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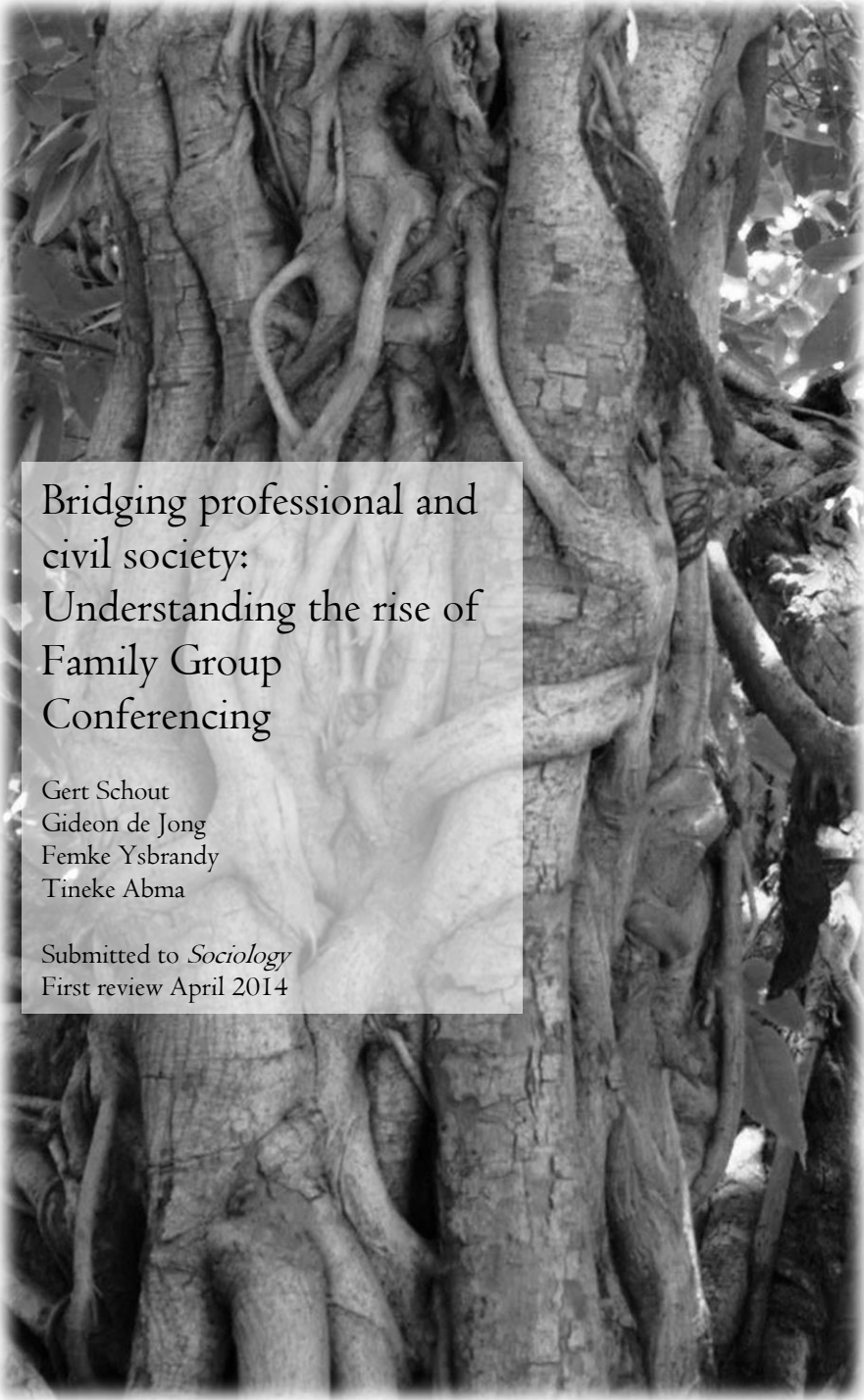
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Bridging professional and  
civil society:  
Understanding the rise of  
Family Group  
Conferencing

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## Chapter Three

# Bridging professional and civil society: Understanding the rise of Family Group Conferencing

### Abstract

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a relatively new form of civic engagement where citizens take matters in their own hands. The social structure of FGC and its development is rarely explored from a sociological and philosophical perspective. This paper is a theoretical exploration of the rise of and the need for FGC. The need for FGC is understandable considering the loss of protection that traditional communities could offer while the rational and calculating methods of the system world lack the potency of strengthening the communities at stake. The rise of FGC is understandable considering its capacity: to produce a shift of power from state agencies to families and communities, from public to private spheres, from professional to civil society; in mitigating the co-isolation of individuals, families and communities, both within civil and professional society; to mobilise resources from both civil and professional society and thereby strengthening communities of fate.

