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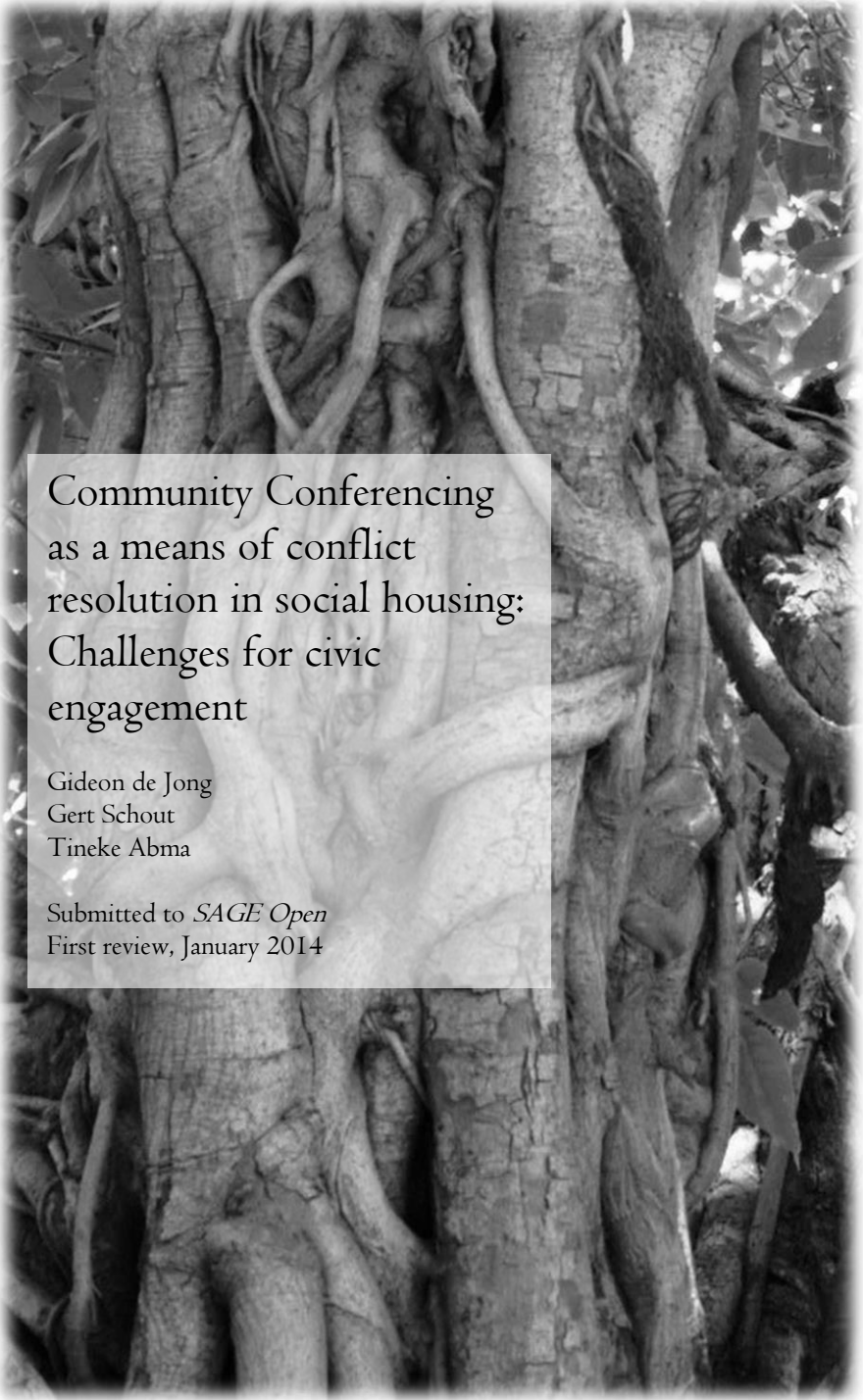
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Community Conferencing
as a means of conflict
resolution in social housing:
Challenges for civic
engagement

