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Commentary on "Practitioners' Views of Family Strengths: A Delphi Study"

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Kathleen Romero, Jessica Crowder and Kenneth Wedel's article, "Practitioners' Views of Family Strengths: A Delphi Study," provides an important consciousness-raising piece on one of the most critical social topics of our times. There tends to be so much noise and higher profile attention grabbing items in the media these days (e.g., presidential campaigns, Occupy Wall Street protests, global economic meltdowns) that the stressors being experienced by the fundamental building block of our society (our families) is relegated to the background; regrettably, this is not a recent oversight. The families who are the first and often the hardest hit by these stressors are typically those living below or at the economic margins; for those reasons and others they do not wield much political power, so they can be easily overlooked.. Romero and colleague's article is an important reminder that we should not do so. The study examines strengths, weaknesses and threats to families in one particular state. While there are many strengths to the study, there are also weaknesses, which the author is the first to point out; its weaknesses notwithstanding, the article is well worth a read for practitioners, policymakers and advocates alike.

The population focus of the research are youth and families in the State of Oklahoma, which, according to the author, ranks among the highest in some critical social problem areas including teen pregnancy, incarceration, divorce, and poverty. Because of the methodology and research design employed, the study does not include a representative sample nor are the results generalizable beyond the state where the data is collected; to the author's credit no claims are made to the contrary. However, one only has to be a cursory reader of the popular press and consumer of television news to be suspicious that families living on the economic margins are experiencing similar stressors across the country.

The Delphi method is now a widely-accepted and even time-honored approach to research; on the continuum of quantitative to qualitative methodologies, Delphi falls more toward the latter end of the spectrum. As the author states, in the Delphi approach "participants are not selected randomly; rather, they are chosen specifically for their expertise in whatever field of topic the study is assessing." According to the author, in this study the researchers "sought the opinions of the people most knowledgeable about families in Oklahoma." The entire sample of

participants was from the Oklahoma Association of Youth Services (OAYS), “an association of not-for-profit youth service agencies in Oklahoma that go through a state-mandated annual peer review process to ensure each agency is providing quality service delivery, maintaining board governance, and meeting standards.” Out of a total of 48 member agencies, representatives from 38 were included in the sample.

After the agencies were selected, each of their directors was contacted by mail to request that “an expert within the agency” be identified to participate in the study; these experts were those “considered to be most knowledgeable about families.” An online survey was developed by the researchers and administered via Survey Monkey. The Delphi process in this study included administering two rounds of the survey. Round One included demographic items and six questions about strengths, weaknesses and threats facing Oklahoma’s families. It resulted in 21 responses that were analyzed and clustered; the resulting clusters comprised Round Two. Once again, the Round Two survey focused on the strengths, weaknesses and threats facing families in Oklahoma. Participants were asked to use a six-point scale to rate the significance, in their opinions, of each item. In addition to the rating scale, respondents were invited to provide open-ended comments.

According to the author, the “panelists provided a wide array of feedback in response to the survey questions.” Round One responses were synthesized into domains and the respondents were, again, asked to rate their importance as part of the Round Two survey. Seven items rose to the surface as being noticeable strengths of Oklahoma’s families. The highest-rated of these was resilience, followed by spirituality, support systems, bonded families, valuing family life, meeting material needs, and participation in family activities.

Six weaknesses were identified by the respondents as affecting Oklahoma’s families. Of greatest concern to these experts is substance abuse; followed by poverty; generational cycles of dysfunction; lack of parenting/life skills; too few programs/resources, particularly in rural areas; and economic stressors. The threats facing families in Oklahoma, according to the study’s participants, are similar to the weaknesses noted above, the exception being state budget reductions, which was noted as a

major threat, and the others being poverty, substance abuse, hard economic times and generational cycles of dysfunction.

The participants were also asked their suggestions for improvements the state could make to strengthen families. Not surprisingly, the participants responded that increasing funding for treatment of mental health and substance abuse would be the most important improvement. Making services more inclusive of the family unit, prevention of substance abuse, health promotion, and the provision of educational and employment opportunities were also noted as important potential improvements.

The researchers were somewhat surprised that the list of strengths generated by the respondents was noticeably shorter than the weaknesses of families. They suggest that the most likely reasons for this difference are unfamiliarity with the strengths-based approach, length of service (i.e., the more time in the field, the greater the cynicism), burnout and fatigue. The author goes on to say that perhaps the explanation which accounts for the greatest amount of variance between the list of strengths and weakness is that "it might reasonably be a telling sign of the state of families" in Oklahoma or even nationwide, as this commentator suggested at the outset.

From the point of view of traditional research methodology, the sample of respondents is not representative (maybe not even in Oklahoma, certainly not nationally) and the results are not generalizable. But there is ample evidence in the literature, popular press included, that our families are suffering all across the United States. They are suffering from a lack of jobs that pay decent wages, a decrease in the availability of preventative and treatment services, and a general lack of support for families. One cannot overstate the negative impact of poverty, a social ill from which too many of our families in Oklahoma and across the nation suffer. This article is an important reminder that there are many meaningful ways to collect information beyond the classic experimental design, the Delphi approach being one of them. More importantly, it reminds us to keep in mind the challenges faced by the families we serve; that they do as well as they do in these difficult economic times is a testament to their resilience.