### Keywords

Civic engagement, communities of fate, family group conferencing, informal solidarity, social embeddedness, therapy culture

### Introduction

Boje (2010) points out that public authorities are often no longer able to deliver services that meet the needs of an increasingly differentiated population. He also underlines the capacity of societal involvement in promoting social cohesion and integrating marginalised social groups into the community. In our research we study the attempts to reach out and reunite extremely marginalised social groups with their social networks

using Family Group Conferencing (FGC).<sup>1</sup>

FGC is a relatively new form of civic engagement. It is a facilitated group dialogue where citizens take matters in their own hands, solve problems and make plans following a structured decision-making process. Professionals contribute but their role within FGC is not to make decisions. Professionals rather facilitate decision-making by providing information, resources and expertise (Hayes & Houston, 2007). Family conferencing resembles the form that problem solving takes in traditional societies, in which families or small communities handle their own issues, rather than exporting them into the hands of professionals (Scheff, 1998).

Since its introduction in the 1980s in New Zealand, FGC is increasingly organised in child protection cases all over the world. In recent years a broader perspective takes over, emphasising not only the capabilities of families but of civil society in general. The decision-making process of FGC can be applied in all sorts of situations where social groups take matters in their own hands. Examples are restorative justice conferencing, community conferencing, alternative dispute resolutions, peer mediation, restorative circles in schools or conferences and circles to build and strengthen communities. In our research we see promising applications of FGC with different target groups in the Netherlands such as multi offenders, homeless youth, residents threatened by eviction and psychiatric patients threatened by coercion. Extremely marginalised people seem to benefit from reunion with their relatives (De Jong & Schout, 2013). Also problems of nuisance and liveability in neighbourhoods are addressed in so called community conferencing (De Jong & Schout, 2012).

Worldwide the use of FGC is rapidly increasing (Crampton, 2007). For example, since 2001, over 8000 conferences with approximately 65.000 participants have been organised in the Netherlands (Van Beek, n.d.). Not only the number of conferences grew, also the nature of the problems and target groups expanded; FGC is no longer only organised in youth care settings, but as well in fields with adult clients (see for example De Jong & Schout, 2011; Malmberg-Heimonen, 2011). Finally, the number of countries outside the western world where these conferences are organised increased. In journals and proceedings of international conferences we found contributions that refer to practices in Latin America (Rotabi *et al.*, 2012), Asia (Kannangara, 2012) and Eastern Europe (Haresnape, 2013).

FGC is derived from Maori culture in New Zealand. The core idea of this approach is a meeting of all family members, state officials, and other persons who are involved with the family in order to establish a plan for the care and protection of individual

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States FGC is referred to as Family Group Decision Making (FGDM).

family members. The meeting is organised by a coordinator who creates conditions so the family can come to terms and find solutions during a private time where professionals are not present. The coordinator is not a professional but a trained fellow citizen. Everyone who can contribute can take part in a conference. Through a democratic process the family establishes its own plan on which everyone needs to agree.

In the FGC-approach it is believed that families are better able to find workable solutions than professionals. In a family group conference the family is in charge and determines the agenda. FGC is sensitive to the culture, lifestyle and history of families. It achieves results through the family and therefore uses the resources that exist within the community (De Jong & Schout, 2011). The role of professionals however is not ceased to apply (see figure 1, Chapter One). Professionals refer clients to a FGC, they are present during parts of the conference, they provide information and support, but also open up resources from other agencies. Their task perception nevertheless changes into what Gerritsen (2013) describes as egoless care: professionals who enjoy making themselves redundant and giving the social network the feeling that they solve the problems themselves.

