right to authority over others. This directly relates to the power that is given to a state social service agency for providing protection to children. It is considered lawful in that they have been officially granted this power. This could occur when a child protective worker places a child in the state’s care due to imminent danger. It could also be demonstrated during a Family Meeting if a caseworker or facilitator presents the “bottom lines,” the conditions that are non-negotiable.

*Referent power* refers to a significant person having influence due to charisma, a personal connection, or admiration. This could occur when a family member is dependent on the caseworker and values her opinion. The caseworker could suggest that one child is better off living with a grandmother, and the parent might agree based on his or her valuing the worker’s judgments. This could be displayed in a Family Meeting if a family defers to a worker’s suggestions simply because they believe she knows what’s best.

Oftentimes in child welfare, the balance of all five types of power is tilted toward the agency and its workers. Power is inherent in the role of a caseworker and in the social service agency at large, and can be either overt or subversive. The empowerment in Family Group Decision Making comes from including families in decisions that personally affect their lives and from confronting the power dynamics between families and the state. There can be no denying that the balance of power will never be equal, but sharing some of it is necessary for empowerment to occur. People have the capacity for
making decisions about their lives, but often lack the opportunity to do so. FGDM models, including Family Meetings, offer families this chance.

**Democracy theory.** Empowerment goes hand in hand with principles of democracy where citizens have a voice in public affairs and the right to participate in government (Follett, 1998). The definition of democracy is a “government by the people” according to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (n.d.). Ideals of democracy include having a voice, freedom, fairness, equality, and respect (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). Power should be in the hands of the people and all have a right to be heard and participate in decisions that affect their lives (Braithwaite, 2000; Merkel-Holguin, 2004).

Democratic ideals stream through all stages of a conference. Preparation helps families in planning their meetings, while the conference itself allows them to ask questions and have input in the planning. Follow-up enables families to work with formal and informal resources according to their plan. FGDM allows for families to regain the power they may have lost in the regulatory focus of state services, while caseworkers and other agency personnel are asked to relinquish some of their authority. One exploratory study even proposes that democracy is possibly increased not only between the state and its citizens but also within families themselves (Holland, Scourfield, O’Neill, & Pithouse, 2005). The state is engaged in a continuous balancing act when it comes to upholding democratic ideals, while still protecting its citizens.

**Ecological theory.** Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, from the field of developmental psychology, contributes to the theoretical underpinnings of FGDM by offering five systems to explain the development of a child through various environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory can explain the contributing forces to abuse and
neglect but can also point to methods for ameliorating those influences. Each system is a concentric circle with the child in the center with each individual ring influencing the child, but less directly as one travels farther from the middle.

The first system, the microsystem, refers to the environment in which the child lives. This can include family, peers, school, and the neighborhood. The influence is considered bi-directional in that not only do the interactions with members of the system influence the child, but the child also has an influence on the members. This microsystem is the most critical of systems, as the relationship between parents and their children is considered most primary. The second system, the mesosystem, refers to interactions between two or more microsystems. One example could be the relationship between the child and his or her daycare provider. Next is the exosystem which involves settings that do not involve the child directly, such as when a father loses his job or when a family is reported for abuse or neglect. Social service agencies are located in this sphere. Moving farther away from the center is the fourth system, the macrosystem. This domain contains the culture of the individual, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Lastly is the chronosystem that pertains to the historical time in which the child lives, e.g. terrorism, and also to personal events, e.g. death of a parent, and their influences over time. These five systems, in both positive and negative ways, come together and influence a child’s development from conception through the end of life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The interaction of two systems in particular is important to understanding the process of Family Group Decision Making: the microsystem i.e. the family, and the exosystem i.e. the social service agency. These systems act together and have either a
positive or negative influence on the child and his or her safety and well-being. This interface transpires whenever a conference is convened but occurs in all interactions between a caseworker and a family whether it is during a home visit, a school meeting, or in a Service Plan Review (SPR). Providing a formal meeting for families to work with agency personnel and community members in making decisions about child safety may result in stronger relationships and positive child development. The formal meeting also helps identify available informal and formal resources and supports the view that several systems are needed to advance a family’s situation. Ecological theory illuminates how conferences work with people in the context of their environment, and uses these influences for helpful outcomes for children.

**Restorative Justice framework.** John Braithwaite’s application of restorative justice and responsive regulation provides a conceptual framework that was originally designed for the justice system but has now been applied specifically to various disciplines including business and child welfare (Adams, 2004b; Adams & Chandler, 2004; Burford and Adams, 2004; Braithwaite, 2002a; 2002b). Restorative justice focuses on wrongs done against an individual or community. In his book entitled *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1989), Braithwaite outlines the importance of repairing the harm to the victim, exposing the shame of the offender, and assisting the victim in resolution of the offense. Instead of having the state dictate what should be done, the offender and victim take part in deciding the reparation. Participatory practices, such as Family Group Decision Making, address offenses of child abuse and neglect, expand justice, and hold participants accountable, while affording them an opportunity to be part of the solutions. The concept of responsive regulation refers to the ability of families to self-regulate and
involves increased democracy and civic engagement. Contrary to this is regulatory formalism, in which decisions are made without input from families and in a manner that is intrusive and heavy handed on the part of government, thereby increasing anger and resentment and reducing the likelihood of families implementing plans (Burford & Adams, 2004). The amount of regulation by a social service agency depends on the ability and actions of the family in meeting the needs of their children.

In *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation* (2002b), Braithwaite extends restorative justice to social challenges such as child welfare. He speaks to what he calls three theories of compliance: restorative justice, deterrence, and incapacitation. Each of these comprises the category of a regulatory pyramid in ascending order (See Figure 3). This pyramid explains differential responses by governing bodies to child abuse and neglect. Restorative justice is located at the base, which is the largest component of the pyramid and where Family Group Decision Making is placed.

![Regulatory Pyramid](image)

*Figure 3. Regulatory Pyramid*

A brief definition by Crampton (2004) defines restorative justice as “a process in which stakeholders come together to resolve a dispute” (p.177). It is assumed that by having all stakeholders involved, fair and improved decisions will result (Adams, 2004b; Braithwaite, 2002b; Strang & Braithwaite, 2001). It is considered to be the lowest level of intervention on the part of the state, where citizens have the most control over their lives. Some might argue that starting at this point allows families too much control over critical decisions while others believe it will only add to the demonstration of caseworkers’ diligent efforts (Adams, 2004a). Ultimately, the amount of decision-making power decreases for families as the form of intervention moves up the pyramid (Adams & Chandler, 2004; Braithwaite, 2002b; Crampton, 2004).

An example will help illustrate these different levels. Consider a family that has an open child protective investigation due to alleged physical abuse of their children. At the restorative level this family would be offered a form of Family Group Decision Making enabling them to make a plan to ensure the children’s safety and to have them take active responsibility. A plan could include respite by other family members, substance abuse treatment for a parent, or any activity that everyone believes will ensure safety. If, after a meeting, the family continues to abuse their children and not follow the plan, deterrence may be the next level of intervention. Here families have less power and may, for example, be involved with court where a judge might impose mandates that must be followed. The family still has room for decisions with some power and control, but the state is more involved. The apex of the pyramid, or incapacitation, could result in the children being placed in temporary care or even in the termination of parental rights. Braithwaite believes that people at the lowest level are considered “virtuous actors” who
have the “will and capacity to respond.” The middle section is the “rational actor” who may not want to cooperate, but with a court order or other threats will oblige. The top level of the pyramid is considered the “incompetent or irrational” actor who “can’t or will not cooperate” (Braithwaite, 2002b).

The extent to which a family is meeting the safety needs of their children determines where they lie on the pyramid at any given time. Location does not represent levels of seriousness of behaviors but rather a lack of repair or change and varying degrees of involvement in decision making. There are times though when a situation escalates to “incapacitation” immediately, but this is usually the exception (Adams & Chandler, 2004). The balance between the family and the state tips more and more toward the state as the safety risks rise and interventions climb the pyramid (Adams, 2004b; Adams & Chandler, 2004; Braithwaite, 2002a; Burford & Adams, 2004; Merkel-Holguin, 2004). In Family Group Decision Making, professionals and families work together to avoid this ascension.

Responsive regulation finds a balance between the state’s duties to protect, but also allows for citizens to retain their rights to privacy and protection. The state’s role can range from very active, as when it acts as parens patriae, to providing supportive services, to no involvement whatsoever. A FGDM can actually form a bridge between responsiveness of the family and regulation by the state. The completed plan at the end of a conference is truly the basis of responsive regulation, since families choose what is in the plan, thereby increasing the odds for self-regulation (Adams, 2004b). An example of this could be when a family is told they cannot allow their child near a particular sex offender. In an FGDM, the family would decide how to make sure this does not occur
rather than have workers telling them how they must do it. Braithwaite states, “the republican ideal is that the rule of law that constrains people in families should come from the people” (Braithwaite, 2002b, p.129).

It is crucial to acknowledge that regardless of how empowering a practice is in helping families keep their children safe, there is always some amount of coercion. According to Braithwaite, a threat from the state always exists, but it should be in the background rather than the foreground (Braithwaite, 2002b; Burford & Adams, 2004). Although FGDM is at the lowest level of the regulatory pyramid, there are still certain bottom lines and expectations on behalf of the state. There is truly no equal sharing of power in that anyone involved with social services for an investigation, preventive services, or foster care, knows that these services have some power over their lives and that complete control is never given to families (Pennell, 2004a). Coercion, whether direct or indirect, can come from court, potential placement, a referral for FGDM, or other intrusions into daily life. It is important to note that even in New Zealand, which emphasizes parental authority, the state still maintains veto power if a plan is deemed to be objectionable (Adams & Chandler, 2004). There is always a contradiction between coercion and partnership, but balancing them both is more possible with conferencing practice (Adams, 2004a). As stated by Burford and Adams, “workers can promote the values of respect, transparency, honesty and non-tyranny without abdicating their statutory responsibilities and desire to assure safety” (Burford & Adams, 2004, p.20).

These theories and concepts come together and explain how such a novel practice can help families be an integral part of resolutions that may have long lasting effects on
their lives. Connecting theory to practice, particularly in terms of empowerment, continues to evolve within the field of social work.

The FGDM literature on facilitation is less extensive than is the literature of other disciplines but fortunately there is much to be borrowed, as facilitators are used in many settings for varying purposes. The next section reviews three fields: general facilitation, mediation, and Family Group Decision Making, including Family Meetings. Each, when combined, contributes to the understanding of the role of the facilitator, neutrality, and empowerment of families and provides concepts for analysis.

General Facilitation

For approximately fifty years, subjects such as education, psychology, business management, mediation, and community development have contributed to the field of facilitation (Hogan, 2002). Carl Rogers and the humanistic psychology movement are often credited with the earliest work on facilitation. The roots of this person-centered, therapeutic approach for helpers and educators began in the early 1960’s and there are several significant areas to review for this study in order to have a complete examination of facilitation. Attributes and competencies that are considered necessary will be examined separately, although there is some overlap. Various roles facilitators employ, along with concepts that are commonly used in the literature, will also be discussed as they lay groundwork for later discussion.

The term “facilitator” comes from the Latin word “facilis” which means “easy to do” (latin-dictionary.org) and “facilitate” is defined as “the act of making easy or easier” (oxforddictionaries.com). The International Association of Facilitation (IAF) borrows from Schwarz (2002) and defines group facilitation as “a process in which a person
whose selection is acceptable to all the members of the group, who is substantively neutral, and who has no substantive decision-making authority, intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, to increase the group’s effectiveness” (p.4). Facilitation is generally thought of as a process in which an individual assists a group by managing its interactions and helps it accomplish identified tasks and goals (Baker & Fraser, 2005). The American Humane Society (2010) uses the term “coordinator” as opposed to “facilitator” as it believes that a facilitator denotes superiority and that a coordinator is more of a guide. The literature in the FGDM arena however continues to use both.

Although different models may contain more stages and sub-stages than others, most experts classify the facilitator role into three stages. These correspond neatly with the three stages of FGDM: planning, the meeting, and follow-up (Nelson & McFadzean, 1998; McFadzean, 2002). All FGDM facilitators have designated tasks to perform for each stage. Initially they meet with family members to discuss the meeting, its purpose, participants, and logistics. They then proceed to contact potential stakeholders and arrange a date and location. During the actual meeting they facilitate and help gain approval of the plan. Lastly, they distribute and maintain all documentation as part of follow-up (Fraser & Norton, 1996; Pennell, 2004a).

Facilitators can be classified as either external or internal. The external facilitator is one who is brought in from the outside, who is not a member of the group, and who is considered impartial, treating all participants equally (Wardale, 2008). The bulk of the literature is more favorable to this type (Flores & Fadden, 2000; Margulies & Raia, 1972). The internal facilitator can be of two kinds: one from within the organization, but
not part of the actual work group, or one coming from the group itself (Wardale, 2008). The unassigned caseworker facilitator (not part of work group) and the assigned (part of the group), both fall under this category and are examined in this study. The internal facilitator is thought to be more likely to influence decisions, yet knowledgeable about the organization, familiar with workers, and less costly (Margulies & Raia, 1972). There is limited support for the internal facilitator with little emphasis placed on its advantages (Flores & Fadden, 2000). However, the worldwide survey by Nixon et al. (2005), found that two-thirds of FGDM coordinators were workers of the sponsoring agency.

Fundamental to the various types of facilitators and directly related to neutrality, is how involved they are in both the process and the content of the actual meeting. The importance of these two concepts is generally agreed on throughout the facilitation literature. “Process” refers to the how of the meeting with the facilitator guiding and supporting members to accomplish their goals. “Content” speaks to the what, meaning a task that has to be accomplished and the contributions each person makes to the outcome (Miranda & Bostrom, 1999). Generally, facilitators are trained to be involved only in the process, and not in the content part of a meeting (Hogan, 2002; Justice & Jamison, 1998; Maier, 1967; Schwarz, 2002). Neutrality relates directly to process and content in that if facilitators are only part of the process then they are considered impartial or neutral, but thought to be biased and partial if contributing to content (Griffith, Fuller, & Northcraft, 1998; Niziol & Free, 2005; Strauss, 2002). The external facilitator is considered to be involved in the process only, whereas the internal facilitator may or may not be part of content. The Family Meeting Toolkit, which is the designated training program for New York State, emphasizes the process role, and discourages facilitators from contributing to
the content (Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009). Training programs such as Annie E. Casey and others also emphasize the need to keep facilitators out of decision making (American Humane, 2010).

The role of the facilitator has many variations including process expert, process guide, consensus builder, analyst, advocate, and moderator to name a few (Schuman, 2005). Schwarz (2002) has identified five facilitator roles: facilitator, facilitative leader, facilitative trainer, facilitative consultant, and facilitative coach. These roles vary in the extent to which each is involved in the content of a meeting. A facilitator can function in any of these roles at different times, but according to Schwarz, it is imperative that the group is informed as to which role he or she is performing (2005). Two roles specifically apply to facilitators of Family Meetings. One is the “facilitator” role that entails managing the group process while remaining neutral and which relates to the role of the unassigned caseworker facilitator. The other is the “facilitative leader” who leads but is also a member of the group and has beliefs that may influence the outcomes. This latter type is similar to the facilitator who is the assigned caseworker of a Family Meeting, since she is both the facilitator and the caseworker that is appointed to the family and could be involved in both process and content. This is considered to be the most difficult role to manage (Schwarz, 2005).

The debate around neutrality is spirited for all types of facilitation, with each side strong in their convictions. One position asserts that there can be no compromise on the necessity of neutrality and lack of involvement by the facilitator in the content of meetings (Bens, 2005; Hogan, 2002; Myers, 2008; Schwarz, 2002; Smith, 2000; Wong, 2005). Others contend that a facilitator cannot be neutral in both process and content,
and that the idea is unreachable (Berry, 1993; Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Gregory & Romm, 2001; Kirk & Broussine, 2000; Rifkin, Millen, & Cobb, 1991; Shaw, 2002). This struggle is evident in Hunter and Thorpe’s (2005) review of the IAF’s process in creating its Code of Ethics and in the wording around neutrality. They determined that “impartial” would be used, as they recognized that the requirement for neutrality was not unanimous and instead urged facilitators to minimize their influence on outcomes. This uncertainty suggests further investigation into neutrality is warranted.

**Facilitator competencies.** Competencies are the areas that relate to training, qualifications, skills, and knowledge. Though the list from a number of experts in the field is long, there is general consensus across disciplines as to what is necessary for a facilitator to be considered proficient. An in-depth review of the literature indicates that a great deal has been written about the necessary qualities, skills, activities, and values that a facilitator must possess (Schmid, 2007).

The IAF has created a competency-based model of facilitation along with accreditation. This shows a commitment to the professionalism of the position. The most updated handbook on group facilitation has six higher-order competencies. These are: to create collaborative client relationships; plan appropriate group processes; create and sustain a participatory environment; guide the group to appropriate and useful outcomes; build and maintain professional knowledge; and model a positive and professional attitude (Baker & Fraser, 2005). These competencies are similar to those in other manuals, texts, and curriculums for facilitation.

Thomas (2004) lays out a typology for four different approaches to training of facilitators, which is useful here in that each approach shows varying levels of
involvement. The first is the *technical facilitator* that is primarily concerned with skills and competencies and considers that once a person is trained, he or she is ready to facilitate. The second type is the *intentional facilitator* who is aware of what he or she is doing and not just merely following steps learned in training. Intuition is integral to this type and the facilitator is expected to think and act in the moment. The third type is the *person-centered facilitator*, which emphasizes skills but regards the relationship between the facilitator and the group members as significant. The facilitator’s personal characteristics play an important part in this role. Lastly, *critical facilitation* associates a political facet to the role where the facilitator is influenced by their organization and needs to consider how he or she can enhance social justice. This role becomes one of advocacy and empowerment rather than oppression, and addresses the power differentials between the family and the state (Kirk & Broussine, 2000). Kirk & Broussine (2000) encourage facilitators to use a reflexive practice in order to manage their political influence. A facilitator could be instructed in one or more of these approaches for a range of purposes. The Family Meeting Toolkit, Annie E. Casey, and all other trainings identified for the focus group participants, appear to use both “technical” and “intentional” instruction methods.

American Humane has few requirements in terms of educational background. A facilitator can be considered qualified by having either a post secondary education with experience, or life and work experience. Those without a formal education need to have some understanding of the child welfare system and possibly their own personal experience with Family Group Decision Making. American Humane (2010) provides a job description of the coordinator which includes protecting the process, giving a voice to
the family members, setting a positive tone, managing crises, keeping time, assisting with new information, and finalizing the plan.

**Facilitator attributes.** Attributes refer to the characteristics of the facilitator and are more complex than just learning skills and acquiring knowledge. These are often what the facilitator brings to the facilitation process and they are more difficult to teach. Facilitators have a great deal of discretion as to the strategies and skills they use and how they contend with their own values and emotions. This aspect of facilitation may be more challenging for remaining neutral when compared to competencies.

Carl Rogers (1945) put forth three specific conditions for the facilitative process: congruence, acceptance, and empathy. “Congruence” refers to how the therapist or teacher experiences the relationship with the client or student. He or she needs to be able to acknowledge his or her thoughts and beliefs and speak about the experience. “Acceptance” means to embrace the clients regardless of what they present or who they are. This “unconditional positive regard,” devised by Rogers, requires a non-judgmental stance. “Empathy,” is a true understanding of what the client is experiencing (Rogers, 1945; Zimring, 1999). These characteristics were the start to what has become a long list of attributes for facilitators. According to Rogers, the teacher acts as a facilitator with fine-tuned listening skills and creates an environment where participants feel open to learning and part of the problem solving process. The awareness of self, participants, and verbal and nonverbal exchanges, all add to the various levels of communication that a facilitator has to attend to, along with goals and group interactions (Rogers, 1989). All are part of the intricacies facilitators must manage while conducting a meeting that may have an impact on their neutrality. Hunter and Thorpe (2005) have identified six key
attributes of a facilitator for the IAF. They include neutrality, humility, flexibility, sincerity, professionalism, and self-awareness. Although views on neutrality are divided, there is general agreement in terms of the other five attributes.

Building on Roger’s early foundation, there are general qualities that are deemed necessary for effective coordination of FGDM and considered key to the success of a conference (Burford, Pennell, & MacLeod, 1995; Gallagher & Jasper, 2003). These include ensuring that interactions are conducted with respect and particular attention to culture, being responsive to the needs of all participants, guaranteeing that everyone has a voice in the process, exhibiting sensitivity to the balance of power, and possessing strong conflict management skills (Connolly, 2006). The American Humane’s (2010) list of attributes includes interpersonal skills, understanding of various cultural backgrounds, empathetic personal characteristics, organizational skills, and a general commitment to the philosophy of family involvement practices.

This brief overview shows that opinions vary as to the level of skills and training necessary for an effective facilitator. Ringer (1999), points out that simply laying out competencies does not capture the role of the facilitator in its entirety. He stresses the importance of the skillfulness of the facilitator and that simply learning the competencies does not guarantee a facilitator will be successful. Highly developed interpersonal skills and a strong belief in the model may be more necessary than the level of training, as suggested by Marsh and Crow (2000).

Mediation

The field of mediation has contributed to discussions on facilitation through scientific research and non-empirical texts. Applying some of the mediation literature to
Family Meetings sheds light on the role of facilitation in a way no other discipline has yet achieved. This in-depth and advanced perspective contributes to the definition of neutrality and is revisited in Chapter 5.

Dispute resolution is far-reaching in that it can be used for union negotiations, legal disagreements, community issues, and family disputes such as custody and divorce. American Humane includes Child Protection Mediation as one participatory approach for engaging families in decision making along with FGDM and other models (Quick Reference Guide). A mediator is considered to be an outside person who helps parties in dispute resolution achieve some form of contract (Flynn, 2005; Kishore, 2006).

Mediation usually involves two parties with differing viewpoints on the outcome of a meeting, whereas Family Meetings may have many more “sides,” given that there are service providers, the social service agency, family and extended family members, and other support people in attendance. Despite this difference, the role of the mediator can, on many levels, be compared to the facilitator of Family Meetings. Both bring together people with varying interests, power differentials, and disparate perspectives and aid them in coming to some form of resolution in the form of an agreement or plan.

Neutrality is considered the main reason for positive outcomes in mediation and is thought of as necessary (Izumi, 2010).

**Defining neutrality.** The debate over neutrality in mediation has been occurring since the mid-1970s (Strauss, 2002). Despite increased arguments about the “myth” of neutrality, many models and training manuals continue to insist on its necessity for this third-party individual (Heisterkamp, 2006a; Kolb & Kressel, 1994; Kishore, 2006; Wing, 2009). A positivist and narrow view of neutrality considers it a quality that a facilitator
either has or does not have. A post-modern approach offered in the mediation arena defines neutrality and power as more situational than absolute (Astor & Chinkin, 2002; Bogdanowski, 2009; Boulle, 2005; Taylor, 1997). This multi-dimensional view is thought to allow facilitators to address the needs in a meeting while still retaining the concept of neutrality.

According to Merriam-Webster Online, neutrality is defined as “the quality or state of not supporting either side in an argument, fight, war, etc.: the quality or state of being neutral.” There are disagreements as to its definition and attainability in mediation, similar to those in the field of facilitation. Traditionally, it has been characterized as free of bias and treating each party equally (McCorkle, 2005; Wing, 2009). Some experts state that mediators, like facilitators, should be neutral to the content, and involved only in the process (Rifkin, Millen, & Cobb 1991). Rifkin et al. (1991) have devised two concepts to aid in clarification: “impartiality” and “equidistance.” It should be acknowledged that not everyone agrees with these distinctions (Mulcahey, 2001; Feer, 1992).

Impartiality is associated with fairness, lack of bias, and is connected to the process and treatment of participants. Neutrality is generally thought of as disinterest, and not having a preference for any particular outcome (Bouille, & Nesic, 2001; Kishore, 2006; Rifkin et al., 1991). The impartial mediator may have feelings, values, or agendas but does not let them interfere with the process (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) also defines impartiality as without bias and dedicated to helping all parties reach an agreement (Heisterkamp, 2006). This goes along
with the definition of “impartiality” from Merriam-Webster which is “not partial or biased; treating or affecting all equally.”

“Equidistance” is how mediators balance their interventions between participants in a symmetrical fashion, making sure everyone has a chance to present his or her side (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Cohen, Dattner, & Luxenburg, 1999; Wing, 2009). This could, at times, require that the facilitator take the side of those less powerful in order to tip the balance of power more equally. For example, a facilitator may observe that a service provider is “taking over” a meeting and then use his or her skills to get family members involved. Or a family member may be monopolizing a meeting and the agency personnel are not able to state the resources they can offer, so the facilitator intercedes. Facilitators shift the balance toward the party they believe at the time needs attention. These two aspects of neutrality have impartiality as bias-free interference, and equidistance as using bias for balancing power as long as it is fair and balanced (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991). These can be quite contradictory and illustrate how neutrality is not a simple notion.

Flynn (2005) points out that it is imperative that family mediators balance power, as it falls under the ethical obligations of social workers. They must work to help those that are disenfranchised and oppressed and assist in their empowerment, thereby using partiality to create a balance of power (Mulcahy, 2001). Providing participants the opportunity to fully express their viewpoint is key to empowerment in both outcome and process (Wing, 2009). A significant study in child mediation identified “power balancing” as one of four processes that leads to empowerment (Barsky, 1996). The other three processes were: development of options; equal opportunity to participate in the process; and decision making responsibility. Because mediators of family issues such
as custody and divorce are often trained to be sensitive to family members and to understand those in weaker positions, perceptions of bias can result (Garcia, Vise, & Whitaker, 2002).

Taylor (1997) believes the definition of neutrality varies in how facilitators view their roles and the purpose of each gathering. This has led her to develop a continuum in levels of neutrality, from strict-not involved, to expanded-very involved, where involvement continually increases. This indicates, “mediators are not unidimensional and need to respond to the variety of situations in which they are involved” (Heisterkamp, 2006b, p.302). Studies using mediator reflections indicate they deem neutrality as often missing from their role as mediator (Douglas, 2008).

To be neutral also consists of not having one’s values, beliefs, and emotions affect mediation. Most research has found this unreachable in that when mediators are balancing power they are influenced by their own personal beliefs, culture, and attitudes (Fisher & Brandon, 2002; Lang, 2004). Studies that examine actual sessions of mediation have concluded repeatedly that mediators influence the process. Each time they make a decision about what to ask, who to ask it of, and when to ask it, they are potentially influencing the process and the perceptions of participants (Garcia et al., 2002; Greatbatch & Dingwall, 1989). Micro-level decisions in terms of questioning, paraphrasing, and other techniques have an impact not only on what gets heard but also on how it is heard. Several studies in mediation indicate that neutrality is expected, yet facilitators often favor definite outcomes and influence the process in understated ways (Mulcahy, 2001).
Some researchers have demonstrated that how a mediator intervenes throughout a meeting drives the group towards specific decisions (Greatbatch & Dingwall, 1989; Grillo, 1991; Silbey, 1993). Specific statements by mediators either reduce or add to neutrality (Heistercamp, 2006a). Rifkin et al. (1991) found that in over eighty percent of meetings, the person who described his or her viewpoint first, became the favored story, impacting the discussion and final decisions (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Garcia et al., 2002). As mediators empathize with participants and feel compassion, their neutrality is challenged. Consequently, mediation without emotions might be close to impossible, since they may run particularly high in family mediation, which often involves the best interests of children (Cohen, Dattner, & Luxenburg, 1999; Duffy, 2010; Flynn, 2005). This increased risk of interference could be similar in Family Meetings that mainly address safety and permanency for children. Most meetings concern issues that elicit strong emotions and opinions.

According to Duffy (2010), mediators need to have a high level of emotional intelligence in order to balance out their need to connect with all parties, while maintaining the appearance of impartiality. They need two qualities to achieve this: self-awareness and self-regulation. Self-awareness is when facilitators are able to identify the feelings they are experiencing. When this is accomplished they can control the impact of these feelings on facilitation through self-regulation. One cannot apply self-regulation without first having self-awareness. This perspective puts forward that mediators are not free from the potential of their own personal interference, and suggests that counter-transference needs to be openly acknowledged (Douglas & Field, 2006; Ringer, 2000). “As an element of self-awareness, an understanding of meta-emotions (the way we feel
about having certain emotions-emotions about emotions) is incredibly important for a mediator” (Duffy, 2010, p.58).

After reviewing the literature, Mulcahy (2001) concludes, “neutrality is unlikely to be found in practice and that in any case it is an impossibility” (p.513). She suggests that neutrality may simply be an ideal that has aspirational value.

**Family Group Decision Making**

As previously stated, neutrality in the FGDM arena is rarely examined but experts stress its necessity (Burford & Hudson, 2000; Connolly & McKenzie, 1999; Love, 2000; Nixon et al., 2000). It is generally defined as a facilitator not voicing his or her opinions or advocating for a particular outcome. It emphasizes to “know thyself” and allow the group to accomplish its goals without any interference (Prendiville, 2004). C.L. Myers (2008), the Executive Director of the Center for Restorative Practice, goes as far as to suggest that the facilitator should have no prior knowledge of the family and that there should be two distinct positions: a coordinator that meets with the family to arrange the meeting, and a facilitator that comes in to facilitate the discussion. Although this does occur, it is not common practice (American Humane, 2010). Neutrality is usually accomplished by designating someone in the agency who does facilitation only, contracting out the service to an independent organization, or using workers or volunteers from outside agencies and the community (Macgowen & Pennell, 2002; Harris, 2008). Adams (2004a) does put forward that perhaps none are truly neutral once they begin meeting with families and getting involved in planning a conference.

A central part of the coordinator’s responsibility is to balance the tension between the official state agency and the family (Fraser & Norton, 1996). He or she tries to
ensure that those who are usually more powerful i.e. agency staff, do not usurp control and resist sharing power. The awareness of the shifting of power should always be in the forefront of the conferencing process. Guidelines used for conducting Family Meetings suggest there should be more family members than service providers in a meeting whenever possible (American Humane, 2010). The guidelines clearly state that a main task of the facilitator is to balance power.

The respective presence of family group members and service providers is based on establishing a balance of power that is not strictly related to numbers. Whenever possible, the coordinator maximizes the participation of natural family supports as opposed to professional service providers. This signals to the family group and service providers that child welfare agencies are intentionally shifting decision making authority and responsibility to the family group (American Humane, 2010, p.46).

This relates directly to the empowerment aspect of Family Group Decision Making and shows the significance of the facilitator. There may be value in using equidistance as a concept as there are always differences in participants’ levels of power, knowledge, skills, socioeconomic status, and information (Lederach & Kraybill, 1995). Facilitators are expected to ensure that disempowered parties have a voice, yet by deciding to empower one side, they may be disempowering or ignoring another. Once facilitators decide to assist different members in being heard, they have made decisions that affect their neutrality (Charlesworth, Turner, & Forman, 2000; Mulcahy, 2001). On the other hand, treating participants “equally” could reinforce inequities and go against a main task of the Family Meeting facilitator - balancing power. One side may perceive
favoritism towards the other in either circumstance. This places facilitators in a paradoxical position and suggests that taking sides may be required.

The Family Meeting Toolkit includes the American Humane’s handbook entitled “Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare” as part of the training materials, which makes clear their view of neutrality:

An independent (i.e., non-case-carrying) coordinator is responsible for convening the family group meeting with agency personnel. When a critical decision about a child is required, dialogue occurs between the family group and the responsible child protection agency personnel. Providing an independent coordinator who is charged with creating an environment in which transparent, honest and respectful discussion occurs between agency personnel and family groups, signifies an agency’s commitment to empowering and non-oppressive practice. (American Humane, 2010, p.12)

It goes on to say under the category “Coordinator Independence”:

The coordinator does not have a role in case decision making for the specific family for which he or she is coordinating the family meeting. The coordinator acts in a fair manner. The family views the coordinator as independent and impartial. When possible, coordinators do not coordinate family meetings for families with whom they have had prior personal or working relationships if their involvement would influence or compromise the outcome or decision. In rural or geographically isolated communities, given the complexity and closeness of relationships, coordinator
independence may be more difficult to achieve. (American Humane, 2010, p.14)

The final sentence in the above quote implies that many coordinators may be familiar with the family whose meeting they are facilitating and that the familiarity may influence their neutrality. This shows an acknowledgement from American Humane and its National Group on Family Group Decision Making that non-neutral facilitators may currently be conducting meetings.

A brief video in the Family Meeting Toolkit also addresses neutrality by having three facilitators discuss their roles. They describe neutrality as not taking sides, keeping focused on the purpose so as not to impact their judgment, not making decisions, and not pushing their own agenda (Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009). It is clear that the Family Meeting facilitator is expected to not desire a particular outcome or take the side of any group member.

**FGDM – Review of Existing Studies**

A review of the research literature on Family Group Decision Making is dedicated mostly to Family Group Conferences and focuses on implementation and pilot programs. There are no peer-reviewed studies on Family Meetings. Although increasing attention is being devoted to more systematic designs, there continues to be a dearth of peer-reviewed studies (Northern California Training Authority, 2008). Assumptions as to what is important in practice are based primarily on opinions of experts in the field with little hard research to support those opinions. Most studies can be divided into either those that qualify as process outcomes or those that fall under long-term effectiveness.
Under the category of process outcomes, satisfaction studies show that most families are pleased with Family Group Conferences. They assert that they are able to ask questions, state their opinions, and are empowered to make decisions for the safety and well-being of their children. Children’s opinions were mixed; some found a Family Group Conference satisfying while others felt powerless and ignored. Social workers also had diverse feelings about Family Group Conferences with some believing that the process and plans were beneficial and others questioning the philosophy behind the model (Hellend, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Academy, 2008). Service providers generally considered private family time helpful while family members had some varying opinions, though the majority of them found it a beneficial stage. One study found that workers believed that the meeting improved their relationship with families (Velen & Devine, 2005). One last finding regarding process outcomes of the meeting process was that families and caseworkers approved over 90% of all plans, though the implementation of these plans was often weak (Northern California Training Academy, 2008).

There are few studies of Family Group Conferences devoted to uncovering their long-term effectiveness, but those that exist have produced some meaningful findings. A slight increase was found in the number of children placed with their extended family after attending a Family Group Conference (Marsh & Crow, 1998; Merkel-Holguin, 1998; Pennell & Burford, 2000; Walter R. McDonald, 2000). A few longitudinal studies have shown decreases in family violence and substance abuse. Results for rereports to CPS for families who participated in Family Group Conferences are mixed, with several
indicating reductions in CPS reports and others showing higher rates (Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Academy, 2008).

**Contributors to family involvement.** There is limited research on what contributes to family participation. Existing literature reviews have uncovered four areas that enhance family involvement: thorough preparation, a neutral location, the opportunity for families to ask questions, and involvement of children in the process (Hellend, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Academy, 2008). Extensive preparation helped families comprehend the purpose and format of a meeting along with the expectations of their role (Pennell, 2006). Adequate preparation time has been identified in several studies as important to family participation (Cashmore & Kiely, 2000; Mirsky, 2003; Rockhill & Rodgers, 1999). A location that affords a comfortable environment and is not associated with the referring agency has been identified as contributing to family involvement (Merkel-Holguin, 1998). Facilitators reported that conferences held at more convenient times such as evenings and weekends, enhanced attendance and participation (Nixon et al., 2005). How concerns and other information are presented to families in a meeting also emerged as an area that may increase family participation, though contradictory evidence shows that some families want a great deal of review while others want only a brief presentation (Nixon, 1998).

