



# RELATIONSHIPS MATTER:

How Agencies Can Support Family and Social Network Development

IN A SERIES OF REPORTS ON  
SOCIAL NETWORKS FROM  
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

# NUMBER THREE

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#### About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information and a copy of this report, visit the Foundation's website at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

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How Agencies Can Support Family and Social Network Development

**THIRD IN A SERIES OF REPORTS  
ON SOCIAL NETWORKS FROM  
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by Elena Pell

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like to acknowledge the men and women who took time out of their busy lives to engage in dialogue with us about these important issues. This report absolutely could not have happened without their willingness to share their experiences and wisdom with us.

*LCW Dialogue Participants:* Janice Vargas, Rasec Vargas, Belgica Peña, Maria Betances, Tomas Peña, Altagracia Cruz, Isaura Peña, Ismar Cruz, Pedro Ayala, Felicia Pichardo, Sandra Mouzon, Basilia Rosario, Jordi Ureña, Eliazer Vazques, Nelson Silvestre, Frank Ditren, Xiomara Silvestre, and Teofilia Richardson.

*FII Dialogue Participants:* Carla, Kalia, Julie, Sylvia, Paula, Sylvia D., Yan, Aishah, Jennifer, Sandap, Chhorvy, and Kathryn. (Only first names were provided by the staff of FII.)

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## FRAMING SOCIAL NETWORKS

The Foundation's Social Network portfolio began in early 2004 with the development of a framework and approach for the "third leg of the triumvirate stool" for the *Making Connections*\* theory: social networks. The three-legged stool represents the three opportunity strands—connections to economic opportunities, strong social networks, and quality services and support—that families must have to realize well-being and successful outcomes. These opportunity strands are at the heart of the Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative.

Cultivating strong social networks was a new area of focus for the Casey Foundation. The development process began with an exploration of existing literature on the subject. After reviewing the literature, it became clear that there was a need to better understand good practice and the social network experiences of families from their points of view. Thus, a consultative session was held in May 2004. The Social Network Team, formed during the planning and implementation of the consultative session, learned much from the participants—a mix of practitioners, resident leaders in the *Making Connections* sites, and researchers. Essentially, the message to the team was to "go carefully into the social ecologies of communities and learn."

A product of this early phase of research is a paper that I wrote, entitled **Tapping the Power of Social Networks**. This paper compiles relevant definitions, key findings from the literature and their limitations when applied to practice and measurement, and the understanding we came to about a potential niche for the Foundation in strengthening positive social networks in the context of the *Making Connections* work in the sites.

The next phase was to learn about and explore successful practices of intermediary organizations already working with families like those who live in our *Making Connections* neighborhoods. Based on a scan of promising approaches across the country and advice from the consultative session participants, we selected six organizations to visit and learn from: Beyond Welfare in Ames, IA; Community Organizing Families Initiative in Chicago, IL; Family Independence Initiative in Oakland, CA; Grace Hill Settlement House in St. Louis, MO; Lawrence Community Works in Lawrence, MA; and La Union de Pueblo Entero (LUPE) in San Juan, TX. These visits included observations, document reviews, interviews, and focus groups with key staff and families involved with these organizations. A second paper, written by Terri Bailey, entitled **The Ties That Bind**, summarizes our findings from these visits, and helps lay the groundwork for the development of a social networks point of view for the Foundation's practice and measurement work in *Making Connections* sites. A third paper, written by Elena Pell, entitled **Relationships Matter: How Agencies Can Support Family and Social Network Development**, focuses specifically on the discussions with the participating families and their experiences in social networks.

\**Making Connections* is a ten-year community change initiative by the Annie E. Casey Foundation that seeks to improve child and family outcomes. To learn more about *Making Connections*, please visit [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).

Being very clear about the importance of the link between strong, positive social networks and the achievement of successful, tangible outcomes for families, the Social Network Team began to explore how to incorporate a social networks approach into the results-oriented work of the Foundation. We are particularly focused on the core results of *Making Connections* in the areas of Family Economic Success (FES) and ensuring that children are healthy and prepared to succeed in school (CHAPSS). We began with FES, following the history of this work in the *Making Connections* sites, which resulted in a fourth paper, written by Nilofer Ahsan, entitled **Social Networks Make a Difference: Family Economic Success**. This paper describes examples of concrete opportunities where a social networks approach can bolster the scope, scale, and/or sustainability of FES results. It also contains some key insights about engaging families who are most vulnerable, such as those families with members who are formerly incarcerated, or with members who are dealing with mental health or substance abuse challenges, or immigrant families, and supporting the “success trajectories” of these families individually and collectively.

The fifth and final paper, entitled **Measuring Social Networks: Tools for Mapping and Evaluating Their Development**, written by David Chavis and Mary Hyde, provides an overview of the tools for mapping, measuring, and evaluating the development of robust social networks and their association with the improvement of key outcomes for residents and families. This guidebook can be used by practitioners and residents who live and work in the *Making Connections* sites. It provides hands-on tools for mapping and measuring social networks and the development of key elements within these networks, and for measuring effects at various levels of analysis: individual, group, organizational, or whole network.

The objective of the papers in this series is to tell the story of the social network development here at the Casey Foundation, as well as to share these lessons—gathered from practitioners, residents, and families—with the larger field. It is our hope that as you review these five papers you are able to understand the positive impact of social networks on improving the lives of children, families, and communities. Social networks can be so powerful in the lives of the most disadvantaged families. Therefore, it is important to focus on them and create opportunities where they can be supported and sustained. Indeed, it is clear that attention to strengthening these networks is a key ingredient in realizing the aspiration of transforming neighborhoods. We hope these papers help to provide some ideas, strategies, and tools for supporting positive social networks in your work. Please feel free to send us your comments. Comments may be sent to me at [ajordan@aecf.org](mailto:ajordan@aecf.org), or Bahia Akerele at [bakerele@aecf.org](mailto:bakerele@aecf.org).