The relationship between civil society and professional society has been studied by sociologists right from the onset of this academic discipline, but little attention has been paid to FGC until now. Also philosophical reflections on this phenomenon are scarce. However, recently FGC is theoretically underpinned from a psychological perspective using the concepts of relational autonomy, resilience and empowerment (Metze *et al.*, 2013). Summarising, we see an expanding new social structure that is rarely explored from a sociological and philosophical perspective. Which gap is FGC filling in? In what way can sociological and philosophical theories contribute to the understanding of the need for and the rise of FGC? The aim of this paper is to find an answer to these questions.

First we will illustrate how a family group conference proceeds with a case from our research. We selected this case because it demonstrates well what kind of social process is set in motion with FGC. Thereafter we will summarise the scarce sociological contributions we found in international journals. Then we discuss classical and contemporary sociological theories that shed light on the need for and rise of FGC. Finally we conclude that these theories fall short and need to be complemented with philosophical theory, in particular the Sloterdijk's theory of spheres. Throughout the article the case is used to illustrate findings and conclusions.

## Family Group Conferencing – an example

A family with two adult sons (27 and 25 years) is living in a regional area in the north of the Netherlands with an overrepresentation of persons with a low socioeconomic status. Both sons are still living at home. They have been unemployed for a while and commit a lot of trouble, such as petty crimes and drugs abuse. Above all, they are terrorising the lives of their mother and stepfather. The situation gets out of hand when during a barbecue party in the back garden the garage is set on fire and jewels get stolen. A social worker is appointed to help solving the problem. He quickly realises that individual trajectories for all family members will not help in reaching a permanent solution. The mother herself is also anxious that she will be easily stigmatised when she will be appointed to mental health care. According to her, the problems occur within a social context and are interrelated. It are mainly both sons who are contributing to the problematic situation, so she questions if there is any sense for individual trajectories:

That needs to be solved here! You do not want to burden other people, but problems need to be shared with your family as they are more closely related. [...] They knew that the situation got out of hand.

As the situation is so threatening, the social worker wants a family group conference to be organised in a short term. The benefit of such a conference is that it can be quickly converted, as there are no waiting lists. Above all, a family group conference makes it possible that the problematic situation can be discussed from all different angles as all of those involved are invited to participate. In such a sense, an overall solution is more easily reached than when individual trajectories would be organised.

Ownership of the process and in establishing a plan is only reached when professionals (dare to) act modest. It is understandable that this is not an easy task in threatening situations. Findings of our research indicate that in successful cases social embeddedness is restored and participants have ownership over reaching a plan (Schout & De Jong, 2013). Especially in conflict situations, this is fundamental for establishing a successful plan. The trouble makers are obliged to come to a plan with those who are victims of their behaviour and actions.

The position of professionals is that they do not influence the participants in reaching a plan. When a plan is established, professionals can review whether or not it is realistic to carry it out and if it is plausible that the threatening situation will no longer occur. The social worker in this case is enthusiastic about the plan this particular family agreed upon. He had a modest role during the whole process, and seemed convinced that

the family could come up with a workable plan. After an assessment he emphasised that this plan covered all problems. Individual trajectories, according to him, could never had the same impact and would have cost a fortune:

In the end, one should make a calculation. Think about the situation when this method was not converted, what would have been the risks afterwards? The mother would have been send to the local mental health clinic, and the police would have been involved sixteen times more! That are just Euro marks!

The impact and the quality of the plan is linked to the role and the position of the coordinator, a man who is originally from the same region as the family and who works as a piano tuner in his professional life. His role as an independent fellow citizen who is not making plans for families, but empowers families to develop their own plan, is highly appreciated by clients, their networks and professionals. FGC-coordinators are easily accessible, even during night time and in weekends, and they have a non-judgemental attitude towards the situation. In this case and other cases, we see that clients who have a troubled history with representatives of the professional society, have less trouble with representatives of the civil society. As coordinators are seen as independent and free of ties with agencies, they can also use words that could never been used by professionals. Illustrative is a memo made just before the member check<sup>2</sup> of the case that was organised in a community centre in order to validate intermediate findings from the interviews:

At the supreme moment, the family does not show up [we – researchers and coordinator – are waiting for them in a local community centre not far from their home]. When we call them and try to convince them to come over, they act reluctant. The coordinator immediately takes over the telephone and tells the mother in her own dialect that it is very rude to let people come over from far and not showing up themselves. We get into the car and ten minutes later we evaluate in informal circumstances at the kitchen table the positive outcomes of the conference. *[EM]*

