

Like many children service programs around the United States, Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) has had periods of difficulty and reorganization focused on their roll to protect children placed into state custody. As with other public agencies this is to be done with scant resources. The intent of this paper is not to minimize the magnitude of the work that DCF does nor the difficulties that are inherent in doing such work, but to discuss the possibility of doing this work with a postmodern approach.

What would child protection look like under a postmodernism model? The most powerful tool DCF has is the ability to remove children from their home, from their biological family; yet their mandate is to do everything in their power to keep the children in the home.<sup>1</sup> As Hummel<sup>2</sup> points out, determining what these cases are rather than dealing with who these people are may be worth considering. No one fits into the format of a case file. They are people, designed and programmed by their experiences and perspectives. These people are brought to the attention of DCF because there is a presumption of a serious problem. If the goal of DCF is to protect that child, postmodernism would ask what process would or should be used to meet such a goal; say a child reaching adult age in an emotional, mental and physical state of health. That process may require immediate intervention. This may be the removal of the child until a subsequent process can be determined. The perspectives of the individuals in the situation would need to be determined. Postmodernism would suggest that any action taken should not involve the government doing something 'to' the family but rather work 'with' the family to determine what services should be made available. As anyone who has taught can attest, when creating a plan, one learns the subject matter much better. It seems reasonable to suggest that when a family understands a problem and possible outcomes; choosing to develop a plan, which would achieve their desired consequence, might also provide for the best results.

What we have currently is a government organization, DCF, which comes into a situation as a deciding party on a family that DCF has an interest in keeping together. DCF has the legal authority to remove a child, yet has a mandate not to do so. All too often the child is regarded as some form of chattel rather than regarded as an individual with human rights of their own.

The family needs assistance, the fact that DCF is involved implies that a problem is perceived by someone, be it a school teacher, a medical professional or a neighbor. Caseworkers have traditionally been required to assess needs based on preconceived Postmodernism would require that the family, in conjunction with the caseworker, determine what they need. These intervention events likely occur due to factors such as lack of parenting skills, financial stress, or other causes which may create a volatile environment for children. Though postmodernism allows for every person to pursue their concept of happiness, one's happiness must not interfere with the health of another person.

Communication, and perhaps as Mary Parker Follett advised, inevitable conflict, may be needed to align the desires of a family with the necessities of a child, before determining that no further services are needed. In some situations parenting isn't passed from parent to child. In many cases families are not aware that they have survived their childhood and have not been raised. Caseworkers need to communicate, winning the trust of the family members. They must build the family into a team willing to confront their personal issues. No one grows without being pressed to reach new limits. Just as people are pushed by their parents, teachers and others in society, these families need the support and influence of DCF to insure progress. If the child needs to be removed on a temporary basis to insure that they are safe, then there should not be any hesitations to do so. Families can and should be reunited, after the family has developed a plan and has made good strides toward ensuring that skills are in place to handle situations. This

would not be the government making decisions for the family, but rather a postmodern method, working with the family to insure that they understand the issues, develop procedures to improve the conditions for themselves and their family and ensure the safety of their children.

DCF needs to insure that families are dealt with in a respectful and compassionate manner. The issues that the families need to address will be addressed by the family, with the assistance of DCF facilitating resources needed to correct issues. Case managers need to review with the caseworkers to insure that plans are developed by the family, with the caseworker acting as a facilitator. Caseworkers can help to locate and develop resources and connections to help the family reach the goals that they set for themselves. Given the costs of lawsuit settlements and pilot programs that has been paid by DCF and the state of Florida, facilitation and assistance to assist a family on a destructive path, should prove to be cost effective.

DCF could well use a change of direction to end the negative publicity surrounding the many deaths of children under their supervision. Families, with the assistance of extended family and friends, working with the facilitation of DCF caseworkers could reach levels of development and creatively address problems that the current organization of DCF is not equipped to handle. Through successful outcomes, the community and other stakeholders benefit. This bottom up focus may lead to community volunteerism and self-help advancement not previously utilized but which could in turn grow into a community outreach for DCF. As a community heals itself and aligns itself to protect and oversee the safe development of its children, DCF benefits from the assistance and the improved relationships.

Endnotes:

1. DeFede, Jim. "Ester Jacobo." *Facing South Florida*. 2013. Miami, FL: CBS.
2. Hummel, Ralph P. *The Bureaucratic Experience: The Post-Modern Challenge*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2008.