**Empowerment.** The majority of empowerment research focuses mainly on the development of theory and less on the experiences of families (Nachshen, 2004). Studies in relation to empowerment cross many disciplines such as education, social work, medicine, economics, and law. There are only two studies that begin to analyze the empowerment of families in Family Group Conferences.
An in depth study by Carol Lupton (1998) examined 14 Family Group Conferences with a total of 101 family members and looked at the quality of empowerment from the perspectives of family members. She set out to examine if a true shift in power occurred during a Family Group Conference. Indicators of power were families’ control over FGC arrangements, access to information about the purpose of the meeting, a chance to speak, and access to information on all available resources. Lupton found that family empowerment might be inhibited by a lack of effective preparation, professionals’ desire to “colonize” the process, and poor follow-up (Lupton, 1998). Some family members reported that the professionals focused on the negative aspects of their situation and were less likely to have conversations with them. Views regarding private family time varied. Although slightly more than 50% found the time liberating, just below 25% believed that not having a professional during this stage did not make a difference. Some comments from participants showed that they wanted to ask questions of the professionals during this time, but often, due to other job responsibilities, those workers were unavailable. Although a facilitator does remain nearby for assistance, he or she may not have all the answers. A small percentage stated they would have preferred having a professional in the room to hear the discussion. More than 25% had a difficult time with the private family time due to conflict within the family.

A study by Holland et al. (2005) examined 17 Family Group Conferences in Wales by gathering information from children, adults, social workers, and three FGC co-coordinators to explore the shift in power during a conference and its influence on democratic decision making within families after a meeting concluded. It was surmised that many of the professionals in a meeting had a difficult time allowing families to make
decisions and that some meetings followed the agencies’ agendas. Service providers and caseworkers read from prepared materials, gave suggestions for the private time, and were a part of planning for many of the conferences. Referring caseworkers acknowledged their beliefs in the philosophy of conferencing but admitted that it was challenging for them to relinquish some of their power. Although this study did not center on private family time, it did discover that professionals were unanimous in their satisfaction with it whereas family participants had mixed opinions. Seven out of seventeen conferences resulted in family members stating they would have preferred to not have private time. They believed professionals would help maintain calm if they remained with the family during decision making. This implies that some participants had fears of being alone with certain family members and may have wanted assistance from professionals (Holland et al., 2005).

Facilitators. A small number of studies in the Family Group Decision Making arena examine the many aspects of the facilitators’ roles, their impact on family empowerment, views on neutrality, and the general challenges they face when facilitating.

In 2007, Jeanette Schmid interviewed seven coordinators in Canada who identified two influences on their use of self: personal values and social location. She defines the “use of self” as “the way coordinators have used their social location, life experience, values, and feelings, in their role” as a facilitator of a conference (p.1). Coordinators believed their personal values greatly influenced their facilitation and they struggled to remain independent without an interest in specific decisions, while also remembering that power needs to rest with families. This is significant in that they were considered
independent coordinators, yet they acknowledged that their opinions could affect their facilitation.

A study by Connolly (2006) collected data from ten facilitators by using focus groups, personal interviews, and questionnaires. They felt that their independence as facilitators was crucial for enabling families to participate fully in the decision-making process (Connolly, 2006). One comment implied that a facilitator was biased when she reported that she disagreed with a professional and then tried to persuade that professional to see a situation differently. This suggests that the facilitator may influence what occurs during a meeting and has a desire to influence the outcome (Connolly, 2006).

The facilitators also reported that caseworkers in an FGC often tempered and de-emphasized the bottom lines they were presenting to families, thereby affecting the quality of plans. They felt that caseworkers needed to deliver complete and honest information in order for families to be part of decision making. Connolly (2006) uncovered that some coordinators do all their preparation by telephone and by mail, which suggests that the facilitators in this study performed a minimal amount of preparation.

A three part pilot study by Paul Ban was initiated in 1992 and conducted on behalf of the Mission of St. James and St. John, a private welfare agency in Australia. The first part of the pilot study used independent coordinators and found that participants in nineteen conferences were satisfied with the role of the coordinator. The second phase of this project specified two groups of conferences, one with an independent facilitator and the other with an experienced staff member. Neither was the assigned caseworker. The perceptions of participants in these two groups were compared (Ban, 2000). Results
imply that having an independent facilitator aided in families’ attendance and participation, while the “in-house” coordinators had difficulty getting referrals. The staff members, who were facilitators but never carried the case, may have been perceived as siding with the agency.

A study by Crampton (2004) looked at the plans developed in Family Group Conferences. He found that when examining input into decisions, families’ responses to surveys suggested the sharing of information between the facilitator and the family is what led to collective decisions. “This may mean it is less important to determine who made the decision than to determine whether everyone felt they contributed to the decision” (Crampton, 2004, p.193). This hints at the possibility that assistance from facilitators in the decision-making process may be beneficial.

One study in the UK looked at the actual interactions between families and professionals and how their communication enhances or hinders parent participation in a Child Protection Conference or CPC (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001). Although their published article discusses only one conference, Hall and Slembrouck observed a total of 29 conferences. Specifically examined are moments in a conference when the parent communicates with either the facilitator or the caseworker. One striking conclusion from this limited analysis is that the mother responds repeatedly to specific incidents, while workers continuously point to patterns of behavior. This disconnect shows a defensive mother who is trying to offer explanations for particular situations, while the professionals are generally speaking about an accumulation of behaviors and decisions. The mother also tries to strike a balance between being cooperative while still advocating on her own behalf. This presents a dilemma in assessing whether this mother is feeling
empowered, as the meeting seems to be more a presentation of “facts” by workers followed by the parent’s responses to them. Hall and Slembrouck (2001) conclude, “the institutional context of a CPC constrains participation” or at least is “fairly limited” (p.157). This suggests that agencies may believe they are offering a practice that encourages partnership and participation, while workers may already have made decisions and coerced parents in ways that are subtle and subversive, thereby disempowering them. Families may feel pressured to cooperate and may have difficulty disagreeing with agency personnel regardless of who is facilitating. Though it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this one study, one must be careful in assuming that an independent facilitator guarantees empowerment.

Success. There is only anecdotal evidence in terms of participants’ perceptions of success that consists of families reporting that they “left happy, connected and exchanging phone numbers” (Helland, 2005, p.32). Velen & Devane (2005) report that coordinators of Family Group Conferences consider all meetings as successful since they improve the relationships between children and their extended families.

Conclusion

As evidenced by this literature review, existing studies explore only non-case carrying facilitators of Family Group Conferences. In two literature reviews of FGDM, each author briefly suggests that the examination of the role of the facilitator in general, and specifically in terms of neutrality, would be worthwhile (Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006). At this time, there are no studies for any FGDM model that include facilitators that run meetings for the families on their caseload. Although some of the research on
Family Group Conferences can be applied to Family Meetings, facilitators are conducting a different process that deserves its own separate examination.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter offers a detailed look at the methods used in planning and executing this study and the rationale for the decisions that were made. It begins with an examination of the research design, recruitment of subjects, and specific demographics of the sample. Each focus group is described separately to show similarities and differences among the groups. Next, data collection is covered offering explicit information on how the focus groups were conducted and the questions that were asked of all participants. A review of Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) four standards for assessing reliability and validity follows with application to this study. The background and experience of the researcher is presented along with other limitations to underscore possible bias and influence. Finally, a lengthy description of the data analysis plan is detailed from initial review of the transcripts to mapping and interpretation.

This study set out to examine the role of the facilitator and its impact on family empowerment and decision making. Two types of facilitators were interviewed: assigned and unassigned caseworkers to the families participating in Family Meetings. Facilitators were asked questions about neutrality, decision making, sharing power, and success as each relates to Family Meetings. The objective of this study was to uncover viewpoints, particularly around neutrality, as the unassigned caseworker facilitator is generally thought to be neutral, while the assigned caseworker is not. This neutrality is considered integral to empowering families to be part of decision making. Gathering perspectives from both types of facilitators would show the differences and similarities in their beliefs and opinions.
Design

When choosing a methodology, the selection needs to match the research questions and issues at hand (Patton, 1999). Therefore a qualitative, exploratory, and naturalistic inquiry is fitting for this study, as there is little existing Family Group Decision Making research on the identified topic. This approach affords an in-depth exploration with insight and understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It also helps develop theory and “identify core intervention components that are associated with desired outcomes” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p.588). This method pertains more to gaining understanding, evaluating programs, and answering what, how and why particular elements of Family Meetings contribute to empowerment (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Although focus groups are not the only method that could have been used, they were chosen because they presented a detailed look at beliefs, opinions, and practices of facilitators using their words as data (Bloor, 2002; Padgett, 1998). The group setting allowed for both a larger sample size and for data to be collected somewhat quickly as opposed to lengthy or time-consuming individual interviews. This method is preferred because group interaction often presents more in-depth discussion, critical feedback, and a synergy of ideas that may be unobtainable with other techniques, such as one-on-one interviews or case studies (Kitzinger, 1994). It is especially helpful not only for understanding participants’ knowledge, but also for gaining insight into the how and why of their reflections. It also was a more cost effective method since three out of the five focus groups demanded extensive travel, with two requiring overnight stays. Comparisons were made between the unassigned caseworker facilitators’ and the
assigned caseworker facilitators’ viewpoints through this multiple category design (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1988).

Recruitment

Approval from the Human Subjects Research Institutional Review Board at the State University at Albany was obtained on June 6, 2011. Recruitment of participants began by contacting commissioners from each county by phone to discuss the purpose of the study, confidentiality, audio taping, and to gain permission to meet with their staff. A follow up e-mail was sent that described the study, participant protections, and dissemination of results. Commissioners who agreed to staff participation were sent a letter of agreement to sign and return that gave permission to begin the recruitment process (see Appendix A). A total of six counties were invited initially, with one county not meeting the criteria and the other declining participation. Commissioners from four counties consented and sent in signed Agreement Forms. The commissioners then provided contact information for the appropriate supervisors, who were spoken to by phone to discuss the nature of the focus groups and to give the researcher names and e-mails of potential participants. Discussion included how best to set up the time, date, and location. Supervisors were either sent a copy of the Agreement Form or their commissioner provided them one.

Most caseworkers were contacted by phone to ask for their participation and an e-mail with the date, time and location for the focus group was then sent to each person who agreed to participate. An additional e-mail was sent two days before the meeting as a reminder, along with a phone call the day before the scheduled focus group. Protocols for e-mails and phone contacts were based on guidance from Krueger & Casey (2009).
and Edmonds (1999). There was little contact with workers from one county as the commissioner wanted to be the person to share the agreement with all those who were eligible and extend the invitation to participate. The researcher stressed to him the necessity of letting potential participants know about confidentiality and the audio taping of the sessions. At this point e-mails that explained the study were sent to all potential participants. The commissioner was contacted again one week before the scheduled focus group and the researcher was informed that several workers expressed interest and would be participating.

The first county to participate had a strong interest in attending and, due to challenges in scheduling, two separate groups were conducted to accommodate everyone. This was easy to do as the researcher lives nearby and is a consultant for initiatives such as Teaming, Succession Planning, and solution-focused practice in this county. The result was a total of five focus groups from four counties for this study.

Individual e-mails to the commissioners and supervisors were sent after all groups were completed to thank them for signing the agreements, contacting staff, and making all the room arrangements. Each participant was sent an e-mail thanking him or her for participating. Many of them responded back with gratitude and well wishes. Several commissioners were contacted for additional descriptive information after the focus groups were conducted.

**Sampling**

Given that Family Meeting facilitators provided a specific expertise and service that was at the center of this study, a purposive, homogeneous, and non-random sampling strategy was used. A simple stratified design was used because there were two subgroups
of interest (Patton, 1990; Vaughn, Shumm, and Sinagub, 1996). There are a total of 62 counties in New York State with 57 under the purview of the Office of Children and Family Services and five in lower New York that are part of the Administration of Children Services (ACS). Since the focus of this study was only on in-house facilitators, this excluded the five counties in New York City as they contracted with independent, outside agencies for the service. According to the Office of Children and Family Services, there are 12 counties out of the 57 under their authority that conduct Family Meetings in New York State (personal communication, Erika Brunelle, October 7, 2010). Since four have outside agencies conducting meetings, a total of eight qualified for this study. Three of these used assigned caseworker facilitators whereas five used the unassigned facilitators. Due to the prohibitive costs and time involved in visiting all eligible counties, it was decided that five counties would be contacted: three of which were the only ones in New York State using the assigned caseworker, and two utilizing the unassigned. One county from the former decided not to participate as a result of overdue reports, vacations, number of cases, and overall stress. This resulted in four counties for the final count, with two using the assigned caseworker as facilitators and two using the unassigned. This allowed for comparisons between those workers who facilitate their own cases and those who do not.

Each county, for the purpose of identity protection, was given a number to be used throughout this report, which was assigned in the order in which each focus group was conducted. County 1 located in northern New York, County 3 and County 4 in the Midwestern part of the state, and County 2 approximately 150 miles north of New York City comprised the entire sample. Focus groups were conducted over a three-week
period from June 29 - July 20, 2011. The number of facilitators per group varied from two to eight with an average of 5.4, resulting in a total sample of 27. There were 18 participants for the assigned caseworker facilitators and nine for the unassigned. Two groups, County 1 and County 3 consisted of facilitators who were the assigned caseworker, while two groups, County 2 and County 4 contained unassigned facilitators. As shown in Table 3, two counties qualify as micropolitans, one as metropolitan, and one as rural. They are similar in median income, except for County 2, which is the highest. The percentage of people below the poverty line shows a range from 12.3% to 14.5%. The land area numbers show that County 1 and County 4 cover a large geographic area, while the other two are similar in size.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
<th>Per Capita Income</th>
<th>Below Poverty</th>
<th>Land Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County 1 (assigned caseworker)</td>
<td>81,618 micropolitan</td>
<td>$49,998</td>
<td>$17,946</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>1,038.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County 2 (unassigned caseworker)</td>
<td>298,284 metropolitan</td>
<td>$59,245</td>
<td>$23,345</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>523.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County 3 (assigned caseworker)</td>
<td>24,482 rural</td>
<td>$41,557</td>
<td>$16,781</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>338.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County 4 (unassigned caseworker)</td>
<td>96,552 micropolitan</td>
<td>$43,568</td>
<td>$18,197</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>1,392.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, (2011)

After visiting each county, it became evident that all fine-tuned the Family Meeting model to meet the needs of their agency, community, and families. These variations are now reviewed county-by-county and summarized in Table 4.
**County 1 (C1) – assigned caseworker facilitators.** County 1 has workers who have a full caseload and facilitate their own Family Meetings. There are occasions when a supervisor or unassigned worker facilitates meetings if it is determined to be in the best interest of the family. This county has a history of training and practice in conducting Family Group Conferences but began implementing Family Meetings as a way to continue using an inclusionary model that was more realistic for them to deliver in terms of time and manpower. It is used in all Child and Family units that include Preventive, Adult, Child Protective, Adolescent, and Foster Care to address all types of needs. Individual caseworkers and teams often decide if they will offer a family a Family Meeting.

One focus group was originally arranged for this county, but due to strong interest, an additional group was conducted to accommodate workers’ schedules. A total of 15 facilitators participated in two focus groups that were combined when the data were analyzed. The large number of interested parties may be due to the researcher’s involvement in the agency and the relationships built over the past 22 years. This researcher helped facilitate Family Group Conferences, provided training in facilitation, conducted surveys of Family Meeting participants, and supplied technical assistance for participatory practices, among other agency projects for this county. Training for facilitation in County 1 consisted of a combination of Family Group Conference training close to ten years prior to their use of Family Meetings, on-going technical assistance, and in-house facilitation workshops. County 1 does not offer private family time.

**County 2 (C2) – unassigned caseworker facilitators.** This county has two individuals who are designated to only facilitate Family Meetings with no other job
duties. The participants of this mini focus group had been caseworkers in several units, but changed positions to become full-time facilitators. They had the most extensive experience in terms of number of meetings facilitated as compared to the other three counties. It is not unusual for counties that assign Family Meeting facilitation as a worker’s sole job duty to have only one or two facilitators, whereas those whose facilitators also have a standard caseload usually have a larger pool. This is a matter of either concentrating the tasks in only a few positions or having them shared across a bigger group. County 2’s Family Meetings are conducted for Preventive, Foster Care, and Child Protective clients without offering private family time. They received training from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

County 3 (C3) – assigned caseworker facilitators. County 3 uses caseworkers and supervisors as facilitators of Family Meetings. They also conduct meetings called “Same Page” that are facilitated by an assigned caseworker, have a very focused agenda, are on-going, and whose membership varies with the identified purpose. It was stressed at the onset of their focus group that they concentrate on Family Meetings only. This county used private time in all of their Family Meetings. They used Family Meetings for families involved in Foster Care, Child Protective, and Preventive units. The workers received training from the New York State Family Meeting Toolkit with on-going assistance from a Family Meeting Specialist. Some workers also had training in the Family Group Conference model. Although there were eight eligible facilitators in this county, only three participated in the focus group, as the others were in court or meeting with families.
County 4 (C4) – unassigned caseworker facilitators. Caseworkers and supervisors conduct Family Meetings along with their regular job duties in this county. Although there was a time when private family time was offered as an option, it is now part of all their Family Meetings. This county has a history of orchestrating Family Group Conferences. Family Meetings are conducted for the Foster Care, Child Protective, and Preventive units. All facilitators attended the Family Toolkit training and at the time of the focus group were having monthly meetings with a Family Meeting Specialist. Seven facilitators participated out of a total of eight who were suitable for this study.

One initial observation, upon meeting with each group, was that there were some differences within the comparison groups. Within the unassigned caseworker facilitator groups, one consisted of workers that did facilitation only (County 2) while the other facilitated for other coworkers and had their own caseload (County 4). The assigned caseworker facilitators had one county where facilitators conducted Family Meetings only (County 1), while the other facilitated both Family Meetings and Same Page Meetings (County 3). The source of training varied for some counties, but all shared similar philosophy, skills, and activities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Types of Cases</th>
<th>History of FGC</th>
<th>Private Time</th>
<th>Referral Process</th>
<th>Regular Caseworker Duties</th>
<th>Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1 (n=15) Assigned Caseworker Facilitator (with own caseload)</td>
<td>Preventive, Foster Care, Adolescent, CPS, Adult</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Caseworker for own cases &amp; unit teams decide</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NYS FGC (1990’s), In-house, On-going technical assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 (n=2) Unassigned Caseworker Facilitator (facilitation only)</td>
<td>Preventive, Foster Care, CPS</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Referrals from other caseworkers &amp; supervisors</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Annie E. Casey Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 (n=3) Assigned Caseworker Facilitator (with own caseload)</td>
<td>Preventive, Foster Care, CPS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Caseworker on own cases &amp; supervisors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NYS Family Meeting Toolkit, On-going support from Family Meeting Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 (n=7) Unassigned Caseworker Facilitator (with own caseload)</td>
<td>Preventive, Foster Care, CPS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Get referrals from other caseworkers &amp; supervisors</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NYS Family Meeting Toolkit, On-going support from Family Meeting Specialist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Before the start of each focus group, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the consent form and answered any questions. All participants signed the form that included an explanation of the study, confidentiality, risks, benefits, and distribution of results (see Appendix B). They were informed of the option to remove themselves from the group at any time. Next, members completed the Focus Group Demographic Information form, an anonymous questionnaire that requested information for descriptive purposes (see Appendix C). Participants put them in a manila envelope upon completion and before the start of the focus group. No compensation was offered to participants other than snacks and beverages at the time of the meetings.

This one time, interactive ninety-minute interview used a semi-structured format that contained questions about the facilitator’s role in terms of neutrality, empowerment, and success. Questions were designed to correspond to the five proposed research questions and can be viewed in Appendix D. A warm-up question was used to help the participants think about facilitation. Then each group was asked to identify Family Meetings they facilitated in order to indirectly get to the underlying concepts, thereby reducing social desirability. As a result of insightful feedback from the dissertation committee members along with continuous refinement, the pre-designed questions required little deviation. One alteration was made after the first focus group when it became apparent that asking follow-up questions about preparation and private family time would elicit further information for the core research questions. This consistency in questioning added to the reliability of the findings. Probes, follow-up questions, and summarization were used as needed to gain additional information and for clarification.
An open-ended final question was offered to allow participants to give suggestions, insights not yet discussed, or anything else they wanted to add before the group concluded. All questions were developed based on the general format for leading focus group discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Each group was audiotaped, using one digital and one cassette recorder in order to have back-up copies. These were placed either on a center conference table or on a stand behind the group depending on the room design. Videotaping was not used despite its potential for adding depth to the analysis by capturing non-verbal communication. It was decided that this was too intrusive and would interfere with participation. In fact, several potential participants stated they would not participate if there was videotaping but agreed to be involved upon learning of the use of audiotaping only. It is this researcher’s impression that the audiotaping had minimal if any impact on the discussion. One participant did ask for it to be stopped while she was trying to think of some examples and was informed to take her time, as there was no rush for answering. She seemed satisfied with this response.

Most participants left upon completion of the group due to other appointments and did not linger for any further discussion. Field notes were taken during and after each group to add strength to the transcript data. These notes are valuable in that according to Krueger and Casey (1990) “it’s been estimated that 80 percent of the content is found in the transcript and the remaining 20 percent are all the other things that occur in the room” (p.124). All five groups began and ended smoothly. One began ten minutes late due to waiting for all of the participants to arrive.
Reliability and Validity

Researchers’ opinions vary as to the importance of validity and reliability in qualitative analysis (Angen, 2000; Golafshani, 2003). Since the researcher is more involved than in quantitative examination, these concepts warrant consideration. Some researchers reject these terms entirely for qualitative research (Stenbacka, 2001), while others see their importance, but have redefined them (Patton, 2002). Traditionally, reliability relates to the replication of results while validity refers to whether the research measures what is intended. These definitions create a conundrum for qualitative researchers as each study has its own non-duplicative features.

Lincoln & Guba (1985), offer four alternative standards to measure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each of these is reviewed and applied to this study.

*Credibility* denotes that the results are an accurate representation of the participants’ perspectives in the study. This can be accomplished by triangulation, identified by Patton (2002) and others, as a method to add to the certainty of findings (Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Denzin (1978; 1989) has identified four types of triangulation: methods, investigator, theory, and data. Data has three subtypes: time, space, and person. All are meant to increase validity of a study. “Investigator,” data of “space,” and data of “person” were used for this study.

Investigator triangulation was applied by having two outside coders index random sections of the transcripts for inter-rater reliability and reduction of bias. Spatial variation of data includes collecting data from two or more locations, which was accomplished by conducting groups in four different counties. Person variation of data comprises
examining certain characteristics in differing subjects. Interviewing caseworker facilitators who were similar, in that they were all facilitators, yet different in that two were assigned and two were not, attained this. This allowed for “comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view” (Patton, 1999, p.1195).

There are three important areas to consider in terms of inter-rater reliability: its worth, the formula for its calculation, and the amount of correlation. There is wide disagreement as to the value of using inter-rater reliability for qualitative studies (Marques & McCall, 2005). Some would argue that finding agreement is quite impossible in that numerous researchers will interpret the data differently (Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997). Others believe that its use is on the rise and that it can solidify findings (Marques & McCall, 2005). It was decided for this study, during the research proposal stage, that this method was worthwhile and added to the dependability of the analysis. Three formulas for calculating the percentage of agreement were used and are reviewed later in this chapter.

Transferability refers to generalizing the results to different settings. It is problematic in qualitative research to do this because no group is the same. According to Flick (1998), generalizing is not the objective of this type of research. Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommend that the researcher provide detailed information so that others can decide if the findings are applicable elsewhere. For example, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (NYSOCFS) could decide if the results from this study are informative for other counties using or planning for Family Meetings. Participating counties can also request a final report from the study and decide if it is valuable.
Dependability takes the place of reliability in quantitative research and refers to the degree to which results can be replicated, measurements sustained over time, and similarities obtained within a given time period (Kirk and Miller, 1986). Some say that demonstrating credibility is enough to show dependability (Golafshani, 2003). One method to determine a study’s dependability presented by Lincoln & Guba (1985) is to carry out an inquiry audit where an outside “auditor” examines the process of the research from discussions with the researcher and review of documentation of the researcher’s efforts. This was accomplished by the researcher meeting with an independent and experienced qualitative researcher at different times throughout the study and reviewing the process, examining blind spots, and obtaining suggestions and general guidance on procedures. Memos were written after each meeting that summarized the discussion and included thoughts and reactions of the researcher (see Figure 4). In addition, supervision from dissertation committee members added to the dependability of the results.

Memo: Today I met with Dr. E.B. and discussed various methods of data analysis. After talking about sample size, number of focus groups and various possibilities, I realized how little I knew about qualitative analysis. I was happy though that my doctoral journey resulted in this type of research. I originally thought a computer program would save me some time, but I finally decided to perform the traditional “cut and paste” approach along with using Microsoft Word and Excel that would allow complete immersion in the data. Figure 4. Memo: Coding method

Confirmability is whether others could review the data and produce similar results. This is where the researcher needs to demonstrate a lack of bias in analyzing the data. This was achieved by employing an in-depth audit trail that provided details of all actions and decisions from the beginning of the research project through the delivery of the results, thus increasing transparency and credibility (Angen, 2000; Wolf, 2003). An
example is offered in Figure 5 where the memo highlights the struggle in coding. Using independent coders to assist in developing themes and comparing of indexing processes, added to the confirmability of this study.

**Memo:** Struggling today with defining the codes. At times they all seem obvious and then at others they are as cloudy as can be. The code “competencies” seems to encompass so much. I first had the codes “bias” and “self-awareness” and “competencies.” After reviewing more data it seemed that it should be just “awareness” and that “bias” was really just an aspect of “awareness”. These were put as sub-categories of “competencies” as they were considered skills that facilitators learn in training and built on as they facilitate meetings. It is different than an “attribute” in that participants discussed the skills it took to be aware of themselves and how each affected different aspects of a meeting.

*Figure 5 Memo: Definition of codes*

An independent reader, who was also used as a coder contributed to the confirmability of this study. She read through various portions of de-identified sections of the transcripts and shared impressions, ideas, and tentative conclusions with the researcher. She also read through the findings, one research question at a time, after all of the data was analyzed to offer feedback in regards to the researcher’s conclusions and their accuracy in representing the data.

Credibility, competency, and perceived trustworthiness of the researcher are of additional importance in reliability and validity for qualitative research (Patton, 1999). Furthermore, all members of the dissertation committee, along with the transparency of the analysis, added to the rigor in design, and strength of the study’s findings.

**Study Limitations**

All studies have limitations that qualify the findings and draw attention to future areas for research. In general, qualitative research is limited in its universal application. This makes it difficult to state that the findings are representative of the population that
may be similar to those in the study, but not included. This drawback holds true for this study of Family Meeting facilitators’ perspectives on family empowerment, neutrality, and success. Other limitations are covered under the next four headings. Drawbacks related specifically to the findings are addressed in Chapter 5.

**Sampling size.** After contacting five potential counties, only four contributed to this study resulting in a total of 27 participants. Although the pool of qualified counties for this study was only eight, including them all was not feasible given only one researcher with limited resources. The limitation of the small sample is more evident when the numbers from each group are examined. The unevenness in the number between comparison groups creates another limitation. The unassigned caseworker facilitators \((n=9)\) are half the size of the assigned \((n =18)\). This was expected as those counties using the unassigned generally have a smaller facilitator pool.

The disparity in size within each facilitator type is noteworthy in terms of their unequal numbers. The unassigned caseworker facilitator groups differed in that County 2 had two participants while County 4 had seven. The difference between the two assigned caseworker facilitator groups connote fifteen for County 1 and only three for County 3. These contrasts may indicate that some of the findings in this study could be based mainly on one county’s responses.

There are also differences in the size of the counties, as shown in Table 3. Given that two counties were micropolitans, one rural and one urban, they could be considered dissimilar in regards to the size of their population. Lastly, the number of Family Meetings facilitated by each participant covered a wide range with the exception of County 2, which facilitated between 90 and 150 Family Meetings. Their responses may
be influenced by their “facilitation only” position and could impact some of the results of this study.

**Role and influence of the facilitator.** Influence of the researcher is a component of both qualitative and quantitative studies as decisions are made throughout the entire process, from selecting research questions to recommendations and suggestions for future investigations. It pertains to the effect of the researcher on the process and the influence of the process on the researcher (May, 1998; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). It “requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining ‘outside of’ one’s subject matter while conducting research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p.228). This bidirectional relationship is particularly important in qualitative research and requires a reflexive stance. The researcher needs to have the self-awareness to reflect on her decisions, reactions, impressions, and opinions through discussion and/or writings. Both strategies were used as the researcher discussed aspects of the study with dissertation committee members and other advisors and maintained a detailed audit trail.

In the spirit of full disclosure and the need to be as transparent as possible, this section comprises a brief review of the researcher’s experience in family involvement practice, specifically with County 1, that uses assigned caseworker facilitators.

Her experience with Family Group Decision Making models spans over fifteen years. She was actively involved in all aspects of FGC and worked closely with the administration. It began with training in Family Group Conferencing using the original New Zealand model. She acted in the role of a co-facilitator, recorder, and later as a trainer for facilitation in County 1. It was a way of working with families that she
wholeheartedly embraced, but she also observed the struggles workers had with implementation due to its extensive time commitment. While some counties in New York State chose to hire outside facilitators or identified a person amongst their staff who would do facilitation only, this county decided to use casework staff. This decision was made to head off the predicted loss in funding for an outside facilitator. Although most workers found the process satisfying, it became increasingly difficult to balance out their existing caseload and take on additional responsibilities of facilitation. Even in these early days, there were some formal debates among staff as to the advantages or disadvantages of facilitators conducting a Family Group Conference for families on their caseload as opposed to having workers who were not involved in the case.

For a short period of time, County 1 hired an outside person to facilitate Family Group Conferences to reduce the workload on their in-house facilitators. This did not go smoothly as the outside person did not follow through with families, and staff felt she did not have the necessary commitment to the agency. A new model of family inclusion was introduced to the entire county that fell under the Coordinated Children’s Services Initiative (CCSI) where agency personnel and families had on-going meetings to address concerns by reviewing strengths and resources to make plans that would be continually updated. The main focus was to prevent residential placement. The responsibilities for CCSI were given to an outside agency for coordination and facilitation. Staff at the Department of Social Services made the referrals and attended most meetings. This process lasted for over two years and left most DSS workers disenchanted, as they felt the process developed into meetings focused mainly on spending wrap-around funds. The
researcher was involved with County 1 and several other agencies in program design, implementation, and start-up of CCSI, but did not attend any meetings.

Several years later, the administration decided to offer Family Meetings as an abbreviated alternative to the lengthy Family Group Conferences as a result of the Director of Children’s Services strong commitment to family involvement practices. After lengthy discussions amongst caseworkers, supervisors, and the Director, all agreed that in-house workers would facilitate Family Meetings for their own caseloads, except when it was deemed negative for families. The researcher assisted staff in implementing Family Meetings by providing consultation on specific meetings and conducting follow-up telephone surveys of all participants over a two-year period.

These various programs led the researcher to develop a strong interest in the type and role of facilitators and their influence on decision making and empowerment. Having worked with unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators, differences between them have been a fascination for quite some time for this researcher. Her extensive experience with Family Group Conference in general and specifically with County1 created a favorable outlook toward using the assigned caseworker facilitator. This bias necessitated continuous attention throughout all stages of the study. By writing audit notes, regularly stepping back from the data, and consulting with advisors, the researcher remained receptive to all possibilities to help maintain a fresh view with each examination of the data.

**Participant bias.** The bias of the participants must be acknowledged since it is generally believed that they support Family Meetings. Because the majority of the facilitators volunteered for the position, it can be assumed that they felt favorable toward
their responsibilities, the model, and its philosophy. Therefore, they most likely do not represent those who consider Family Meetings worthless or even detrimental. Also, those facilitators who attended a focus group were self-selected based on their agreement to participate in the study. Responses from participants in the county where the researcher is a consultant may have been influenced by their relationship. Although workers only had a general overview of the research, their desire to please the researcher may have influenced some of their answers. In addition, the years of knowing the researcher may have led them to be either more forthcoming or reticent in their responses.

Since Family Meetings are a fairly new practice in New York State, the limited experience of the facilitators could be an additional restriction of this study. More extensive experience could yield richer and more sophisticated responses, as seasoned facilitators would have more knowledge from which they could draw.

**Design of study.** This study uses only one source of data: focus group interviews. Additional sources, such as observation of actual Family Meetings, individual dialogue with facilitators, follow-up focus group sessions, and surveys, would have added to the depth and weight of the findings thereby increasing reliability. In addition, only the perspectives of facilitators were gathered leaving out other key participants’ viewpoints. Interviewing family members, non-social service professionals, caseworkers, and non-family supports would have provided a well-rounded view of stakeholders’ beliefs. The similarities and differences between them would greatly enhance the conclusions in this study. Including these additional methods and samples types would require extensive
funding, time, and manpower that were not realistic for this minimally funded doctoral dissertation.

**Participant Protections**

Information and data from all stages of the study were protected from any breach in confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality, only the researcher and dissertation committee members had access to the audiotapes. Any names mentioned on the tapes were removed from the transcripts. A transcriptionist transcribed the tapes only and was not part of any other aspect of the study. She completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) course for human subject protection before data collection began. The outside inter-raters reviewed only sections of de-identified data and were not privy to any identifying information. All computer files were password protected and hard copies of any research information were kept in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms, audiotapes, all notes and materials will be kept for a minimum of three years, in accordance with the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at the University of Albany.

Risks to participants were considered minimal but could include discomfort due to difference of opinions among workers, discussion around adherence, or lack thereof to the model, or expressions of dissatisfaction. Possible benefits were appreciation of the opportunity to speak about Family Meeting practices, sharing of opinions with coworkers, and considerations for policy change.

**Data Analysis**

It is crucial that all analysis be systematic, verifiable, sequential, and continuing, particularly for a qualitative study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Systematic analysis requires that it be “deliberate and planned” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p.115). Therefore,
each stage in this study was carried out with purpose and attention. Verifiability was achieved by using two independent coders, one of whom also reviewed the data analysis. A sequential analysis was accomplished with careful planning for every aspect of the study, from the research questions to the dissemination of results. Continuity was guaranteed simply by the nature of qualitative data; collection and analysis were simultaneous (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Although specialists identify many methods for qualitative analysis, similarities in the stages exist. Framework analysis developed in Britain by Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) and used for this study is a variant of content analysis and focuses on applied policy research (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). “The strength of an approach like ‘Framework’ is that by following a well-defined procedure, it is possible to reconsider and rework ideas precisely because the analytical process has been documented and is therefore accessible” (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, p.177). It is used only for analyzing interview data and permits “defining of concepts,” “finding associations,” and “developing new ideas” all of which are key functions that pertain to the questions in this study (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, p.176). This deductive and directed content analysis approach is suitable in that the research questions are somewhat focused and apply to the data rather than inductive which waits for themes to surface (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). “Although framework analysis may generate theories, the prime concern is to describe and interpret what is happening in a particular setting” (Srivastava &, Thompson, 2009, p.73). Its strength is in allowing for both within case and between case inspections. “Framework” outlines a path that consists of the following five stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and mapping, and
interpretation (Barnard, 2010). These defined steps provide a clear path for first-time researchers (Raibee, 2004).