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

# E N O

## INTRODUCTION

*Most learning and change processes fail to access and work with the underlying field of potential from which new possibilities emerge.*

—Joseph Jaworski, Adam Kahane and C. Otto Scharmer, *The Presence Workbook*, Society for Organizational Learning, 2004

*When we all share our ideas, the common good becomes universally understood. (Cuando se comparten los ideas, se hace universal el trabajo del bien.)*

—LCW Dialogue Participant

*To participate in this kind of project, you have to see a different future for yourself. People have to see a different future for themselves. They have to be visionary. When I try to explain this project to some people, they hear me but they aren't listening. Even seeing me as an example is not enough. They have to see themselves. But people have gotten into believing that things do not change. It's the way that they have been socialized. They cannot believe that they have things to build on. But I really feel like everyone involved in FII is able to see things that others can't see.*

—FII Dialogue Participant

The Annie E. Casey Foundation<sup>1</sup> has been a consistent messenger for the idea that family strengthening is central to building and sustaining healthy communities and improving conditions for children. This report chronicles some of what was learned during an exploration of two innovative agencies: Lawrence Community Works (LCW) and Family Independence Initiative (FII). Each has developed some unique ways to support families and social networks.

The Foundation recognizes that strong social ties are important to the welfare of a community and that the lack thereof can have deleterious effects on individuals, families, and neighborhoods. However, we don't fully understand how participation in social networks impacts families and, conversely, how families impact social networks. This report hopes to further the understanding of this interaction in the context of the work of these two agencies.

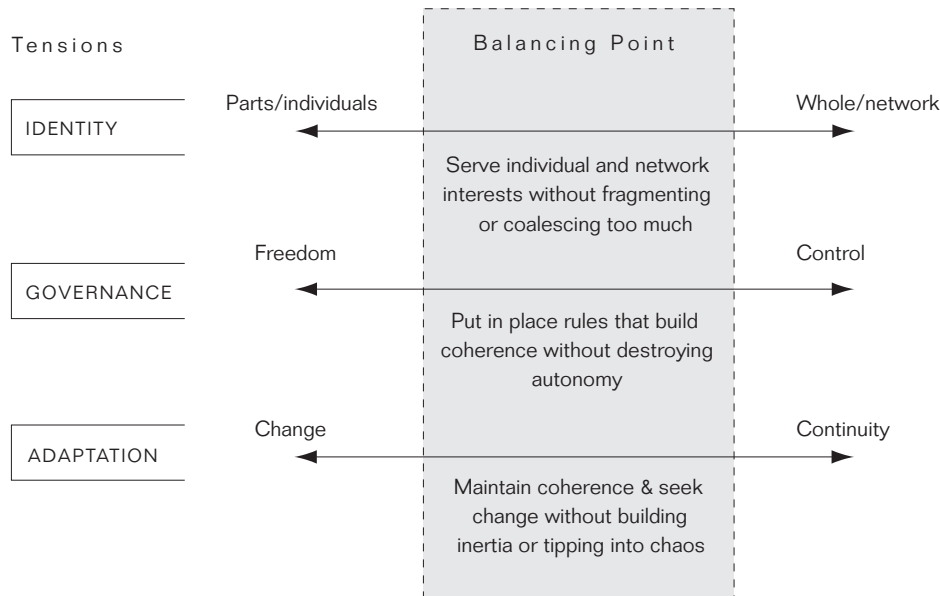


FRAME OF ANALYSIS

*A. Social Networks Are Complex Human Systems*

An examination of social networks can benefit from a frame of analysis that does justice to their complexity. Basically, the science of complexity is “the science of how patterns and structures self-organize from simple elements.”<sup>2</sup> This report draws upon the work of a notable pioneer in the science of complexity, the Santa Fe Institute’s Brian Arthur, as well as the writings of MIT’s C. Otto Scharmer and Generon Consulting’s Joseph Jaworski.

**Balancing Tensions in Networks**



Source: Draft 4.1 Barr Foundation Network Research Project, 2/2004.

In 2004, Peter Plastrik and Madeleine Taylor wrote a report on “Network Power for Philanthropy and Nonprofits” for the Barr Foundation that built on the work of Brian Arthur to show how social networks survive and prosper by continually balancing the needs of the network against those of individuals. Networks also must maintain coherence without destroying autonomy. Networks continually adapt by balancing change and continuity in ways that evolve the whole system without tipping it into chaos. In complex systems, balancing points are not fixed but dynamic states where components never quite lock into place nor dissolve into turbulence. These equilibria provide robustness to the network and allow it to thrive and evolve.

### *B. Families Are Networks*

Families are a type of social network. They produce social capital, particularly bonding social capital, that provides the resources, support, and capacity needed for the family to thrive. Families provide membership, economic support, socialization, learning, protection, affection, and cultural socialization.

Plastrick and Taylor's analysis also applies to family networks. Building and sustaining a strong *family* network requires that the identities of individual members are balanced vis-à-vis the family as a whole. Healthy families achieve their own form of governance in the form of rules and shared norms that sustain the family system without crushing the autonomy of individual family members.

Finally, families *adapt* and must continually do so without tipping the family system into chaos. Adaptation is particularly germane to this report. Family systems do not function in a vacuum; families are always embedded within other systems. These extra-familial interactions have a profound impact on the strength of family networks.

### *C. Context Matters*

*Everything is mutually adapting to everything else all of the time, and the complexity point of view asks how things adapt to various circumstances.*

—Brian Arthur

In all communities, the context in which the family operates has undergone dramatic changes, affecting family composition, roles, work patterns, and dynamics. Not all of these changes cause stress on families, but most modern American families—urban and rural, middle class and poor—are coping with lack of time, energy, and community support; geographically dispersed family support systems; and a host of other pressures.