The kitchen table was a very accurate metaphor in this case, as before the appointment to the conference, the family was not able to solve their problems at this table. Discussions quickly turned into conflicts, and in addition the sons angrily left the table. As a family group conference is organised in a neutral environment, such as a community centre, in the presence of a wider circle of bystanders (the extended family)

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<sup>2</sup> In each case study we are organising so called 'member checks' (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in order to validate intermediate findings from the interviews on the process and the outcomes of the family group conference.



it is more difficult to leave the discussion in comparison to sitting in an informal situation with just your parents. Both sons were indifferent towards participating in the conference, but finally made a decision to participate as they felt pity for their mother and in a lesser degree for their stepfather. Purpose of the conference was to establish a plan that would help the sons a house on their own and a paid job, so that the mother and stepfather would be relieved from troubles. The private phase of the conference lasted long and was very intense. At a certain moment it became very emotional for the mother, so she burst into tears. Subsequently, a sister of the mother and the daughter of the stepfather confronted both sons with the misery they were causing to their mother and stepfather, as both the sister and the mother emphasise:

I said to them: "When are you both finally gonna say sorry to my sister! When are you finally gonna do so! You have treated her like an animal! Why are you making the life of my sister such a misery?! Where do you think this will contribute to?!" [*sister of the mother*]

My stepdaughter also started yelling: "Why are you not working?! Why is the police all the time coming over?! Why are you troubling the life of my father and your mother?!" That was really tough, but very necessary. [*mother*]

This was the moment that the sons finally realised the impact of their behaviour, as the youngest son describes:

When my mother started crying, I felt pity for her. And finally I thought: something needs to be changed, because I have never heard my mothers' side of the story. At home you always leave the kitchen table angrily and you never hear of the other side. [...] I looked at my brother, and thought 'shit', you need to convince it all to them. Then they got to know why we had so many debts. Well, that was because of cannabis use, buying liquor, partying every night. [...] Before I always kept this secret, I never told anybody about it. [...] And when I finally told them, it felt like a relief. [*youngest son*]

Shortly after the conference, the oldest son started living together with his girlfriend. In the meantime he found a job and is paying his debts. The youngest son is still living with his mother and stepfather, but is no longer causing troubles. He has made other friends and found a job as well. Nine months later the mother tells us during the member check that she is really happy with the outcomes of the conference: both her sons have almost fulfilled their debts and made other friends. Another side-effect is that agencies or professionals are no longer involved within this situation.

In the following sections we will reflect on this case with sociological and philosophical theories: why did it take so long before the family reached a solution and

in what sense did the conference contribute in establishing a plan; why were both sons inclined to change their behaviour after they were corrected by extended family members and why did they not want to change for professionals; which gap does FGC fill and how can its recent popularity be understood?

## FGC and sociology

Civic engagement in welfare states is often associated with the relationship between 'crowding in' and 'crowding out'. State activities serve as a substitute for social volunteering. Crowding in refers to the situation wherein the state and civil society complement each other. The state creates conditions like time and money for actors to take responsibility. Crowding out refers to situations wherein civic engagement is hindered by professionals (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2010). Even if the 'crowding in' and 'crowding out' theory helps to uncover the balance between professional society and civil society, it remains an economic theory that sheds little light on what is going on in the interaction between state agencies, communities and individuals.

Although rarely researched, there are all sorts of sociological themes that could be studied in relation to FGC, like: the shift of power from state agencies to families and communities; the vulnerability of the nuclear family; FGC as a response to the loss of family structures and functions and; FGC as a remedy for the failing of an institutional regime.

Searching in various databases and sociology journals, we found two papers reporting of researching FGC from a sociological perspective. Remarkably, the two papers we found were not published in sociology journals. Drawing on Habermas' critical social theory Hayes and Houston (2007) re-work aspects of FGC processes by emphasising the possibility of an empowering dialogue between families who embody the 'lifeworld' and professionals who represent the 'system world'. They project Habermas' theory as a way to constitute a moral practice by communicational procedures that address issues relating to the use of power and the need for recognition between subjects.