After extensive review of analytic methods and meeting with the previously mentioned experienced qualitative researcher, a “classic analysis strategy,” as reviewed by Krueger and Casey (2009), was chosen. This traditional cut and paste method is simple though time-consuming and ensures immersion in the data. This path was taken for several reasons. First, the number of focus groups and facilitators, although leading to 128 pages of transcription, were small enough to be manageable using Microsoft Word and Excel, with no need for advanced computer software. This approach helps first time qualitative researchers get a true understanding of the process and leads to a mastering of the analysis (Barnard, 2010; Rabiee, 2004). Microsoft Word, used for transcription, allowed for ease in transferring information, highlighting data sets, and analyzing within and across cases. All lines in the transcript were numbered with each person’s response delineated. The facilitator’s questions were highlighted and utterances were included when audible. Audiotapes began at the start of each group and included the review of the Consent Form and Demographic Data sheet. Transcripts were typed from the warm-up question to the final word in the discussion. Details of each stage of analysis are examined in the next five sections.

**Familiarization.** It is imperative that the researcher becomes completely engrossed in acquainting herself with the data. This is time intensive for qualitative researchers in that it takes continuous review of the collected information and a determination to master its contents. Familiarization was accomplished in this study by reviewing numerous times all of the data including audiotapes, transcripts, field and
debriefing notes. While waiting for the tapes to be transcribed, the researcher listened to the seven and a half hours of audiotape three times and wrote down individual responses from each group, resulting in handwritten copies of each discussion. Upon completion of the typed transcripts, comparisons were made with the audiotapes to correct for missed or inaccurate words. This resulted in the researcher listening to each tape a total of four times and reading the transcripts in their entirety six times. Additional sections were reviewed as needed while sorting, analyzing, and summarizing the results. Each group was reviewed and examined in the order in which the data were collected. Initial impressions were written to begin identifying topics and designing a thematic framework. The researcher also recorded the number of times a theme was mentioned within a group and across groups, and noted when there were agreements and disagreements.

**Identifying a thematic framework.** Identifying a thematic framework is the first formal step in analyzing the data. It asks the researcher to begin identifying themes but with flexibility and awareness that those themes will be redesigned many times throughout the process (Srivastava & Thompson, 2009). The researcher started with broad categories from the focus group questions. Sheets of poster paper were set up for all six focus group questions with one column for each type of facilitator. Quotes from the transcripts were then written on the sheets that applied to the related question and were color-coded by county. For example, answers to the questions “Describe a meeting where it was easy to be neutral” and “Describe a meeting where it was difficult to be neutral” from the two focus groups in County 1, were written on the poster paper in the column for the assigned caseworker facilitator in a color that represented that county (see Figure 6). All quotes were placed with the appropriate question and those that were
considered uncertain were put aside to be reviewed at a later time. Those that fit in more than one category were placed in each one. After this was completed, all poster papers were read through several times and the researcher wrote summaries of the responses for all of the counties (see Appendix E). These summations were done for descriptive purposes with attention to frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2009). They also included general themes and impressions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One person more likeable, trying to be fair</td>
<td>hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All more aware – give him a clean slate</td>
<td>hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone who came</td>
<td>hard to accept – he offered services – opened my eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have goals</td>
<td>hard - less involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have goals – we have an interest in them working together – no preferences; do what’s workable and get out</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting on a different hat</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not neutral at all?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely different process – extensive relationship in meeting</td>
<td>hard to be neutral – listening to client for so long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family to open up differently – trust needed; I’m going to be honest, respectful</td>
<td>hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will challenge – know them, non-verbals; honest with family – tell what they don’t want to hear; be honest with self</td>
<td>easy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A challenge – e.g.: I don’t like husband as much (neutrality)</td>
<td>hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had strong confrontational and supportive relationship</td>
<td>success in spec. Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics are difficult – 3rd party person seen in Service Plan Review</td>
<td>they’ve uncomfortable; with someone hearing their issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you facilitate? With overview uncomfortable? I would miss things people have said in surveys</td>
<td>I wanted to meet people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aftermath – follow up; what to do – changes if no longer involved, up to date; might confuse for follow up.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own personal; aware of their triggers – perhaps you should not be</td>
<td>hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History – harder for family and caseworker to be neutral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with family – 1-2 people, then meeting</td>
<td>hard to be neutral – listening to client for so long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Advantages]:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did FGC [as indep. fac.] outsider- to me almost harder – no intimate knowledge of family; already dealt with emotional stuff – rather than surprise and having to process it; prefer one I worked so I have knowledge and history</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cues – because you knew her; imagine what she’s going through; know what to do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Also easier to keep service providers in check – know what would trigger them; could be swayed too much if independent – strong personalities; double edged sword = could be you know too much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As caseworker you know their strengths and biases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a gap when other caseworker takes over – re-authoring can be stopped – you know what happened (i.e. drug test; better to have info – can’t lie)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members say they’ll transport but you knew they can’t – i.e.: has seizures; some offering resources may have to on a more limited basis – you know as caseworker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirect; refocus = easier; not get sucked in – DSS vs. corporation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder as caseworker-you will reap benefit; more committed – it benefits you = closes, goes to court, you don’t’ have to transport; never as committed when impact you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate details – know ins and outs that impact plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kids more comfortable – knows caseworker; may have already discussed with caseworker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6 Response to questions about neutrality: when easy, when difficult (County 1)
Next, the researcher began to identify themes that surfaced and put them next to corresponding quotes. This initial coding of emergent themes helped ensure that they came from the data rather than from preconceived notions (Stemler, 2001). These categories began with the more obvious ones such as “private family time” and evolved into many themes and subthemes. Some quotes supported more than one theme and through this process a tentative list developed. For example, in response to “What do facilitators do to contribute to decision making?” a quote such as “A lot of reflecting, a lot of reframing or repeating to people what you’ve heard” fell under the theme of “competencies.” This was defined as the facilitation skills learned through training and practice. This process continued until a preliminary list of themes was developed that included thirty-one items which can be seen on page 82 in Figure 7. These categories were applied initially to the two data sets: the unassigned caseworker facilitators and the assigned caseworker facilitators. At this point, the researcher met for a second time with the accomplished, qualitative researcher to discuss the coding process (see Figure 8).

**Memo:** Met with Dr. E.B. again and walked in with confidence about coding and walked out realizing I had a lot more work to do. The most helpful part of the meeting today was being advised to hold off on completely coding the transcripts and bring in an outside person for inter-rater reliability to help in revising the codes. It is astounding how important it is to check in from time to time with an experienced person to guide me in this new and big undertaking.

*Figure 8 Memo: Code Refinement*

During the initial development of the thematic framework, one independent coder was given access to de-identified and random portions of the transcripts representing both types of facilitators. The researcher only allocated themes to two sets of transcripts to see what this outside person assigned and then adjusted the coding system accordingly. This
person is a Director of Children and Family Services in County 1, is well read on the subject of conferencing and participatory practices, and has experience in initiating Family Group Conferences and Family Meetings within her agency. She was asked to assign themes that she believed occurred in her portion of the transcripts. She was not given a list of themes to use and was not informed of those that the researcher had tentatively assigned.

After her review, she and the researcher met to discuss her general impressions of the data in terms of the two groups. Her remarks matched up closely with those of the summaries written by the researcher. Next, the transcript portions were examined by reviewing all the given quotes and the coder’s assigned themes with a lengthy discussion about their construction. Although they varied at times in name, they did fit into similar categories when they were defined and the majority matched those of the researcher. For example, both had the categories of plan, private family time, and preparation to name a few but the outsider named “skills” for one category while the researcher coded it as “competencies.” These comparisons were beneficial in looking at the validity of the researcher’s decisions. It was concluded that some of the initial theme assignments needed clarification, some were repetitive, and others could remain.

After this meeting the researcher used what Lofland & Lofland (1995) call “focused coding” to generate precise, representative themes and sub-themes. For example, “bias,” at first a sub-category of “attributes,” was commonly assigned, but after continued analysis, it appeared to warrant its own code name because it played an integral part in the discussion about neutrality. It was then changed to “facilitator opinion” because the researcher believed “bias” in itself implied prejudice on the part of
the researcher and therefore a more impartial word was selected. Each code was
precisely characterized by considering what was and was not part of its definition,
resulting in a finalized system of 20 codes with seven sub-categories (see Appendix F).

This second step in analysis resulted in what is often referred to as “manageable chunks
for subsequent retrieval and exploration” (Pope et al., 2000, p.116). This paved the way
for the next step of indexing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Having to do with activities before Family Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Activities involved in running meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Not influencing process or content; perception re: not influencing process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Having to do with plan – developing, planning, follow up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Circumstances that influence all aspect of Family Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private time</td>
<td>Time where family meets to plan without service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Comments relating to balancing power, shared decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Provider</td>
<td>Comments about service providers, influence, behaviors, agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Referring to buy-in, involvement or lack of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>A chance for participants to speak up and be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Refers to relationship between caseworker and family and/or members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Personal qualities that the caseworker brings to all aspects of facilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies</td>
<td>Facilitation skills the facilitator has learned from trainings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Negative view of social services and/or caseworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>Personal reflection, awareness; connection facilitator has to self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Caseworker knowing information about family whether through casework, history,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reading paperwork and/or information from other workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>Any reference to what occurs in terms of plan after the meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Refers to emotions/feelings of participants or facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td>Occurrence that is unexpected in meeting; ex.person showing up, new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Refers to various characteristics of participants such as MH, LD etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Refers to whether active or not in process of meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>People come in Family Meeting one way/out different; new viewpoint</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 7. Preliminary list of codes*
**Indexing.** Indexing is the step in analysis where the researcher can feel as though progress is being made by relating the codes that were worked and reworked in the previous stage. It required the researcher to return to the transcripts and assign the established codes to all of the passages.

Upon completion of the coding, an outside rater (# 1), the outside coder with the child welfare experience and a second independent rater (# 2), with knowledge of qualitative research, were given sections of transcripts with de-identified data to assign codes from the coding list. The second rater had minimal knowledge of Family Meetings but extensive experience with coding qualitative data. Each section was ten pages with a total of 56 passages. Both independent raters were told there were no limits to the number of codes they could assign. The researcher then compared the assignment of codes, passage by passage.

Computing inter-rater reliability is not firmly established for qualitative research. Despite this, there are several methods suggested for its calculation. “Percentage of agreement” was used for this study, as it is appropriate for nominal data. A major drawback to this simplistic estimation is that it does not account for chance agreement.
between raters (Stemler, 2001). More sophisticated equations have been designed but
could not be used here as there were no ordinal data. Marques and McCall (2005) outline
three ways for calculating percentage of agreement that were computed for this study to
unveil any extreme differences in calculations and to prevent favoritism toward one type.
The first formula is the following simple measure of the difference between the number
of agreements and observations.

**Calculation Method 1**

\[
\text{% of Agreement} = \frac{\text{Total # of Agreements (added between 2 raters)}}{\text{Total # of Observations (added between both raters)}} \times 100
\]

The next method takes into account the unequal totals of assigned codes by each
rater. It requires using the lowest number of assignments as a total in the denominator.
This could result in a higher percentage of agreement.

**Calculation Method 2**

\[
\text{% of Agreement} = \frac{\text{Number of Common Themes}}{\text{Lowest Number of Submission}} \times 100
\]

The last calculation offered by Marques & McCall (2005), also speaks to the
differences in number of submissions and is determined by the following method:

**Calculation Method 3**

\[
\text{% of Agreement} = \frac{\# \text{ of Corresponding Themes}}{\# \text{ of Corresponding Themes} + \# \text{ of Non-Corresponding Themes of Lowest #)}
\]

Method 1 uses the total number of observations whereas the other two include only
the lowest number of submissions. The first method could reduce the level of agreement
if there is great variation between coders in the total number of assigned codes. All three
computations were completed for three comparisons: Rater 1 to Rater 2, Rater 1 to
researcher, and Rater 2 to researcher (see Table 5)

Table 5
*Inter-rater Reliability - Percentage of Agreement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inter-rater Comparisons</th>
<th>Method 1</th>
<th>Method 2</th>
<th>Method 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rater 1/Rater 2</td>
<td>66.96%</td>
<td>75.51%</td>
<td>75.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 1/ Researcher</td>
<td>63.44%</td>
<td>69.23%</td>
<td>69.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rater 2/ Researcher</td>
<td>79.20%</td>
<td>81.63%</td>
<td>81.63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no established percentage of agreement in qualitative research that is considered satisfactory for reliability (Marques & McCall, 2005). This makes it difficult for researchers to state with confidence that resulting percentages of agreement are significant. The researcher decided to set 65% or higher as an acceptable level with hopes of higher percentages. If the results were too low, refinements in coding would be considered.

When comparing the results from each method, methods 2 and 3 have the same percentage of agreement. The difference between calculations for methods 1 and 2 shows the first method producing lower percentages. The level of agreement between the two coders could be considered fair depending on which method is applied. This researcher advocates for using the latter two methods, as they do not reduce the agreement by including the total number of agreements. Given that the coders could use an unlimited number of codes, there was a difference in number with Coder 1 assigning 123 codes and Coder 2 allocating 98. This difference may be due to lack of experience on the part of Coder 1 who expressed concern about the procedures despite detailed instructions. Coder 2 seemed to code quickly and without hesitation. This may explain
why the percentage of agreement between the two coders was not as high as would be desired. There is clearly more agreement between Coder 2 and the researcher for all comparisons as evidenced by 79.2% or 81.63%. This would be considered a fairly high level of agreement and one could conclude that the determined codes were somewhat appropriate and assigned in a reliable manner (Armstrong et al., 1997). The researcher concluded that the existing codes would be used to finalize all coding of the transcripts with some changes made in wording upon completion of the analysis for more detailed representation. This led the way to uncovering the significance of the data and connecting it to the research questions.

**Charting.** The fourth stage consisted of taking all the indexed data and putting it in a chart format. This required that the actual coded quotations were removed from their context and then organized according to the themes of the study. The heading for each chart was one of the research questions. Therefore, “How do facilitators who are the assigned caseworker define success in a Family Meeting?” was one question put on the top of a chart and then all the quotes with their assigned code(s) were listed along with specific focus group identification. This enabled the researcher to easily find the quotes and where they came from when returning to the data. Some quotes were listed under more than one question. For example, quotes and information pertaining to “plan” were listed under the “success” question and also under the “families involvement in decision making” question. This procedure resulted in a visual representation of all the quotes within and across facilitator types. It culminated in five charts for each type of facilitator that included all quotes from the transcripts corresponding to each of the five research questions.


**Mapping and interpretation.** During the final stage of mapping and interpretation, the researcher interpreted the charts, finding patterns and associations, thereby leading to explanations and recommendations discussed in the final chapter of this study (Pope et al., 2000; Rabiee, 2004; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Srivastava & Thompson, 2009). This final stage is when the researcher strives to represent the participants’ viewpoints accurately. Information was summarized for each research question with one summary for the unassigned and one for the assigned caseworker facilitator groups, including within and across group similarities and differences. This resulted in a total of ten summaries. An additional review was written that included information or suggestions that did not fall under the research questions. Counts were also identified for the number of responses to particular themes to indicate agreement or lack thereof.

Micro-interlocutor analysis, a fairly new method, which scrutinizes intra-focus group data, was also employed. While most focus group analysis is concentrated on considering each group as a unit, this method adds to the comparisons between groups by examining how different participants respond within a group. It takes into account who responds and who does not, disagreements, and consensus among members. Although small graphs can be used that track participants’ response patterns and provide visual representations of their answers, this was achieved in a more basic way for this study due to the small sample size. Consolidating the notes taken during and after each focus group interview and reviewing the tapes upon the completion of each group when the researcher’s memory was freshest, accomplished this. This additional examination provided information about the number of people who had a particular viewpoint
(Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2010; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) and added to the “range, depth, and complexity of emergent themes” (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009, p.11). Although micro-interlocutor analysis can also include recordings of nonverbal interactions, this was done minimally through the investigator’s notes, since a more in-depth inspection would have required videotaping and an assistant moderator.

**Demographic Information**

The Focus Group Demographic Information sheets were totaled for each facilitator group for descriptive purposes and to look for any distinguishing characteristics that could inform the Findings and Discussion chapters. Results were combined to describe the entire sample and were also separated by the two types of facilitators to determine whether there were any striking differences.

**Conclusion**

This chapter offered a detailed review of the methods used to gather and analyze data from five focus groups consisting of Family Meeting facilitators in four different counties in New York State. Reasons for various decisions were justified and some of the study’s limitations were discussed. The outline of the steps in analysis demonstrated the time consuming nature of qualitative analysis. The need for flexibility and patience is clear as the constant data immersion and continuous review can seem interminable. The next chapter uncovers the results of this lengthy process, lays out the findings, and begins to answer the research questions.
Chapter Four

Findings

This study focused on several broad questions regarding the perspectives of facilitators in terms of their beliefs about empowerment of families, neutrality, and success in relation to Family Meetings. Unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators were compared to uncover any distinctions between their views. As stated earlier in the literature review, there is little examination of the role of the facilitator in Family Group Decision Making and specifically in Family Meetings. Only twelve counties, under the Office of Children and Family Services in New York State, offer them. Each has adapted their use of Family Meetings to best meet the needs of their agency and families. Five focus groups were conducted in four of the twelve counties in which participants were asked to reflect on meetings they had conducted.

This chapter begins by highlighting information about qualitative data analysis and then summarizes the combined demographics of all four focus groups. A lengthy and methodical analysis of the transcripts in relation to each research question follows and comprises the greater part of the chapter.

Qualitative analysis requires more than simply reporting the data; the analysis must also examine the words for depth and meaning (Raibee, 2004). Krueger (1994) outlines seven different standards for interpreting data: words; context; internal consistency; frequency and extensiveness of comments; intensity of comments; specificity of comments; and big ideas. The standard “words” is used to examine those that are specific to the questions in this study and how the participants define them. For example, many participants used the words “agenda,” “same page,” and “caseworker hat”
that pertain specifically to their experience with Family Meetings. The researcher used the facilitators’ own words regularly in order to closely represent their intent. “Context” refers to what was said surrounding the responses either by the focus group leader or the other participants. Direct quotes were presented far more often than summaries of discussions so as not to take words out of context. This at times meant including quotes that were quite lengthy. “Internal consistency” relates to the varying opinions or changes in them as the discussion unfolds. Although an infrequent occurrence, disagreements within a focus group were highlighted whenever they took place.

“Frequency and extensiveness” relates to the actual number of times a particular response was stated and the breadth of the discussion. These were identified when a response had agreement or it generated detailed conversation. “Intensity of comments” pertains to when participants speak in a way that reveals the depth of their feelings. This was noted whenever a topic elicited strong emotions and emphatic opinions. Answers derived from direct experience rather than imaginary situations define “specificity of responses.” This standard was applied often in this study in that most of the focus group questions centered on actual Family Meetings that participants facilitated. The criterion “big ideas” considers “larger trends or concepts that emerge from an accumulation of evidence and cut across the various discussions” (Raibee, 2004, p.659). This is a significant standard in that it helps to connect the various answers to each research question. The interconnectedness between the focus group questions and the analysis uncovered additional broad themes that are mentioned in this chapter with further elaboration in Chapter 5. Although Krueger and Casey (2000) combined and reduced these categories, Raibee (2004) suggests using the longer list for inexperienced
researchers, as it may be more straightforward. This researcher decided to pay attention to all seven to ensure the application of each throughout the analysis.

There are several ways to organize findings in a qualitative study depending on the design, type of data, and research questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Findings for this study are presented by using the five research questions as a framework. Assigned codes and emergent themes were reviewed for each question and the two types of facilitators were analyzed separately. There are 20 main codes with some containing sub-categories resulting in a total of 27 (see Appendix F). The overall format of the analysis in this chapter is as follows: a research question is presented, themes are reviewed, and then applicable quotes are offered with some discussion. Codes in common between both types of facilitators are covered first and then those that are dissimilar are considered separately. An overall summary is given after responses are analyzed for each research question with minimal interpretation as this was reserved for the Discussion Chapter. Several figures are incorporated into the text of this chapter as visual summaries of some of the results.

Within-group differences are included as there are some varying viewpoints between the focus groups for the same type of facilitator. For example, the two counties with the unassigned caseworker facilitators had some divergent observations as to what contributed to family involvement. Some research questions called for a longer analysis than others due to the volume of discussion that unfolded. The next part of this chapter reviews the demographics of the sample before laying out the analysis of the transcripts.
Demographics

A total of twenty-seven facilitators comprised the five focus groups in this study. Table 6, on pages 92–93, shows the demographics with all four focus groups combined. The majority of participants identified themselves as white, with one African-American and one Asian-Pacific Islander. Eighteen and a half percent of the facilitators were males and 81.5% females. Each decade for ages was represented evenly except for three members in the over 60 range. All had a bachelor’s degree and six had completed a master’s degree. Job titles varied and all types of units were represented, including one county that used Family Meetings for Adult Services. Some workers were quite new to the agency while a few were nearing retirement. Most had facilitated conferences for less than ten years, with 11% identifying over ten years of experience. The 11% included their practice with Family Group Conferences. Length of experience did not necessarily correlate with number of conferences facilitated. Most participants facilitated less than 11 meetings with 4 facilitating from 40 to 150. When completing the Demographic Form, many participants commented that they could only estimate the number of meetings they facilitated. Results from the final question showed that 85% volunteered for the position with close to 15% reporting they had no choice.

The number of participants in each focus group varied from two in County 2, three in County 3, seven in County 4, and a total of 15 from two groups in County 1. The sample contained a total of 9 for the unassigned caseworker facilitator groups and 18 for the assigned caseworkers. It is common for the unassigned type to have fewer facilitators on their staff because when the position is designated as a worker’s sole responsibility, an agency will devote only one or two staff members to perform the task. The assigned
group usually has a much larger pool of facilitators as it could potentially include every caseworker because they facilitate for their own cases. The smallest focus group is the one that did facilitation only and also had facilitated the greatest number of Family Meetings. The similarities among all four counties were mainly in terms of educational levels, race and ethnicity, with the majority of the facilitators volunteering for the position.

After a lengthy coding process and analysis of data as described in Chapter 3, the following sections review each theme and sub-category by each research question. This methodical approach exposes the continuous review and comparison of the data.

The final codes and subcategories are repeatedly defined in the headings throughout this chapter and can be seen in Appendix F.

Table 6

Demographics of Each Focus Group (percentages rounded to whole percents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n =</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male:</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female:</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian-Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 (continued)

Demographics of Each Focus Group (percentages rounded to whole percents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Percentages of Respondents</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n =</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Title</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Caseworker</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homefinder</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Meeting Facilitator</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Meeting Specialist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSS Unit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPS</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preventive</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Team Meeting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years at DSS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Became Facilitator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteered</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Training</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toolkit</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Group Conference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie E. Casey Foundation</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Of Meetings Facilitated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95-150</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question #1 - What elements of Family Meetings do the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators believe are necessary for families to be empowered and for shared decision making to occur?

The theme of decision making for this study is more *a priori* as opposed to emergent in that it came directly from the research proposal and the focus group questions. Family participation was discussed with each group to understand what enabled families to be involved in decision making. Decision making in Family Meetings, for the purpose of this study, was defined as *the process of discussion and information gathering during a Family Meeting that leads to specific decisions that become part of a plan, which addresses the identified issues.* An assumption that underlies Family Group Decision Making practices is that if families are involved in the process then they have been given some control over their lives by the social service agency (Holland et al., 2005). If they are not a part of decision making then it is inferred they are less empowered and the balance of power leans more toward the social service agency. This theme was explored by asking focus group members to recall Family Meetings they had facilitated, both typical and challenging, and to gauge the involvement of families. After a warm-up question about their role, the following questions were asked for each type of meeting:

1) *Please describe a typical Family Meeting that you have recently facilitated.*

   a) How involved was the family in decision making?

   b) What do you believe contributed to their involvement?

   c) What challenges did you face in getting the family involved in decision making?

The same follow-up questions a-c, were also asked for the next inquiry:
2) Now I would like you to describe another meeting, which you recently facilitated, that was more challenging for you.

After extensive review of the responses, two categories of decision making evolved: contributors to and detractors from decision making. The two categories are covered for both types of facilitators resulting in two main sections, with contributors analyzed first. Similarities in results between facilitator types are presented and then those themes that are different between the types are presented separately. All within-group differences are also indicated. These two categories did not include what the facilitators believed they personally did to enhance participation, since this was examined separately in the second research question.

**Contributors to Family Decision Making**

There were a total of four themes in common between both facilitator types: “meeting format,” “preparation,” “family engagement,” and “sharing power.” One within-group difference was “private family time,” identified by one unassigned caseworker facilitator group and one assigned. Having a completed “written plan” was a theme that evolved for the county that did facilitation only, while “education of non-social service professional” emerged for the other unassigned facilitator group. Overall, this shows a great deal of agreement between the two types of facilitators for the first research question (see Figure 9).
Meeting format – a course of activities that are expected and typical of what occurs during a Family Meeting and leads to a completed plan. The format of the meeting includes reviewing the stages, presenting strengths, concerns, resources and bottom lines, and allowing everyone a chance to speak and to hear identical information at the same time. A completed plan indicates that decisions were made that addressed the presented concerns. The majority of Family Meeting facilitators identified the sequence of a meeting as a major contributor to family decision making. With all the information out in the open and adherence to the designated steps, facilitators felt that families knew what they needed to address that enabled them to make decisions.

We move the meetings from the beginning to the introductory phase and exploring different strengths and concerns of the family, coming up with ideas to address the concerns and then really working toward a resolution in that sense. So that way it is helping assist the family in
coming up with ideas about what works with their families and what they feel is best for their family and how they can make their situation better.

(C2)

“Reviewing the ground rules,” getting “everything out on the table,” and “keeping the meeting moving along” helped accomplish family involvement. This viewpoint is evidenced in the following quote:

I think that also at Family Meetings it allows people to be on the same page because sometimes it is hard to admit the reasons why things are happening. And so when you are in a group and it is out there, it just seems to have a way, and everybody is on the same page and understanding. And the energy that was going into being upset with DSS because something happened this way, it kind of gets rid of that. And then we can focus on “okay, this is how it is and now we can fix it.” (C1)

Another passage shows that the design itself and the faith facilitators have in the model adds to families being able to come up with specific steps.

Well, the format of the meeting is sort of a trick. I mean it is the strength of the format to us, but by the time we go through the way that the meetings lined up for them, it’s pretty obvious what the plan should be at the end. And it always amazes me because it seems obvious to me, and then we always use family time and then when we come back, the plan is always a little different. Which is okay—I’m totally fine with that being their plan, but I think that is kind of the strength of the meeting is the
format and the fact that I think it takes a little pressure off the family because they don’t have to come up with some magical idea. (C4)

Facilitators overall believed that the actual process from the beginning of the meeting through the finalization of a plan, in and of itself, was designed in a way that added to the likelihood of family involvement. This implies that by abiding by each stage of a Family Meeting, the possibility for families and service providers to work together increases. Participants used the term “same page” several times in reference to everyone knowing the situation, thereby opening the door for decision making. This process was considered unique compared to the conventional meetings they referenced, such as Service Plan Reviews.

**Bottom lines** - safety and/or health concerns that the caseworker usually presents during a Family Meeting and that the plan must address. The words “bottom lines” were mentioned repeatedly in all focus groups and emerged as a sub-category of “meeting format.” It was designated as a sub-category because reviewing them is part of the sequence of a Family Meeting, yet it warranted its own category due its frequency throughout the transcripts. The bottom lines are often considered the non-negotiables – the circumstances that must be addressed. Part of the process of Family Meetings is for them to be clearly stated and out in the open. An example of a bottom line could be when a family cannot allow their child near a known sex offender. As a bottom line, the family must make decisions about how to prevent such contact.

Facilitators thought that identifying the bottom lines added to a family’s involvement because a family would know what issues were necessary to address and would make decisions accordingly. Unclear bottom lines might impede family
participation, as the family would not know what concerns should be considered. The following quote speaks to the struggle in making bottom lines clear:

And I always try to frame it to the family that the bottom lines are the non-negotiable; things that have to do with health and safety are what are going to be the difference between your child coming home and not coming home. And trying to help them understand why going to bed at 9:00 may be really important, that can be something that we address later, right now that is not one of the bottom lines. And trying to kind of redirect them and I think some of it is also about preparing the caseworker whom is bringing this case in advance. What are your bottom lines? What really needs to change? What are the key things here? And making sure they are prepared to chime in. (C4)

Clear bottom lines are important for all in attendance, but especially for the family. When an unassigned caseworker is facilitating a meeting, the family’s caseworker is expected to be the one who presents the bottom lines. The above facilitator intimated that the caseworker was unprepared to do so. In this example the unassigned caseworker facilitator was coordinating the meeting and presenting the bottom lines because the caseworker was not doing so. This challenge of playing two roles is revisited later under the examination of neutrality.

Preparation - when a facilitator speaks with all the potential participants in order to get them ready for a Family Meeting. It also includes any other activities done prior to the meeting – securing a room, buying snacks, etc. Another area that was identified as a contributor to family decision making was “preparation” which
incorporates phone calls and/or face-to-face contacts where the facilitator reviews the process, purpose, and concerns with family members, service providers, DSS staff, and anyone else who might potentially be in attendance. Several of the facilitators from both types thought it was “invaluable” and “key to buy-in” when the purpose was presented prior to a Family Meeting. Families were informed that they were expected to make decisions and that agency personnel were there to provide support, information, and potential services. This let families know it was a very different meeting from what they were used to, where they were often told by providers how to “fix” their situation. Service providers also were given similar information about what to expect during a Family Meeting, their role, and that the family would be making decisions.

Preparation was considered key to reducing the chances of participants coming in with different expectations or “agendas.” The following passage shows a strong response from a focus group participant and how essential a clear purpose is to family involvement.

Preparation. We need to prep for people that are coming very well about our rules, our regulations, about how important it is for them to be there; it is a group thing where everybody puts something in and you all figure out what solution…what can we do to help this child and this family. I think that prep is very important and I know one time we really didn’t have much time to prep the people one-on-one. A lot of prep was done on the phone because to coordinate everybody to get there, we had no choice but to do a lot of it by phone. The constant reinforcing of the purpose of the meeting, I think that is really important—that prep before they come. (C4)
Facilitators regarded this up front work as integral for laying a foundation for the actual Family Meeting. After the first focus group, the researcher asked the subsequent groups how much time they devoted to preparation, as it seemed to be an important element in several discussions. These facilitators considered preparation as essential but stated that most had little time for it. This is revisited later in this chapter. One of the participants in the county that did only facilitation stated that referral numbers were up, resulting in phone contacts as the only form of preparation. She lamented the loss of the days when she could at least have some face-to-face consultations. The other unassigned county also acknowledged a minimal amount of preparation, but stressed its importance.

Well it’s the…everything you do up to ‘til the Family Meeting. The beginning of the discussion of talking to them about a Family Meeting. This is what it is. Once you talk to everybody. Are you interested in a Family Meeting? This is what it is, the purpose. Once you say that to everybody, you say that again and again when you first get in the meeting we go through why they are here; this is what we are going to go through; everything we are going to go through it; and the point of this is we need to make decisions, you need to make decisions as a family and this is what we expect and what are your expectations? So they know from the beginning that this is what you need to be doing. (C3)

The implication here is that families would be less involved if they didn’t know that they were required to make decisions.

One facilitator discussed two different meetings where she needed to determine how the history of domestic violence would affect the actual meeting. What is
remarkable here is that for one family it was determined that attendance could be empowering but for the other it was decided that re-victimization would occur. This indicates that part of preparation may include determining if a Family Meeting will even take place.

I mean, there have been two separate situations in a family team meeting where I’ve had to consider domestic violence. In the one meeting, what you have to do is establish is it an issue of power or control. If you have both parents, are both members of this family at the table? Is that going to influence one or the other not to give the same thing back? And in meeting with the family prior and the preparation for the meeting, it was ascertained it wasn’t a matter of power or control, and that they could be within the same meeting, and that was a successful meeting and we came to a resolution on that. In the other meeting, however, that wasn’t the case. There was no way that the two people could function in the same room, because of that imbalance of power and control. (C2)

This example demonstrates that facilitators at times decide whether a family will be offered a Family Meeting and might select cases they believe are more likely to benefit from it. This shows some power on the part of the facilitator during the preparation phase. Although he or she may have the best intentions to protect certain family members, there could be times when a decision is not made in the best interest of a family.

**Family engagement** - participation of family members where it is evident that they “buy into” the process, demonstrated by asking questions, involvement in

102
discussions, and making contributions. Both types of facilitators thought the amount of involvement on the part of a family throughout a Family Meeting led to increased decision making. Many stated this occurred when “everyone was working together,” participants “felt heard,” and they “had a say in the plan.”

I feel when we do see parents prior to a meeting, they don’t really feel empowered, they feel like they are being told what to do, and I think that in meetings where people are really involved, it is like a light bulb that goes off. They are like ‘oh, I have a say’, or you know, giving a person an opportunity to explain their situation is very empowering and I think this lays the foundation for that. (C2)

It seems simplistic and obvious to state that when families are involved they are more likely to participate in decisions that affect their lives, but it is more complex than that. Engagement does not necessarily guarantee that a family will make decisions in a Family Meeting; it may only increase the possibility. Even though families could be asking questions, expressing interest, and providing information during a meeting, they may not necessarily be making decisions. Facilitators in this study though connected engagement to decision making. They pointed to a level of trust between the family and agency personnel along with an atmosphere of openness, that enabled families to be engaged. This trust laid a foundation for families to share the details of their circumstances.

The following facilitator spoke about a meeting in Adult Services where the family was committed to the person in need and engaged in the process, which lead to an involvement in planning.
The family was always wanting to see how they could help the disabled person that we were having a meeting about. And usually that person attended, and I think that person attended the meeting too, if I recall, and it was, the family was just….they were almost like running the show. We were just there to help guide them along and explain how we could help and what our limitations were. And they were coming up with a plan on how we could fill in the gaps. It was really very, very good. I was very impressed. (C1)

This family was so focused on solutions that the facilitator barely interceded. It should be noted that this is the only county that made use of Family Meetings for individuals in an Adult Unit. They provided many examples where families were involved and produced successful outcomes.

**Sharing power** - when families have input and control over decisions made during a Family Meeting. Power is a fundamental concept within this study and is intertwined with decision making, neutrality, and empowerment. It is important in that power is typically in the hands of the state agency and a main goal of Family Meetings is to share this power with families. One component of the facilitator’s role is to balance power and empower family members. The unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators agreed that when families made decisions, they thought that power was shared between families and service providers.