While middle-class and wealthy families can purchase goods and services (recreational sports programs, quality day care, tutoring, enrichment programs, vacations, housekeepers, communication technology, security systems, etc.) to help manage some of the stresses of modern family life, poor families have fewer resources available to them for dealing with the demands they face.

Poor people often must overcome considerable obstacles to access goods and services. The Casey Foundation has long understood the strain that families experience when service systems are fragmented, overlapping, or unresponsive. Systems of support based on traditional service models can be difficult and time-consuming for families to access and often unintentionally impose restrictive or conflicting agendas on family members. Numerous studies on parent participation in service systems have shown that their situations can be further complicated by a reduced awareness of rights or procedures, logistical hurdles, language barriers, and distrust of authority.

#### D. How Agencies Operate Has Implications for Family and Social Networks

Meg Wheatley has said that human systems function in “waves of potential” that are “relationships waiting to happen.” As she explains:

*The conditions that are in place that support the manifestation of these waves of potential are very important for the outcome...the precondition for a spontaneous emergence of order is the linking of disparate elements by a few simple rules of relationship [emphasis added].*

These rules of relationship govern how systems manage fundamental dynamics such as communication, information sharing, choice, and accountability.

This report hopes to shed light on some of the assumptions and everyday practices at LCW and FII that contribute to their ability to work with families in ways that support family networks. Brian Arthur has said: “It’s not what people know that counts; it’s what they take for granted.”<sup>3</sup> The *actual* rules of relationship that operate in an organization are not always codified in a mission statement or employee manual. The rules of relationship *as practiced* may be tacit or informal agreements.

The scope and design of this project would have needed to be far more extensive to surface, examine, and speak to *all* the rules of relationship that are operating within these agencies. As such, this report is not intended to offer a *comprehensive* analysis of how these rules may be operating. This report will offer examples of rules that are either explicit or were brought to light in the course of this project, and focus on those that contribute to family and network development. It is also important to say that the project design was not intended to produce a critique—or an assessment—of the work of these agencies, nor the families on this organizational journey with them. In the dialogues, and in the course of this project, I have simply attempted to surface lessons that may help us understand how these agencies contribute to families and social networks.

These two agencies were chosen because each of them has an explicit goal of building social networks. LCW and, perhaps to a lesser extent, FII are “network organizations.” A network organization is more like the Internet than a factory. Like the Internet, network organizations are demand-driven and highly flexible environments that place a high premium on choice and communication. Network organizations are constantly innovating and adjusting parameters. LCW’s approach is intentionally linked to a community social network development agenda. FII’s is more narrowly focused on creating a support system for women and families by strengthening their bridging and bonding ties.

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## PROJECT DESIGN

### *A. Genesis of This Report*

The idea for this report came about in 2003 as a result of several discussions with Audrey Jordan, Senior Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Most of the research for this report was done in 2004 in conjunction with the Foundation's Social Network Team activities. Four dialogues were held with families who participate in programs of Lawrence Community Works and the Family Independence Initiative. Insights into LCW's organizational philosophy and practices have also benefited from my two-year collaboration with Bill Traynor, LCW's executive director, while we were both consulting for the Foundation's Louisville *Making Connections* site. Members of the Foundation's Social Network Team—Mary Achatz, Terri Bailey, Bill Traynor, and, of course, Audrey Jordan—also contributed to interpreting the findings outlined in this report.

### *B. The Use of Dialogue*

In *The Web of Life*, Fritjof Capra shows that complex systems function in three domains. The most straightforward and familiar is the structure of the system—the parts. The second domain is the relationships—how the different parts of the system interrelate. The third domain is how these systems emerge and evolve. The first domain lends itself easily to quantitative analysis. The second domain—that of relationship effects—can on occasion be quantified, although ethnography and other forms of qualitative analysis often capture it best. The third domain, that which is adaptive and emergent, can only be understood from within the system. It is perhaps for this reason that Brian Arthur asserts that the best way to understand any complex human system is to immerse oneself in it and patiently observe patterns of behavior until its properties become clear. Given that time and resources would not be adequate to immerse ourselves in these institutions, we chose to do the next best thing—to engage in a dialogue with people who have lived this experience.

Dialogue is distinct from focus groups, interviewing, and regular conversation. By asking deeper questions, slowing down the pace, and promoting careful listening and the opportunity to clarify meaning, dialogue encourages people to move outside their own experience and see through the eyes of others. By making frequent use of paraphrasing and meaning checking, it encourages people to hear themselves.

In a dialogue, a group often comes to a collective insight that emerges not as an agreement, but as a breakthrough that elevates the group's understanding to a higher level. To the greatest extent possible, participants were given opportunities to engage in "Generative Dialogue," which promotes the explorations of shared meanings and contexts that arise out of breakthrough thinking. Part of my facilitation technique involves what I call "platforming," sensing when these breakthroughs are occurring and supporting them as they occur.

I worked with Audrey Jordan to develop a set of questions to trigger an exploration of the experiences of these families with social networks and their relation to these agencies.

Four dialogues were conducted. We met with 18 individuals involved with Lawrence Community Works and 11 from the Family Independence Initiative.

A great deal of attention was paid to the makeup of the groups to insure a diversity of life experience, age, and family role. Each group included some members who were from the same family as well as other individuals. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, most, but not all, participants were of Latino origin and included both men and women. In Oakland, the two groups were all women, and mostly immigrant. One was composed primarily of Cambodian refugees; the second comprised a mix of African-American, Latino, and Asian women. To create an appropriate atmosphere for sharing, dialogue participants were assured of our commitment to confidentiality. Their gender or ethnicity is only mentioned when it is helpful to understand their remarks. When they are referred to by name in the context of a quote, I use only the first letter of their name.

Each dialogue was followed by a debriefing session with Audrey Jordan during which we explored what we had heard. I also met at least once with staff at both agencies to help understand organizational context. Finally, I joined with other members of the Social Network Team to glean trends in thinking and key insights across the different pieces of work that each of us was doing.

