

Research Abstract

FFTA's 16th Annual Conference on Treatment Foster Care

July 2002

The 4-D: A Meaningful Guide to Strengths-Based Practice with Youth in Care

Jane F. Gilgun

The 4-D are a set of assessment tools based on *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*, a book that draws upon 15,000 years of Native wisdom on child socialization and is widely used in youth-caring agencies. The tools are Belonging, Mastery, Autonomy, and Generosity, representing the four quadrants of the Circle of Courage, an American Indian Medicine Wheel that is the centerpiece of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Brocken, 1990). The 4-D were tested on youth ages 12 to 19 who had experienced adversities and were clients in six different agencies, both in Minnesota and nationally.

Besides ideas from *Reclaiming Youth at Risk*, the 4-D are based upon contemporary theories of human development, such as Erikson's psychosocial theory, research and theory on risk and resilience, and the practice experience of social workers and psychologists. I wrote an in-depth discussion of the ideas on which the 4-D are based (Gilgun, 2002). A second paper describing the tools, a manual, and a long and short version of the tools are available on the web at <http://ssw.che.umn.edu/faculty/jgilgun.htm>.

The integration of the Circle of Courage with contemporary theories and practice recognizes the transcultural nature of Native perspectives and contributes to a growing body of literature on the complementarity between Native and Western approaches to the promotion of well-being and healing from adversities.

The tools are designed to help in assessment, treatment planning, to monitor the course of treatment, and to provide outcome scores. They also have the potential to guide conversations that can lead both youth and social service professionals to new understandings.

As clinical rating scales, that is, scales that are filled out by practitioners and not by clients, the instruments are designed to fit and add to practice. The instruments direct practitioners' attention to risks and strengths that reside in individuals, families, peer groups, and communities.

The tools are composed of items that have a risk side and a strength side. Figure 1 shows the first two items of the Belonging instrument. The items are purposely broad in scope in order to help practitioners organize the information they have of clients and their situations. Thus, scoring requires practitioner judgment. Practitioners draw upon their multiple sources of knowledge, such as direct contact with youth and their biological and foster families, case records, and conversations with collaborating service providers.

Growing Home, a national therapeutic foster care agency headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota, assembled a team to develop the instruments. The agency had adopted the Circle of Courage as a foundation for its practice and wanted to extend the ideas of the Circle to a set of assessment

tools. The team was composed of agency administrators, line social workers, the agency’s clinical psychologist, and me, a professor of social work at the University of Minnesota.

The team followed high standards of instrument development. We gave much thought to each item, winnowing a list of several hundred possible items to a reasonable size. After thoroughly considering a range of options, we decided to follow the structure of the CASPARS, strengths-based instruments for children ages 5-13 that I had developed a few years earlier (Gilgun, 1999).

The 4-D, like the CASPARS, yield two scores: a strength score and a risk score. They identify the strengths that can be mobilized to support youth’s efforts to cope with, adjust to, and overcome adversities. Figure 1 shows the first few items of the Belonging instrument.

Figure 1: The First Two Items of Belonging

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Scoring | | | | | | | |
| 4=high strength | | | | 4=high risk | | | |
| 3=medium strength | | | | 3=medium risk | | | |
| 2=low strength | | | | 2=low risk | | | |
| 1=inconsistent strength | | | | 1=inconsistent risk | | | |
| Strengths | | | | Risks | | | |
| 1. Youth feels connected to at least one other pro-social person. | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| ▶ | | | | | | | |
| 2. When stressed, youth seeks a person, a setting, or an activity that provides a safe haven. | | | | | | | |
| 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| ▶ | | | | | | | |

The early drafts of the instruments were subjected to a vigorous piloting that resulted in additional revisions. The piloting ended when no more revisions were necessary. The development period was two years long.

An 18-month long field test followed the piloting. Analysis of the field test data showed that the instruments have high reliabilities and good indices of validity. As seen in Table 1, the coefficient alphas reached .9, which is the “gold standard” for instruments that are to be used with individuals.

Table 1: Coefficient Alphas for Individual Instruments and the Total Item Pool

| Instrument | Number of Items | Coefficient Alpha |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Belonging | 11 | .89 |
| Mastery | 19 | .93 |
| Autonomy | 8 | .91 |
| Generosity | 9 | .91 |
| Total Item Pool | 47 | .96 |

Training is required for practitioners to get the most out of the 4-D. The manual available on the web provides information needed to use the tools, including discussions of the four dimensions of the Circle of Courage. Persons who want additional background can pursue the readings listed in the reference section of the manual. Besides training, the optimal use of the tools requires a paperwork audit so that the 4-D don't become just one more form to fill out rather than a meaningful guide to a competent practice. Many practitioners are deeply stressed by the paperwork requirements of their jobs, as our field test showed. The paper on the 4-D that is available on the web, as mentioned earlier, provides an in-depth discussion of this serious issue.

In the Circle of Courage, questions about what adults are doing or not doing to promote youth's belonging, mastery, autonomy, and generosity are as important as asking how young people are responding. Thus, the framework assumes trust, mutuality, and reciprocity between young people and the persons to whom they relate.

As the Circle of Courage makes clear, children cannot become resilient on their own; that is, they cannot accomplish the tasks of belonging, mastery, autonomy, and generosity without the efforts of others. Adults, peers, and communities have important roles, as counselors to provide guidance, as role models to emulate, and as cheerleaders to affirm and encourage. Finally, families, communities, and governments must provide resources that young people in care can use to cope with, adapt to, and overcome adversities.

Within a resource-rich network of connection and resources, children and youth in care can become resilient and in their turn become persons who guide, serve as role models, affirm and encourage. Thus, the circle becomes complete.

Note: The research on which the 4-D is based was funded by the Bush Foundation, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Author (s) Contact Information:

Jane F. Gilgun, Ph.D., LICSW
School of Social Work, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities
1404 Gortner Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55108 USA
Phone: (612) 925-3569
E-Mail: jgilgun@umn.edu

References

Brendtro, Larry K., Brokenleg, Martin & Van Bockern, Steven (1990). Reclaiming youth at risk: Our hope for the future. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

Gilgun, Jane F. (2002). Completing the Circle: American Indian Medicine Wheels and the promotion of resilience in children and youth in care. *Journal of Human Behavior and the Social Environment* 6(2), 65-84.

Gilgun, Jane F. (1999). CASPARS: New tools for assessing client risks and strengths. *Families in Society*, 80, 450-459. Tools available at <http://ssw.che.umn.edu/faculty/jgilgun.htm>