Facilitators referred to “empowering families” and that Family Meetings “assisted them in reaching solutions.” They discussed accepting plans, despite having different opinions, as long as they met the bottom lines. One worker stated:
The plan may not be exactly what the Department thinks is best, the best way to get from point A to point B. But you know what? It is a road that takes them from point A to point B, and it is a road that is acceptable from the family’s perspective and from the Department’s perspective. So that need, or that solution is found or met. (C2)

This quote speaks to the shifting of power from the agency to the family. Even though it was clear that the agency retained some power through “bottom lines,” there was a change in the sharing of it. As stated earlier in Chapter 2, any time a family is involved with the Department of Social Services, they have relinquished some control and power over their lives. It is the solutions to problem solving that are in the families’ hands during a Family Meeting. Another facilitator put it this way:

Once they see that they are not being attacked and everybody is talking about strengths and trying to help problem solve and come up with solutions. And letting them take the power and driving the car to come up with the solution at the end. I think that that helps them see that they are trying something outside of the box...at least it is outside of the box right now for us, it’s not something we have always done. (C4)

Unassigned caseworker facilitators stated that sharing power with families is clearly a concept that strays from the norm of how child and family services workers usually conduct business. Traditionally in child welfare, those in power, such as government agencies, inform parents as to what they should do in regards to their circumstances. It is difficult to imagine how a family can be empowered by a Family Meeting without the social service agency and service providers conceding some control.
These facilitators offered examples of very involved families where it appears this shifting of power took place. Giving permission to families to make their own choices and demonstrating that agency staff was not going to do it for them, sent a strong message in terms of family input.

The assigned caseworker facilitator groups identified “sharing of power” with more depth and frequency than the unassigned facilitators. Families were considered to be “very involved” when the “families made decisions” that led “to a plan.” These facilitators who were also the family’s caseworker “presented the bottom lines.” Facilitators identified several meetings when family members devised solutions and then expressed disbelief when told their decisions were acceptable. The next two passages about a single meeting show an empowered family with a facilitator ensuring that they continued to be empowered long after the meeting was conducted:

One case was focused on child safety and this was a case with a prescription drug problem. The mom had had quite a few car accidents so obviously from my viewpoint part of the plan needed to be getting the kids places without mom driving. One of the things that family members insisted on was that mom not drive herself at all and filling in the gaps to get her where she needed. And that’s not something that we really insisted on. I don’t think if I had been the one to tell the mom don’t drive anymore, she’s not going to hear that from me, but hearing that from her husband and her father who were a little bit more concerned about her safety and being able to hear it from them, she agreed to it.
She then went on to say that after some time passed the family wanted to make some changes in the plan and checked in to see if it was acceptable.

And they were calling me later saying, can we use that? And I’m like, that was your thing. You guys made that decision. You see an improvement then you can change that yourselves. (C1)

This specific case shows the family expecting the agency to make a decision and tell them what to do but the caseworker continuously informed them it was truly up to them. Since she was also the family’s caseworker, she was part of the follow-up to their Family Meeting.

**Private family time** - the part of a Family Meeting where the family meets without the facilitator, service providers, and DSS staff to come up with a plan to address the identified concerns. Private time was identified as an important component for increased family input by one county using the unassigned caseworker facilitator and one using the assigned. Originating in New Zealand where the practice is specified in the *Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act*, private time is considered to be the most empowering aspect of conferencing and integral to sharing power (Merkel-Holguin, 1998). It demonstrates to families they are considered experts on their situation and that the agency believes they can produce well thought-out plans without providers’ intervention. It was unanimous for these two counties that this unique element greatly contributed to families making decisions. They cited examples where families who typically did not work well together came up with viable plans. One facilitator described the following:

I did one where it started out that the mom was kind of a defensive type of
mother, and it was really scary at the thought of bringing everybody together at one table. But once we did that and went through and gave them family time, they actually came up with their own plan that the mother was thrilled about! She never blew up. She never got upset. They sat and talked it out, and my mouth probably went to the floor because I couldn’t believe that this was happening. (C4)

Private family time sends a message to families that they have influence over the important decisions in their lives. It should be noted that including private family time might not guarantee that a family has more control over the decisions that are made. As pointed out in Chapter 2, the county social service agency retains the final say as to the acceptability of a plan. Therefore, if a family comes up with decisions that do not meet the bottom lines, they can be “sent back to the drawing board” for reconsideration. This raises the question as to how much say a family really has. It is possible they could meet privately and merely rubberstamp what service providers have strongly suggested. In theory private family time shifts power to families, but it remains uncertain if that is truly the case.

One county demonstrated their belief in the importance of private family time by striving to include it every time, “even if it was for five minutes.” A facilitator stated that it was necessary to always offer private time and that no decisions were made until families had it. The intensity of facilitators’ comments as to the benefits of private family time, proposes an area for other counties to evaluate. A few members of the assigned caseworker facilitators that did not use it had a history of including it when they
conducted Family Group Conferences. They stated it was unhelpful but that the focus group discussion for this study led them to reconsider the practice.

**Education of non-social service professional - strategies used to train non-social service agency professionals about Family Meetings.** This last theme was coded for only one of the unassigned caseworker facilitator groups and opens the door to an additional strategy to enhance family participation. It is different from preparation in that preparation, for the sake of this study, referred to getting participants ready for a specific meeting. “Education of non-social service professional” has no particular Family Meeting as its focus, but teaches services providers about the overall process, goals, and expectations. The unassigned caseworker facilitators from one county discussed how their training of service providers in the community added to gaining input from family members. It will be seen in the section on “detractors to decision making” that all focus groups agreed that service providers could be problematic, but that this county with “education of non-social service professional” as a theme, was the only one that observed positive contributions. They staged a mock Family Meeting for professionals in the community who would likely attend a Family Meeting. This was designed for them to understand the philosophy of participatory practice, the roles expected of participants, and the stages of a meeting.

I think it helped too when we did that mock Family Meeting and invited people to come to be able to see what a Family Meeting was. Researcher:

So you not only did preparation for families, you did some real practice drills for service providers?
For service providers, teachers, the school districts, the lawyers so they could come and see what a Family Meeting was about and so we did a mock Family Meeting. I think that helped them. Helped them understand what a Family Meeting was. (C4)

This presentation of a Family Meeting allowed the social service agency to take a proactive approach to increasing family involvement. They stated that the mock meetings reduced service providers’ negative impact on family involvement and was an approach other counties should consider. Preparation by phone or a brief face-to-face may not be enough for service providers to truly understand their role. The mock meeting enabled them to actually watch a meeting and see how they were expected to conduct themselves.

**Written plan - the end result of a Family Meeting where a written document is created, which includes decisions made to meet the presenting concerns.** This is one area where the two counties with the unassigned caseworker facilitators differed from each other. When focus group participants performed only facilitation, they repeatedly mentioned the “plan” as what led to a great deal of involvement on a family’s part, while the other unassigned group did not mention it as important. The plan represents a concrete record that decisions were made. Not all Family Meetings though result in a written plan in that there are times when participants cannot agree or they fail to tackle what are the bottom lines, those issues and concerns that must be addressed in the plan.

These facilitators went on to say that families were more involved when “they came up with a plan,” the content was truly “their plan” and they “stuck to it.” They felt
families were more motivated to follow a plan when it was not the agency’s
determination. The following quote illuminates this belief:

The solutions that have come out of Family Team Meetings have been
ones that the families are more bonded to and more able to follow through
on because it is part of their plan. And families that I have followed up
with in Family Meetings that I have done, there has been a higher success
rate because the family has actually created the plan themselves. And that
is really a foundation of meetings. (C2)

This demonstrates a strong belief by this county in the creation of a written plan
and its empowerment of families during and after a Family Meeting. Although the other
groups considered it an outcome, workers that did facilitation only believed the
expectation of or need to come up with a plan in and of itself helped families make
decisions. They may have thought that a completed plan indicated that families were
empowered and made decisions. However, similar to private family time, having a plan
in place does not guarantee that the family made the decisions. Other participants could
have coerced a family to make certain choices.

Detractors from Family Decision Making

This section covers those themes that arose when looking for what factors
inhibited family involvement. Both types of facilitators identified “conditions” with its
three subcategories, and “non-social service professionals” as factors that diminished the
level of family contributions (see Figure 10). The unassigned caseworker facilitators
brought out the category of “lack of sharing power” while the assigned added the
additional themes of “lack of engagement” and “strong emotions.” Similarities and differences between facilitator types are discussed throughout the review of each theme.

**Figure 10. Unassigned and Assigned Caseworker Facilitators – Detractors to Family Decision Making**

**Conditions** – *various circumstances or situations that occur and are unrelated to the purpose of a Family Meeting but have an affect on how the meeting transpires.* This first portion begins with “conditions” and includes the subcategories of “client characteristics,” “unexpected event,” or “crisis.” “Client characteristics” are related to descriptive features of participants such as age, mental status, level of literacy, or alcoholism, to name a few. This can hinder decision making as people may have cognitive limitations that prevent them from understanding the process or a drug addiction that makes it hard to concentrate on the bottom lines. “Unexpected event” is when an unanticipated incident occurs at a meeting such as a particular person showing up or a participant having an outburst. Lastly, “crisis” refers to circumstances that occur that make it difficult for families to focus on the reasons for having a Family Meeting.
An example could be that a family becomes homeless the night before a scheduled Family Meeting where the focus was to address child safety. Due to the lack of housing, the family may find it hard to make decisions, as their priorities could be elsewhere. Though demonstrated here through negative examples, “conditions” could also be positive, although they were never mentioned from this perspective. Each sub-category is evaluated separately with supportive excerpts.

**Client characteristics - are associated with the characteristics of the family members in the meeting such as age, mental status, learning disabilities, and substance abuse.** Facilitators discussed diverse participants and characteristics that made participation challenging for them. All focus groups reflected on meetings where the family had minimal input and referenced the mental health of participants as a deterrent to involvement.

Mental health challenges with the parents that really made it difficult for them to take ownership of anything. So their defense strategy was to deflect. They were like slippery. Everything, nothing, stuck to them at all and it was really hard to stay on track and to not get diverted. I mean they had been practicing this mechanism for so long that you are kind of involved in it and then you think, oh! (C4)

This facilitator admitted to getting off track in the process as a result of a participant’s inability to concentrate. Another facilitator described it this way:

With my family, the attention of the 9 year old was certainly dissipating when time got to the handwriting and we knew that that was going to happen. So the school counselor was there and she was able to take him
out, but that was a huge obstacle considering he was bouncing off the walls. And then I think just mom’s emotional state was a bigger obstacle because she was very overwhelmed, recently widowed and that was a challenge. Very, very emotional, to lay all this out. (C1)

These are just two examples of many that were offered by facilitators. Additional categories were brought up that made involvement difficult such as learning disabilities and inability to read or write. Some focus group participants identified children as the most problematic group to engage for all stages of a meeting. One participant expressed it this way:

I think the hardest members of the family to get to participate were the kids. All of the ones that I have done, I think the kids participate the least. I don’t know if they are just overwhelmed, or they don’t have the skills, or if they feel like it doesn’t matter what they say. They take more engagement. (C4)

The sub-category of “client characteristics” is rather straightforward and needs little elaboration, as they could be challenging for any service provider in a number of circumstances.

**Unexpected event** – *is an unanticipated incident that occurs during a Family Meeting.* A surprise occurrence can make it difficult for decision making in that a person could arrive who may not understand the purpose of the meeting, could come with his or her own agenda, or could be someone the family did not want to invite. An unexpected incident could change the direction of any meeting and sabotage the decision making
process. Although this passage does not mention a specific incident, it was presented in the context of what can diminish family involvement.

Actually people showing up all the time, always extra people, that is a challenge, because you set up and then there’s an extra person and I’m like I didn’t expect this person in this chair, this room is kind of tight. So even the physical preparation is, you know, I’ve had times where we’ve had 13-15 chairs and people are almost out the door, and it’s just like okay, so it’s just a lot. (C2)

One worker responded that she always sets aside an extra chair; this shows how common an “unexpected event” at a meeting can be. Others discussed the possibility or threat of an unexpected incident occurring. For example, someone could show up and be physically aggressive or upset over something that just occurred in his or her life. This “unexpected event” affects the decisions that are made or whether any are made at all.

I think also not knowing people’s capacity. Like, for example, I think it was S. that did the one with one brother? We did one where there were twin brothers and there was a bunch of neglect stuff going on and one wasn’t living at home and all this is going on. And one of the brothers had a lot of mental health issues and physical issues and he turned into quite a problem. To the point of at one point he got physically aggressive with his step-dad and had to leave and stuff like that. (C4)

This physical altercation quickly halted any of the discussion and planning that may have taken place. Another participant referred to merely the threat of a situation occurring:
That unknown is probably the most fearful thing of walking in that room, because you have no idea if somebody is going to totally flip out and turn the meeting upside down and you’re not going to know what to say, or be able to get everybody back on track. (C4)

**Crisis** – is a circumstance that occurs that makes it difficult for families to focus on the reasons for convening a Family Meeting. A clear example of when a “crisis” prevented decision making from occurring is demonstrated in the following passage where the facilitator decided to postpone the meeting due to last minute circumstances. The person who supervised the visits with their children was unavailable rendering contacts uncertain and the parents distressed.

I had one that could have been challenging and we decided to delay the meeting. When families go through a lot of changes, their whole life circumstances change. The most pressing needs have changed or re-prioritized. The preparation to get them ready to where it’s very clear what the focus of the meeting might include, what everybody potentially is bringing to the table and what needs to be decided on, changed overnight. So to have that meeting at that point in time, I decided to just not have it and do different things. I knew that they wouldn’t be able to focus on the big picture of this case and how it would move forward. So we postponed it. (C3)

This reveals that facilitators at times made assessments as to the potential helpfulness of convening a meeting. Similar to the earlier example pertaining to domestic violence under “contributors” to decision making, the above example shows the
facilitator evaluating the situation to see if a meeting should proceed. This indicates again the power of the facilitator in deciding whether to have a Family Meeting. There was no mention in either of these descriptions of whether the family was ever consulted.

The following passage shows creativity on the part of a facilitator when faced with a client’s order of protection that could have thwarted the meeting. Despite going to great lengths to arrange this meeting, the facilitator felt the unusual circumstances made decision making difficult for all involved.

My most challenging was a situation in where we couldn’t even have the main players of the family in the same room together. And we had to make some accommodations to have them in separate parts of the building and have them speak by speakerphone and they were (laugh out loud) and they had some very strong personalities. And there ended up being several staff in a room with one party and one staff member would sit with the other party. And that was very challenging because of the personalities, because of the agendas that came to the table and because of the lack of being able to see some of the non-verbals and other things that were going on in the other room. That was very difficult. (C1)

It is unmistakable that a range of conditions that could be considered unrelated to the purpose of a Family Meeting, can act as barriers to family involvement. Each type presents diverse challenges to facilitation in keeping the meeting focused on the identified goals. Some areas such as “crisis” may be managed or reduced through preparation or facilitation, but others such as “client characteristics” may present conditions where facilitators’ impact is limited. “Unexpected event” is one condition
where the facilitator’s effect could depend on the circumstances and/or the facilitator’s skills.

**Non-social service professionals** - *are agency personnel, excluding DSS workers, in a Family Meeting and their influence, behaviors, and/or personal agendas.* Most often this included personnel such as lawyers, mental health professionals, physicians, and other non-DSS workers. Almost all focus group participants concurred that these members often had their own agenda going into a meeting. They were not “on board” with the process of Family Meetings “no matter how much preparation” took place. Judging by the intensity of their responses and the richness of the examples, both types of facilitators showed outside service providers to be a significant impediment to empowerment.

And then there was a professional who had really inappropriate behavior, that’s a judgmental word. But, had boundaries that sent mixed messages to the parent. For instance, saying during a break, “These people are just trying to take your children. They should be ashamed of themselves.” And lawyers who wanted to cut to the chase, they didn’t want to be part of a process. They wanted to get to the end product. (C4)

It didn’t feel like this was a family team meeting. This was a providers’ meeting. And we were talking about---we got some placement things out of it, but that wasn’t about the family, that was about the providers, and it was funny to see their response to it. And I got a lot of accolades. “Oh, that was a great meeting M.” And I was like uhhhh. It was good because
you [service providers] got your points out but that wasn’t about the family. (C2)

Additional barriers included mistrusting the process and a lack of understanding of Family Meetings. The phrase “pushing their own agenda” was said in each group repeatedly. It cannot be gleaned from the data if these actions were intentional.

Another powerful example comes from an Adult Services facilitator who describes a time when the service providers expected him to chastise the family.

The challenge I’m thinking of actually had less to do with the family member and more to do with the professional support staff that were involved because there was a great deal of reluctance on the professional staff’s part to turn over some of that decision making to the family. Their expectation, even though it had been laid out very clearly in the start of the meeting that this was the family’s opportunity to plan. Their [service providers] expectation was that I was going to make them [do things] and so trying to break through that preconceived idea and get them to be willing to allow the family to make a plan, was the most challenging part.

Generally, the families, in my experience, have been the easy part of the participation.

Researcher: And the other agency personnel are more difficult?

Absolutely, because what their agencies’ bottom lines are, are not necessarily risk or safety things, they are more compliance related. Or they have already had some bad experience with the family so it kind of
wants to punish them before … You know it is kind of like, “Here wear this hairshirt before we are willing to work with you again.”(C1)

It seems that out of all the discovered themes, “non-social service professionals” was the most difficult challenge to family empowerment. This category surely gives rise to an area that merits attention.

**Lack of sharing power** – is when families have little or no input and control over decisions made during a Family Meeting. Although the sharing of power can be seen as a contributor to decision making, it was also thought to detract from it when it did not occur. There were times when facilitators had to take charge, thereby actually taking power from families. This theme emerged only for the unassigned caseworker facilitators in discussions about the more difficult Family Meetings they facilitated. The following quotation openly demonstrates a meeting where the family had little control:

That one case of yours that young girl. I actually had to switch from facilitator to supervisor. The girl I talked about earlier that wouldn’t participate and then she wouldn’t make a plan and said, “I’m going to run away”, and ….

Researcher: So you were a facilitator and then you sort of had to move over to…. I had to yes, because I had to go into supervisor mode and get a hold of probation and our law department and it pretty much ended the meeting. (C4)

Shifting of power away from families and into the hands of the state goes against the principles and philosophy of Family Meetings. This meeting shows a disempowered
family with little or no control. It also illuminates the challenge of engaging children. It appeared that a plan was somewhat in place but the child refused to comply. The young girl may not have been engaged from the start and perhaps required more preparation before the meeting. She also may have believed she had little if any input into the plan.

While the above example has the social service agency procuring power, the next one shows an outside service provider taking charge even before the meeting begins. The facilitator first describes a dispute over the starting time of the meeting. The medical staff did not want to accommodate the grandmother’s work schedule. After the facilitator advocated on her behalf, everyone agreed to the favored time slot. She went on to depict the meeting in this way:

> And it was supposed to be two doctors. When we get to the hospital, the psych unit, there are probably fifteen professionals in the room and there is the head of psychiatry doctor there and the mom is outside the room and there is a little window she peaks in and they tell us mom can’t be a part of the meeting. I’m like this is a family team meeting, grandma and a possible potential dad are here, we have gotten him to come forward, and they said mom is not ready. (C2)

This facilitator went on to portray a heart-wrenching meeting that excluded the mother based on her mental illness. The facilitator believed the mother was competent, but the other professionals disagreed. She questioned their assessment especially when they released her the day after decisions were made in regards to the custody of her newborn. The facilitator felt that the mother deserved to be included even if the outcome was the same.
It was also identified that some families refrained from taking power thereby minimizing their own empowerment. They stated that family members may be “intimidated by it all.” This demonstrates the resistance to power identified by French and Raven (1959), as one half of a relationship between two people. The majority of the Family Group Decision Making literature focuses on the challenges for agency personnel in giving up power, and little about families’ opposition to it.

I think families really struggle buying into the power shift. I think that that is the hardest thing. I don’t think the actual shift [for us] is that difficult, but getting the families to embrace it, I think is difficult. (C4)

There seems to be a continuous shifting of power throughout a Family Meeting where at times it seems trouble-free and at others it is like a tug-of-war. The facilitator’s role, as identified in Family Meeting trainings, is to help balance power (Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009). This section shows that when that power is tipped more toward social service workers and other service providers it impedes family involvement. The theme of power, as previously stated, runs through several aspects of this study and is revisited in more depth for the research question on neutrality.

**Lack of family engagement** – is when there is minimal participation by family members where it is evident that they do not ‘buy into’ the process, ask few questions, and make little if any contributions. While the unassigned caseworker facilitators brought out the additional category of “lack of sharing power,” the assigned identified “lack of family engagement” and “strong emotions” as extra themes. These assigned caseworker facilitators surmised that lack of involvement of family members interfered with the decision-making process. Some families were quiet during meetings and the
facilitator worked to get them to participate. Other times families acted as though they were involved, but facilitators felt they were “just going through the motions.” These families were seen as not taking any responsibility for their situation with little reason, from their perspective, to be invested in the decision-making process. This “lack of engagement” could exist for a number of reasons: an antagonistic relationship between the family and the social service agency, a family member who is not ready to initiate changes, or a lack of trust in the process itself, to name a few. This backs up the belief by McCallum and Prilleltensky (1996) that empowerment is less likely to occur when families do not take responsibility and are not open to assistance.

One of the most challenging is when a family says, “okay this is what we are going to do,” and “we’re all on board.” And you know darn well that they are just saying this because this is what they have to go through. And they are going to try to please you and just get this over with. And I think that is very challenging because they’ll tell you everything, but they’re not going to do anything they don’t want. (C3)

A lack of engagement raises the questions about timing, control, and the referral process. Perhaps there are times in the “life of a case” when a family may be less receptive to a Family Meeting. Some additional work to build trust, explain the process, and find strategies to gain commitment may help to engage family members. Other times, a family may feel they have no choice but to accept when offered a Family Meeting, despite their ambivalence. This could be a result of coercion on the part of the agency, coercion that is either concealed or blatant. A family may be in attendance only to comply with the social service agency. Lastly, the types of cases referred for a Family
Meeting may also be a factor in the likelihood of engagement. There is no way of knowing from this study the reasons for a lack of engagement, only that the assigned facilitators believed it held families back from participation.

**Strong emotions** - *are intense feelings of the participants in a Family Meeting.* Discussion around decision making led to the coding of “strong emotions” for the assigned caseworker facilitators who believed those emotions prevented participants from focusing on the identified issues. Family members could not make decisions, as their emotions were too overwhelming. The following glaring example shows how emotions around a daughter’s drug addiction needed to be worked through before the family could come up with ideas for a plan.

And at one point it almost got like a family therapy session because…but you had to…I mean as a facilitator I felt like I had to let it happen to a point. I had to let her sister and her mother talk about their disappointment and their fears based on the history and whatever. So allowing that, but keeping it in check, for me, I was like, “oh my gosh I’m so tired.” Because it was emotionally draining for me. But allowing them to do that, reframing that in terms of making it more positive so it wasn’t just “you’re a bad person,” “you’re a drug addict,” “you’re this”… But, really focusing on their fears not just their disappointments, but their fears and their fears for her as well as for the child. And the fact that they wanted to support her but they were fearful of being let down again in putting all this energy in. Sometimes I think you have to let some of that happen to a point and just as a facilitator it is hard to balance that the
family needs to get through this whole therapeutic part in order to get to the plan. But keeping it in check. And it was pretty emotional. There was a point where all of us and the caseworker. And I, as primary facilitator and the caseworkers, were pretty much in tears too because it was emotional. It was genuine. (C1)

Other facilitators added that they could not ignore emotions and just focus on the agenda. They felt it was their responsibility to assist families in reconciling their emotions. The example above shows the emotions of both the family and the caseworker while the next quote shows how frustrations of participants warranted attention.

Getting everybody to buy into “we can problem solve around this.” That was tough because there were certain things that certain people were willing to do. But then when you talked about the long term goals or what everybody wanted to do, what everybody wanted to see changed, the frustration came out as far as those being issues that the family had been dealing with for awhile. (C1)

The management and resolution of emotions required effective therapeutic skills on the part of facilitators. They helped members process their feelings about their situation in order to be clear thinking for gathering information and planning.

**Overall Summary – Contributors to Family Decision Making**

This segment compares and contrasts both types of facilitators’ views for contributors in regards to the first research question. Analysis of responses from both types of facilitators for questions around family involvement had more similarities than differences. All four counties identified meetings where families were engaged and made
decisions that led to completed plans. They all spoke about the “meeting format” and getting “everyone on the same page” as leading to families making decisions. Preparation of participants helped by allowing everyone to know the process and what was expected of them. When participants knew their role, the family was more likely to make contributions. Families that were engaged in the process also contributed since by definition “family engagement” implies participation. Finally, a shifting of power from professionals to families was necessary to give them more control over decisions.

One unassigned caseworker facilitator group and one assigned saw private family time as a significant and necessary factor in augmenting family involvement. Out of the two counties that did not offer it, one stated they tried it once and found it unhelpful, while the other discussed its possible inclusion for future Family Meetings.

Some differences existed between the assigned and unassigned groups, although they were not contradictory. The unassigned group that did facilitation only, saw the “plan” as a contributor to family involvement while it was not mentioned by the other focus groups. Although it is usually considered an outcome, these facilitators perceived it as an indication that a family was involved. From their perspective, the expectation of families to produce a plan was considered enough to get them to generate one. This assumes that having a plan is equivalent to family involvement. This may or may not be true: professionals could in both covert and overt ways be making decisions. There is also the possibility of more pressure on these facilitators to produce a completed plan as evidence of their efforts for the referral source. Due to their separate office location, they had less contact with the workers sending them referrals than all the other facilitators.
One last difference in terms of elements that enhanced family participation was that the other unassigned caseworker facilitator group associated “education of non-social service professional” as a tactic that got service providers “onboard.” They attributed their success with outside providers as partly due to their presentation of a “mock” meeting that demonstrated the purpose and expectations of Family Meetings. These facilitators concluded that if service providers were more knowledgeable about their own role, they would be less likely to disrupt the process. No other county brought up this method in any dialogue related to non-family participants.

The examples presented by facilitators illustrate that there are a lot of factors that go into getting families involved, from the preparation stage through the conclusion of a meeting. All identified themes are significant in their own right but in combination offer a multifaceted view of what enhances participation.

**Overall Summary – Detractors to Family Decision Making**

Comparisons between facilitator types and their viewpoints on what detracts from empowering families showed a good deal of agreement, but also some differences. All groups cited the three subcategories of “conditions” as keen elements that reduced family involvement. Various circumstances, both known and unexpected steered some meetings in directions that impeded participation.

The continuous identification of “non-social service professionals” by all participants, along with the strength of their remarks, underscored their belief that they often disempowered families. They undermined the basic tenets of Family Meetings and seemed to be the strongest detractor. Most service providers were not extensively trained in the philosophy and model of Family Meetings. Even though there was agreement that
facilitators did not get enough time for preparation in general, whatever time they did have was devoted to family members rather than to service providers. Given their busy schedules, service providers often have little time for discussing a potential Family Meeting with a facilitator, whereas some family members may be more accessible or feel they have little choice.

Several differences appeared between the facilitator types. One is that the unassigned saw the “lack of sharing power” as a detriment. There is no clear evidence in the data to explain this. Although the unassigned admitted to providing their own input, as will be seen in the next section, they still saw the sharing of power as important. Even though the other groups did not identify “power” as a detractor they did include it as a contributor. Therefore, it seems fair to say they might agree that the resistance to sharing power would be unhelpful. It may simply be they did not look at it from this “lack of power” stance or that they had already discussed it, so it was therefore assumed.

Another variation between the facilitator types is that the assigned caseworker facilitators spoke about emotions as roadblocks for families. Although all four groups offered examples of meetings that were filled with emotions, only the assigned spoke about them as problematic for decision making. This could be a consequence of their being privy to “behind the scene” problems as a result of their relationship with the family. Therefore, a family may be more comfortable exposing their troubles during a meeting. Another possibility may be that they facilitate in a way that brings out emotions. These facilitators saw a therapeutic approach as necessary in resolving feelings so that families could make decisions.
A last distinction the assigned caseworker facilitators saw as problematic for family decision making centered on engagement. Level of engagement may predict how involved a family is going to be. It is hard to imagine an unengaged family actively contributing in a Family Meeting. Several factors may go into the probability of family engagement such as timing, relationship between the social service agency and the family, or the rationale for a meeting. This was not discussed at length allowing little explanation from this study as to why the unassigned did not mention it. Just as with “lack of power,” they may have neglected to highlight it since they had already discussed it as a contributor. Again, it can be inferred for some themes that if they consider it a contributor they may also see the lack of it as a detractor. It cannot be stated with certainty that the lack of a theme in one group equals a lack of agreement. Possible explanations include that some of the groups simply did not get to the additional themes, they were less prominent, or there was true disagreement. This is a caution that applies to most focus group analysis (Bloor, 2002; Edmunds, 1999).

It can be seen that some of the same elements that contribute to decision making, and empowerment, can be the exact ones that also prevent it from occurring. Power when shared, allows families to participate, but power when taken from or not given to families, results either in decisions made by agency personnel or none at all. Families cannot be empowered if they do not take or are not given control over decisions that may have longstanding effects on their lives. Although giving power to families is required in all Family Group Decision Making models, these facilitators showed many examples when it did not occur. Working to give power to families relates directly to one of the
roles of a facilitator. Their job in balancing power was demonstrated as challenging in some meetings, resulting in less family involvement.

Various elements go into helping or hindering the empowerment of families during Family Meetings. By examining contributors and detractors, components to include, expand, or reduce during Family Meetings have been uncovered that may augment family involvement. These areas warrant further examination and will be revisited in the final chapter of this study.

**Research Question #2: How do the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators perceive their influence on decision making in a Family Meeting?**

This research question continues to analyze family decision making, but narrows the focus to how facilitators distinguish their own impact. Questions about their specific contributions were asked for each of the three main areas in this study: decision making, neutrality, and success. This was done to obtain details and insight as to how the facilitators viewed their role in relation to these categories.

All focus group members were asked the following two questions in terms of a “typical meeting” and then for a “more challenging meeting,” in order to gain answers to the second research question:

a) Tell me about your level of involvement in decision making in this meeting.

b) Are there certain skills you used to help the family be a part of decision making?
Facilitator Contributions to Family Involvement

Similar themes emerged for both types of facilitators as to what they believed they did to contribute to family involvement (see Table 7). Despite these similarities, their emphasis on some themes varied.

Table 7

*Themes for Facilitators’ Influence on Family Decision Making*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unassigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
<th>Assigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Competencies Subcategory: Facilitator Self-Awareness</td>
<td>Facilitator Competencies Subcategory: Facilitator Self-Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Attributes</td>
<td>Facilitator Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Opinion (C2 - facilitation only)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Facilitator competencies - *are facilitation skills that the facilitator has learned from training, consultation with staff, and by facilitating Family Meetings.* This is an area that general facilitation literature explores extensively. There are lists of skills for a facilitator to master in order to be considered competent. These skills do not include the personal qualities that each facilitator brings to the role. Both types of facilitators agreed to their significance. All spoke about the need to keep the meeting focused and follow the agenda.

I think that people being able to get the meeting to stay on task. People love to go off on tangents, and just being… modeling, respectful, communication with others. I think you bring all of those facilitation skills to the process. (C2)
The facilitators that did facilitation only believed their skills developed and improved over time. This is not surprising as they conducted the greatest number of meetings out of all the focus groups. Another passage exemplifies the skills required to help gain full participation.

I think another really important skill is to be able to balance the room. So if you have somebody that isn’t talking and not participating, trying to find ways to draw them in, to get them to participate and remain comfortable. Or if you have that person that is always in the background saying something negative or just always blurring things out. Try to keep the room balanced so that everybody shares and feels comfortable. (C4)

Facilitators repeatedly referred to ensuring everyone had a turn and was heard. Although this overlaps with the code “meeting format,” it is considered here as a competency since it was in the context of what the facilitators believed they actually did to increase family participation. The assigned caseworker facilitators emphasized their competencies more than the unassigned. These competencies included confronting, listening, summarizing, identifying strengths, and managing emotions. The facilitators believed they also guided the process, reframed and reflected statements, and provided clarification. Some named specific types of questions they used such as open-ended, follow-up, and solution-focused. This particular passage shows a summary of some of the skills a facilitator used from the beginning of a meeting until its end.

There is first, thanking everybody for coming. Recognizing that the people that are there, sitting at the table, or wherever they are, are there because they care and because they want your support. Letting everyone
know they are free to chime in and express concerns or offer up things that they could do if they have solutions. A lot of reflecting, a lot of re-framing or repeating to people what you’ve heard to make sure that that’s what they are saying and make sure that that is what they want to get across. And then the final thing that I find myself doing quite a bit and usually several times at the end of the meeting is just reviewing and reframing the whole meeting as to putting it back with the family. “This is a concrete, somewhat detailed plan that you have come up with.” And giving some credit to how much skill that took for everybody to get together and come up with these ideas and usually that takes some creativity, some volunteerism on the part of a lot of people. And then finally thanking everybody again for their caring so much about the family and the persons that are there to get together and come up with solutions.

(C1)

Facilitators felt they consciously made on-going assessments about what skills to employ in order to maximize family contributions.

**Facilitator self-awareness** - *is the facilitator’s consciousness in terms of his or her potential effect on all stages of a Family Meeting and what he or she does with that knowledge.*

This sub-category of competencies was touched on slightly by the unassigned caseworker facilitator group, but referred to extensively by the assigned. Only two participants from one of the unassigned groups offered a brief mention of it:
I know the skill of trying to keep quiet is required. I mean that not to throw your own two cents in. That is probably one of the hardest things if you have any idea what the case is, it is like biting your lip. And you have to bite your lip in that you won’t throw your own two cents in. And giving them the run of the meeting.
You mean like self-regulate? [laugh out loud]…
I don’t know what you want to call it. (C4)

The assigned caseworker facilitators spoke about the importance of keeping their “emotions in check,” “stepping back,” and reminding themselves about their function in the meeting. Keeping their opinions, beliefs, and sentiments from interfering in the decision making process was strived for. They believed they needed to be aware of these internal elements while facilitating in order to keep from being involved. The following statement underscores this process by the facilitator:

Going back to what was said earlier, just managing your emotions. I think it’s easy to get caught up in their emergencies or in their crisis or problems. To feel that…what it must feel like and you want to be reactive to it. If you don’t manage it, you’re basically - your role as a facilitator is changed. You need to be aware of the emotions, but you need to know what to do. That’s to step back in your mind to where you are in the meeting, what’s been done, what needs to be done, and then somehow reset that stage. I don’t know what you call that process, but I guess it’s just adjusting and readjusting…(C3)

Another worker went on to say:
If you can come in from the get go that this is their meeting. That we are not here to badger and degrade them. To remember that. You know, these are your decisions and we try and help them come forward with them, but you have to really sort of take that step back and not be deciding for them. It takes some skills to do that. (C3)

This theme of “awareness” is revisited in more depth for the research question on neutrality. It is included here in that the facilitators directly stated they employed this skill in gaining family involvement.