In understanding the rise of FGC, Habermas' theory certainly has potency. Public participation, sharing information, reaching consensus through dialogue, decreasing the influence of experts and bureaucrats, are central themes in the work of Habermas (1981, 1989). The rise of the welfare state implies more interference with the lives of citizens. For Habermas the central problem of contemporary societies is how to create conditions for what he refers to as 'communicative action', meaning the process of reaching a common understanding. The theoretical core of his Theory of Communicative Action is

what Habermas calls the 'colonisation of lifeworld by systems', meaning that the private sphere is penetrated by the strategic communication of systems in the public sphere. The system world is characterised by rationalisation, looking for efficiency, calculability, control and predictability. If the family in the presented case would not have established a plan, after some time the state would have intervened with legal action, for example, forcing the mother to be hospitalised in a psychiatric ward and/or punishing and imprisoning the sons. That the plan succeeded in this case means a shift of power from a state agency to this family; colonisation of the life world by strategic action of the system world has been prevented.

Central to the life world is a common understanding, namely a shared sense of who we are. It is the latent sum of all sorts of assumptions about our identity, values, desires and beliefs. In the life world we constantly reaffirm to ourselves and each other who we are and what we value, what we believe and what we achieve. Habermas observes colonisation processes throughout society. Communicative justice depends on a shared sense of what is right, but the process of juridification is dominant. In Habermas' view, communities have fewer spheres for communicative action. In other words, the community of generalised others is transforming into a contract based state of taxpayers without responsibility for each other. Communicative action deals with creating a so called ideal 'speech situation', a situation free from coercion, where every subject is allowed to speak, to question, to express and to assert, a situation wherein the colonisation of the life world by the system is pushed back. In a way, FGC can be seen as approaching such form of an ideal speech situation. In the described case the colonisation of the life world by the system world is not only pushed back redressing the balance between life and system world, but also a dialogue and common understanding between the two worlds emerges in a concrete situation. The professional could stay aloof because the social network managed to make their own plan. Commonly, experts and layman have troubles understanding each other (Pellizzoni, 2003). The case indicates that FGC might have the potency to mitigate this.

Holland *et al.* (2005) evaluate the impact of FGC drawing on sociological theory of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens. They suggest that FGC not only has the potential to shift the balance of power between the state and families but that it may have the potential to democratise decision-making within families. Holland *et al.* reflect on Giddens' view that there are potential interrelationships between the democratisation of civic institutions and the democratisation of the family. They articulate the particular relevance of those ideas to FGC, where through the democratisation of one aspect of state versus client relations there may be the possibility of promoting democratisation in the private sphere. Relationships now are more equal and negotiated, involve more

choice and are more contingent than previously. It is argued that more autonomy, reflection and equality lead to a democratisation of the family, which holds promise for a better civic society more generally. Not articulated by Holland et al. but nevertheless conceivable is that more choice and more freedom means less tradition, less continuity and less binding bonds. Does FGC invoke new forms of loyalties, involvement and social embeddedness and therefore perhaps less freedom? In our research of the outcomes of FGC in public mental health care we see recovery of these bonds and the tacit obligations that comes with it (De Jong & Schout, 2013; Schout & De Jong, 2013). In the presented case the sons were once again aware of their moral obligations. Not the horizontal relationships were articulated but the authority of the parents is restored and the freedom to do whatever the sons wanted is limited. Everyone, also the sons, has a contribution in decision-making. Perhaps this is also why some families because of shame, strained relationships, or embarrassment prefer traditional, state-dominated mechanisms for problem solving (Merkel-Holguin, 2004).

To some extent the insights of Habermas, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens provide insight into the value of FGC, namely the redressing of the balance between system and life world. At the same time, there is still an open question: Why precisely at this juncture FGC finds so much response in the Western World?

## Alienation, vulnerability and the call for welfare agencies

That the state competes with civil society and that it hinders informal solidarity was already described and analysed by Durkheim (1997/1893) in the nineteenth century. He observed how mechanical solidarity was replaced by organic solidarity based on outsourced services by the state. Freed from traditional obligations individualism could develop.