### *C. Brief Background on Each of the Agencies*

#### **1. Lawrence Community Works**

In 1998, Bill Traynor, a Lawrence resident, along with three graduate students from MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning, spearheaded a redevelopment and planning effort that resurrected elements of a troubled Community Development Corporation and combined it with a comprehensive community organizing strategy. This "Reviviendo" (Rebirth) formed the genesis for what is now Lawrence Community Works in Lawrence, Massachusetts. LCW provides an array of programs spanning affordable housing, family asset building, community revitalization, leadership training, youth development, and financial independence for women with a staff of 20 and a network membership of 700 residents.

#### **2. Family Independence Initiative**

Less than five years ago, the Family Independence Initiative, based in Oakland, California, pioneered a unique family network approach to breaking the cycle of poverty. As described in its brochure, FII "invests directly in the leadership and vision of low-income families who work in groups to develop pathways out of poverty for themselves and those around them. . . . FII strengthens group members' ties to each other, builds their capacity, increases their net worth, and networks them into new opportunities." FII was founded by Maurice Lim Miller based on his insights into why traditional anti-poverty programs fail. He looked at how first generation immigrants formed networks that helped people succeed in spite of tremendous challenges. FII continues to build its agency in Oakland with a small and dedicated staff, and Maurice Lim Miller is currently working to replicate the FII approach in other communities.

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## FINDINGS

### A. Overview

The dialogues at LCW and FII produced important insights. Both agencies have mechanisms in place that maximize the ability of families to act within their support systems. Both provide these services in ways that sharply contrast with standard service delivery models.

The first section of the findings chronicles an outstanding feature of each agency that supports the strengthening of families. The second section elaborates on the “rules of relationship” that guide their operations. The third section explores how leadership plays a distinct role in these organizations.

### B. Unique Agency Features

#### 1. LCW’s “Whole-Family” Approach

Families are clearly honored at LCW, in the workplace and in programs. On both of our visits, staff had children with them at work and people of all ages participated in a variety of activities throughout the agency.

Dialogue participants frequently mentioned that LCW offers an array of services that appeals to the interests of different family members. Many family members are able to locate themselves in a meaningful place in the network *and participate as a family*. For example, the availability of child care and youth programs allows adult family members to take part in classes and other activities.

As one female participant said:

*When I volunteered at other organizations, I had to leave my children with my sister or someone else. We don't have that problem here. My son has lots of activities that he likes and can get involved in.*

A male participant shared the following:

*In the Dominican Republic, I used to work in the social cooperative movement creating social enterprises. The focus was on head of household. But here the whole family can be involved. My wife, my kids, my grandchildren have learning opportunities and other activities. There are things we do [as a family] outside of this network, but there are [family] links that tie us back to the network.*

In addition to getting needed services, adults and youth take up leadership roles through their contact with the LCW network. Having multiple family members involved as leaders may create a different net impact on family governance in subtle ways that bear noticing.

For instance, one couple confided that their marriage has evolved to a place where they have adopted a family ritual of sharing the information they get at LCW with one another. Another participant stated:

*My son participates in anything they offer for him to be involved in. My two daughters are in college, and now they want me to finish college. They are proud of me...they feel like I am accomplishing things when they see me carrying all my materials to neighborhood circles.*

Another summed it up this way:

*[Here at LCW] there is an active place and role for everyone to be involved. It helps everyone feel they are important and valued. And this is equally for adults and youth. I saw it happen with my son. Children get to see that they are valuable participants and they learn a lot. For instance, he learned how to speak to his congressman about concerns.*

Youth seemed unusually empowered relative to the adults in these dialogues, expressing their views with ease. This may be due to the provision of youth leadership development in the context of a whole-family approach. Several parents expressed the opinion that their children have developed different notions about leadership as a result of seeing their parents in leadership roles. As one female participant stated, *“My three-year-old daughter is here watching and she seems to be preparing herself to be a leader...I see her with her dolls.”*

Dialogue participants also said that not all families are participating with LCW in this way. They shared that some family members are unable to participate because work, child-rearing, or other obligations are so extensive that they don't have time to get involved. In a few cases, they described family members who simply weren't interested. It is notable that many of these participants who *did not* have other family members participating in LCW activities, programs, or leadership roles reported that involvement in network activities sometimes caused a strain on their families.

## **2. FII's Co-Designed Family**

The FII approach breaks from traditional case management by intentionally supporting the development of “peer groups” with shared goals that meet regularly. Groups are not assigned, but are self-selected based on the affinity of the members.

The FII participants' consistent use of the term “FII Family” to describe their chosen peer group was compelling. I refer to this as a “co-designed family” to put appropriate emphasis on its importance. They described these co-designed FII families as a system of bonded relationships that resemble those they would normally have with blood relatives. In some cases, their FII family supplements a biological one; in others, it serves as their primary family network.

When asked to whom they turned in a crisis, dialogue participants made the following remarks:

*Outside of FII I don't have family. I mean, I have blood relatives, but they are not people that help me, and I don't trust them. I can't lean on them. Everybody is doing his or her own thing. It is the FII family and some other close friends that are the people who are my family.*

Another said:

*In a crisis I turn to my mother. I have my friends, and they are like sisters to me. And I have my FII family—they are very significant in my life. We are getting to know each other now. At first it wasn't like that. I didn't have the excitement about it. But now we support each other, we share knowledge and resources. I learn what can benefit me, or hurt me.*

And another:

*It is FII and my FII family that helps me keep going.*

As mentioned earlier, FII families are self-selected. It is quite possible that trust and support is enhanced by the fact they generally select along shared ethnic or race lines.