**Facilitator attributes** - *are personal qualities that the facilitator brings to all aspects of facilitation such as being non-judgmental, respectful, empathetic, and believing in the process.*

Attributes are what set facilitators apart from each other in that they are unique to their own experiences, values, and beliefs. These traits are more difficult to teach than competencies. This is not to say a facilitator cannot work to improve or incorporate them, just that they require more self-reflection and personal development. For example, teaching empathy is not easy despite role-playing in a training session, whereas learning competencies to ensure that each member has a turn to speak may require less effort. The unassigned caseworker facilitators stressed attributes far more than the assigned caseworker facilitator who only gave it a brief mention. The following excerpts inform the character of the facilitator:

You learn that everybody has a face. It is not just a number; it’s not just a place and time. People that we work with are real families with real issues. And if you can respect that and really come to the understanding
of that, I think that it helps you to see them as human beings and to really understand their role in the decision making process. They are a mother and a father; I’m a mother. So you can relate your own needs to their needs as a human being. (C2)

And I think if the families get a sense from us that we are calm, but also that we are not there to point fingers at them, or to judge them, and that we are just there to help them solve a problem and come up with ideas. (C4)

I think I bring empathy to the table. I’m very connected and want to help families. And this process really speaks to me and the work that needs to be done with families. M. spoke about having respect for families, but even just seeing that there are people just like yourself, not that you are any better, and not that they are any less than you, but that they are people just like you. (C2)

All three of these passages were delivered with passion and sincerity. These facilitators believed certain attributes added greatly to family involvement by setting an atmosphere of openness and acceptance. They identified other personal qualities such as commitment and compassion.

There were three themes that surfaced demonstrating differences between the two types of facilitators. One was “facilitator opinion” for the smallest unassigned facilitator group and “preparation” and “sharing power” from both of the assigned groups. These add to the list of contributions by facilitators to aid in family participation.
**Facilitator opinion** - *is the facilitator’s thoughts, ideas, and views about what should and should not happen during the preparation phase and the actual Family Meeting*. There were many instances when the county that did facilitation only, spoke to their own involvement in decision making and their belief that it actually helped include families. This theme speaks directly to the neutrality of the facilitator and is revisited from another standpoint in the next section of this chapter. It is discussed here in terms of the facilitators’ beliefs that their viewpoints of family members, offering their own ideas, and speaking to concerns they deemed necessary, increased family participation.

The following quotes show their strong involvement.

Good or bad, I take an active role in the decision making process. I offer ideas, I’ll make suggestions. If things are quiet and there is too long of a silence, I will start off by saying this is an idea in hearing this situation, this is an idea that I have come up with. (C2)

So it helps them to kind of break things down with assistance. Because many times families that we work with don’t have the capacity to prioritize and break things down at a level that people who aren’t involved, say with the department, can, generally speaking. And that’s a general statement because many of our families do have that capacity, but at times it just helps people to prioritize with others and brainstorm with others to really lay a foundation for what would be the best way to spend their time. How can they best ensure the child gets to school, or that somebody is supervising the children? So, that is more of a typical meeting – just kind of helping them break it down, coming up with ideas
to address specific concerns and then move forward and stick with those plans. And then if they can, reach out to those resources that they may not have thought about in the past. (C2)

These facilitators were clear in that they participated in the decision making process, particularly by suggesting solutions. It appears that the assigned caseworkers labored to keep out of the process by applying “awareness,” while the unassigned spoke about ways they actually joined in. This is also discussed further in Chapter 5.

**Preparation** - *is when a facilitator speaks with all the potential participants in order to get them ready for the meeting. It also includes any other activities done prior to the meeting – securing a room, buying snacks, etc.* This pre-meeting stage was also reviewed in the first research question about family involvement and was identified as vital to successful Family Meetings. One worker stressed the importance of it in this way:

Well it’s the…everything you do up until the Family Meeting. Beginning of the discussion of talking to them about a Family Meeting. This is what it is. Once you talk to everybody. Are you interested in a Family Meeting? Once you talked to everybody you say it again and again when they first come into the meeting. We go through why they are here. This is what we are going to go through; everything we are going to go through it. And the point of this is if we make decisions, you need to make decisions with the family and this is what we expect and what are your expectations? So they know from the beginning that this is what you need to be doing. (C3)
Repeatedly reviewing the purpose and stages is what was of significance here. This suggests that some facilitators believe it is how they actually conduct preparation that helps family involvement.

**Sharing power** - *is when families have input and control over decisions made during a Family Meeting.* The assigned caseworker facilitators indicated that they worked to ensure that power was shared with families. They made references to “putting it back on them,” “taking my caseworker hat off,” and “having the family decide,” particularly when families asked for answers.

I had a family that wanted us to lay it all out…wanted us to tell them the plan and that was clearly put back in their court. And we’re not going to dictate what you guys come up with at this point. This is for you to decide what’s workable for everybody. (C1)

Facilitators reinforced that families had control over decisions by reminding them to make decisions and that the facilitator would not do it for them.

**Overall Summary**

All four focus groups had themes of “facilitator competencies” and “facilitator attributes” in response to the questions about their own contributions to family involvement. These themes are logical in that they both speak specifically to the actions of the facilitator and are part of their training. The sub-category “facilitator self-awareness” was coded more often for the assigned caseworker facilitators along with two additional codes of “sharing power” and “preparation.” Their conscious handing over of power and preparation of families before a meeting made additional contributions.
“Facilitator opinion” was coded for one unassigned group only and presented a unique perspective.

It appears that the unassigned caseworkers emphasized “facilitator attributes,” more than the assigned ones who stressed “facilitator competencies.” This difference may lie in the relationship each type has with the family. As stated previously, the unassigned caseworker facilitators barely know the families, while the assigned who are also the families’ caseworker, is quite familiar with them. The assigned caseworker facilitators may rely on their competencies more as they work in order to not have their relationship interfere with family decision making. The unassigned caseworker facilitators may think less about skills as they are managing fewer interpersonal levels. Quite possibly the unassigned caseworker facilitators stressed their attributes more because they needed to demonstrate to families who they were as people, while the families of the assigned already knew their facilitator. These possible explanations cannot be stated with certainty and would require additional exploration.

By applying the competency of “facilitator self-awareness,” the assigned caseworkers were sensitive to what they were thinking, doing, and feeling in order to raise the level of family participation. Their additional theme of “sharing power” is connected to their application of this “facilitator self-awareness.” They were more conscious of their own power and with this recognition, they could work to share it.

One of the unassigned caseworker facilitator groups acknowledged that they were involved in decision making by offering their ideas and viewpoints. It is understandable that these facilitators would not use “facilitator self-awareness” to separate their influence since they were insistent that their involvement enhanced family contributions.
By facilitators identifying their own contributions to family involvement, they showed a commitment to inclusionary practice. They expressed a strong desire for families to be involved and provided examples of how they specifically added to the process. Some of their responses uncovered beliefs and behaviors related to their neutrality which leads to the next research question.

**Research Question #3: How do the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators perceive neutrality in their role during a Family Meeting?**

As discussed in Chapter 2, experts in the facilitation field disagree on the definition of neutrality and its achievability in the facilitator role. Neutrality, for the purpose of this study, was defined as “the quality or state of not supporting either side in an argument, fight, war, etc.: the quality or state of being neutral” (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.). Additional layers to the concept, borrowed from the fields of general facilitation and mediation, include the distinction between process and content, free of bias, non-interference of one’s values and beliefs, and distancing oneself from decision making. American Humane, the main organization and clearinghouse for Family Group Decision Making information, stresses the importance of independence for the Family Meeting facilitator defined as “non-case carrying” (American Humane, 2010). The third research question examined this multifaceted concept from the perspectives of both types of Family Meeting facilitators. This researcher was particularly interested in seeing if there were differences in their viewpoints, their beliefs as to its necessity in their position, and if they were exhibiting neutrality during facilitation.

Responses to the focus group questions around neutrality and the facilitator type elicited stronger and more varied responses than any other focus group question. The
following questions were asked in each focus group, with some variation in wording due to the flow of conversation:

   a) Describe a meeting where it was easy to be neutral.

   b) Now describe a meeting where it was difficult to be neutral.

   c) Talk about how necessary you believe neutrality is in your role as a facilitator.

   d) Discuss an example where a family asked for your opinion and how you responded to the request.

In following the already established format, the themes in common to both types of facilitators are reviewed first. Next the categories that vary within and between the types of facilitators are analyzed. A separate analysis as to what the facilitators did specifically to remain neutral is then portrayed. The entire section concludes with an overall summary highlighting the similarities and differences along with some preliminary insights.

**Facilitators’ Perceptions about Neutrality**

Four themes were common to both facilitator types in response to the third research question: “facilitator opinion,” “knowledge,” “role of the facilitator”, and “balancing power.” The unassigned caseworker facilitators were also coded “bottom lines” while the assigned caseworker facilitators spoke also about “lack of family engagement” (see Table 8). Despite some of the similarities, insights and conclusions are markedly different. There are also clear distinctions within each facilitator type, particularly in the unassigned group that will be examined throughout this section. A review of each theme with supportive quotations will help define facilitators’ perspectives on neutrality.
Facilitator opinion - is the facilitator’s thoughts, ideas, and views about what should and should not happen during the preparation phase and the actual Family Meeting. It is reasonable that “facilitator opinion” would arise for this research question in that it is central to the debate as to the existence of neutrality. It was not surprising that facilitators had thoughts and opinions during meetings about the participants, the process, and the outcomes. What is significant is whether or not their opinions impacted facilitation. There were key distinctions between the facilitator types for this category.

The unassigned caseworker facilitators offered numerous times when they had opinions regarding various aspects of meetings. Some admitted they were “supposed to have a neutral role” but that it was problematic when a family struggled with addressing the bottom lines or when they created unacceptable plans. The county that performed facilitation only offered examples of when they played an active role and suggested ideas. The following quotation is only one example:

So I do take an active role and throughout our process or throughout our training I have tried to be neutral, but sometimes when things are not coming out, and I feel that they need to come out, I will ensure that they do. I do that quite often. (C2)
It shows that although she was trained to be neutral and independent of the content of a meeting, there were times when her opinion influenced direction and outcomes. Another quote supports this view: “So I definitely put my thoughts and ideas about what’s going on out on the table, so I help in that process.” (C2)

The “facilitation only” group believed it was their responsibility to ensure that safety and risk were addressed even if it meant interference. They attributed this to their child protective background that was mentioned several times throughout their focus group. The next passage shows a justification for interfering in the direction of a meeting.

And I don’t know if it is so much neutrality, because we want protective objectives to be met. But we understand what needs to be presented and resolved. And because we know what the department needs and we also know what the family needs. And we are making sure both of those are met. And if they are not met, we make sure it hits the table.

Researcher: That is where the feeling of being not neutral might come in? I mean ultimately it’s about child safety. It’s about keeping these children safe. So, oh well, you’ve got to make sure kids are safe. (C2)

There is also a clear distinction between each unassigned caseworker facilitator group when it comes to the influence of their opinions. While the “facilitation only” unassigned group saw it as “part of their role to offer suggestions,” the other unassigned with a caseload, did not state openly that they did so. They spoke more to the difficulty in keeping their opinions to themselves and the importance of doing so:
It’s hard. It is. It is hard because you have ideas, you have something that you want to say and we all have our own opinion… (C4)

That’s what we do for a living, right? We are always telling people what to do. And this is the one time that we can’t tell them. It is up to them. It is a whole new way of doing things because we’ve always told them “this is what you are going to do”. (C4)

It’s even tougher for J. and I as supervisors because we are used to working with caseworkers and trying to help them out. It is hard to keep your mouth shut and just be a facilitator sometimes. (C4)

It is unmistakable that the above county believed they should keep their opinions to themselves but that it was not a simple task. They referred to it several times as “not getting sucked in.” The following example, from an assigned caseworker facilitator, shows a time when she was biased against a particular family friend and demonstrates how she restrained from interfering and was able to realize her original view was incorrect:

I had one where you know she also included a family friend who I also knew from another case. And I kind of did the “oh my God,” the eye roll. And I didn’t see her as a positive resource but in fact she did have some things to bring to the table. And she got us some resources that we wouldn’t have known, but she also offered services in ways I wouldn’t
have given her credit for. So that kind of opened my eyes a little bit because she wouldn’t have been on my list to invite. (C1)

A portion at the end of one of the transcripts sums up a conclusion one facilitator made about neutrality after reflecting on it during the focus group. She identified the contradictions in her training.

And I think through the experience of doing this, like in training, I feel like even just reflecting just now on it. In our training we were taught to be neutral and that’s the best practice case model. But as I do this more, that is not really the case and that is what I am seeing. You try to maintain like a persona of neutrality, but you still represent the department, as safeguarding the department’s requirements on cases if you will, or making sure kids are safe and split decisions are not being made. And in just thinking about it, even in training, when we went to training through Casey, they said the facilitator should be experienced and knowledgeable of CPS regulations and have a lot of experience with that, but then you are supposed to be neutral. But as I am thinking about it with the experience I have had and the amount of meetings I’m doing, you are not really neutral. (C2)

This is noteworthy in that there were assigned caseworkers in all of the unassigned caseworker facilitators’ Family Meetings that were not in the role of the facilitator. The caseworkers, whose role it was to identify the concerns and bottom lines, did not always do so or at least the facilitators did not think they did. Therefore, the facilitator did it for them. This implies that at times they are taking over the caseworker
role and possibly “wearing two different hats” which they referenced as one of the downsides to using an assigned caseworker as a facilitator. This presents a contradiction that will be explored in the analysis for using assigned caseworkers to facilitate meetings.

Despite the struggle in keeping their opinions from interfering, both types of facilitators strived to remain neutral. The next theme is a sub-category of “facilitator opinion” and adds greatly to the stance of the assigned caseworker group on neutrality.

Assessment - is the process of determining if a facilitator’s opinion will interfere in the direction of a Family Meeting and if a different facilitator should be used. The assigned caseworker facilitators talked about times, due to their strong opinions, when they would consider having an unassigned worker facilitate meetings for their cases. The following quote speaks to these circumstances:

You know there’s just those tough cases where you’d rather be more of a participant versus the facilitator. So you ask somebody that is within the unit to facilitate the meeting for you because you just feel that strong about it—your conviction. Like this is the role that you should play in that. (C3)

The main reason offered for this decision was that they could not control their opinion from interfering, resulting in a lack of neutrality. Another passage gives some insight into the procedure:

Now at the same time, having stated earlier that I feel comfortable if I had a relationship, I would say from a supervisory standpoint, and I have had caseworkers in the past come to me and say, “I think there is a little too much animosity between myself and the family. It would be better if…”
And that has been successful too where we have had somebody who could be the neutral party facilitator. So, I do see that as a benefit. I think it is doing a truthful analysis of what your involvement is with the family and how it is perceived by the family. Because I can also see with some of our families, if I pulled their assigned caseworker and put somebody else in, I don’t think they will participate in the meeting because, you know, there goes my buddy F. (laugh out loud). And so at least from a supervisor’s perspective that is part of the conversation that I have with the caseworker going into a meeting is “what role do you want to play?” (C1)

This suggests the decision was based on the best interest of the family and the nature of the family’s relationship with the caseworker. It seems from this passage that this supervisor typically left it up to the caseworker to decide.

The next portion of a transcript explains how a determination may be made based on the caseworker’s assessment of the family’s perception of neutrality.

Because you may feel like you are neutral, you may be neutral but they not going to look at you that way because they already have their ideas. In this case I would much rather have a neutral party in there to facilitate it and someone who never worked with the family before. (C3)

Another example further illustrates the assessment process with one worker consulting with families for input, and another deciding on her own.

Researcher: And so, is that something you decide? You assess that and decide if you want to make a referral?
Decide with the family and when you start having the Family Meetings, and do you want somebody else to facilitate it or do you want me to do it? Let them make their decision.

Researcher: So do you think that is for the most part how it gets decided? That most people just talk to the families and say these are sort of your options and what do you think if I did it, or would you want someone else? I think if your decision is very clear as an individual, I think you know whether you should be the one to facilitate or not. Out of the gate. If you feel very strongly that it would be okay, you may not necessarily address it with the family and say, “Here’s your options.” (C3)

For the most part, facilitators assumed that families wanted a neutral facilitator or would judge them in terms of their neutrality. Conceivably, family members may have an idea of which they might prefer and see the concept of neutrality differently. Family members’ perceptions have yet to be explored and could be quite enlightening.

Overall, this review shows the assigned caseworker facilitators putting a good deal of deliberation into determining who should facilitate Family Meetings for their own cases. The assessment process appeared to be subjective, achieved by either caseworkers judging their own ability to be neutral, or through consultation with other staff members. Inclusion of families seemed to be the exception. This raises the question as to how neutral are facilitators in judging their own state of neutrality?

**Knowledge** - what and how much the facilitator knows about the family who is having a Family Meeting. This theme includes facilitators knowing such information as a family’s history with the social service agency, information about relatives, past or
current problems such as substance abuse, or illegal activities, to name only a few. This connects closely with the struggles on the part of the facilitator in remaining neutral. Typically, the unassigned caseworker facilitators know little about the families they are arranging a meeting for, whereas the assigned caseworker facilitators have more information due to their pre-existing relationships (American Humane, 2010). It is assumed that the former are more neutral than the latter. The pre-meeting stage of preparation is the chief way that unassigned caseworker facilitators gather background on a family. This is not to say that the assigned do not perform preparation, as there are usually potential members with which they have had little or no prior contact. As the theme of “knowledge” emerged from this study, it showed a powerful distinction between the two types of facilitators, leading the researcher to present the results separately.

The unassigned caseworker facilitators who had their own caseloads, dialogued about the intricacies of having knowledge while those that did “facilitation only” made little mention of it. This is reasonable in that the “facilitation only” group, who were not part of a specific child and family unit, oftentimes received minimal information from the referral source. They disclosed that the time they devoted to preparation was negligible. The only time they had some prior knowledge was when they were facilitating follow-up meetings. They also worked in an urban area compared to the more rural area of the other unassigned caseworker facilitators. Participants in less populated counties oftentimes know about a family from unit meetings, other positions they held, or simply due to the close proximity to others in the office. Small town agencies tend to have more knowledge of the populace as compared to urban areas. The American Humane Society,
as referenced in Chapter 2, recognized that it is difficult to obtain an independent facilitator in rural areas (American Humane, 2010). These circumstances may explain why the code “knowledge” was not assigned for both unassigned caseworker facilitator groups.

In the following examples, the unassigned caseworker facilitators add a deeper understanding to the complexity of neutrality. The first passage shows that knowledge of the family made it difficult when listing ideas from family members on poster paper. Others show the amount of information they had influenced their opinions and added to the struggle of remaining neutral.

And I see that sometimes being difficult [knowing the family]. But you just have to put it out of your mind and go in like you don’t know the case, or know the specifics. And no matter what they [family] say, you put down; you know its like “ugh.” You still put it down because it is what they feel. You have to go by what they feel not how I’m the person that sees it. You have to be on that fine gray line. (C4)

If you have any inkling of the case it is hard to be neutral.

I don’t want too much preparation. I don’t want to be too prepared because then I feel like I’m driving the meeting towards a certain goal.

Like this person is going to do this and have that idea in my head. (C4)

One facilitator disagreed with the group several times in that she preferred to have more information before she facilitated a case.

I guess I feel the opposite. I like knowing the background. If there are any learning disabilities, if there is any mental illness. I feel like the better
I am prepared knowing about the family, then I can cue in. Like that one meeting we had with the father was sitting there, the stepfather was there and the mother and they kept making slight little jabs about the bio-father. And you know their history, so you know if they make too many jabs they are going to have a fight here…and the father did get up and walk out.

But I like knowing the background. To me that is helpful. (C4)

It is apparent she believed that information about the family put her at an advantage for unexpected situations and ways for her to work with a family, but her view was an exception. For the most part these unassigned caseworker facilitators spoke about how they minimized the amount of information a facilitator knew about a family at the time of referral, thereby diminishing their bias and manipulation of the process.

And I think in that regard we are pretty good about when J. gives us referrals. Getting us basic background of the referral to know who’s ever had any contact with the family previously. (C4)

This county was careful in assigning cases to facilitators but acknowledged that the system was not perfect. There appeared to be an agreed-upon policy when assigning a facilitator for a specific Family Meeting. The following quote illustrates an extreme example where screening of the family would not have helped, since the facilitator did not know the grandmother’s married name:

At one of our Family Meetings that we had, it was the one that mom was very upset. In walks the father’s mother and she goes “Oh J. How are you? Remember me? I went to school with you?” And I’m like ohhhhhhhhhhh. And that’s the last thing you want to hear because you are
thinking here’s this mother and if she starts realizing that this grandmother knows me…(C4)

She went on to elaborate how she was concerned about how the family, particularly the mother, would perceive her neutrality. Even though the facilitator felt she could be unbiased, the family might think she would take sides, given the past relationship with the grandmother.

Only two advantages to having knowledge of the family were conveyed by the unassigned caseworker facilitators. One was that background obtained in the preparation phase allowed them to sometimes advocate for a family and ensure that certain issues were addressed. The other was that facilitators might know when to prompt or encourage certain participants to speak up as a result of having additional information. Despite these two benefits, they deduced that it was easier to facilitate with less information, allowing them more neutrality.

The code of “knowledge” was assigned more than any other for the assigned caseworker facilitators in relation to the third research question. They carried out lengthy dialogues that looked at the advantages and drawbacks to how much a facilitator knew about a family before conducting a meeting. One county clearly believed the advantages outweighed the disadvantages while the other was more balanced in its view. The following passages from the county that could see both sides to having knowledge, show one worker who believed less knowledge for certain cases was best, while another thought a facilitator could be neutral regardless of how much she knew.

Right. And we are so small back there [in same office] that it is sort of hard not to know what everybody’s other cases are doing. And so I think
we all need to be very mindful about picking that right caseworker that would be the best fit and that would be the most unbiased and the most neutral party. Just don’t give them a whole lot of information because they are going to taint it right from the get-go.

Researcher: Other people agree?

Well, I think even if you know some or a lot about the case, I think going in there as a facilitator you don’t really have to interfere. You can have your agenda. This is what we are going to do, and not really get into the arguments or take a side one way or another. I think you can be neutral if you do know a lot about it. You have to decide that’s what you are going to do and stick to what your role is and not get into the rest of it. (C3)

This also showed the emphasis on knowing their role and relying on the format of the meeting to ensure some distance. One worker believed you could do it while the other was not as certain. The one that was less sure did go on to say that the ability to be a neutral facilitator varied with the individual and how effective she was in preventing her knowledge from manipulating the process:

It’s not purposeful for the person, I believe, if you go in knowing a lot of information. You as a facilitator have the ability to steer that meeting in a certain direction. And you need to know what I guess your downfalls are in that process, to be able to not do that. Some people are better at it than others. And that’s the way that it will always be. Every person is an individual. (C3)
A few members concurred that it was “hard” to be neutral when they had a history with the family and had spent time listening to only one or two key family members that affected their viewpoint.

Some of the assigned caseworker facilitators went on at length about the advantages to “knowing a lot about the case.” They believed that as caseworkers they would have already processed some of the “emotional stuff” thereby reducing the chance of being unnerved during a Family Meeting. Another advantage extended to service providers in that facilitators would be familiar with their opinions, potential “triggers,” and hidden agendas, which would allow them to keep a meeting focused. They believed a facilitator with negligible information, could be swayed unknowingly, by service providers, in a particular direction. In addition, by understanding what transpired in a family over time, these facilitators felt they could clear up any misinformation that was presented. For example, a Family Meeting participant could be misrepresenting what a judge expected them to do and the assigned caseworker facilitator could give a more accurate description since they “would already know the case.” This is notable in that they believed that this advantage supported the use of an assigned caseworker facilitator.

There was no acknowledgement that an unassigned facilitator would have a family’s caseworker in a Family Meeting to correct any inaccuracies.

Knowledge was also thought to help in terms of planning, as demonstrated by the following quote:

Sometimes family members say “Okay I’ll transport so and so.” And you know that they have seizures. Or you know that some of the family
members that are offering resources may actually have to be on a more limited basis because you may have more information. (C1)

One last benefit to having knowledge of a family, also coded as the sub-category “facilitator/family relationship,” stressed the advantages for children.

And for kids I think too. They have a more familiar feel with the caseworker than they would with someone who is unfamiliar to them.

And they may have already had a discussion with the caseworker of some of the things that they are willing to present at the meeting. So, I think that probably is a benefit to their comfort level. (C1)

The knowledge these assigned caseworker facilitators gained as the caseworker to their families was seen as affecting their neutrality but thought to be advantageous and manageable in terms of its interference. The unassigned workers, particularly for one county, believed too much knowledge was problematic.

**Role of the facilitator - a function or part played by the facilitator with obligations and defined behaviors.** In this study “role of the facilitator” was coded whenever facilitators spoke about their position directly and identified activities they believed were a function of their job. There was general agreement for this category between both types of facilitators. They saw their role as the person who was unbiased and purely orchestrating the meeting. The next quote is from an unassigned caseworker facilitator:

And you are the one person in the room who is in the middle. You don’t
know anything about the people and they don’t know anything about you.

So you are the one person that, I guess it kind of helps you keep on task because you are not…

Researcher: You’re not as involved?

Exactly. (C4)

Another member defined the actual role of the facilitator in the following way:

I think it’s a neutral person to mediate and lay the ground rules of the meeting to make sure that the family has an agenda that meets goals and you have to work together to come up with a plan to reach those goals.

(C3)

The next passage has a facilitator acknowledging her lack of neutrality but speaking to how she tries to keep this separate by functioning in a different position.

To me, I think everything is just putting on that different hat. I can say in the Family Meetings that I have conducted, as far as the family goes, I’m not neutral at all. I have a very in-depth role with them and usually have quite extensive relationships with the family members and sometimes the extended family members. And it certainly is a vested interest in seeing them succeed. But when I start that Family Meeting or decide to have a Family Meeting that becomes a completely different process. And in that meeting I step back and although I may know certain things about the way the family functions or the history or whatever, it’s more my job to take a step back at that point and let the family be creative in coming up with
their own solutions on how they are going to tackle the issues at hand.

(C1)

This caseworker acknowledged she was biased and had a stake in the family’s progress, but felt she could put this aside when she switched into the facilitator role.

Some facilitators believed it was their role at times to protect family members, particularly from service providers that “were piling on them.” This taking of sides is apparent in many responses. The following quote is just one example of this and shows the facilitator possibly compromising her neutrality.

So then I think one of the placement facilities came to interview the son [during the meeting], so he left. And mom was read the riot act and she is just sitting there crying and they are like piling on her. And I was like, wait a minute, “She’s crying. Let’s give her a moment.” And again I felt my role at that time was to protect this mother even though she hadn’t done what she needed to do. She needed a little bit of protecting. (C2)

When this facilitator displayed this aspect of her role, she aligned herself with the family, somewhat against the service providers. By coming to the family’s defense she compromised her neutrality and allowed her views to influence facilitation. Facilitators also offered times when they sided with agency personnel, although these examples were far less frequent. It seems they may err on the side of defending families more often, possibly due to the family’s vulnerability and the previously mentioned interference by service providers.

The assigned caseworker facilitators made several references to taking their “caseworker hat off” in that they had separate responsibilities as a facilitator. They used
“mental notes” to remind themselves that they were not to be acting in the caseworker role. This technique allowed them to step back from the process by realizing that as both caseworker and facilitator they were not responsible for the decisions that needed to be made. This duality in roles is thought to be nonexistent for the unassigned group since they are acting only as facilitators, yet the analysis in the previous section on “facilitator opinion” and the subsequent ones pertaining to “balancing power” and “bottom lines” indicate that at times they also may have played two roles.

Balancing power - is the on-going decision facilitators make about which participants will have influence and control throughout a Family Meeting. Historically, caseworkers and other agency personnel are in the role of telling families how to resolve their difficulties. Power underlies the very nature of empowerment in that if families contribute to decisions for the safety of their children, then caseworkers, supervisors, and the other agency personnel have relinquished some of their power. It is expected in Family Meetings that families will have more say in planning for the needs of its members. The facilitator is in a key position to assist in this balancing of power.

Both types of facilitators spoke about not taking sides but also about making certain that power was more balanced than in the conventional relationship between families and their social service workers. This at times, as touched on earlier, was manifested when the facilitator decided to take a side to balance power during a meeting. For example, when a facilitator believed that a family member wasn’t being heard or that agency personnel were monopolizing the conversation, a facilitator made the decision to give the family a turn to speak. The opposite also held true in that the facilitator shifted power to agency personnel and service providers when judged as necessary. This speaks
to the concept of equidistance as identified in Chapter 2 where facilitators balance their interventions between participants to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to present their side (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Cohen, Dattner, & Luxenburg, 1999; Wing, 2009).

When workers do this they are making decisions throughout a meeting about who has power, if it is in the correct hands, and if it should be shifted. It shows a level of involvement that compromises their neutrality with little assurance that a facilitator will balance the power in the “right” direction. This continuous maintenance of equilibrium may be conscious or unconscious and implies that facilitators are not acting in a neutral way. The following passage gives some insight into this struggle and shows a facilitator making sure a family was heard while acknowledging she was not neutral.

And that’s the same for the family. Sometimes maybe there is not time for the family’s concerns to be heard, but they need to be heard. So you are not neutral because you have an agenda of bringing both [the family and service providers’ concerns] of those things to the table. So you aren’t neutrally facilitating that process. (C3)

One worker spoke of the same struggle but considered herself neutral in wanting to support families while also staying out of decision making.

Because I think you are [the facilitator] the neutral party, sometimes they kind of look at you and want you to help them along. So trying—that balance of helping them along, but not influencing them in any way. Trying to find a way to do that without influencing the outcome of the meeting. (C4)
The next compelling example is from a discussion between two participants referenced earlier under “detractors” to family involvement. It is used again here for power and neutrality and offers an instance where the balance of power is in the agency’s direction. Power was taken from the family, particularly the teenager who refused to participate and did not agree with the plan. In fact the meeting ended and the agency facilitator moved into the authoritative role of supervisor.

That one case of yours. That was the worst. I actually had to switch from facilitator to supervisor.

Researcher: What happened there?

The girl I talked about earlier that wouldn’t participate and then she wouldn’t make a plan and said I’m going to run away, and …. 

Researcher: So you were a facilitator and then you sort of had to move over to….

I had to yes, because I had to go into supervisor mode and get a hold of probation and our law department and it pretty much ended the meeting. We wanted her to be informed of, okay, if that’s your plan that is fine, but this is what happens if that is your plan.

Researcher: So then you’re not being neutral, you’re feeling at that point you’re saying this is what needs to happen and…. 

Yes, relative to your question, there came a point in that meeting where she said if you make me go home and go in this location, I’m going to run away. What do we do with that? That pretty much ended my facilitation role. (C4)
The facilitator who was also a supervisor used what could be considered “legitimate power” to intervene and take control (French & Raven, 1959). He exercised his right to take charge, as it was his and the agency’s job to ensure safety. This shows an unassigned caseworker facilitator intervening, not working to balance power, and never mentioning the family’s caseworker stepping in. It is remarkable that in this case a facilitator exerted power over the family and not the caseworker. Having a supervisor who is also the facilitator may be what contributed to this “takeover.” It is possible that the caseworker might have been more involved had the facilitator been another caseworker as opposed to a supervisor. The caseworker may have yielded to the supervisor who by the nature of his job status had more power. This exposes another layer of power that is outside the range of this study.

The next facilitator describes a Family Meeting when a mother did not want a particular service provider in attendance. Due to the mother’s recent homelessness, the facilitator was unable to inform her that this particular person would be in attendance. The facilitator used her influence to convince the mother to allow the service provider into the meeting.

And the woman from the VA’s came in and she [mother] was really angry because she thought the VA representative was the person who called in the hotline report. And she was because she told them she did and she was very angry, she was like “I don’t want you here.” So you know, I told her “I wasn’t able to talk to you before this but it’s a team effort, we want to get everyone here at the table so we can get a good plan.” “Help your family get a good plan.” And she was adamant “I don’t want her here, she
doesn’t help.” I was like, I know housing was an issue, she’s a housing person trying to get an in with her. And finally the husband said “well she is helping with HUD” and she was like, “okay I’ll let her stay.” By the end of it this woman offered her a slew of services that she wants to take advantage of. So again, “if she wasn’t here you wouldn’t have gotten it.” And at the end she was like, “that’s right.”

Researcher: And if you hadn’t worked through that issue, she might not have stayed.

Right, right. (C2)

This instance shows the facilitator believed the worker from the Veteran’s Administration would be of assistance to the mother. She used coercive power and possibly a stance of expertise to persuade this woman to agree (French & Raven, 1959). The facilitator used her own power to intervene and influence what would become the outcomes of the meeting.

These examples showed facilitators were involved in many aspects of Family Meetings and did so when they believed it was warranted. They stepped back from the process in some instances and exerted or balanced power during others. It seems these decisions varied with the facilitator’s views on the interactions throughout a Family Meeting.

**Bottom lines** - _information presented usually by the caseworker that outlines the safety and/or health concerns that the written plan must address._ Bottom lines, typically stated by caseworkers, are the necessary issues that the family must give attention to in the planning stage. For example, a caseworker may state that a child must see her
pediatrician regularly for a specific medical condition. How this is accomplished is in the hands of family members. The family must decide how the child will get to the doctors and include the strategies in a written plan.

The unassigned caseworker facilitators believed they needed to step in and “take control” when bottom lines were unclear or unaddressed. Making these types of judgments moves facilitators into territory where they are quite involved and compromising their neutrality. These appraisals directed their facilitation as supported by the following quotation:

I think where I struggle with neutrality is a lot of times some of the things to us is kind of common sense, I guess. What we are asking or looking for. So we see things sometimes very black and white. Obviously. I think being neutral in most of the meetings is pretty easy for me until we come to the bottom lines. And I don’t know if it is just the way I look at things. And for families sometimes their bottom lines are you have to go to sleep at 9:00. And to me the bottom line is ‘that’s not the bottom line!’ and trying to draw that out or get somebody else to draw that out. Because I know the bottom line is not going to bed at 9:00. I struggle there sometimes in trying to find the best way to do it. (C4)

Perhaps remaining neutral for these facilitators comes with its qualifications: they do not interfere when bottom lines are handled correctly but intrude when they see them mishandled. This presents a conundrum in that the family’s caseworker was in the meeting yet did not seem to present the critical issues. The next conversation shows some of the frustration with the caseworker of the family.
And trying to kind of redirect them. And I think some of it is also about preparing the caseworker who is bringing this case in advance. “What are your bottom lines?” “What really needs to change?” “What are the key things here?” And making sure they are prepared to chime in. Because I think that is where it happens [interference] is when that caseworker doesn’t do that piece.

And you are thinking that someone needs to chime in. Is it me? And is it okay if it is me? But this has to be put out there. And when the caseworker doesn’t do it, then it is like ugh. (C4)

According to the FGDM model, the caseworker states the bottom lines, thereby freeing the facilitator from appearing to have an opinion. However, these passages show that these unassigned caseworker facilitators oftentimes felt they needed to articulate the bottom lines for the caseworker. This contradicts the unassigned caseworker facilitators’ beliefs that part of their neutrality was based on not having the dual role of facilitating and also acting as the family’s caseworker.

I think being a caseworker, having a caseload is very demanding. I think this job although you don’t have a caseload is demanding in its own way. So to be able to juggle both. I think it is not good to be a caseworker because you can’t really be…..you have those bottom lines – safety issues, that you are responsible for. And then if you are trying to--- you are oppositional most of the time with the family. (C2)

Bottom lines as a theme is an important factor influencing the neutrality of unassigned caseworker facilitators and is closely tied to their assertion of power.
Family engagement - Participation of family members where it is evident that they ‘buy into’ the process, demonstrated by asking questions, being part of discussions, and making contributions. This can also include an interest in attending future meetings.