Besides Durkheim, several other sociologists like Nisbett (1953) and Tönnies (2004/1887), point out that the rise of individualism produced the alienated individual. A collective sense of belonging, loyalty and solidarity is scarce in modern societies. Especially the way the state erodes the role of associations, institutions and communities is part of this analysis. Social institutions can be seen as cultural produced patterns that existed before we were born, which were delivered to us by previous generations and which will still exist when we are gone. Examples of such institutions are language, family, marriage, friendship, law, religion, education and economy. Sociologists like Gehlen (1988/1949), Berger *et al.* (1974) and Zijderveld (2000) designate institutions as natural, tacit and powerful sources of regulation. Gehlen views man as vulnerable and

dependent on others. To survive he needs a stable cultural environment that alleviates him from uncertainty. This common and habitual cultural environment is perpetuated in institutions. The forming, absorbing, stimulating, binding, controlling, regulatory, structuring, channelling characteristics of institutions have both an encouraging and a discouraging effect. Loyalties, bonds, routines and traditions produce continuity but also limit freedom of choice. The unbridled behaviour of the sons in the highlighted case can be viewed as a lack of moral upbringing, as an erosion of a particular social institution. The family as a whole seemed not sufficiently embedded in social systems. The regulatory properties of structures beyond the person are powerless in this case.

The work of Furedi demonstrates that not only classical sociology sheds light on the need for (and the rise of) FGC. His work has particular meaning for the aim of this paper. The welfare state produced the liberated individual, but Furedi (2004) points out that this individual is uncertain and not able to deal with disappointment, setbacks, rejection and stress. The drug abuse and the procrastination of the boys in the case can be seen as ways to avoid responsibilities in real life. Market driven organisations magnify this vulnerability. Furedi describes the rise of a therapy culture. Within this culture experts are the only legitimised authority to solve problems. Therapy culture projects families as pathological and not capable of solving their own problems. Furedi's empirical based research resembles the theoretical informed research of Illich (1975, 1977) who described the age of the disabling professions, referring to the emergence of commodification and the rise of experts that comes with it. The professional dominance in both Furedi's as Illich's view undermines people's confidence in themselves and in their capacity to solve problems. Would the family in the presented case have been helped with traditional means by mental health care, addiction care and welfare agencies, it is likely that their resilience and their power to deal with issues were not called upon but undermined. Where the state practices controlled by professionals too often provokes passiveness, FGC reinforces norms and expectations of mutual responsibility (Braithwaite, 2000; Pranis, 2000).

## Social capital and the desire to widen the circle

Perhaps the most promising angle of research is the capacity of building social capital with FGC. Widening the circle is a goal of FGC (Pennell, 2004; Pennell & Andersson, 2005). FGC seeks to expand the social network and when necessary restore broken or faded relationships within the family or community. Since the 1980s there has been attention in sociology for trust as fuel for social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman,

1988; Nooteboom, 2002; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Findings from McPherson *et al.* (2006) indicate that social capital among the population in the United States has declined in recent decades (especially ties and mutual trust within families, neighbourhoods and communities) so that increasingly people fall down in social isolation.

Looking at the social problems wherefore FGC is applied, like child abuse and neglect, juvenile crime, domestic violence, addiction, social isolation and neighbourhood conflicts, we can assume that FGC is deployed in social environments with little social capital. In the conference of the presented case we see the building of social capital in the strengthening of ties with extended family members. For the aunt and stepdaughter the boys feel ashamed and feel the need to show responsibility. Time, intensity, intimacy, and – especially – reciprocity and recognition are the engine for strong ties in networks. Reciprocity depends on obligations between people – networks with more mutual obligations are characterised by strong social capital (Coleman, 1988). People who cannot offer reciprocity have limited social capital on which they can rely (Bourdieu, 1986). Can FGC contribute in restoring reciprocity?

Granovetter (1973, 1983) points out that ‘weak ties’ act as a source for renewal. Granovetter suggests that we learn the most from people we know the least, precisely formulated: because we share beliefs and assumptions with those who are closest to us, we get new information from people with whom we are loosely connected. People who have a wide network of weak ties can rely on more resources than those with only private networks of ‘strong ties’. In the presented case the participants from outside the nuclear family brought in new ways of acting (confronting sons, restoring authority), new loyalties (stepsister) and new responsibilities (caring for the mother); later these determinants turned out to be crucial for the outcome. One may question whether FGC form a bridging function to other networks, and whether FGC leads to the strengthening of ‘strong ties’ and to the extension of ‘weak ties’. In other cases we researched, but also in a study of Malmberg-Heimonen and Johansen (2013), it is evident that weak ties are not sufficiently involved in FGC.