One woman described how she drew others from her ethnic community into her FII family:

*For me, my blood family is back in Cambodia. I am the only person in the U.S. from my blood family. But the Cambodian family I met—I call them aunts and uncles—I talked with them about FII, and they signed up.*

Another woman described her FII family this way:

*We are an all African-American group. Most of us in the group are married. We came together around our interests in art, culture, and healing. Some of us knew each other before. We have been together for three years.*

But race and ethnic affinities can only partly explain these effects. We spoke to women whose FII families are inter-ethnic and inter-racial. A few quotes illustrate how this co-designed family continued to evolve.

One said:

*We have different ethnicities in our FII families, and we talk about our different cultural values and practices. And it is not phony. And you can trust the group members; they don't use what you say against you.*

Another shared how her diverse FII family now brings together their children.

*When we got involved in FII we got to know one another and found out we had a lot in common. Now our kids play and do things together.*

Yet another woman talked about how her FII family was evolving even though they are from different racial and cultural backgrounds:

*We talk to each other about everything; share everything. We go to school together. If someone gets sick, we all know. Even though we are culturally different, we're our family. J is Filipino. C is Black. We don't see color.*

The ties that bind these families together are complex and difficult to fully articulate. One dialogue participant I spoke to said that part of what made this effort special was that the



approach supports having a “unifying experience” that leads to a very different set of relationships among these women. This is worth exploring in greater detail. It is clear, however, that the several aspects of the way that FII operates helps these participants to co-design something akin to a family system with a shared fate and identity.

### C. The Rules of Relationship

#### 1. Definition

As was stated earlier, the rules of relationship in this context refer to preconditions for the spontaneous emergence of order in human systems. Network organizations often have different *rules of relationship* than traditional organizations in how they:

- Provide access to resources, data, and information
- Support choice and flexibility
- Promote mutual accountability and communication

LCW intentionally uses the Internet as a metaphor and framework for many of the rules of relationship it embraces. It is explicit about creating a flexible and “demand-driven network environment” characterized by choice, access, and free flow of communication.

LCW places high value on “organic connections” between and among people and groups, and then investing in strengthening and multiplying these connections. The following explanation appears on LCW’s website:

*Community organizations that engage in network building employ what we refer to as **open architecture** [emphasis in original]. This means the form of the organization closely follows the function and that the impetus is always on doing rather than being and on flexible responses to evolving needs.*

In the course of the dialogues it became apparent that these and other rules of relationship are *explicit*, *enacted*, and *embraced* throughout LCW. Specifically, this means:

- **Explicit:** The rules are not derived from another organizational model, but intentionally linked to the desired outcomes of the network organization.
- **Enacted:** The rules are applied consistently, and important decisions can be, and often are, enacted throughout different levels of the network.
- **Embraced:** The rules are embedded and understood throughout the network.

Although less explicit, numerous examples of underlying rules of relationship that pointed to doing things in a “network way” existed at FII as well. Both agencies provide access to resources, data, *and* information in ways that support the families and the network organization.

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## 2. Rules of Relationship Operating in These Agencies

### *#1 Rule of Relationship: Access leads to access*

Most participants communicated that initial contact with the agency is usually motivated by the perception of tangible benefits. Women at FII reported that financial opportunities or other “perks” such as personal computers attracted them to the program. LCW participants often mentioned that training opportunities drew them to the agency.

However, once someone comes through the door of either of these agencies, his or her experience is network oriented. Access leads to access in ways that support family systems. Networks are constructed so that families quickly gain entrée to an ever-expanding array of services and multiple social network links. Each agency also devotes considerable attention to nurturing opportunities where people interact on a deep and personal level, stories are shared, and profound relationships are developed. These multiple forms of access seem to work synergistically to reposition participants to see themselves in a different light—as people who have power and control over the forces that impact their own family support system. Two comments from FII participants might shed light on this distinction:

One Latina at FII said:

*At the first meeting, buying a house, school, a PC...all that sounded nice...I now can actually see myself in a house. At first I couldn't see it. It seemed like that was somebody else's life. I had so much despair and negativity at first. But now I see it. I am in a much more positive place. I can see myself in my own house. Other people might see the business that they will own. It's like A said, seeing your dream is key.*

Another Asian woman elaborated:

*That's very important. At one time, I couldn't see it either. But then something changed. I got hope. I see myself pushing for my dreams. I can see that I can change my circumstances and fulfill my goals.*

Similar sentiments were expressed at LCW. As one participant stated:

*People have sometimes gotten used to things just getting done for them, or used to the idea that people with money will just do what they want to do. And they believe that what they think doesn't matter. You just have to help people see—maybe even one-to-one—that they have some control, especially as a collective. People just have to get this belief, this hope, that they can make a difference. Some don't have it because their experience has said otherwise.*

Consistent with its use of Internet metaphors, LCW views programs and services as “portals” for network entry. At LCW, they are explicit that “all doors lead to other doors.” People are encouraged, but not required, to access all of the interpersonal and resource support the network offers and are given multiple opportunities to shape those offerings according to evolving needs.

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MULTIPLE SOCIAL  
NETWORK LINKS.

Access leads not only to individual access, but also to the exercise of collective leverage. Both organizations demonstrate how network agencies nurture the belief that individuals and families are capable of producing leverage through network relationships. To support this, both organizations help manage the systems' interface between families and the larger political, societal, and economic context. For example, LCW's neighbor circles are strategically linked to powerful players and programs in Lawrence. FII has a commission that includes congressional representatives, the mayor, and leaders from both the philanthropy and private sectors that help open doors for FII families.

### *#2 Rule of Relationship: Choices are maximized*

A great deal of evidence emerged that these agencies have both explicit and implicit rules of relationship that place a high premium on flexibility and choice. In the course of the dialogues, the FII participants spoke quite a bit about the importance of flexibility and choice in their experience with the agency, and within their FII families. As mentioned earlier, FII families are families of choice based on their personal affinities for the other individuals.