The theme of “lack of family engagement” is the last one to review for this third research question. It was only a mention by the assigned caseworker facilitators but had strong agreement. They referred to the difficulty of keeping neutral when the facilitator worked with a family who was not committed to change or saw no need for it. Due to frustrations from past interactions and lack of progress, a caseworker might have unresolved feelings toward a family that could impact facilitation. This also touched on the themes of “knowledge” and “facilitator opinion” but was included separately as it was singled out as an additional impediment to neutrality. The following quote demonstrates that facilitators felt they may be more neutral with a family who was “on board” as opposed to a family that was just “going through the motions.”

I think it’s harder to be objective when, with those families that don’t engage. They don’t comply. They don’t take things seriously. They don’t see the seriousness of the circumstances. I think we, I’ll speak for myself. I get frustrated by that. And I think if I were to facilitate the case in mind, that that would be difficult to do. (C 3)

This passage implies that it was easier to be neutral with a family that was involved and committed to the process. If a facilitator thinks a family is resistant to making changes, his or her bias may interfere more than with a cooperative family. This raises questions about how decisions are made as to what families are offered a Family Meeting. An assigned caseworker facilitator could offer meetings only to those families
they believe are worthy, cooperative, and/or motivated. This assessment and referral process is outside the scope of this study but points to areas for possible research.

**What Did Facilitators Do To Stay Neutral?**

This focus group question evolved out of discussions with all four counties and was instructive for examining in detail facilitators’ actions. This is much like the analysis in the first section on family decision making. Despite facilitators identifying the challenges of remaining neutral, and even admitting to not being neutral at times, they offered strategies they used in achieving it. Both types of facilitators spoke of the various “facilitator competencies” they implemented, while the unassigned also claimed that following the “meeting format” was an additional tool.

**Facilitator competencies** - *Facilitation skills that facilitators have learned from training, consultation with staff, and by facilitating Family Meetings. This includes the sub-category of “facilitator self-awareness” defined as a facilitator’s consciousness in terms of his or her potential effect on all stages of a Family Meeting and what he or she does with that knowledge.* Skills they learned in training such as reflecting and summarizing were used to encourage families to be part of the process and allowed the facilitator to take a step back. The phrase “back in their court” was used several times. They often reminded themselves that “this is not my plan” to help them stay out of decision making. Many of the same competencies that were listed in reference to family involvement were similar to those used to remain neutral.

The sub-category of “facilitator self-awareness” was identified as important for facilitators in order to “keep themselves in check.”
And I see that sometimes being difficult. But you just have to put it out of your mind and go in like you don’t know the case, or know the specifics. You need to manage yourself.

I remind myself of the importance of it being a family plan. And reminding myself that I believe in this process and why we are doing something differently. And that kind of keeps me in check. (C4)

Facilitators used self-talk in order to separate their beliefs, opinions, and values from influencing the process. They frequently expressed confidence in their ability to do this, which was stated more often by the assigned caseworker facilitators.

For me, it's simple. And at times I have to remind myself in my brain, “This isn’t my family.” “This is a job.” Not to get too invested in it and just say, “This isn’t my family.” They are going to make decisions and they are adults. You can only do so much regardless of whether it’s Family Meetings or whether it’s something else. I pretty much tell myself this daily (laugh out loud). (C1)

This awareness also allowed the assigned caseworker facilitators to decide if it was more beneficial for a family to have an unassigned caseworker rather than themselves to facilitate a Family Meeting, as detailed previously under the category “assessment.”

**Meeting format - A course of activities, which are expected and typical of what occurs during a Family Meeting and leads to a completed plan. These include the review of the purpose and ground rules of the meeting, presentation of strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines, and having everyone have a “voice” during the meeting.**
The course of activities from the beginning of a Family Meeting until the finalization of a plan, was also identified by the unassigned caseworker facilitators as helping them to remain neutral. Following the agenda and stages of a Family Meeting, in and of itself, afforded them a tool for distancing themselves from the process. This enabled them to “stay on task” and not be influenced in various directions. Several people relied on this strategy.

I try to stick with the agenda.

Focus on the facts.

Exactly. That agenda is a lifesaver because you can focus on that and just go on and…

Ask the questions and they plug in the answers for you.

Sometimes you just have to go, okay, let’s move on to the resources now.

(C4)

Facilitators relied on following the stages of the model to prevent them from taking sides. They saw their role as a gatherer of information, listener to all participants, and finally as a recorder of the meeting and final plan. This somewhat removed position relates to Taylor’s continuum of neutrality where this type of facilitation would be considered the least involved in the process (1997). Facilitators believed the format itself acted as a script for them to follow and allowed for little intervention on their part.

Overall Summary

There are some perceptions about neutrality in the facilitator’s role where all of the focus groups were in agreement. They all expressed that the ability to maintain neutrality was challenging. Both types brought out the themes of “facilitator opinion,” “role of the
facilitator,” “knowledge” and “balancing power.” They had opinions about family members, the needed direction of meetings, the bottom lines, and preferred outcomes. This demonstrates their influence on the process and content that by definition would render them biased. Their role was to be uninvolved and not to take sides, but at times they felt they needed to do so. They were resolute as to the importance of remaining neutral, but appeared from some of their examples to be partial.

Examples of balancing power in either a family’s or service provider’s direction, showed a taking of sides that also compromised their neutrality. Although they tried to balance in a way that was in what they thought was in the best interest of families, they also shifted it to agency personnel when they deemed it necessary. This supporting of different “sides” clearly showed that facilitators made decisions throughout meetings as to where the balance of power should be. This too indicates interference into the course of a meeting, whether consciously or not.

There were also clear differences between the two types of facilitators. Unassigned caseworker facilitators seemed to have an unclear and at times contradictory view of neutrality. The workers that did facilitation only believed they were neutral but also offered their ideas and opinions. Both of the unassigned groups believed they stayed out of the content except when the bottom lines were vague or safety and health concerns were not addressed.

When it came to how much a facilitator knew about a family, the unassigned caseworker facilitators that also had a caseload concluded that having less knowledge about a family’s situation helped them be neutral.
Overall, responses from the unassigned caseworker facilitators showed involvement in Family Meetings, along with beliefs about what should be the focus. They assessed when they should intervene, on whose behalf they should do it, and whether or not the correct issues were being addressed. Despite these behaviors, they continued to see neutrality as essential to their responsibilities. Quite possibly, they know they are not always neutral, but it is something they strive for when they believe it is required.

The assigned caseworker facilitators are in a very different position from that of the unassigned ones in that they are not only the family’s caseworker but also their Family Meeting facilitator. According to the Family Group Decision Making literature, this in itself compromises neutrality. Yet these two groups conducted meetings and presented informative insights into the concept and the challenges they faced.

The assigned caseworker facilitators were well aware of the duality in their role and spoke about the need to “take their caseworker hat off” to reduce bias. The theme of “knowledge” was tied strongly to neutrality in that the assigned caseworker facilitator often knew the history of a family and had an existing relationship with them. They acknowledged that this complicated their facilitation, but felt certain, through using “facilitator self-awareness,” that they could set it aside in order to be fair.

When faced with a potential meeting where they believed they could not be neutral, a different facilitator was obtained. Criteria for these decisions were based on the relationship with the family and/or the potential interference of their knowledge and beliefs. They felt this assessment was key to their neutrality. Lastly, a family that demonstrated little engagement made it difficult for them to remain neutral. The
facilitator might have a history of trying to persuade a family to make improvements and be irritated by their lack of progress.

Although process and content are defined separately in the literature, it is not always easy to keep them this way. Process is considered to be the part of a meeting that is acceptable for a facilitator to meddle in, while the content is not. Facilitators are clearly involved in the process as it is part of their responsibilities. Their involvement in the content may be less obvious. If facilitators offer ideas, they are clearly contributing to content. But if they are working to encourage a particular member to speak up, it could be either one: content - if the idea presented influenced outcome, or process - if they were just ensuring the person got a turn to speak. All four groups offered many examples of when they seemed to be involved in both.

Both groups were coded for “facilitator competencies” with the sub-category of “facilitator self-awareness” for what they do specifically to remain neutral. The assigned caseworker facilitators emphasized these far more. These acquired skills were applied in a deliberate fashion to reduce bias. The unassigned caseworker facilitators also identified “meeting format” since they relied on the sequence of the model and the stages of a Family Meeting to remain neutral. Since the unassigned are less familiar with families, they might feel more removed from the process thereby relying on the steps and stages. The assigned depended on their competencies more, especially self-awareness, because their knowledge was an additional challenge to an unbiased condition.

Even though examples of participation and intervention on the part of the facilitators were presented frequently, all felt they worked to keep a neutral stance. The
following research question adds further understanding to their sentiments about neutrality.

**Research Question #4: What are the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators’ beliefs about the assigned caseworker also acting as the facilitator of a Family Meeting?**

The intention of the fourth question was to understand how facilitators viewed the rare practice of having a caseworker facilitate Family Meetings for families on their caseload. By exploring their thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages to this novel approach, findings on neutrality were enriched. As stated previously, it is assumed in the FGDM field that the non-case carrying, so-called “independent” facilitators are more neutral than those who have a history of working with a family.

The following two focus group questions elicited responses that were quite revealing:

1) What are some of the challenges the unassigned caseworkers face when they facilitate a Family Meeting?

2) Contrast these challenges with those of the assigned caseworker facilitating a Family Meeting.

**Beliefs About the Assigned Caseworker Facilitator**

Two themes were uncovered for all four focus groups: “role of facilitator” and “facilitator/family relationship.” Despite this match in coding, the variations in their responses are vast.

**Role of facilitator** - a function or part played by the facilitator with obligations and defined behaviors. The unassigned caseworker facilitators had very strong beliefs
against using an assigned caseworker to facilitate Family Meetings for their own caseload. “Role of the facilitator” was coded several times for when they talked about the “duality” in the position and that using the assigned caseworker did not allow for neutrality. This first passage shows the challenges in acting as both the facilitator and the caseworker:

You are in different roles, you are opposite. The family sees you as the government coming in and telling them what to do, what needs to be done, what they are doing wrong. So now how do you pull trust from them? And how do you facilitate a meeting where it needs to have some type of mutuality, if you will? So I think that’s very hard. That is a dual hat to wear. I don’t foresee how that is possible. (C2)

The following two passages represent most of the unassigned caseworker facilitators’ views and substantiate how they see the challenges as insurmountable.

To me it creates a dual role for the caseworker. They are no longer just able to participate and get their opinion out objectively. Now they also take on the role of having to conduct people and having to keep people on task and get from start to end. (C4)

And I think it is a lot easier for those lines to be blurred for a caseworker to be standing up there, and maybe giving their concerns. (C4)

All answers were delivered with passion and force demonstrating their unwavering views. The unassigned caseworker facilitators were emphatic that having a caseworker facilitate a Family Meeting for their own cases was detrimental and confusing to families.
The assigned caseworker facilitators had little conversation in reference to their role. They alluded only to the stress of the additional tasks when functioning in both positions. The following discussion was in response to a question about the disadvantages to running a meeting for their own case.

I sat in on one that wasn’t mine so I didn’t feel the pressure that I felt running my own meetings. All of the things that pop into your head of the things that you have got to do, the caseworker activities that you got to do that week or for that month, so which is hard sometimes to separate….

Researcher: Different hats that you have to…

It is. I remember sitting in on the Family Meeting as an observer that they were noticing I wasn’t feeling the anxiety: What do I have to do? What is the family doing? And what’s next? I think there is a great benefit in that you can be more relaxed. You don’t have to think on your feet two different roles at the same time. (C3)

Aside from this disadvantage to facilitating for their own caseload, they generally felt favorable about their role.

**Facilitator/family relationship** – the association facilitators have with the family who is having a Family Meeting. This sub-category of “knowledge” gets to the heart of what in theory defines unassigned caseworker facilitators as neutral, since they have a limited relationship with families. They stressed that the relationship between the caseworker and the family was often “adversarial.”

And if you violate them and do a neglect, they get the letter in the mail and my name is on it. And I have to go back to the house and try to
continue to help them when that line can be blurred. And I don’t know how many times I have tried to explain that “I’ll try to be fair,” “I’ll try to do my best,” “I’ll try to find a solution that’s good for everybody,” they still see me as that woman who filed a neglect and she’s trying to take my kids away. (C4)

According to these facilitators, this negative association was typical, regardless of their efforts to foster it in a positive direction. There was one favorable mention, but it was more of an afterthought.

And there are a lot of meetings where families say, “oh I love my caseworker.” “She’s a wonderful worker. We have a good relationship.” So it’s always not that adversarial, but I think it is a separate role. Being a caseworker and being a facilitator are two separate roles, and to have one person playing both roles I think it is a conflict. (C2)

The focus group participants who did only facilitation expressed the belief that they actually improved the relationship between the caseworker and the family through a Family Meeting.

And I think as facilitators we both think that we strengthen that bond between caseworker and family. We do strengthen the bond and the outcome that comes from the meeting. The family gets to see the caseworker’s role as something different than they first anticipated. (C2)

This advantage was mentioned from this focus group only. Evidence in the FGC literature indicates that having a meeting oftentimes develops the relationship between a caseworker and a family in positive direction (Huntsman, 2006; Nixon et al., 2005). The
negative belief about the role of the assigned caseworker facilitator continued as evidenced in the following quotes. The overlap with the theme of power is also clear.

I think not only finger pointing but fear that they might, we might be somehow sneakily leading them in some other direction. Thinking that we’ve got some hidden agenda.

And I think that is the way a lot of the people feel is that DSS is out to get them and why do we want to do these things and then it’s the caseworker running the meeting and her again… (C4)

Contrary to these views, the assigned caseworker facilitators had an overwhelmingly strong response that their relationship with families was beneficial. They believed it saved time because they gathered information about them from the start of the case. A level of trust was created that was integral to enhanced family participation. Due to this foundation, facilitators were able to be both supportive and challenging.

I think back to one of our very, very first Family Meetings and I think had I not had a very strong confrontational yet supportive relationship with that mother, that we would have never had that meeting. Or it would have never been successful at all. It was very difficult for her to allow that, to accept those challenges, to hear what everybody was saying. And she ended up letting people that she didn’t know participate. But not having that prior formed relationship and her being used to me being able to confront her about things. I don’t think that would have happened at all. (C1)
The county that used assigned caseworker facilitators most often was passionate in their expression that the relationship was integral to the success of a Family Meeting. The following quote illustrates their difficulty in understanding the use of an unassigned caseworker:

If another caseworker came to me and said “Could you facilitate a Family Meeting? I’ll give you an overview of what’s going on,” I wouldn’t be comfortable with that. I would probably want to meet the family members first and get a feel – just because of that comfort level. Our units had other caseworkers help them be part of Family Meetings and that has been one of the comments I think when we did the surveys that people say they would have liked to have met everybody before we did it. So, I would feel like I would miss things if I just got that overview and “here do this, and here’s who will be there.” I would feel more comfortable having met people and gotten their perspective and gotten a feel for everybody. (C1)

The researcher pointed out during this discussion that the unassigned do speak with families during the preparation phase, but this caseworker did not feel it would be enough.

The assigned caseworker facilitators emphasized the need to create a positive relationship from the start, long before a Family Meeting takes place.

I think your relationship that you build prior to any of that from the onset probably plays a big role on how well that meeting is going to go. How respectful you are of the family. How much you have given them – either options along the way or having coping discussions with them. Anything
that can make the meeting go much better and get better involvement so that they realize that you are there to help them at the meeting. So it’s not like when you get in there they think everybody is against them and you are trying to have this meeting to get them to make decisions or to get them involved. If you’ve done that all along leading up to that, I think that makes a huge difference in how that’s going to look. (C1)

This points to the advantage of developing a working relationship right from the start when caseworkers first meet with families. Caseworkers in New York State, during their core caseworker training, are encouraged to work from this partnership approach (Research Foundation, 2012). The county that decided on facilitator type more often on a case-by-case basis, was less strong in their beliefs around this, as evidenced in the following quote:

I only would do meetings on my own if it was a true Family Meeting feel, or if it’s a family I may have worked with before. That or a family that I had worked with a lot and we get along really well. And they are open to the idea that I could be neutral. (C3)

Two final areas were suggested as benefits to facilitating Family Meetings for their own caseload: less work for the caseworker and not burdening another worker.

It can make it shorter, quicker, a more compact deal when you do your own. (C3)

Everybody gets together, kind of goes through. Everybody kind of knows what they are doing at that point. So that can be a definite advantage to doing them yourself. (C3)
Not putting that added work onto another caseworker. (C3)

Responses from the assigned caseworker facilitators also showed they were able to look at both sides of the issue. Despite their identified advantages, they acknowledged that the very nature of their job responsibilities could lead to an unconstructive relationship with families:

I think by the time you get to that meeting, the history. “You’re the one that kept us from seeing our kids whenever we want to. You’re the one that said ‘no’ more than you said ‘yes.’ You are the one that wants us to change our whole life around and engage all these services, which we’re not able to do. We don’t even agree with you as to why we have to do all these things.” I think just we are often an adversary, unfortunately…not always, but often when we first get involved. (C3)

They also identified times when a family was too angry at their caseworker and/or the agency so that facilitating a Family Meeting just “would not work.”

I think if you have a very, very angry family that is fighting the caseworker all the way because they think the caseworker has their own agenda or something. I think that’s when using a different person can certainly help motivate. They really need to be somebody they’re not working with. (C1)

A few facilitators also mentioned that knowing certain details about a family’s situation could be difficult to “put aside.” One also stated that despite appearing neutral, an assigned caseworker facilitator could still guide the meeting and push her agenda
unconsciously. These types of circumstances could lead the assigned caseworker facilitators to use “assessment” to decide if they should facilitate.

**Overall Summary**

Little has been documented about facilitators’ views on which type of facilitator is best suited for Family Meetings. It is expected that each would be more favorable toward their own, which for the most part, was consistent with the data from this study. Although all four counties were trained similarly, the practices at their agency resulted in promotion for their own kind. Responses to the fourth research question brought out more fervent reactions than any other question. The unassigned caseworker facilitators saw no benefits to using the assigned and could not even fathom its possibility. They believed the contradiction in the role of caseworker and facilitator resulted in a lack of neutrality. The assigned caseworker facilitators were able to speak from both experiences: managing meetings for their own cases and having a different caseworker do it for them. This enabled them to see the strengths and weaknesses in each kind.

There were some differences between the two assigned caseworker facilitator groups. The county that decided more often on a case-by-case basis was balanced in outlining both benefits and drawbacks. The other county was more definitive in their statements that facilitating for their own cases was the favored way to conduct Family Meetings. Most were doubtful the unassigned caseworker facilitators could be as effective as the assigned.

Another area of disagreement between the two types of facilitators was that the unassigned could not see “playing” two roles as conceivable, while the assigned believed they could integrate them both. A glaring distinction between the unassigned and
assigned caseworkers was evidenced for the theme of “facilitator/family relationship,” a sub-category of “knowledge.” The unassigned saw the relationship between a caseworker and a family as generally negative, thereby creating an unworkable atmosphere for them to facilitate. They even stated that they, as facilitators, improved the relationship between families and their workers. It was also easier for them to follow the set agenda for a meeting and have no contact with a family once the meeting was completed. The assigned caseworkers presented several reasons why a relationship with a family was valuable. They felt the association, for the most part, was positive and productive and that the benefits outweighed the detriments.

It is reasonable that the two types of facilitators would have such opposing standpoints. Both defended their position against the other, and for the most part, each expressed that their approach was superior.

**Research # 5: How do the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators define success for a Family Meeting?**

The last research question is about success and how each facilitator group characterized it. Added to the list later in the development of the research plan as discussed during the defense of the research proposal, it hoped to uncover information that enhanced the other research questions. Merriam-Webster Online defines success as “a favorable or desired outcome.” This broad definition allows for the inclusion of all aspects of Family Meetings that facilitators viewed in a favorable light. The wide range of responses supports this broad definition. The following questions were asked of the participants in each focus group:
1) Talk about a Family Meeting you facilitated that you believe was very successful.

2) What told you it was a success?

3) What did you do that contributed to its success?

4) What facilitator skills do you believe are most important for a successful meeting?

Responses to these questions were examined in two parts: definition of success and facilitator activities that contributed to its occurrence.

**Definition of Success**

Three similar themes were uncovered for both facilitator types: “written plan,” “viewpoint change,” and “meeting format.” Answers from the assigned caseworkers included the additional theme of “family engagement” (see Table 9). Within the unassigned caseworker group, the county that did facilitation only, had a more limited response to the question on success. This may be partially because there were only two participants in this mini-focus group as opposed to a total of seven in the other unassigned. Sheer numbers can add to a richer discussion as each member brings additional comments that spawn further responses (Bloor, 2002; Kitzinger, 1994). Also, these questions were considered at the end of the focus group session and participants had appointments immediately following. The timing of this question seemed to reduce the responses for all four groups in that they had already covered several aspects to their position, answers became redundant, and there was little time left.
Table 9

*Themes for Facilitators’ Definition of Success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unassigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
<th>Assigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written Plan</td>
<td>Written Plan+ Subcategory Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoint Change</td>
<td>Viewpoint Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Format</td>
<td>Meeting Format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Family Engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Written plan** - The end result of the meeting where a document is created that includes decisions made to meet the presenting concerns. This also includes the sub-category “follow-up” which is defined as “any information that relates to the progress of the family in following the plan.” Participants from all four counties were in agreement that the “written plan” helped to define success as demonstrated by the following quotation:

> You have addressed all safety issues regarding the child and you come out with action steps that everyone agrees on and participates and creates. I think that is a successful meeting. Being able to really have that involvement, have those decisions made and reach a consensus makes it a success. (C2)

All participants in the unassigned group, that also had a caseload, stressed the plan if they were convinced it would be followed. This may be due to the likelihood of them learning more about families before and after a meeting, due to their close proximity with the caseworkers that were the source of referrals. One facilitator put it this way: “For me, it is that they actually come up with a plan, and you as a facilitator feel as though the family is actually going to follow the plan” (C4). As mentioned
previously, the unassigned caseworker facilitators may have felt some pressure to send something tangible back to the referral source.

The assigned caseworker facilitators expanded on the stage of “follow-up” as they often continued to work with families in putting their plan into practice.

I think that when you have a Family Meeting you have an agenda and some goals that you want. So when you get together and you talk about those and you come up with a workable plan and you can see them. The people walking out and then down the road you can see that that plan actually worked – that’s a successful meeting. (C1)

These facilitators were able to see when a Family Meeting was beneficial. It is important to note that not all cases receive additional services upon completion of a meeting. Some are closed with little or no contact from the social service agency. Therefore, the assigned caseworker facilitators do not always know about successful outcomes after a meeting.

**Viewpoint change** – is when participants come to a Family Meeting with one view about the family, their situation, and/or possible solutions and leave with a different one. “Viewpoint change” was identified as an important part of success as one member may come in with one agenda, undergo a change through the process and then leave with a different perspective. For example, a mother may refuse at first to help her drug-addicted daughter, but at the end of a meeting offers to watch the children while her daughter goes to counseling. This is only one of a myriad of examples that could be possible for “viewpoint change.” This alteration can occur in family and non-family members.
I remember in the early stages, and periodically this happens when people come in, like our caseworkers and supervisors come in where “we are filing a neglect.” “It doesn’t matter what is going on in this case, we have to file because we are so concerned.” And through the process and identifying strengths, in talking and gathering information, and coming up with ideas for the case. We put plans in place and no neglect is needed. And like some of the cases are resolved without even going on to long-term, just through this process. So that is pretty amazing. (C2)

This example shows the transformation as rewarding for the facilitator in that she was pleased with the outcome of not going to court. She also seemed satisfied that the supervisors and caseworkers were open to different options. This particular passage comes from the “facilitation only” focus group that felt they improved the relationship between the caseworker and the family. Perhaps it is this type of success that they believe leads to families feeling more positive about their workers. Another worker put it this way:

I think when you leave and people are still talking about it. Just people’s attitudes. People that can’t get up and go quick enough, versus people linger and talk willingly and get on the elevators, that type of thing. Like when the meeting ends, they are working on what is next. “Are you picking them up? How are they going to get there?” Versus ones that just tolerate it. (C4)

Although all four focus groups identified these transformations, the assigned caseworker facilitators offered a more expanded view.
Even a small change, a little bit of, “okay let’s talk tomorrow” kind of in some meetings. That’s a success. Or if somebody in the meeting says can we meet again, and maybe we won’t get everything done this time that they want to. Those little triumphs that make it successful. (C4)

The assigned gave a more extensive list of changes that consisted of examples such as relatives reconnecting, informal resources being uncovered, and service providers feeling more positive towards families. All these instances show they noticed both small and large accomplishments and considered them significant in defining success.

**Meeting format** - A course of activities, which are expected and typical of what occurs during a Family Meeting and leads to a completed plan. These include the review of the purpose and ground rules of the meeting, presentation of strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines, and having everyone have a “voice” during the meeting.

The last theme in common to all four facilitator groups was “meeting format.” Workers felt that giving all participants a chance to voice their thoughts in and of itself was considered an accomplishment. “Getting it all out there” was valuable so that family members, service providers, and DSS personnel all heard the same information.

I think making people feel heard is important and leads to successful meetings. That everybody has something important to say and to have a chance to be heard. (C3)

I think that my gauge of success within a meeting is one or more of the primary participants leaving the meeting with a sense of empowerment from the process. Knowing that they have either been able to voice their piece. Or that they have gotten a little more acceptance from somebody in
the room that they didn’t necessarily expect that from. Or someone offered
to do something for them that they wouldn’t have asked for or expected.

(C1)

The following passage exemplifies the assigned caseworker facilitators’ extensive
view of success by looking at results that were clearly unrelated to the goals of the
Family Meeting.

I don’t recall the plan that came out of it or if it was something mom and
everybody in the family ended up following. But just bringing the family
back together as a resource for the mom—that right there, even if we don’t
see the immediate benefit right there. The fact that she was reconnected
with people that she hadn’t had contact with—that’s big. (C1)

These facilitators gave several examples where the meaning of success did not
necessarily match the formal goals of Family Meetings as outlined in the literature. They
expressed satisfaction knowing that families obtained these unintended gains.

**Family engagement** - Participation of family members where it is evident that
they ‘buy into’ the process, demonstrated by asking questions, being part of discussions,
and making contributions. This can also include interest in attending future meetings.

This additional theme emerged only for the assigned caseworker facilitators and
continues to demonstrate that they had an expansive definition of success. They believed
that if a family bought into the process and made contributions, then it was deemed a
success, even if they did not have a completed plan. One worker referenced results from
her county’s telephone survey where most families found the meetings helpful and would
attend another one.
The following lengthy passage shows some variation in opinions between workers who attended the same meeting and their beliefs as to what qualified as a success. The meeting was considered at first to be a success by most in that the mother was engaged and able to make a plan. It was during the follow-up where her engagement waned which led some to later qualify the meeting as a failure.

I know there were some people in my unit who felt like it wasn’t a success because we had this meeting and we spent all these hours and we had this great plan and then mom just couldn’t do it. She just wasn’t at the place she needed to be at. And she needed a little bit more time and she needed a little bit more direction. And we ended up having to go to court. So they thought...some people in the meeting saw it as failure. So that’s why I say success depends on how you look at it because for me it was a success because we didn’t have to go to court right away, it was delayed. But when we went to court, it wasn’t a situation where there was a lot of animosity. The mom knew we tried and she knew she had tried. She knew the family had tried and it was just another step, and we already had a permanency plan lined up and ready to go for this child. So for me, there was a lot of groundwork that was done that didn’t have to be done at the time we went to court so it was a success in the immediate and in the long term. (C1)

This again points to the long-term relationship some of the assigned caseworker facilitators have with families. They were able to continue assessing success long after a
Family Meeting whereas the unassigned only had the meeting to draw from, resulting in a more narrow view.

Facilitators’ Contributions to Success

Facilitators were asked about their contributions to creating a successful Family Meeting. This resulted in only a brief portion of the transcripts and did not warrant an entire section for each theme. Themes of “facilitator competencies,” “preparation,” and “facilitator attributes,” were common to both types of facilitators. The assigned caseworker facilitators had discussions that also fell under the themes of “sharing power,” “follow-up,” “meeting format,” and “facilitator/family relationship” (see Table 10). Those in common are offered first.

“Facilitator competencies” were identified by both facilitator types as what they used to create a successful meeting. The specific skills they brought to the process included making sure everyone was heard and worked together, keeping everyone on task, maintaining control, and balancing the room. Along with these skills, “facilitator self-awareness,” a subcategory of “facilitator competencies,” was an important contributor. Two facilitators spoke about the need to “debrief after meetings” either with themselves or with a supervisor in order to learn what they “could do better” specifically for families, and in regards to their general facilitation skills. One participant stated the skills were identical to those “that made a good caseworker, or a good parent, or a good teacher.” Many of these were some of the same abilities they identified as crucial to gaining family involvement and remaining neutral.
**Table 10**

*Themes for Facilitators’ Contributions to Success*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unassigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
<th>Assigned Caseworker Facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Competencies &amp; Subcategory</td>
<td>Facilitator Competencies &amp; Subcategory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Self-Awareness</td>
<td>Facilitator Self-Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitator Attributes</td>
<td>Facilitator Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Subcategory Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Meeting Format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Facilitator/Family Relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unassigned caseworker facilitators believed that simply arranging and “having everyone show up” as result of “preparation,” were indicators of success. Learning what the family and the agency staff wanted to achieve during this pre-meeting stage also contributed. They spoke about how their “facilitator attributes” contributed to success. Several participants discussed how their personalities impacted the success of the meetings.

> I think being courteous and proper and polite and not being demeaning toward them. And not reflecting the voices in a demeaning way. You can be businesslike but still be pleasant at the same time and give them that feeling of comfort. (C4)

This led to additional talk about the type of worker who volunteers to facilitate Family Meetings but also has other casework responsibilities.

> When I look at this group of people, I see a group of people who have a lot of compassion for their clients, no matter how much knucklehead stuff is going on [laugh out loud], you know. There’s compassion for people that really comes out. (C4)
Additional “facilitator attributes” were listed such as respect, acceptance, tolerance, flexibility, and commitment. They also considered their interest in learning new skills along with their strong belief in participatory practice, were integral to success. Neutrality was referenced only once out of all the focus groups as a quality that led to success. It is difficult to draw any conclusions from this. Participants may have felt that they had already spoke at length about neutrality for the other questions or the information they did give was more significant. It is necessary to be cautious when making deductions from the absence of a theme. Additional follow-up questions may have provided some probable explanations.

The assigned caseworker facilitators talked about “follow-up,” a subcategory of “written plan,” as associated with success since the caseworker, also acting as facilitator, was in the position to follow-up on many meetings, as suggested in the last section. When a case was still open, the assigned caseworker facilitators were directly involved in helping families abide by the plan. Assigned caseworker facilitators have a vested interest in successful outcomes from a Family Meeting because as caseworkers they might reap some of the benefits such as fewer crises, families needing less assistance, or closing some of their cases.

The assigned caseworker facilitators also referenced “sharing power” in terms of relinquishing some to families and allowing them to have control. They used the words “empower” and “empowerment” when talking about both parents and children. The facilitator consciously “gave power” and decision making to families leading to a successful meeting. The following statement shows the internal struggle some facilitators have:
Not somebody who is against them, and telling them what to do. You are actually in the backseat and they are driving and you are there to kind of point out things along the way. You’re not going to be in charge and this is something they do for themselves. As long as you can get your ego out of the way then it is usually more successful. (C3)

“Meeting Format,” another factor cited for success, was judged as something the facilitators used by going through the steps of “strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines.” They were trained to follow this format in every meeting. What is noteworthy for the assigned caseworker facilitators is that they identified the “facilitator/family relationship,” a subcategory of “knowledge,” as an important factor to a successful Family Meeting. This was elaborated on earlier, as a significant contributor to family empowerment in regards to neutrality. They believed they were able to confront family members more easily and provide support due to trusting and longstanding relationships. Facilitators felt they used a solution-focused approach from the start of the relationship and that this helped lay a foundation for future success.

**Overall Summary**

Although the data on success was limited, it did provide some instructive information. The unassigned caseworker facilitators provided less depth to the discussion. Both types of facilitators defined success in three ways that were similar. One was the creation of a plan that met the identified needs and that the family was likely to follow. The second was when one or more participants changed their viewpoints by the end of a meeting. The final agreed upon theme was the “meeting format” itself, particularly in that everyone had a chance to speak. These definitions of success are not
surprising as they are part of the traditional and expected gains from Family Meetings that are laid out in training and throughout the literature (American Humane, 2010; Nixon et al., 2005).

“Family engagement” emerged for the assigned caseworker facilitators who believed that simply having a family absorbed in the process was an achievement.

Despite these similarities, there were some variations between facilitator types. The assigned caseworker facilitators had a more expansive definition of success that included what could be considered more unconventional and unrelated to the purpose of meetings. They spoke about reconnections with relatives, improved relationships with school personnel, and friends that just offered to have tea when someone was feeling overwhelmed. The unassigned were more focused on the plan, which was also significant for them as contributors to family involvement. Their narrow outlook may be a result of fewer experiences to pull from as they have less contact with families before and after meetings.

All four counties identified their own competencies and personal attributes as contributors to successful meetings, but there were some considerable differences. The assigned caseworker facilitators found the follow-up phase to be of additional help, due to their ability to assist families in implementing plans. They also regarded the sharing of power with a family, following the steps of a meeting, and the relationship they had with families as additional contributors.

This chapter offered a detailed analysis of the data by presenting separately each of the five research questions in this study. A lengthy and systematic examination laid out findings that opened the door for the discussion section of this study. The next and
The final chapter includes interpretation of the findings, limitations of the results, implications for social welfare, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter Five

Discussion

This study interviewed facilitators from four counties in New York State who organized and conducted Family Meetings. Two focus groups consisted of unassigned caseworker facilitators and two contained assigned caseworker facilitators. It was this researcher’s intention to uncover the similarities and differences in their respective viewpoints and unravel the complexities of empowering families, the role of neutrality in the facilitator position, and facilitators’ definitions of success.

This final chapter offers an in-depth interpretation of the findings presented in Chapter 4 along with an analysis of their limitations. Implications for the field of social welfare, specifically in terms of practice and research, are included. Suggestions for counties conducting or considering Family Meetings and FGDM models in general are also offered.

The results from this study, as stated earlier, cannot be generalized to other FGDM models or to other Family Meetings. Despite this drawback, they do uncover areas for consideration that others in the FGDM field will hopefully explore. Drawbacks in terms of sample size, the participants’ and researcher’s potential biases, and limitations of the study design were highlighted in Chapter 3. Those drawbacks related specifically to the findings are reviewed where applicable under various headings in this final chapter.

As stated in Chapter 2, the word facilitator is derived from the Latin “facilis” meaning “easy to do” when in fact, as demonstrated by this study and others, it is quite challenging and multi-layered (latin-dictionary.org). The fundamental role of Family Meeting facilitators is to prepare participants, make arrangements, conduct the meeting,
and assist everyone in devising a plan that specifically addresses identified needs of the family (Fraser & Norton, 1996; Pennell, 2004a). This study indicates that their functions are far more diverse than this. Focus group participants offered insight into the challenges, ongoing struggles, and on-the-spot decisions that each meeting presents. They spoke about contributors and detractors to decision making, power differentials, and their definition of success, while offering strategies they used to address each.