## The great disembedding

The discussed sociological theories shed some light on the rise of FGC but are still not able to convey the need for this social intervention. For this we call in the insights of Charles Taylor in his book ‘Modern social imaginaries’. Taylor (2004) describes the great disembedding, this refers to the loosening of ties of clans, communities and the

mandatory customs, traditions, rituals, religious obligations that come with it. Before modernisation, people could not imagine themselves outside their social context. The questions “how would it be if I would emigrate”, “if I convert to another/no religion?” That one can ask these questions nowadays refers to this disembedding (Taylor, 2004, p. 60). According to Taylor personal independence and disembedding go hand-in-hand together.

Following Tocqueville’s description of ‘Société des ordres’ Taylor (2004) demonstrates that a division can be made between societies where hierarchy and mediated access are dominant and societies in which horizontal relationships with direct access prevails. Before modernisation one always belonged to a part of a hierarchically ordered chain. A chain in which a farmer was connected to a feudal lord who in turn was indebted to the king. Families were actually a kind of large household in which also people who were no relatives lived together with the core group: employees, students, a cousin who came to learn a trade (Taylor, 2004). These households were strongly patriarchal under the undisputed authority of the male head. Dependency relationships and hierarchy were paramount. Tenant farmers were dependent on landlords, artists of patrons; chains of dependency and servitude connected vassals, patrons to the king. Everyone knew his or her place. Hierarchical and mediated relationships in long chains till the king, determined the image (Taylor, 2004). Modern horizontal societies are exactly reversed; everyone has direct access and equal distance to the centre of power, marked by an impersonal egalitarian organisation where citizens have a direct relationship with the state.

Where Taylor follows Tocqueville, he in turn is indebted to Burke. In ‘Reflections on the revolution in France’ Burke (2001) expresses his love for traditional communities, places where changes occur gradually, common sense is paramount and where there is an ordered liberty. The central idea of ‘Reflections’ is that society is not a social contract between the living, but between the living, the dead and those who will be born. In Burke’s view civil society and social harmony recall each other. Burke and Tocqueville share their preference for the dependencies, continuity and the security offered by traditional communities and the civic associations that form the core of it, precisely the opposite of the great disembedding Taylor describes so vividly.

A deeper understanding of the great disembedding and the need for civic engagement like FGC that come with it, can be derived from the work of the German philosopher Sloterdijk. In his trilogy ‘Spheres’, he introduces the concepts ‘Bubbles’ (vol. I, 1998), ‘Globes’ (vol. II, 1999) and ‘Foam’ (vol. III, 2004) and rewrites the history of mankind by understanding humans as sphere-producing and sphere-dependent beings dealing with the elusiveness and the immensity of the world. People surround themselves with

spatial spheres (their home, a nation) to protect themselves against others and against the world. They seek protection in their house, park, nation, in intimate relationships as spheres or metaphysical systems. Central to Sloterdijk's thoughts are two concepts: solidarity and immunity. In the first he describes the internal cohesion of a spatial communality, in the latter, the closed nature for the outside world. The shared sphere forms a barrier (immunisation) for the dangers from outside and offers solidarity for the inside. In essence Sloterdijk writes a history of perpetual emerging and disappearing symbolic, protective atmospheres (Sloterdijk, 1999).

All solidarity relationships are in Sloterdijk's view sphere formations. These spheres produce protection, in his words "immunity" (1999, p. 994). But in the world of expanding globalisation 'sympathy in the *Gemeinschaft*' is transformed into the 'telepathy of the *Gesellschaft*'. The syntheses of community, religion, politics in one great monosphere is gone and transformed into a "super tribalistic psychological community" where everyone is equally far from the centre (1999, p. 995). Sloterdijk refers to foam as the structure for living in 'co-isolation', in separated cells where the relationship between neighbours is not produced by a common inspiration or a shared language, but by sharing a vulnerable, temporary and transformative cell wall. Via internet and telecommunication spheres of immunity are built with likeminded, not with near neighbours. Being part of a larger entity is not realised in national states or physical communities but in temporary spheres. Globalisation in Sloterdijk's view is actually the expansion of foam, an empire without a centre, not able to provide protection (2004). The foam envisions a herd of independents desperately in search for commonalities against a background of total atomisation.