The FII approach is intentionally designed to offer far greater options to the FII family members than they experienced in the welfare system. Dialogue participants frequently compared their experience with FII with their (usually negatively described) experiences with welfare services, where they experienced limited choice and (in their opinion) horrible treatment. A few examples of how they described their experience at FII:

As one woman said: *"There is no pressure. You don't have to do A-B-C... they trust me, and I trust them."* Another said of her experience: *"It's give and take. It doesn't feel like pressure."*

And another:

*I love FII. It has helped me get the county off of my back, and allows me to be a functional person. The money helps! ... In FII you get to decide what you want to do and you are not penalized.*

All FII families are given the opportunity to choose a joint project, and many of them do so. It was apparent after talking with the women that they exercised a great deal of group control over what that project would be. Up to \$5,000 is available to each FII family for projects that they jointly carry out to help others in their community.

That flexibility and choice seemed to be mirrored within this FII family when family members described how they help each other:

*We all have different roles. We make choices. One fund-raises, another does flyers, another does outreach. And we help each other out. We find ways to get things done so nobody gets burned out.*

LCW participants reported exercising choice in nearly every aspect of their relationship with the network. The patterns of participation of any given family member are self-determined, never mandated. Families reported openness to their "coming and going" and

spoke of the importance of not feeling like there was any minimum or maximum imposed on their involvement.

As one female participant reported:

*LCW has two interesting things. First, it has lots of opportunities for family members... so other family members can come and get involved too. Second, the organization realizes you have your own life, so there is not a lot of pressure... I am invited, asked to participate. If I can, great. If I say I can't, I don't feel pressured or obligated. [They are] always open to participate when I can. LCW is an outlet for stress [not a cause of it].*

The flexibility that LCW builds into the network seems to allow families to make appropriate adjustments to preserve their family system. For example, they are able to make ongoing internal adjustments to the level of participation of family members.

### ***#3 Rule of Relationship: Co-adaptation is necessary and desirable***

To varying degrees, but in ways that are significant, the agencies both engage in co-adaptation. Co-adaptation requires what has been called reciprocal enculturation—a process whereby new cultural patterns are acquired by both systems as they develop and mature.

To support this co-adaptation, both agencies have adopted specific rules of relationship regarding mutual accountability. LCW network members frequently talk about how they are a source of insight into emergent trends and opportunities and how they are empowered to influence the system and contribute to agency course corrections.

As one participant noted:

*Other organizations invite you but they don't welcome you. Here you can observe. You can make suggestions, and LCW responds. You don't have to battle here.*

LCW apparently practices high levels of transparency around financial management of network activities. As one participant mentioned:

*This organization has excellent financial management. Each group has a budget... and it is information that is visible, plain, shared freely, and easy to discuss.*

A commitment to mutual accountability and to co-adaptation may be evident in how FII handles data. FII has developed a comprehensive web-based tracking system that collects data about the progress of FII families and how social ties contribute to results. FII families, not agency members, track and record these data. Staff roles are limited to verifying information through secondary documents. In this sense, FII families are not only participating in, but also co-creating the information, communication, and accountability systems that allow FII to evaluate impact and make course corrections.

FII participants also provided several examples of how they hold each other accountable within their FII families. One woman referred to her tendency to revert to “habits” developed when she was in the welfare system. However, it was clear that accountability and

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sustaining the momentum to help women from lapsing into old patterns was not just a matter of compliance with FII requirements, but was supported by the FII family system she had co-created. In other words, FII families seem to have developed capacity to balance identity and governance issues within their “families.”

On the subject of habits, another woman began by saying:

*If something is wrong, we schedule an emergency meeting, like when certain members slack up and stop coming to the meetings, the group worries that something is going on.*

Another immediately jumped in to finish the thought:

*The group worries that something is going on that could be pulling the person down and they get together. It was happening to me. I was slacking off, and the group reached out to me. I got reconnected.*

Another woman added...

*When we don't like how somebody is acting in the group... we talk about it. We see that people need positive strokes and confidence and we do it honestly. We know we have self-esteem issues, partly because the system just beats you down and you feel like you are nothing. And I was in a terrible relationship with a man who just beat me down physically and emotionally. And we [FII family members] sometimes go off on each other in frustration. But we understand. We have been there. It makes us stronger as individuals and as a group.*

#### ***#4 Rule of Relationship: Problems are solved jointly***

So much about accountability in service and support agencies usually focuses on people within the agency, usually agency leaders, figuring out the “right” action to take in any given situation. Multiple chains of command and control systems are in place in most family-serving agencies to ensure that these correct decisions are being made. Some actions are straightforward enough to be regarded that way. In the highly complex circumstances that these agencies and families operate within, many are not. Although some agencies go to great lengths to reach out to families to continually understand the impact that their problem solving has on the identity, governance, and adaptability of the family systems of their clients, a great many of them do not.

The clearest example of what I am trying to communicate is in LCW, so I am going to concentrate on describing how problems are solved at that agency.

At LCW, the duality between “them” (the families) and “us” (the network organization) doesn't exist in the same way as it does in traditional organizations because everyone is indeed part of the same inter-locking system. Families and the network organization are constantly co-inventing and co-adapting to tackle problems as they emerge. As Brian Arthur said:

*Once you drop the duality, then the questions change. You can't talk about optimization, because it becomes meaningless. It would be like parents trying to optimize their behavior in*

*terms of “us” vs. “the kids,” which is a strange point of view if you see yourself as a family. You have to talk about accommodation and co-adaptation—what would be good for the family as a whole.*

When queried about how one maneuvers in an environment like that, Arthur said:

*...The answer is that you want to keep as many options open as possible. You go for viability, something that’s workable, rather than what is “optimal.” A lot of people say to that, “Aren’t you then accepting second best?” No, you’re not, because optimization isn’t well defined anymore. What you’re trying to do is maximize robustness, or survivability, in the face of an ill-defined future.*

Because co-adaptation and accommodation between participants’ family networks and the larger LCW network are inextricably linked, they engage in regular joint problem solving in ways that take into account what each is learning about the problems they inevitably face as they roll out new ideas. As one participant said:

*Here in LCW—we get together and talk to each other to solve problems. Communication is important. Without it, there is no net in the network.*

LCW’s problem-solving approach focuses on sustaining the robustness of the network, even if the optimal solution is not yet clear. The agency has explicit rules of relationship regarding the risk of making mistakes when you work in this way. They say, *Let it Go (if it doesn’t work)* and *Solve the Problem*. People make mistakes together, they own up to them together, and together they reject pet ideas in favor of what seems to be actually working. According to the people we spoke to, these rules of *Let it Go (if it doesn’t work)* and *Solve the Problem* are enacted and embraced throughout the network. When we asked LCW participants to share their most important advice for what it takes to build social networks, they made the following comments:

*Hold on to what works and if it doesn’t work, don’t stick with it. Make changes.*

*It is very important to be sure of purpose, and people have to support each other. There has to be equilibrium. And don’t focus on the little details. People don’t want to make mistakes, but they do. You can’t dwell on mistakes.*

#### *D. How These Agencies Approach Leadership*

##### **1. Leaders Enact a Clear Intent**

Complexity theory also makes note of how initial conditions are essential for the unfolding of systems. The leaders of each of these agencies both apparently had a clear intention about what they were trying to create, and understood that they needed to work in a “network way” to fulfill that intention. In other words, I use the term intention in a precise way.

*Intention goes beyond aiming or committing to accomplish something. It encompasses a desire to interact with reality in such a way that possibilities and emerging futures are enacted in the world.*

—Scharmer and Jaworski

They designed an organizational strategy to ensure that the intention is continually realized. The purpose of flexible arrangements regarding access, choice, accountability, and the like is to identify emerging opportunities that build on their initial intention.

Although their approaches and scale are very different, both LCW and FII are clear that their business lies in unleashing people's intrinsic energy toward a collective good. In this section, I discuss the two agencies in very different ways, but I believe that each lends an essential insight into how they support families in ways that are different from traditional service providers.

As Brian Arthur says:

*Once you have frameworks you're willing to impose, they imply the appropriate reactions. Not optimal reactions, but appropriate... the people who win... are... [the ones] who can frame it most accurately. If you can figure out what the game is rather than how to play it—it's pretty obvious how to play it—then you are going to do well.*

An LCW dialogue participant put it the following way:

*When organizations have a clear vision and its members know it and plan from it, it is easy to make and keep commitments.*

Simply put, LCW's intent is to foster "community change empowered by people." LCW exhibits a clear understanding of how a network approach can lead to different and more sustainable outcomes. Through their approach, they have built an organization that is by many accounts an innovative and successful community organizing venture. In just a few short years, they have developed a comprehensive array of services and supports, including neighbor circles, a leadership institute, an affordable housing program, a campaign for controlling open land, urban revitalization initiatives, adult learning clubs, homeownership training, individual development account programs, performing arts programs, youth training, boys' empowerment training, and more. However, I would submit that the innovativeness of their approach might lie more in *how* they do things than *what* they do. By co-evolving all of these programs and services in tandem with families in the network, they have built a robust network that maintains sight of the whole community. As one LCW dialogue participant put it:

*Other organizations begin with an idea, and then two years later they change their purpose... they work for the good of the people at first, but then they change goals. LCW is different. It is totally about what the community wants. Not just one [person's] goal, but [the] many goals of the community.*

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I have somewhat less insight into FII’s internal organizational culture and practices. FII’s intent is to invest directly in the leadership and vision of low-income families and help them create networks that serve as pathways out of poverty for themselves and for those around them. They provide monetary awards and new connections that increase the economic and social assets of FII families in ways that leverage culture, values, and natural community. They are also intentional in how they locate themselves relative to family systems. As FII learns what actions families are taking both to help themselves and others, FII connects these efforts to public, private, and philanthropic sectors.

FII points out that the underpinning of this approach is the belief that most families strive for leadership, community, opportunity, and control over their own lives. They believe that it is the responsibility of both the families and the sectors that work with them to build from these strengths. When I spoke to Maurice Lim Miller at the Foundation’s May 2004 Social Networks Consultative Session, he helped me understand that his intent was to open up opportunities associated with privilege and purchasing power for these women after having gained considerable insight into the changing context and specific challenges they were facing.

As Marisa Castuera, former executive director of FII, has said *“wealth equals the power to resist an evolution that is not of your choosing.”* As noted earlier in this paper, context is essential. Poor families often face great obstacles acquiring goods and services and lack the financial resources to buffer their family system. FII is built on a premise that these women not only need support systems, but that they cannot truly thrive unless they develop a family system that can access financial resources.

FII offers financial supports to strengthen families who would otherwise be in the welfare system. Families earn up to \$3,000 per year for taking actions that might improve their economic standing, \$50 for improving their credit scores, \$100 for enrolling in a health insurance plan, and \$25 when their children improve their grades at school. They also have access to IDAs (Individual Development Accounts) through which they can receive up to \$2,000 in matching funds. The FII approach has become part of a state demonstration project that exempts FII participants from having their welfare benefits and food stamps reduced as a result of increased income brought about by FII activities.

FII is also explicit that their approach is best suited to women who are, with the right support, willing to re-create their lives. The staff person I spoke to told me that FII is occasionally accused of “creaming” (picking the clients who are most likely to succeed) because they acknowledge that there are about 20 percent of women who would not be able to benefit from their approach. After meeting with these women, I would disagree with the spirit of that charge, and argue instead that they work quite deeply, but are simply clear about what they can and cannot accomplish. As one woman said:

*FII is a program that enables people who are suffering to take back power over their lives, over their families’ lives.*

They do, indeed, work with women whose life circumstances are quite complicated. For poor immigrant women, encountering the complexities of an unfamiliar cultural and



service context, the norms that provided coherence in their home countries sometimes clash with those here. These factors contribute to friction and entropy within family dynamics that may have otherwise been adaptive and healthy. Several women in the FII dialogues also reported having been victims of domestic violence, a clear indication that family governance had tipped to the point where individual autonomy and safety were compromised.