Comparisons between both types of facilitators showed many similarities in their perceptions, but also some clear distinctions. Some parts of the analysis are remarkable while others are quite predictable. The interpretation section of this chapter is divided into three parts: empowerment, neutrality, and success.

**What Contributes To Family Empowerment**

Empowerment theory explains the mechanisms behind how citizens can become less disenfranchised, have access to resources, and gain power over their lives (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998). Family Meetings put empowerment theory into practice by upholding its main beliefs and values and affording families an opportunity to make decisions about the safety and well-being of their family members. Principles of democracy are upheld in a Family Meeting whenever a family has a chance to voice their opinion and have input into solutions (Braithwaite, 2002b). The struggle for power between the state (the social service agency) and its citizens (families in Family Meetings) is evident in many of the responses from facilitators in this study. They spoke about a continuous balancing of power between responsive regulation where families were self-regulating and regulatory formalism where decisions were made by the state (Burford & Adams, 2004). Despite the goal of sharing power with families, Braithwaite
(2002b) asserts that power can never be equal in that the state always retains some level of control.

Decision making in Family Meetings was defined for this study as “the process of discussion and gathering information during a meeting that leads to specific decisions that become part of a plan which addresses the identified issues.” For the sake of this study, empowerment was considered a key component of decision making in a Family Meeting and was referred to as “having input into decisions during a Family Meeting that affect one’s life, specifically in terms of safety and well being of one’s children or adult family members.” It was assumed that families were empowered when they were part of making decisions in a Family Meeting. Little involvement in decision making by families could indicate not only a lack of empowerment, but also that professionals most likely made choices for them. Examination of the process of empowerment is complicated as it is a fluid state of being that ebbs and flows and disallows an “empowered or not empowered” dichotomy. Empowerment theory provides a basis for understanding this evasive condition that varies from person to person and meeting to meeting (Zimmerman, 1995). One part of this research focused on what contributes to and detracts from empowerment and the role the facilitator plays, all during a Family Meeting. By applying Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, these two categories demonstrate how the microsystem – the family, and the exosystem – the social service agencies, can come together to either hinder or assist families in becoming empowered. The influence of these two systems shows how a family’s environment can impact its development in both positive and negative ways. There is no direct causal evidence from this study that building on the components facilitators identified will lead directly to
family involvement. Despite this, these various elements are worthy of attention.

As reviewed in Chapter 4, there was ample agreement between both types of facilitators about factors that added to family involvement. For the most part they agreed that thorough preparation of participants, going through the stages of a meeting, having families engaged, and ensuring that power was shared, all enhanced family involvement. These are the same components that are outlined in the general FGDM literature and specifically for Family Meetings (American Humane 2008, 2010; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002; Burford & Hudson, 2000; Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009; Fraser & Norton, 1996; Macgowen & Pennell, 2002; Pennell & Burford, 2000). Therefore, it is not surprising that these features would be identified as they come directly from the model and are taught in training. The only difference was with the unassigned caseworker facilitators that did “facilitation only,” who stressed that the plan itself helped get families involved. To them the plan was a significant accomplishment, as demonstrated by the numerous references to it in response to several focus group questions. As stated previously, this may be due to their more removed position from the referral source, and consequently, sending back a plan was a tangible representation of their efforts and family involvement. A completed plan though may not be an indication that a family was involved since they may simply be complying with the demands of the agency and other service providers.

**Use of a mock meeting to prepare service providers.** One county from the unassigned caseworker facilitator group identified the training of service providers through a mock meeting as valuable. They felt that by having service providers see what takes place during a Family Meeting, they would learn the importance of family
involvement and ways they should contribute. Although this county still spoke of interference by service providers, they reported it far less than all the other focus groups. Programs using Family Meetings or other participatory practices may want to consider this strategy. Witnessing a mock meeting may have far more instructional impact than educating through pamphlets, face-to-face contacts, or phone calls. It requires some additional up-front time, but the effort may reduce future difficulties. This mock meeting is revisited in this chapter when the impact of service providers is evaluated.

**Private family time.** The survey conducted by Nixon et al. (2005), exposed that over ninety percent of the child welfare programs using conferences included private family time. This stage is designed for family members and their informal supports to meet without professionals for planning and decision making. The original Family Group Conference model had private family time as a requirement for all meetings while the FGDM literature encourages its use, but recognizes that not all programs will use it. Existing research on private family time is minimal with only a few studies gathering input from participants or looking at model fidelity. The few surveys on participant satisfaction show that most were pleased, but that it was not unanimous (Berzen et al., 2007; Holland et al., 2005; Lupton 1998). A study by Marie Connolly (2004; 2005), found that most coordinators revealed it was “the magic of the family time” (p. 252) that afforded families the opportunity to engage in honest discussions for the safety of their children. Facilitators from the two counties in this study that employed the practice confirmed this belief by stating with certainty its contribution to family decision making.

Still there is no assurance that private family time will lead to family decision making. Professionals may be idealistic in their conviction that using it guarantees
empowerment. Indeed, it is possible some participants may feel coerced by more powerful family members thereby reinforcing an imbalance of power. Also service providers may still maintain control despite offering private time. Lastly, not all family members may want private family time. Indeed some families may welcome the opportunity for assistance from service providers that could be an indication of family empowerment and a positive partnership between workers and families. This implies that some families could work closely with service providers in making decisions and still feel empowered, while other families may think they need to have discussions outside the purview of professionals and may find private time beneficial. This study suggests that agencies that have abandoned its practice in the past or those just launching Family Meetings could benefit from considering its use.

**How Facilitators Get Families Involved in Decision Making**

Facilitators applied their own competencies and attributes throughout Family Meetings to increase family participation. The unassigned caseworker facilitators used their attributes more while the assigned relied more on their competencies. The unassigned may have felt they needed to convey to families that they were empathetic and caring while the assigned may have already proven this through their relationships with them. It would seem worthwhile that both types of facilitators build on these two influential aspects of their role. Although all groups identified the application of “facilitator self-awareness” in gaining involvement, the assigned elaborated on its use far more, as they acknowledged their own potential for interference.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the group that did facilitation only strongly felt that offering their opinions added to family participation. This leads to the tentative deduction that the
assigned perceived that stepping back from the process encouraged families to get involved while at least one of the unassigned groups felt their input enhanced family participation.

**What Detracts From Family Empowerment**

By examining the elements that reduced the likelihood of family empowerment in Family Meetings, suggestions were uncovered that could augment family involvement. All facilitators identified the areas of “conditions” and “non-social service professionals” as detriments to family involvement, while the assigned caseworker facilitators also discussed “lack of family engagement” and “strong emotions.” These themes indicated the difficulties facilitators faced when orchestrating such complicated gatherings.

**Lack of Preparation**

Extensive preparation is considered a key element for family participation and is stressed in the FGDM literature (Cashmore & Kiely, 2000; Mirsky, 2003; Rockhill & Rodgers, 1999). Preparation occurs before a Family Meeting and includes making all arrangements, communicating with potential participants, and reviewing with them the purpose, stages, goals, and expectations. It has been estimated that preparation can range between 18-40 hours for a Family Group Conference (Marsh & Crow, 1996; Paterson & Harvey, 1991; Pennell & Burford, 2000). Family Meetings require far less preparation and were selected by three counties in this study as an alternative to their past usage of the time-consuming Family Group Conference. Yet facilitators in this study were frustrated in that they did not devote enough time to this foundation laying stage. They seemed to desire more thorough preparation but felt they did not have the time to do so.

According to Helland (2005), “the coordinator’s ability and quality of preparation and
planning correlate with the overall success of the conference” (p.27). This places a large burden on facilitators in that they are mainly responsible for what gets accomplished.

Facilitators in this study pointed repeatedly to the value of more comprehensive preparation and its connection to enhanced family involvement. According to these facilitators, minimal preparation, noted as common practice, reduced the participation of family members. Preparation is a theme that underlies several important aspects of this study: interference by non-social service professionals, impact of certain conditions, emotions of the participants, and engagement of families.

**Non-social service professionals and their interference.** All four focus groups identified outside service providers as the most prominent factor working against family involvement. Facilitators stressed that despite how many times they informed service providers of the purpose of Family Meetings, those providers still contributed to the disempowerment of families. Service providers had a difficult time sharing power and allowing families to make decisions. Preparation typically included only a brief review, often over the telephone, which may not be enough for service providers to understand the process, their role, and the expected outcomes. Connolly’s (2006) small research study of facilitators supports the existence of such limited preparation. Participatory practices require a change in philosophy and methodology that service providers may feel is in opposition to the more traditional deficit-focused approach (Blundo, 2001; Saleeby, 2002). Service providers may need more in-depth teaching that assists them in understanding this paradigm shift to developing partnerships with families. This study suggests that more preparation of service providers is needed than is currently performed. The mock Family Meeting, as described by one county, may be one answer for agencies
to consider. Other tactics could include formal training, information sessions, and on-going education in using this inclusionary approach for solutions to abuse and neglect.

**Various conditions and their interference.** All facilitators discussed times when characteristics of families led to minimal participation and empowerment. Qualities of participants such as level of functioning, drug addiction, or emotional disturbances made their participation problematic. Children were identified as one of the most difficult groups to engage in the general process and in actual decision making. “Unexpected event” such as an unexpected participant and “crisis” that could include a sudden illness of a family member easily changed the focus of a meeting and deterred decision making. These conditions required the attention of facilitators, thereby taking them away from their designated tasks. As noted earlier in Chapter 4, some of these conditions might be reduced by preventive efforts while others are inescapable. Knowing that certain participants have limitations may call for additional preparation of both them and their supporters. Some unexpected events and crises cannot be predicted, but specialized training to provide facilitators with additional tools to address them may help move families toward decision making.

**Emotions and their interference.** Despite all groups presenting meetings that had a great deal of emotion, only the assigned caseworker facilitators conveyed this as problematic. They identified emotions such as anger, hurt, and surprise as preventing the advancement of families to decision making. If participants were experiencing strong feelings, these facilitators deemed it their role to help members work through them. The fact that these facilitators were also the families’ caseworkers may have led them to experience and interpret emotions differently from the unassigned caseworker facilitators.
Processing some of the emotions before the actual Family Meeting during the preparation stage may reduce their intrusion. It is recommended here that facilitators receive ongoing training in managing emotions, as they are a common element in Family Meetings. Even though a facilitator cannot control all conversations and reactions during a meeting, strengthening their skills could bolster the management of them. Emotions and additional implications are analyzed further in the section on neutrality.

**Lack of family engagement.** Logically, lack of engagement of family members was thought by facilitators to lead to less involvement. Families who did not believe in the process and were less motivated to change resulted in negligible empowerment, if any. This once again points to the need for extensive preparation. The assigned caseworker facilitators believed that engaging families from the start of the working relationship could indeed enhance participation. Family members may need time to develop trust in the facilitator, the process, and the agency in order to build a foundation for decision making. Also, discussing Family Meetings with families early in the life of a case may pave the way for productive meetings at a later point in time. In addition, a determination as to a family’s readiness could also be of assistance.

**Lack of Sharing Power**

The very nature of Family Meetings includes the sharing of power between agencies and families in order for families to make decisions during a Family Meeting. All the facilitators in this study identified times when power was not shared with families thereby acting as a barrier to their participation. It is reasonable that the assigned caseworker facilitators spoke of this more than the unassigned. As the caseworkers to the families, they recognized their power was more apparent. They had in-depth knowledge
of the case, had an existing relationship with the family, presented the bottom lines, and usually had the final say in accepting a family’s plan. Possibly due to these circumstances, they gave more attention to the balancing of power. The unassigned caseworker facilitators spoke about power only minimally yet they provided more examples than the assigned of their interventions and possible exertion of their own power. These differences are interpreted more deeply under the concept of neutrality. It may be necessary for all types of facilitators to pay attention to the sharing of power.

**Are Family Meeting Facilitators Neutral?**

As explained in the literature review, most facilitation models require neutrality on the part of the facilitator or mediator, yet there is disagreement as to its definition and attainability. It is generally considered a “state of being” in which a facilitator is either neutral or not. This binary view of neutrality disregards what many see as its various “shades” that change throughout a meeting (Bogdanowski, 2009; Astor & Chinkin, 2002; Boulle, 2005). Family Meetings and other Family Group Decision Making designs seek to ensure neutrality by requiring an independent, non-case carrying facilitator. Shared decision making and the empowerment of families hinges on this condition and places neutrality at the very heart of what makes Family Meetings successful. The inclusion of assigned caseworker facilitators in this study highlighted the examination of the neutrality requirement. The unassigned caseworker facilitators are believed to be neutral by the very nature of their minimal relationship to families who are having a Family Meeting. They are expected to not have an opinion about the outcomes, as they are not aligned with a particular view. The assigned caseworker facilitators are generally considered biased since they know the family, have opinions as to what should occur, and
are believed to be in support of the social service agency’s agenda. Upon a thorough analysis of the data, this researcher concludes that neither type of facilitator was neutral and both interceded in various ways from the preparation stage through the conclusion of meetings.

The most basic definitions of neutrality are “not to take sides,” and to be “opinion-free,” but there are additional descriptions that permit a more in-depth analysis. As noted in Chapter 2, the condition of neutrality has been addressed extensively in the mediation field, but scarcely touched on in FGDM. Experts in mediation have debated its existence, offered alternative definitions, proposed techniques for its management, and suggested methods for training to achieve it. Even though mediation grew out of the principles of judicial impartiality and is often considered to be an alternative to court intervention, its concepts and discourse shed light on the concept of neutrality, regardless of the difference in focus for Family Meetings. This study confirms the struggles of facilitators with neutrality and begins to bring the debate to the field of Family Group Decision Making and more specifically to Family Meetings. This section uses the varying concepts identified in the literature review from general facilitation and mediation, and applies them to the findings of this study.

**Impact on process and content.** The facilitation literature outlines that it is acceptable and expected that facilitators are involved in the “process” of a meeting. They make certain that everyone gets to speak, mediate disagreements, clarify various viewpoints, and assist members in accomplishing their tasks. At the same time, they are not to be influencing the “content” of a meeting which includes offering opinions, contributing to decisions, and guiding the meeting in particular directions. As touched
upon in Chapter 4, these two elements are not always straightforward and easy to separate (Berry, 1993; Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Gregory & Romm, 2001; Kirk & Broussine, 2000; Rifkin, Millen, & Cobb, 1991; Shaw, 2002). If facilitators are involved in the process only, they are considered to be unbiased. Once they infringe on the content of a meeting, they are not regarded as neutral. Facilitators in all four focus groups gave examples of when they were involved in both process and content.

Both types of Family Meeting facilitators demonstrated when they were part of the process by employing competencies they learned from training such as reflecting, summarizing, and clarifying, among others, to facilitate and help produce a plan. They gave participants a voice, made sure the strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines were presented, and advanced the group to decision making. Facilitators would not be performing their job if they were not a part of the process. Therefore these types of interventions were anticipated.

Facilitators from all four counties also presented times when they were involved in the content of Family Meetings. The unassigned caseworker facilitators offered opinions, persuaded family members to allow particular participants to attend, and brought attention to issues of health and safety. Although the assigned believed they were uninvolved in decisions, they influenced the content when they confronted family members, corrected inaccuracies, and persuaded participants to manage their emotions.

According to the process/content dichotomy for defining neutrality, this level of involvement implies that these facilitators were not neutral. This researcher proposes that whenever facilitators guide what occurs in the process, they affect what decisions are made, thereby intervening in the content and compromising their neutrality.
Applying impartiality. The concept of neutrality in facilitators is defined as having no judgments on the issues at hand. Impartiality has been presented as an alternative to the definition of neutrality in that it acknowledges facilitators have opinions as to best outcomes, but that they control their beliefs from interfering in meetings (Miranda & Bostrom, 1999).

The unassigned caseworker facilitators who did “facilitation only” admitted to offering their opinions and contributing ideas. Despite having had far less involvement with a family than the assigned, they developed opinions during both preparation for and facilitation of the actual Family Meeting. The other unassigned caseworker facilitator group also acknowledged their strong judgments but were less clear about their own interventions. Nevertheless, both unassigned groups gave glaring examples that revealed interference when the bottom lines were unclear or unaddressed. At times, they took over the caseworker’s responsibility of presenting the issues that needed to be considered. They defended their actions by rationalizing that their intrusions were acceptable because “it had to be done” for reasons of health and safety.

The assigned caseworker facilitators also candidly conveyed that they had beliefs about what should be in the final plans. Since they were the assigned caseworkers to the family, they typically were involved with them from their first encounter, oftentimes long before a Family Meeting. It would be unlikely for them to not have ideas as to what was in the best interest for the family. These facilitators believed that by applying the skill of “facilitator self-awareness” during a meeting they worked to “hold themselves back.” Analysis of the transcripts indicates they believed they were successful in keeping impartial, but there was evidence at times to the contrary.
Establishing that facilitators have opinions is only one part of impartiality; determining if their opinions affect their facilitation is the other. Since both types of facilitators highlighted meetings where their opinions affected their facilitation, it is concluded that they did not meet the standards for impartiality, rendering them non-neutral. Observation of their facilitation would have helped to strengthen this deduction.

**Emotions and facilitator intervention.** Emotions felt or expressed by Family Meeting participants were exhibited through many examples given by all focus group participants. Although they were included as one element that detracts from decision making, they also precipitated interventions on the part of facilitators. Intense emotions during Family Meetings are expected since the topics surrounding abuse and neglect usually produce varying opinions, unresolved feelings, and surprising information. All four focus group discussions included meetings where the facilitators were aware of emotions and guided the meetings accordingly. Whether it was protecting a member from verbal attacks, getting a service provider to “back off,” or allowing someone to simply vent frustrations, they made decisions about who would speak, what emotions would be addressed, and which participants needed to be heard. This shows a level of empathy on the part of facilitators that is identified by Duffy (2010) as one of “the most subtle yet pervasive challenges to mediator neutrality” (p.53). He speaks about the existence of emotions in mediation and the necessity for facilitators to manage them. Rogers (1945) identified empathy as one of three conditions that is necessary for effective facilitation. This empathy places facilitators in a compromised position in terms of their neutrality.
The assigned caseworker facilitators demonstrated “emotional intelligence” that Duffy (2010) proposes as a necessary ability to master in order to appear impartial. Emotional intelligence is defined as “the ability to monitor one’s own and other’s feelings and emotions, discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p.189). Through self-awareness and self-regulation Duffy asserts that mediators can emotionally bond with participants but still keep their feelings from affecting a meeting. The assigned caseworker facilitators used both of these skills. They applied self-awareness when they acknowledged their opinions about the presenting issues and demonstrated self-regulation when they controlled the influence of their recognized beliefs. The unassigned facilitators who had a negligible relationship with the family and mentioned feelings only minimally, believed they were already neutral. This could explain why they barely spoke about self-awareness. The assigned caseworker facilitators may have felt they needed to establish their neutrality more than the unassigned did, so they applied their emotional intelligence for its management.

How facilitators addressed emotions affected the process and content of Family Meetings. Both types of facilitators made determinations about managing emotions thereby impacting decision making. It is proposed by this researcher that decisions driven by unresolved emotions may be very different from those made in a clear thinking and rational manner. When facilitators managed emotions, they certainly influenced the choices that were made and the subsequent plans. This once again demonstrates a lack of neutrality on the part of the facilitators in this study.
**Equidistance and balancing power.** One of the main goals of Family Meetings is to empower families by balancing power between the agency and the family (Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009). This requires facilitators to assess throughout a meeting where power is, where it needs to be, and then intervene accordingly. These actions clearly put facilitators in a contradictory position that jeopardizes their neutrality. Equidistance refers to the stance a facilitator takes in order to ensure that each person in a meeting has a chance to be heard (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Cohen et al., 1999; Wing, 2009). Borrowed from the field of mediation, equidistance offers a perspective on how the facilitator takes different sides throughout a meeting in order to balance power. Facilitators in this study applied equidistance by continuously assessing the balance, making internal decisions, and intervening in ways that impacted the course of meetings.

It is presumed that the unassigned caseworker facilitators would be fair, neutral, and less likely to take sides when balancing power since they were not the caseworkers to the family having a meeting. This did not hold true for this study, as there were many instances when the unassigned shifted the balance of power. They cited occasions when service providers were treating families unfairly and so they intruded to protect and/or ensure that the families were given a voice in the process. They also discussed meetings where they stepped in as the role of authority and tipped the power more favorably toward service providers. The assigned caseworker facilitators also made decisions to balance power. If families were being “piled on” by service providers, or a parent was verbally abusing his or her child in a meeting, they intervened in order to empower various participants who were at the time disempowered.
Both the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators shifted the balance of power toward those whom they believed needed it. Perceptions by participants about a facilitator’s neutrality may be greatly influenced by how this shift is executed. When facilitators decide to empower one party, they run the risk of disempowering another. Yet, lack of intervention could reinforce already existing inequities. By applying the concept of equidistance to this study, it is again clear that these facilitators demonstrated a lack of neutrality.

The majority of the literature on power in the FGDM field is focused on the relationship between families and service providers with little recognition of the power of the facilitator (Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006). This study demonstrates how their position as facilitators affords them a great deal of power. Both types of facilitators showed they made assessments and decisions about the balance of power based on what they thought was best at the moment. Although they believed their actions were for appropriate reasons, there is the potential for misusing their interventions that at times could be purposeful. The basic tenets of FGDM imply that the non-case carrying facilitator has less interest in taking power as opposed to one that is also the caseworker (American Humane, 2010).

A post-modern view of power borrowed from mediation broadens its definition by describing it as fluctuating throughout a meeting depending on participants and situation (Douglas, 2008). This suggests the possibility that as meetings become more challenging, facilitators’ involvement increases. Facilitators may be more neutral when a meeting proceeds with minimum emotions, little conflict, and engaged participants. When the process is not going “by the book” then facilitators’ intervention may increase
in order to get the meeting on track. This implies a level of interference that varies from meeting to meeting and is in the hands of the facilitator. This intermittent taking of sides depends on what transpires during a Family Meeting and was validated by the facilitators in this study. Taylor’s (1997) continuum of neutrality can be applied here as it has facilitators’ level of involvement fluctuating with the purpose and needs of the group. Facilitators in this study showed a continuum of involvement from minimal to active and confirmed a fluid state of neutrality.

**Relationship Between Facilitator and Family**

The main theme of “knowledge” – how much a facilitator knows about a family, and its subcategory “facilitator/family relationship” – the association between the facilitator and the family, are closely connected to neutrality. The unassigned caseworker facilitators considered both as main reasons against having caseworkers facilitate meetings for their own caseload. Most believed that having extensive information about a family was a detriment and would guide facilitation. They felt that the more facilitators knew, the less likely it was that they could act in an unbiased manner. In addition, the unassigned caseworker facilitators considered the relationship between caseworkers and families to be typically negative, adding to the challenges of remaining neutral and/or maintaining the perception of it.

Conversely, the assigned caseworker facilitators believed that their knowledge of families on their caseload was, for the most part, an asset. They acquired knowledge of family stories, individual needs, and historical events that benefited their facilitation. They perceived their relationship with families in general and with children in particular as positive and productive. They felt children were provided with protection and
comfort, as opposed to possible uneasiness with an unfamiliar facilitator. Van Ryn and Heaney (1997) point out that the more empowering the professional-parent relationship, the more successful the services. This shows the importance of having workers develop partnerships with families upon their first contact, which could result in families viewing their worker in a positive light, as well as in seeing them as collaborators for planning (Sandau-Becker et al., 2002). Therefore, having the family’s caseworker facilitate a Family Meeting may be an extension of an effective working relationship. The unassigned caseworker facilitators did not identify this level of trust and reassurance between facilitators and families.

There was also a clear difference between facilitator types about whether the benefits of knowing a family outweighed what they believed were the disadvantages. It cannot be said with any certainty which type of facilitator’s perspective is correct. It can only be concluded that they had opposite viewpoints. It appears from this study that having knowledge about families may make neutrality more challenging, however those with little of it also struggled to remain neutral. Therefore it is unreasonable to rule out the assigned caseworker as a facilitator based solely on using their relationship to families as an indication of partiality. The effect of facilitators’ knowledge of families on their facilitation warrants further examination.

**Applying Competencies to Maintain Neutrality**

All facilitators identified competencies that they thought helped them to stay out of the content of Family Meetings. They learned these skills in training and developed them through ongoing facilitation. “Facilitator self-awareness,” a subcategory of competencies, was used to keep their interference “in check.” The unassigned caseworker
facilitators identified this skill far less than the assigned and relied more on the format of the meeting. The assigned caseworker facilitators applied their “self-awareness” by ongoing use of self-talk to remind them of their role. Perhaps, the unassigned thought less about awareness when facilitating because they assumed they were neutral. The assigned may have felt they had to pay attention to it because they had to “prove” they were neutral despite their relationship with a family. Kirk and Broussine (2000) outline four different positions in terms of facilitator awareness: partial awareness - closed; immobilized awareness; manipulative awareness; and partial awareness - open. These four types are presented on a continuum of levels of consciousness and influence on the part of the facilitator in the context of power differentials. It recognizes the bidirectional influence between the facilitator and participants (Ringer, 1999, 2000). Kirk & Broussine advocate for “partial awareness - open” which has facilitators using a reflexive practice for learning their biases and using them constructively. This could explain the assigned caseworker facilitators’ use of self-talk in controlling their influence on family decision making.

It is not feasible to deduce from this study if facilitators were actually successful in keeping neutral by using these various competencies, but clearly they believed they were. It would be advantageous for unassigned caseworker facilitators to consider increasing their use of “awareness” since it was established in this study that they participated in the process and content of meetings.

**Using Assessment to Decide Facilitator Type**

The theme of “assessment” emerged in this study as a strategy used by the assigned caseworker facilitators to determine whether they should facilitate a Family
Meeting for their own case. This determination was based on the projected level of interference by assigned caseworker facilitators as a result of their relationship with a family. It was the assigned caseworker facilitators’ way of ensuring that only neutral facilitators orchestrated Family Meetings. It also took into account what was thought to be the family’s perception about having their caseworker be in the position of facilitator. This assessment process involved caseworkers, either individually or in consultation with their supervisors and/or coworkers, evaluating if they could refrain from interference. The unassigned did not apply this assessment process as they typically did not know the families and were without the option of referring to others for facilitation. Also, applying assessment would not be necessary for them, as they believed they were neutral by the very nature of their “unassigned” status.

The implementation of the assessment process by the assigned caseworker facilitators showed their conviction toward achieving neutrality. This raises the question referred to in Chapter 4, as to how well workers, even in consultation, can assess their current or potential state of neutrality? There is little data from this study to make any conclusions about the precision of their “assessment,” other than that it took place. Gathering information from facilitators about meetings when they referred cases to different facilitators could provide additional insight into this strategy. Further investigation into this assessment process is needed.

**Unassigned or Assigned Caseworker Facilitator?**

This study reveals that the question may not be which type of facilitator is superior in terms of their level of neutrality. Both the unassigned and assigned caseworker facilitators were biased, involved, and controlled the direction of meetings at
different times, thereby demonstrating that choosing one type should not be based on the qualification of neutrality; neither type was neutral. Determining if a worker should facilitate a Family Meeting calls for different criteria. This researcher suggests more realistic standards could be used to appraise a facilitator’s skills in areas such as self-awareness and self-regulation, balancing of power, and managing various conditions and emotions. This would require a sophisticated evaluation of workers to determine their suitability as Family Meeting facilitators that is, as of yet, unexplored. At this time there are no clear procedures for measuring facilitators’ performance and their influence on family empowerment.

It is suggested by this researcher that organizations that offer or are considering conducting Family Meetings be open to looking at both types of facilitators to decide which is best for their agency and the families they serve. There are similarities and differences between both types, and each has its own strengths. Not all departments are able to designate workers whose sole responsibility is Family Meeting facilitation. Given these fiscally challenged times, it may be unavoidable that facilitators have a caseload. Consideration of having caseworkers facilitate Family Meetings for their own cases could also expand the pool of available facilitators in an agency.

**Definition of Success**

All four focus groups defined success as having a completed plan along with participants having a “voice” throughout the meeting. These two benefits have been identified in the literature as indications of success (Holland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006). They also expressed that having a participant come to a meeting with one viewpoint on the situation, and then leave with a very different perspective, was another aspect of
success. They thought it was a signal that participants were heard and that the discussion stage was influential. Facilitators showed satisfaction in this consequence of a Family Meeting. They believed that the results of some meetings would have been different had the changes in perspective not occurred. Facilitators perceived that it was their responsibility to create an atmosphere during a meeting that leads to these types of shifts.

The data in this study relating to success suggests that the assigned caseworker facilitator had a more expansive view of success as compared to the unassigned. Although the reason for this is not stated directly, it seems plausible that their position as the family’s caseworker affords them more opportunities to view additional accomplishments. It is of interest that all facilitators mainly identified immediate and short-term successes and not those that would be considered more enduring. Research on the benefits of FGDM have examined long-term outcomes such as effects on the number of children in foster care, children living with relatives, or number of subsequent CPS reports (Helland, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Academy, 2008). Responses from focus group participants in this study did not reference any of these. Perhaps their perspective was narrowed since the majority of the focus group discussions concentrated on specific meetings. Also, they offered only results that they were more likely to observe rather than those that are often tracked by administrators.

Both types of facilitators used similar competencies and attributes that they believed created an environment that increased the possibility for success. The assigned caseworker facilitators also cited their relationships with family members, giving power to families, and following the stages of a meeting as additional ways their actions contributed to success.
There is little in terms of conclusions or specific suggestions for conducting Family Meetings that can be gleaned from the facilitators’ discussions on success. Though it can be stated with certainty that both facilitators cited meetings they believed were successful and personally rewarding.

**Implications for Social Work**

Principles of participatory practices align well with the values of the social work profession. “Dignity and worth of the person” includes advancing clients’ self-determination and assisting them in solving their own challenges (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). By upholding the value of social justice, social workers are expected to operate as partners in planning to create conditions that lead to client empowerment. Although there is no agreement as to how to create empowerment, “there is much consensus in the literature about the general role of the social worker in the empowerment process as a nondirective and enabling facilitator” (Boehm & Staples, 2002, p.4452). According to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008), they “strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people” (p. 4).

Facilitators of Family Meetings put these principles into action from the preparation stage to the finalization of a plan. Results from this study contribute to the field of social work in both practice and research.

**Practice**

Social workers convene and facilitate meetings, both formal and informal, with families for various purposes and in different contexts. Although the focus of this study is on Family Meetings, it points to many areas that facilitators may find helpful in terms
of their influence in meetings, regardless of type. How facilitators conduct themselves, intervene in a process, and help or hurt family empowerment should always be considered. By applying the suggestions from this study for family involvement and accepting their own lack of neutrality, workers could facilitate in ways that are more empowering to families.

Participants in all four focus groups participated in both the New York State’s Common Core and Child Protective Service trainings that all new caseworkers are mandated to attend. In addition, they received specific training for facilitating Family Meetings that consisted mainly of model review and basic skills. As evidenced by the numerous struggles facilitators offered in this study, it is clear they are in need of more sophisticated training to manage many complex challenges. Facilitators need assistance in learning to facilitate in ways that accepts their lack of neutrality but puts them in a position to maximize on family participation and minimize their own intrusions into the content of Family Meetings. It is suggested here that advanced training and on-going technical assistance could produce such results.

**Preparing Facilitators for this Multifaceted Role**

A brief review of Thomas’ typology (2004; 2005) for educating facilitators, which was considered in Chapter 2, provides a framework for instructing Family Meeting facilitators. He offers the following four approaches to facilitator education: “technical” for skill development; “intentional” for purposive actions; “person-centered” for facilitators’ attitudes and their relationship with participants; and “critical” for the role of empowerment and social justice. Although Thomas (2004) applies these approaches to training outdoor education facilitators, they are a result of reviews from the general field
of facilitation and are useful here. Each one corresponds to the various challenges that both types of facilitators brought out in this study. They spoke about the practical skills they utilized during meetings, struggles with the effects of their opinions, the influence of their relationships with families, and the application of strategies for empowerment. Thomas (2004; 2005) presents his framework for educating facilitators as a hierarchical model with experts advocating for their own type.

This researcher suggests that training for Family Meeting facilitators should include all four of Thomas’ approaches, as each contributes to effective facilitation. This is not to say that the existing trainings are ineffective, only that workers need to be prepared with deeper and more expansive methods. Combining them would provide comprehensive training that would strengthen their ability to manage the tribulations they encounter. The education programs also need to be supplemented with on-going training and technical assistance in order to assist facilitators to continuously build on their skills and support them as new challenges arise. A review of all four approaches to facilitator education follows that includes ideas for state and local agencies to consider.

**The technical approach.** This competency-based approach is the most common one used for general facilitation, mediation, and FGDM. A review of the trainings for all four counties in this study consisted mostly of this method, although the other approaches are touched on indirectly (Family Meeting Toolkit, 2009; American Humane, 2010; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). The technical approach provides facilitators with an overview of their role, meeting protocols, and general facilitation skills. Facilitators in this study identified many competencies they employed that they believed enhanced family involvement such as active listening, reflection, redirection, and questioning, to
name only a few. They also associated the “meeting format” as an element that added to family participation and enabled facilitators to stay out of the content of meetings. Despite these positive contributions, they cited meetings where they struggled with keeping everyone focused, sticking to the model, eliciting the “bottom lines,” and managing certain “conditions” such as unexpected situations. They discussed meetings when non-social service professionals, agency personnel, and non-family supports presented various challenges. Limited preparation and a lack of family engagement were also named as detractors to family decision making. These difficulties indicate that Family Meeting facilitators could benefit from additional skill development.

Bringing the significant participants together for a Family Meeting may be challenging in itself, but getting them to work together and make decisions can be an on-going difficulty. This researcher suggests that a one-time training program is not enough. Facilitators need on-going, highly developed training to improve their competencies. Helping them to better prepare potential participants, develop partnerships during the preparation stage, and learn specific skills for engagement of parents and children, may increase family decision making. In addition, providing them with feedback before, during, and after Family Meetings along with the opportunity to assess their performance would continuously strengthen their skills from meeting to meeting. General facilitation skills are never completely mastered and are continuously developing since each meeting brings fresh dilemmas.

Despite the necessity for having a technical approach to facilitator preparation, this researcher puts forward that offering only this type minimizes the complexity of the facilitator’s role. This approach needs to be combined with other methods. Facilitating
any form of participatory practice is more than simply applying a set of prescriptive skills in a standardized manner.