Where Burke and Tocqueville could see the community as safeguard for insecurity, Sloterdijk sees communities as bubbles that are doomed to burst apart and where immunity is temporary. With his sphere-theory one can understand the difficulties of the informal and voluntary sector in addressing social problems, solidarity is felt only for those within the shared sphere. But it also helps understanding why a focussed intervention like FGC that has no ambition beyond restoring harmony in just a view bubbles of foam, is likely to succeed. With his sphere-theory one can also understand how easily grown up children and their parents in the presented case, can lose each other. But also how the loss of solidarity between spoiled children and uncertain parents impairs their immunity; state agencies nearly took over. In the isolated foam cell it is hard for parents to connect with their adolescents who have their own sphere. Given the isolated nature of the foam cell it is also hard to copy the art of parenting of other parents. Moreover, the civil society and professional society are also co-isolated and locked up in separate bubbles. A family group conference can offer a platform to join



the forces and regain solidarity on a small scale.

## Communities of fate and FGC

The limitations of the informal sector like amateurism, lack of resources, inequities in participation across class, ethnicity, and education levels, the difficulties of engaging the informal sector in complex services, and lack of consistency (Heitzmann *et al.*, 2009), but also the broader lack of willingness to contribute to the realization of collective goals, the declining civic engagement, the loosening connections and the loss of association, which Lorentzen and Hustinx (2007) sum up, support the argument of Sloterdijk that ambitions beyond the foam cell have a hard time. Processes of individualisation, secularisation and globalisation indeed deter individuals from collective enterprises. Following Hirst (1994), Lorentzen and Hustinx describe this process as a shift from communities of fate to communities of choice, meaning that collective identities are replaced by subjective individualism, processes where each individual constitutes his own life independent of the collective. The notion of communities of fate is however important for understanding the rise of FGC and the success or failure of each conference.

Stinchcombe (1965) described a community of fate as an organisation in which the success of individual participants is closely linked with the success of the larger collective. Hirst (1994, p. 52) sees them as “existential communities”: “one is born in them and raised in them.” Brydon and Coleman (2008) underline that boundaries, identity and belonging are crucial features of communities but that ‘communities of fate’ do not necessarily share identity; rather a situation, a process, a fate. Exactly these communities of fate are the point of application of FGC.

Looking back at the case, we see a reconstituted family, besides the parents no one has ever chosen to be together. Nevertheless, no one would want to leave the family. They share a situation, a process and a fate of growing up and ageing in an environment with little resources.

## Conclusion

In what way can sociological and philosophical theories contribute to the understanding of the need for and the rise of FGC? Sloterdijk’s sphere theory makes it conceivable that

every ambition beyond the immediate foam cells are ambivalent and lack durable support because solidarity does not easily transcend through different spheres. Interventions like FGC with a specific and modest ambition contribute to small scale solidarity. This ambition is not inclined to establish a broad social cohesion within society but to restore immunity (protection) and solidarity in communities of fate; resolving issues with those (family, neighbours, colleagues) who share a sphere (a situation, a process, a fate). The rise of FGC is the mirror image of the need for FGC. The need for FGC is understandable considering:

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- the loss of protection that the traditional communities and social institutions could offer;
  - the loss of solidarity within and between social groups;
  - that auxiliary troops of civil and professional society are also co-isolated;
  - that the social capital of FGC-users is often unilaterally populated by strong ties;
  - that the rational and calculating methods of the system world do not have the potency of strengthening the communities at stake, and;
  - that the therapy-culture of professionals does not mobilise the resilience of families.
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We conclude that the rise of a relative new social structure such as FGC is under-theorised from a sociological and philosophical perspective. The social theories that are presented to explore this upcoming social phenomenon in this paper are by no means exhaustive, it is an attempt to investigate the contribution of social theories in understanding both the need for as the rise of FGC. These terrains should be explored more thoroughly and systematically than we did in this paper. The rise of FGC is nevertheless understandable considering its capacity:

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- to produce a shift of power from state agencies to families and communities, from public to private spheres, from professional to civil society;
  - in mitigating the co-isolation of individuals, families and communities, both within civil and professional society, and;
  - to mobilise resources from both civil and professional society and thereby strengthen communities of fate.
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