## 2. Leadership Operates Differently

Leadership operates differently in network organizations. It was striking that in all of the dialogues only one person spoke explicitly about the “leader” of their respective agency. This is particularly notable because both are relatively young organizations highly influenced by the vision of a pivotal leader.

As Plastrik and Taylor point out, in social networks, “someone has to pay attention to what is going on in the network.” Paying attention to what is going on in the network goes beyond traditional notions of what we expect executives to do. Leaders of network organizations require “the ability to sense and seize opportunities as they emerge.”<sup>4</sup>

As Scharmer and Jaworski describe, to sense and seize emergent opportunities, network leaders need to operate in ways that consistently challenge their preconceptions, guide them to what is needed in specific situations, keep them grounded in their intentions, and allow them to “act in an instant.” They further assert that:

*Leaders who want to incorporate the competence for sensing and seizing in their organizations need to build infrastructure and instill practices to ensure that the work of these stages happen collectively and regularly. Right now, for instance, there are people in every organization who are so totally immersed in a topic that they have a complete “feel” for a situation and can see what is coming up next—but have no opportunity to articulate it or move into the next stages. There are leaders and potential leaders throughout every level of organizations who will flourish in the right environment. Good structures not only enable invention and improvement, they capitalize on every organization’s most critical resource: people.*

One of the members of our Social Network Team commented that Bill Traynor’s leadership is best characterized as “leading the Conga line from behind.” I think this is an apt description of what we learned about what is required to lead an institution that is explicitly about building and supporting social networks. In a real sense, the rules of relationship in network organizations help pre-position network leaders to follow in order to lead. Leadership in this context involves sustaining dynamic organizations that provide opportunities for people throughout the network organization to exercise leadership. At LCW in particular, leadership that emerges from within the network has the power to change the very shape and evolution of the agency. There are numerous examples of how this is carried out at LCW. One notable one is the fact that LCW’s Board is comprised of people that are elected by network members.

As one LCW dialogue participant described:

*There are some organizations where there is one person—one “head.” That’s all you see. Not here. Here there is a team. There is democracy.*

## REFLECTIONS ON WHAT WAS LEARNED

After four dialogues, several discussions with colleagues, and a great deal of reflection, I have come to some conclusions about what was learned.

I opened the report with the quote *“most learning and change processes fail to access and work with the underlying field of potential from which new possibilities emerge.”* One central finding of this report is that rules of relationship in the agencies serve as preconditions for the emergence of new possibilities for network development. When organizations work in a network way:

- Access leads to access
- Choices are maximized
- Co-adaptation is necessary and desirable
- Problems are solved jointly

Leadership also operates differently when the object of the exercise is to build sustainable networks, not just provide services. Network leaders ensure that the rules of relationship that enable the organization to build networks are explicit, enacted, and embraced at multiple levels. To be effective network leaders, they must have, or develop, a keen capacity for sensing and seizing emerging opportunities. Finally, to be able to sense and seize emerging opportunities network leaders follow to lead—they build an organization that promotes the exercise of leadership and real contributions to co-evolving the network.

Understanding the qualities and practices of network-oriented organizations such as Lawrence Community Works and Family Independence Initiative is particularly important for understanding how agencies can support family and social network development in ways that serve both ends. The dialogues brought forth considerable evidence that adopting a network approach influences what happens when agencies interact with family networks. In the best cases, they support the robustness of families. At minimum, they do less harm to the family system than traditional service-based agency models that often place restrictive or conflicting demands on families.

The effects that network organizations create in relation to family networks should not be regarded as discrete program elements that can be replicated in isolation. We cannot simply select one or two best practices from these agencies and insert them into another agency environment and expect the same results.

For network organizations, the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts. There are numerous synergies. For example, the success of LCW’s whole family approach is reinforced by the fact that it provides opportunities for family members to experience network leadership. The open architecture of LCW’s network provides the flexibility that allows families to balance identity and governance issues as they interact with the network. The successes produced by FII’s co-designed family are likely inter-linked with the

importance they place on flexibility and dealing head-on with the economic realities that limit the choices of these women. The results they are able to produce are linked to the ways in which they ensure access to other networks. In lieu of extracting best practices, agencies interested in adopting a network approach with families might be better served by experimenting with small-scale prototypes of programs and policies. To do this effectively, they must pay careful attention to how the rules of relationship are enacted within the prototyping.

The context in which families are embedded is also central to producing better outcomes for children and families. Each of these organizations offers examples of not only the supports and social network development they can muster within the bounds of their internal system, but distinct policies for how they help manage the interface between families and the larger community environment. Each is committed to increasing access of families to resources, decision-makers, and social networks outside of their agencies. Each, and particularly LCW, has a distinct strategy for how they support and nurture collective leverage to engage in community change.

Neither would claim to be a definitive model and both would likely admit that there are still gaps in their understanding and practice. Their greatest strengths are a clear and enacted intention to innovate and take risks, and going about it in a way that does justice to the families with whom they work.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 To learn more about the ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION, please visit [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org).
- 2 C. OTTO SCHARMER, "Self-Transcending Knowledge: Sensing and Organizing Around Emerging Opportunities," *Journal of Knowledge Management* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2001).
- 3 W. BRIAN ARTHUR, "Conversation with W. Brian Arthur: Coming from Your Inner Self," Interview by C. O. Scharmer and Joseph Jaworski, Xerox Parc, Palo Alto, California (April 16, 1999). Available at [www.dialogonleadership.org](http://www.dialogonleadership.org).
- 4 JOSEPH JAWORSKI AND C. OTTO SCHARMER, *Leading in the Digital Economy: Sensing and Seeing Emerging Opportunities (Executive Summary)* (December 2000).

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