The intentional approach. The “intentional” approach to educating facilitators consists of teaching them to be deliberate in their actions and to understand the reasons behind them, rather than simply developing a skill set (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Schwarz, 2002). Facilitators of Family Meetings could benefit greatly in learning more about the decisions they make and the purposes behind them. In addition to following the format and stages of a Family Meeting, they could be trained to make more thoughtful interventions. Having facilitators learn to reflect on why they ask certain questions, reasons for their shifting of power, or why they chose not to address a particular issue provides them with a rationale for their behaviors. When faced with a challenge it is important for them not to simply be reactive, randomly pull from their skill set, or “give in” to whatever is occurring. They need to continuously assess the dynamics of the meeting and make decisions about when to intervene, how to intervene, and why they are intervening in the way that they are. Informing facilitators about the various theories of group facilitation from the fields of psychology, social work, and counseling would provide them with a foundation for their actions. Understanding principles of empowerment, ways to enhance the democratic process, and the mechanisms of restorative justice will also help provide facilitators to have established theory behind their actions. Educating facilitators in these theories would aid them to realize how their role is integral in Family Meetings for families to be heard, to make decisions, and to empower them to take control over events and conditions in their lives.
Schwarz (2002) suggests that training facilitators to establish ground rules with participants helps everyone, including the facilitator, to share responsibility and guide behaviors. He stresses that facilitators communicate their approach to facilitation with participants in order for members to understand the facilitators’ motives and actions. Training facilitators with this approach could include Heron’s (1999) matrix of six learning dimensions with its three forms of decision making that helps facilitators to know their options and assess their strengths and weaknesses. This model also points to areas for training modules that state and local authorities could use to develop curriculums (Thomas, 2004). The dimensions that Heron (1999) puts forth pertain to achieving goals, the cognitive aspect of facilitation, confrontation, emotions, structuring the group, and the values and integrity of the facilitator. The three types of decision making consist of: the hierarchical, the cooperative, and the autonomous. The combinations of these result in a matrix of 18 possibilities for successful facilitation (Heron, 1999). Other possibilities for providing guidance to facilitation could include developing checklists for training and assessment that match closely with the various skills, positions, and approaches facilitators must exemplify. The intentional approach to facilitator education should also include on-going practice and feedback to remind facilitators of the importance of having intent behind their actions.

The person-centered approach. The person-centered approach, directly from the work of Carl Rogers, emphasizes the attributes that facilitators bring to the meeting process and their relationship to all members in a group (Rogers, 1989; Thomas, 2008). These attributes include their values, beliefs, and individual thinking styles that are often manifested in facilitators’ behaviors. Rogers identified three significant conditions for
effective facilitation: congruence, acceptance, and empathy. “Congruence”
acknowledges that there is a relationship between the facilitator and the participants. The
unassigned believed they had no relationship to the members in a Family Meeting and
that the relationship between families and caseworkers was generally negative. They
presented this damaged relationship as a main reason for not supporting the idea of
caseworkers facilitating for their own caseload. The assigned caseworker facilitators
believed that their relationship with families was generally positive and was beneficial to
their facilitation. “Acceptance” is when a facilitator is non-judgmental towards all
members in a meeting. All four focus group participants mentioned times when their
values and opinions impacted their facilitation. They also struggled with their judgments
of participants, the presented concerns, the issues that needed to be addressed, and the
strategies to be included in planning. “Empathy” requires the facilitator to work to truly
understand each participant’s perspective. Both types of facilitators portrayed this quality
often but there were occasions when they did not understand a participant’s point of
view. The combination of all three of these qualities create a facilitator that is aware of
his or her feelings and beliefs but uses them for the best interests of all those in
attendance.

It is clear that each of these presented challenges for both types of facilitators and
expose the need for them to be trained from a person-centered approach. Education in
reflexive techniques, such as self-awareness and self-regulation, would help in
understanding their personal qualities and how to use them effectively. Developing this
emotional intelligence would produce facilitators that could work to recognize blind
spots, expand their consciousness during a Family Meeting, acknowledge the potential
for their interference, and practice strategies of restraint. Teaching workers about emotional intelligence is gaining traction in the field of social work and child welfare (Morrison, 2007). Adapting some of the materials to train facilitators of Family Meetings could be of great value.

Unassigned caseworker facilitators identified that having knowledge about a family challenged their neutrality while the assigned believed it was an advantage. According to the person-centered approach, it is essential that facilitators explore their relationship to participants and the impact of their presence in a meeting. Both types of facilitators must realize they have a relationship with all participants in a Family Meeting since they gain knowledge of a family once they receive a referral and begin meeting with various participants. Training facilitators to use this knowledge for the best interest of families and not to the detriment of empowerment is critical. In addition to formal training, using supervisors and coworkers in this process would be valuable. By meeting with colleagues before a Family Meeting, they could increase awareness of their beliefs and potential alignments, thereby allowing more deliberate interventions. This leads to the assessment process that the assigned caseworker facilitators used as a strategy to ensure their neutrality. It is suggested here that part of the person-centered approach for educating facilitators should include guidelines in how to conduct this process by including the family’s caseworker, supervisors, other casework staff, and family members to decide who would best facilitate a family’s meeting. A list of questions could be designed that allows stakeholders to assess the potential impact of a particular facilitator. These could include questions about the nature of the relationship, past
contacts with the family, and beliefs related to the identified concerns, to name only a few.

Facilitators identified a number of meetings that demonstrated strong emotions on the part of many of the participants. Although caseworkers may have training in managing difficult clients, intense emotions, and conflict resolution, these techniques need to be translated and transferred to facilitator training. Some facilitators identified the therapeutic nature of some Family Meetings. This requires them to have complex skills that they are underprepared for. Borrowing from social work, counseling, and psychology, facilitators could be instructed in various individual and group techniques that would help them manage such multifaceted interactions.

Overall, the person-centered approach uncovers the obligation facilitators of Family Meetings have to recognizing their attributes and the relationship they have to the participants.

**The critical approach.** Critical facilitator education addresses the political character of the role of facilitation by recognizing power differentials and the goal of social justice. This assumes that facilitators are not neutral and that they “must recognize the political and emotional impact an organization has on them” (Thomas, 2004, p. 133). Kirk and Broussine (2000) offer three propositions in regards to the politics of facilitation: organizations are political; facilitation is political; and facilitators are political. All FGDM models stress the importance of empowering families and giving them a voice throughout the meeting process. Facilitators in this study identified times when they balanced power and took sides to assist families who were often disempowered and underserved. They also provided examples when they reinforced the
power of their agency and a lack of sharing power with families resulted. Informing facilitators as to how to manage their lack of neutrality and to resist enforcing the power of their organization could increase the possibility for family empowerment. Workers need to make certain they do not become part of the bureaucratic systems that may be oppressing the very people they are trying to assist (Kirk & Broussine, 2000).

Facilitators receive very little training on how to handle the power inherent in their position (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1994). This requires an understanding of the principles of empowerment, power differentials, and the various types of power.

It would be constructive to train facilitators to understand their tremendous power, acknowledge their lack of neutrality, and to develop strengths to intervene in ways that capitalize on family participation while minimizing their own involvement. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Kirk and Broussine (2000) suggest that facilitators work to remain in the position of “partial awareness-open” where they work with what is going on within themselves, the group, and the wider systems. They offer five “containers” that help to achieve this state. The first is to recognize that they are never completely aware. The second is to apply a reflexive practice by using personal self-reflection and the processing of their facilitation with colleagues upon completion of a meeting. Third is to use reflexivity during a meeting where facilitators reflect on how they and others are thinking and acting throughout the meeting. Knowing their role and the role of all members in a Family Meeting makes up the fourth container. It refers to the facilitator keeping the focus of the meeting regardless of what surprises arise. The last one is “care” where it is expected that the facilitator be concerned not only about the process, but also about all the people who are part of the process. All five containers need to be incorporated into
the training of Family Meeting facilitators for them to achieve a stance of awareness that enables them to use power in a way that contributes to family decision making. Lastly, informing facilitators of French & Ravens’ (1959) categories of power, referenced in Chapter 2, should also be included, as it will help facilitators to recognize and manage each one as they arise.

Hilary Astor (2007) adds additional insight for training by offering five factors to help mediators achieve a stance that is even-handed in the context of the fluid states of power and neutrality. Although some are similar to those previously mentioned, these standards are helpful when considered in the context of power differentials. The first one is to recognize their viewpoints and values by using self-awareness. This can be accomplished by staffing with co-workers and through in-depth training. The second principle encourages mediators to understand the perspectives of others. Again, through training and reflexivity, facilitators can learn to be open to the perspectives of Family Meeting participants, which is often demonstrated through empathy. The third standard has mediators seeing the importance of differing vantage points by acknowledging the importance of diverse perspectives and backgrounds. A fourth suggestion is for them to make the best use of the power of participants. This requires intervening in ways that allow for members to have as much control as possible in the decision making process. Facilitators need assistance in knowing when to intervene and when to retreat since their on-going decisions guide the direction of meetings and influence the results. Lastly, Astor (2007) suggests that after looking at how mediators manage power, they need to ensure it is handled appropriately.
It would also be worthwhile for facilitators to be upfront during preparation about their involvement in the Family Meeting process. Explaining how they intervene for the main goal of consensus decision making may be a more realistic and honest approach. Cohen et al. (1999), suggest facilitators explain to participants the nature of their role and their views on neutrality in a detailed way instead of simply pronouncing that they are neutral.

All four approaches to facilitator education, though described here separately, clearly overlap. Combining all of the above strategies will require a great deal of time, resources, and manpower. It is the belief of this researcher that by providing facilitators with a thorough training program, on-going staffing with colleagues, and critical self-reflection opportunities, the struggles that were identified in this study could be reduced, resulting in a process that truly belongs to the participants.

**Research**

This study has exposed a number of areas for further exploration and lays the groundwork for larger and multi-method investigations such as observations, interviews, surveys, and case studies. Follow-up focus groups with the counties in this study, data from other counties in New York State, and the inclusion of other stakeholders, would add understanding and reliability to this study’s findings. Although there are few counties that use the assigned caseworker as facilitators, their inclusion is of particular significance since there has been minimal examination of their uncommon feature as caseworker to the family having a meeting. This next section provides further discussion on those previously mentioned areas for future research along with additional possibilities that merit consideration.
**Preparation.** The preparation stage has a significant impact on the success of a Family Meeting. Additional studies that look at this critical stage by gathering perspectives of families, service providers and in-house social service personnel are needed. Investigating these stakeholders’ opinions of what assists them in understanding their role in a Family Meeting would be informative.

Comparison studies could be made to reveal what is an adequate amount of preparation that would be conducive to positive outcomes, yet not too much of a drain on facilitators’ other commitments. Three of the four counties in this study abandoned the use of Family Group Conferences in favor of Family Meetings due to the hours of preparation for Family Group Conferences. Yet they were frustrated by the lack of time they had for preparation with Family Meetings. It would be helpful to define what is adequate preparation and to develop guidelines for facilitators. Administrative support may be needed to reduce facilitators’ job responsibilities to free up time in their schedules. Clearly, more evidence-based research is needed to guide facilitators in this pre-meeting stage.

**Empowerment.** Gaining involvement of families in decisions that affect the health and well-being of their families is integral to successful casework. This study gathered perspectives from facilitators who gave examples of Family Meetings in which they believed families were empowered. Because viewpoints cannot be considered factual, as there is no way to confirm them with this study, investigations that examine how involved families are in decision making, particularly from their perspective, will help to shed light on whether they are truly empowered. Comparison studies that contrast families’ outlooks on their empowerment in Family Meetings compared to other types of
meetings, such as Service Plan Reviews, may reveal if Family Meetings are actually more empowering.

**Concepts in neutrality.** This study touched only the surface of neutrality in the role of the facilitator. Additional focus groups, along with individual interviews that delve into the nuances of facilitation, would add more depth to what was discovered in this review. Asking facilitators more focused questions in terms of how they apply equidistance in their balancing of power, their perceptions about taking sides, and other issues of power sharing would contribute greatly to the field. Additional areas to investigate more deeply include managing emotions during a meeting, facilitators’ internal decision making, and the influence of their values and beliefs. Also, investigation of independent, external facilitators from outside agencies who plan and conduct Family Meetings for social service agencies may add another dimension to neutrality that was not exposed in this study.

Studies that include observation of actual Family Meetings would provide an in-depth view as to whether facilitators’ perceptions of their actions correspond to their actual facilitation. Researchers as observers could gauge facilitators’ level of interference, skills they use for family empowerment, and strategies of intervention.

Gathering families’ views of a Family Meeting facilitator in terms of neutrality is an area that has yet to be explored. Some focus group participants referenced the “perception of neutrality” by family members without really knowing their actual thoughts. The requirement of neutrality is considered in the best interest of families yet little is known about how they perceive its importance. Research in this area would add a
well-rounded view of neutrality when the family’s beliefs are combined with those of facilitators, service providers, and casework staff.

**Private family time.** There are few studies that examine private family time in terms of facilitators’ and families’ viewpoints (Hellend, 2005; Huntsman, 2006; Northern California Training Academy, 2008). Additional examination is needed that includes comparison groups of families that are offered private time and those that are not. This would help agencies decide whether it should be mandatory for all meetings, optional for families, or not offered at all.

**Use of assessment.** This study brought out the fascinating process used by the assigned caseworker facilitators for deciding whether an unassigned caseworker facilitator or an assigned should facilitate a Family Meeting. They believed that assessment ensured the neutrality of a facilitator. This strategy needs further research in terms of its effectiveness, how decisions are made, and if it would be a beneficial practice for all Family Meetings.

It may be wise for all agencies to consider applying the assessment process. Developing guidelines that determine the projected impact of interference by a facilitator in a Family Meeting, as opposed to a “yes” or “no” determination of neutrality, could be beneficial. Asking facilitators questions about their judgment about a case and whether they can keep from interfering in the meeting process could be done for every Family Meeting.

As stated previously, families’ perspectives on neutrality are sorely missing from the literature. Perhaps including families’ opinions in the assessment process could help uncover what they want in a facilitator. Since empowering families is expected to begin
during preparation, families’ input could be included as part of facilitator selection. This may seem like a radical proposal, but inclusionary practices need to look at all opportunities for empowerment. The process of assessment needs examination in order for agencies to make informed decisions about its use.

**Enhancing child involvement.** There is some research in the Family Group Conference arena that identifies the challenge of engaging children in participatory practices. Surveys of child satisfaction with Family Group Conferences and their level of participation show both positive and negative results (Helland, 2005). Oftentimes decisions in Family Meetings pertain to children and, depending on their age, their involvement may be necessary to create successful plans. Assigned caseworker facilitators in this study cited examples where they felt their relationship with children contributed to the children’s involvement. The level of comfort and trust created an environment where children felt safe to speak and to be part of decision making. Exploring the use of a family’s caseworker as a facilitator and its impact on child empowerment is essential. Collecting views from children who may have experienced one or both types of facilitators would offer a wealth of information.

**Family Meetings for adult services.** Family Group Decision Making models are mainly designed to address issues related to child health and safety. One county in this study used Family Meetings for their adult clients in their Adult Protection Unit. They offered examples of when families met to make plans for aging parents and physically or cognitively impaired adult children. This suggests an expanded use for Family Meetings that agencies should consider and researchers could examine.
Conclusion

All four focus groups described meetings both when they believed families were empowered and when they were not. They were able to point to elements that increased the possibility of empowerment as well as to those that reduced it. Level of family participation varied with each meeting depending on a multitude of factors such as adherence to meeting format, degree of family engagement, intensity of emotions, varying conditions, thoroughness of preparation, and the sharing of power. Each of these is an area that requires attention by facilitators to maximize family involvement in the decision-making process. Facilitators are in a central position in that how they facilitate greatly influences family participation.

Contradictions between theory and practice in terms of neutrality were substantiated by this study. Both types of facilitators believed they were neutral but often behaved in a biased manner. By borrowing concepts from facilitation and mediation, it can be seen that these facilitators were not neutral during many of the Family Meetings they presented. They did not meet the criteria in terms of their involvement in outcomes, impartiality, equidistance, application of competencies, and balancing of power. Since neutrality is defined as not taking sides and having little preference for outcomes, then touting Family Meeting facilitators as neutral is deceiving to families, service providers, and facilitators. It is proposed here that having Family Meeting facilitators present neutrality as one of their qualifications places undue pressure on them to attain the unachievable. Expecting them to be neutral is naïve and unfair to all participants of Family Meetings. This researcher encourages the acceptance of bias and intervention on the part of all facilitators and asserts that through extensive training and technical
assistance, they can augment their skills to create an atmosphere for family empowerment.

This study opens the door and brings the discussion into the Family Group Decision Making arena about the impact of the facilitator on family empowerment and the unequivocal belief that a neutral and non-case carrying facilitator is necessary. Other fields of study have given attention to this critical aspect to facilitation for a number of years. It is time for experts on various aspects of FGDM models to join the conversation on neutrality, as they could make valuable contributions with their knowledge and expertise. Their consideration is essential in that the FGDM literature stresses the empowering nature of these participatory meetings and the critical role facilitators play in the process.

Despite the challenges reported by both types of facilitators, all were able to define success and identify ways that they contributed to its occurrence. It was clear from their responses that they found it rewarding to witness and contribute to families making significant decisions for the safety and well-being of their children and other family members.
Appendix A

Agency Permission Agreement
Ona Belser, student; Principal Investigator  (518) 564-4176 belserob@plattsburgh.edu
Dr. Nancy Claiborne, Advisor (518) 442-5349; NC@CSC.Albany.Ed
School of Social Welfare
State University of New York at Albany

Your staff is being asked to take part in a research study about facilitation of Family Meetings. Only those workers who are or have been facilitators are invited to participate.

Description of research: This study will conduct a focus group of facilitators to gather their perspectives about neutrality, decision making, and family empowerment. This will consist of one, ninety-minute meeting with a semi-structured format. Participants will also be asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire that contains demographic questions that include: age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of education, job title, unit, years on the job and as a facilitator, type of training, and number of meetings facilitated.

Risks and benefits to participation: Risks to participants are considered minimal with the probability and magnitude of harm anticipated to be no more than encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Additional risks may include discomfort due to difference of opinions between workers, discussion around adherence, or lack of, to the model, and expressions of any dissatisfaction.

Benefits may include appreciation of the opportunity to speak about Family Meeting practices, sharing of opinions with coworkers, and considerations for policy change. Although some may not receive direct benefit from participation, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

Steps to minimize risks: The focus group will be conducted in a comfortable, private environment to allow for open discussion between participants, and where outsiders will not be able to hear them. It is expected that offering their expert opinion will be a beneficial experience and that varying viewpoints will be shared. They do not have to answer a question if they do not want to. None of the discussion will be shared with their supervisors or any other workers in their county or other counties. The Principal Investigator will be available after the focus group if anyone has questions or concerns. Each participant will be given a copy of the consent form that includes contact information if they would like to file an official complaint.

Confidentiality of records and data: All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records. All identifying information will be removed during transcription and there will be no identifiers in the final report. All computer files will be password protected and hard copies of any research information will be kept in a locked file.
cabinet. Consent forms, audiotapes, all notes and materials, will be kept for a minimum of three years, in accordance with the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at the University of Albany.

**Audio taping:** Audiotapes will be kept confidential and only the researcher and dissertation committee members will have access to them and any names mentioned on the tapes will be removed from the transcripts. A transcriptionist will transcribe the tapes only, and will not be part of any other aspect of the research. An outside researcher will have access to de-identified select portions of the transcripts for inter-coder reliability only.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation offered to participants other than snacks and beverages at the time of the meetings.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Participation by your staff in this research is voluntary. Each participant will be informed of the audio taping and then asked to sign a consent form before they participate. They will be told that they can leave the study at any time without penalty or loss. This study has been reviewed and approved by The State University of New York at Albany Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies.

**Dissemination of results:** A final report will be available upon request. Final results will be included in a completed dissertation and may be submitted for presentations at conferences and to pertinent journals.

**Contact information:** Please feel free to contact Ona Belser or her advisor Dr. Nancy Claiborne if you have any questions about this study. If you have any questions that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 800-365-9139 or orc@uamail.albany.edu.

**Statement of consent:** I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby agree to allow facilitators of Family Meetings that are part of my staff, to participate in this study.

**Signature:**
________________________________________________________________________
Name: (printed) _________________________________________ Title:___________
Date: ______________________________ County:____________________________

I also hereby agree to allow the focus group discussion to be audio recorded.

**Signature:** _____________________________________________ Date:___________

Thank you for allowing your staff to participate.
Appendix B
Consent Form

Family Meetings: Facilitators Reflect on Neutrality and Family Empowerment
Facilitator Family Meetings Consent Form
Ona Belser, doctoral student; Principal Investigator
518-564-4176
belserob@plattsburgh.edu
School of Social Welfare, State University of New York at Albany

You are being asked to take part in a research study about facilitating Family Meetings.

Description of research: This study will examine the role of the facilitator, neutrality, decision making, and family empowerment, through the perspectives of facilitators of Family Meetings.

Description of your involvement: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be included in a one time, audio taped, ninety-minute focus group with other Family Meeting facilitators from your agency. You will be asked questions about your role, decision making, and family empowerment. You will also complete an anonymous questionnaire that asks demographic questions that include: age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of education, job title, unit, years on the job and as a facilitator, type of training, and number of meetings facilitated.

Risks and discomforts of participation: Risks to participants are considered minimal with the probability and magnitude of harm anticipated to be no more than encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Minimal risks may include discomfort due to difference of opinions between workers, discussion around adherence, or lack of, to the model, and any expressions of dissatisfaction.

Steps to minimize risks: The focus group will be set up in a private, comfortable environment where outsiders will not be able to hear, and allows for open discussion between participants. It is expected that offering your expert opinion will be a beneficial experience and that opinions will vary. You do not have to answer a question if you do not want to. Please refrain from mentioning any names or identifying data about third parties. None of the discussion will be shared with supervisors or any other workers in your county or other counties. The Principal Investigator will be available after the focus group to answer any questions or address concerns you may have. You will be given a copy of this consent form that includes contact information if you would like to file an official complaint.

Expected benefits: Benefits may include appreciation of the opportunity to speak about Family Meeting practices, sharing of opinions with coworkers, and considerations for
policy change. Although you may not receive direct benefits from your participation, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

**Confidentiality of records and data:** All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records. All identifying information will be removed during transcription and there will be no identifiers in the final report. All computer files will be password protected and hard copies of any research information will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms, audiotapes, all notes and materials, will be kept for a minimum of three years from the close of the study and then all documents will be shredded and audiotapes erased.

**Audio taping:** Audiotapes will be kept confidential and only the researcher and dissertation committee members will have access to them and any names mentioned on the tapes will be removed from the transcripts. A transcriptionist will transcribe the tapes only, and will not be part of any other aspect of the research. An outside researcher will have access to de-identified select portions of the tapes for inter-coder reliability only. She will devise themes and categories for comparison to the coding of data by the Principal Investigator.

**Compensation:** There will be no compensation offered to participants other than snacks and beverages at the time of the meetings.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Your participation in this project is voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers and it is expected that there will be varying opinions. Even after you agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise have been entitled. I will retain and analyze the information you have provided up until the point you have left the study unless you request that your data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed.

**Dissemination of results:** A final report will be available upon request. Final results will be part of a completed dissertation, and may also be submitted for presentations at conferences and to pertinent journals.

**If you have questions:** The investigator conducting this study is Ona Belser, a student from the School of Social Welfare at SUNY Albany. Please ask any questions now if you have any. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Nancy Claiborne, Ph.D. One copy of this document will be kept together with the research records of this study. Also, you will be given a copy.

**Principal Investigator:** Ona Belser  
518-564-4176  
belserob@plattsburgh.edu.

**Advisor:** Dr. Nancy Claiborne  
518-442-5349  
NC@Csc.Albany.edu
Contact information: If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at 800-365-9139 or orrc@uamail.albany.edu.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The State University of New York at Albany Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies.

Statement of consent: I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

Signature: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________ County: ___________________

____ yes, I am willing to be audio taped during the focus group.
____ no, I am NOT willing to be audio taped during the focus group.

Please sign below if you are willing to have this interview audio recorded. You may not participate in this study if you are unwilling to have the interview audio recorded.

Signature: ______________________________

Date: ______________________________

Name: (printed)

__________________________________________________________
Appendix C

FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Family Meetings:
Facilitators Reflect on Neutrality and Family Empowerment

Please answer the following questions. **Do not put your name on it.** It will be used for descriptive purposes only. Thank you for taking the time to complete this short questionnaire. You can put it in the manila envelope when you are done.

1) Gender: _____male _____female

2) Age: _____

3) Race/Ethnicity: Check all that apply
   _____White _____White, non-Hispanic _____African-American _____Hispanic
   _____Asian-Pacific Islander _____Native American _____Other

4) Highest level of education: _________________

5) Job title: _________________

6) Unit: _________________

6) How many years have you worked for your county Social Services Dept? ________

7) How long have you been a facilitator of Family Meetings? ________________

8) What type of training have you had to be a facilitator? _______________________
   _______________________________________________________________________

9) How many Family Meetings have you facilitated? ____________

10) How did you become a facilitator? (check one)
    _____I volunteered _____It was required
Appendix D

Family Meetings:
Facilitators Reflect on Neutrality and Family Empowerment

OUTLINE FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

GREETING – Welcome everyone and express appreciation for their taking the time to meet. Researcher will introduce herself briefly and encourage participants to help themselves to a beverage and snack.

PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUP – The group will be informed that the researcher is conducting the study in order to gain facilitators’ perspectives on their role in family meetings. Discussion will focus on neutrality, decision making, and empowerment.

GROUND RULES – The consent form will be explained and written permission will be obtained from each participant before the start of the focus group. He or she will also complete an anonymous questionnaire that asks for demographic information only. Participants will be informed of the role of researcher, the audio taping, confidentiality, and that they may withdraw from the study at anytime. They will also be told to refrain from mentioning any names or identifying information about third parties. Participants will be encouraged to take turns so that everyone gets a chance to speak but also informed they do not have to answer if they do not want to. It will be emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers and that it is expected there will be varying viewpoints.

INTRODUCTIONS – Each participant will briefly introduce themselves by using their first name only.

1) Warm-up question: Describe your role as a facilitator.

2) Please describe a typical Family Meeting that you have recently facilitated.

a) How involved was the family in decision making?
b) What do you believe contributed to their involvement?
c) Tell me about your level of involvement in decision making in this meeting.
d) Are there certain skills you used to help the family be a part of decision making?
e) What challenges did you face in getting the family involved in decision making?

3) Now I would like you to describe another meeting, which you recently facilitated, that was more challenging for you.

a) How involved was the family in decision making?
b) What do you believe contributed to their involvement?
c) Tell me about your level of involvement in decision making in this meeting.
d) Are there certain skills you used to help the family be a part of decision making?
e) What challenges did you face in getting the family involved in decision making?
4) *Talk about a Family Meeting you facilitated that you believe was very successful.*

a) What told you it was a success?
b) What did you do that contributed to its success?
c) What facilitator skills do you believe are most important for a successful meeting?

5) *I would like to ask you some questions about neutrality in the role as a facilitator.*

a) Describe a meeting where it was easy to be neutral.
b) Now describe a meeting where it was difficult to be neutral.
c) Talk about how necessary you believe neutrality is in your role as a facilitator.
d) Discuss an example where a family asked for your opinion and how you responded to the request.
e) What are some of the challenges the non-assigned caseworkers face when they facilitate a Family Meeting?
f) Contrast these challenges with those of the assigned caseworker facilitating a Family Meeting.

6) *Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify?*

**CLOSING REMARKS** - The researcher will thank the participants again and inform them that their input was invaluable. She will restate that the information will be combined with data from other focus groups and that a copy of the final report will be available upon request.
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP – C1

ROLE
Participants described their role in 3 categories:

1) helping to come up with a plan
2) making arrangements – time, place, comfort, etc…
3) using their skills as a facilitator: communication, keeping focused, moving it along, on track

TYPICAL MEETING – HOW INVOLVED WAS FAMILY?
Several said that the families were very involved. Some were hard at first but then got easier.

Adult unit meetings sometimes had adults looking to others to make decisions. Families expected them to make decisions. Other agencies stomped on decisions. Overall most were involved – some challenges identified.

WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO INVOLVEMENT?
We guided – they came up with a plan.
Resources were flushed out.
On the same page mentioned several times (4).
Getting rid of the negatives about DSS.
Preparation time - key to buy in.
Setting ground rules.
The relationship - between the worker and family.
The situation – something needs to be done.

SKILLS THAT YOU DO THAT LEADS TO INVOLVEMENT IN DECISIONS
Interpersonal, facilitation skills – redirect, focus, reframing, listening, reviewing, discuss, guide, mediating, neutral, getting everyone involved, non-verbals, questions, interpreter, bring understanding, nonreactive, put it back on them, leader.
Relationship – fair, respectful from start.
Putting it on them.
Acknowledgement – family cares, their efforts.

**CHALLENGING MEETING – HOW INVOLVED WAS FAMILY?**

Not getting buy in, not taking responsibility

Specific populations: children, mental illness, M.R.

Wanting us to decide.

Getting other agencies to back off – having unrealistic expectations.

Overcoming DSS stigma – a bit at first.

Preparation time – have discussions before meeting about purpose, focus.

**CHALLENGES**

Service providers – reluctant, families easier, not getting their agendas across, “they expected me to punish them”. (Strong responses; all in agreement)

Order of protection – parents in different room.

Pregnant girl – in labor, cut meeting short.

Substance abusing parent – working through emotions, they were blocking decision making.

**WHAT QUALIFIES AS A SUCCESSFUL MEETING?**

Changed views walking out from walking in, all know – now rally, better understanding.

Empowerment, “going to do this”

Heard, a voice, shown in the plan.

At the meeting – a plan in place; future – it worked.

Same case – different views on success – some yes, some no “a lot of work and court anyway”.

Success maybe not related to purpose but ex. reconnected after years with family (passionate)

Broad definition of success

**WHAT DO YOU DO THAT LEADS TO SUCCESS?**

Skills – summarize, solution-focused from start – past successes, strengths, what worked; prep. work.

Empowerment – children, everyone, thanking, giving credit, reinforce in follow-up.

Transparency.

Stick with it – let family see that you were committed to pulling it off.
Accept behaviors – pen playing, game boy – stress relievers.

**NEUTRALITY – CHALLENGES**

Person, family – not likeable, wouldn’t have invited, clean slate

Own triggers.

Knowing history.

Have been listening to 1-2 people, hard not get swayed, sucked in, pick sides.

**EASY ABOUT BEING NEUTRAL**

Openness.

Self-interest.

Take off CW hat. (Can do belief)

Remove self from decisions.

**DISADVANTAGES TO CW FACILITATING OWN CASES.**

History

Agenda.

Angry family.

Pretending to be neutral – still guiding.

Vested – want certain outcome.

Last ditch effort – dynamic changes neutrality.

**ADVANTAGES TO CW FACILITATING OWN CASES.**

Relationship - family: children comfortable; knowing information, history; trust; reading non-verbals; supportive and confrontational; families uncomfortable without knowing – ex. SPR; want caseworker Frank; know strengths and biases, events; smoother; information for planning – what works, doesn’t work. (passionate, strong responses)

Relationship – service providers: know triggers, personalities, agendas.

Invested – you benefit, less work in the long run.

**CHALLENGES TO UNASSIGNED CASEWORKER FACILITATOR**

Not having information; uncomfortable with overview only – miss things; not being able to work through emotional stuff – could be surprises. (Strong responses)

Follow-up – aftermath.

Service providers – could be swayed too much – lack of knowledge.

**HOW DO YOU NOT GET INVOLVED?**
Awareness – honest with self, step out if need be.
Separate self – not my family, they’re adults; self-talk – mindset “not my plan”; if can’t – get another CW.
Follow guidelines, criteria.
Same standards for self as others.
Focus on problem – not court.
Make sure not having an agenda.

PUT ON THE SPOT. WHAT DO YOU DO?
Put it back on them: pro’s, con’s, look at plan, and then their decision; your day, your plan; review and on them.
Said sure to their ideas – they were surprised.
Need to give choices from the beginning – sets the approach.

SUGGESTIONS:
Animosity – get another CW.
Taper meetings – certain times, certain people.
Offer private time – 5, 10 minutes air laundry.
Have meetings earlier – not wait until critical. Could be some resistance from families.
“I can do this on my own”.
Define family meeting – SPR- broader definition.
Court driving – do what’s right for families, they will know. Get in trouble later.
Appendix F

Definitions of Final Codes

Balancing power – This refers to the on-going decision facilitators make about which participants will have influence and control throughout a Family Meeting.

Bottom lines – This is information that is presented during a Family Meeting, usually by the caseworker that outlines the safety and/or health concerns that the written plan must address. For example, the child must see her pediatrician regularly for a specific medical condition.

Conditions – This refers to various circumstances or situations that occur and are unrelated to the purpose of a Family Meeting but have an affect on how the meeting transpires. This includes the subcategories of “crisis,” “client characteristics,” and “unexpected event.” For example, “crisis” is when something occurs that makes it difficult for a family to focus on the reasons for convening a Family Meeting, such as a family becomes homeless the night before a meeting. “Client characteristics” are associated with the characteristics of the family members in the meeting such as age, mental status, learning disabilities, and substance abuse. Lastly, “unexpected event” is when an unanticipated incident occurs at a meeting such as a particular person showing up or the potential for a participant to have an outburst.

Education of non-social service professional- This is defined as strategies used to train non-social service agency professionals about Family Meetings.
Facilitator attributes – These are personal qualities that the facilitator brings to all aspects of facilitation, such as being non-judgmental, respectful, empathetic, and believing in the process.

Facilitator competencies – Facilitation skills that the facilitator has learned from training, consultation with staff, and by facilitating Family Meetings. This includes the sub-category of “facilitator self-awareness” defined as a facilitator’s consciousness in terms of his or her potential effect on all stages of a Family Meeting and what he or she does with that knowledge.

Facilitator opinion – This refers to the thoughts, ideas, and views of the facilitator and what he or she thinks should and should not happen during the preparation phase and the actual Family Meeting. This also includes the subcategory “assessment” referring to the process of determining if the facilitator’s opinion will interfere in the direction of the Family Meeting and if a different facilitator should be used.

Family engagement - Participation of family members where it is evident that they “buy into” the process, demonstrated by asking questions, being part of discussions, and making contributions. This can also include an interest in attending future meetings.

Knowledge – This is in reference to what and how much the facilitator knows about the family who is having a Family Meeting. This also includes the sub-category of “facilitator/family relationship,” the association facilitators have with the family who is having a Family Meeting.

Lack of family engagement - Minimal participation by family members in a Family Meeting where it is evident that they do not “buy into” the process, ask few questions, and make few if any contributions.
Lack of sharing power - When families have little or no input and control over decisions made during a Family Meeting.

Meeting format – A course of activities, which are expected and typical of what occurs during a Family Meeting and leads to a completed plan. These include the review of the purpose and ground rules of the meeting, presentation of strengths, concerns, resources, and bottom lines, and having everyone have a “voice” during the meeting.

Non-social service professional – This includes agency personnel, excluding DSS workers, in a Family Meeting and their influence, behaviors, and/or personal agendas.

Preparation – This is when a facilitator speaks with all the potential participants in order to get them ready for the Family Meeting. It also includes any other activities done prior to the meeting – securing a room, buying snacks, etc.

Private family time – The part of a Family Meeting where the family meets without the facilitator, service providers, and DSS staff to come up with a plan to address the identified concerns.

Role of the facilitator – A function or part played by the facilitator with obligations and defined behaviors.

Sharing power – When families have input and control over decisions made during a Family Meeting.

Strong emotions – This relates to intense feelings of the participants in a Family Meeting.

Viewpoint change – This is when participants come to a Family Meeting with one view about the family, their situation, and/or possible solutions and leave with a different one.
Written plan - The end result of a Family Meeting where a document is created that includes decisions made to meet the presenting concerns. This also includes the subcategory “follow-up” which is defined as “any information that relates to the progress of the family in following the plan.”
References


Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of Health and Illness, 16*(1), 103-121.