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Chapter Eight

Community Conferencing as a means of conflict resolution in social housing: Challenges for civic engagement

Abstract

Ideas on civic engagement, mutualisation and ownership underpinned by new trust based relationships resonates beyond the European Union. In the Netherlands social housing practices are aiming at empowering residents in establishing a plan on their own to improve living conditions in their neighbourhood. A form of such civic engagement is Community Conferencing (CC). The aim of this article is to determine if CC can complement the existing conflict resolution strategies in social housing practices wherein public mental health care (PMHC) clients are involved. PMHC serves as a safety net for people who are in need for professional care but who frequently avoid the care they actually need. Professionals in PMHC also provide unsolicited assistance when clients are involved in conflicts in residential areas. From January 2011 until September 2013 we examined the process and outcomes of eleven community conferences in a PMHC setting in the north of the Netherlands. We highlight findings from three case studies that are illustrative for the other eight cases. We carried out in-depth interviews with every actor involved in the case. For CC to succeed, four conditions are crucial: 1) impartiality of the housing association and its capacity to establish a clear framework for a plan; 2) the need of a non-professional, independent coordinator who is engaged as a citizen and can prevent escalation of conflicts; 3) using so called 'dialogue circles' to ensure that every actor of the conference is empowered to participate; 4) widening the circle in the conference by involving community members.

Keywords

Civic engagement, Community Conferencing, conflict resolution, joint decision making, public mental health care, social housing

Introduction

In this article we raise the question whether civic engagement can stop conflicts in social housing practices. Because of recent policy reforms that are in line with Blond's 'big society' (Blond, 2010) and budget cuts there is a clear focus in the Netherlands to let citizens first establish a plan on their own in order to solve a problematic situation before the state intervenes. Family Group Conferencing (FGC) for groups ('Eigen Kracht-conferenties voor groepen'), a promising decision making model that up to this date is under-researched, helps residents to come to a settlement when they are involved in neighbourhood conflicts. Internationally this type of FGC is known as Community Conferencing (CC) (McDonald & Moore, 2001; Prichard, 2002). There is extensive experience with FGC, mainly in youth care as a means to prevent guardianship and outplacement of children (Pennell *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Weigensberg *et al.*, 2009) and restore broken relationships in communities wherein young people are involved in petty crimes (Jeong *et al.*, 2012). However, there is little evidence for the applicability of CC in social housing practices wherein public mental health care (PMHC) clients are involved. To our best knowledge there are no studies on the effectiveness of CC in such settings. Our assumption is that CC can offer solutions for conflicts and troubles in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Early 2011 we started a two years investigation into the proces and outcomes of FGC in the PMHC setting of Groningen, a province in the north of the Netherlands. We have analysed forty one family group conferences, and out of these, eleven community conferences. This article reports and reflects on findings from three CC case studies that are illustrative for the other CC cases. Aim of this article is to reveal the underlying patterns that determine the process of this type of conferencing and indicate if CC can complement the existing conflict resolution strategies in social housing practices.

Public mental health care and Community Conferencing

Public mental health care serves as a safety net for people who are in need for professional care but who frequently do not seek, or avoid, the care they actually need (Schout *et al.*, 2011). The target group of PMHC is diverse: addicted homeless; older people suffering from early dementia; people living in socially isolated circumstances; people suffering from psychosis; loitering youth. Not only clients who are in need for

help are served by PMHC, professionals – such as social workers, community mental health nurses, police officers, as well as officials from housing associations and municipality workers – also provide unsolicited assistance to those who are involved in conflicts in residential areas. Such as neighbours who on the basis of mental health or personality disorders are in conflict with each other or addicted people who commit troubles within their living area. In the words of Gurstein and Small (2005), this is the “hard to house population [who] are deemed problematic by housing providers” (p. 718) and who are easily evicted when there is a lack of compliance, “usually under the guise of protecting the housing ambience for the other tenants” (p. 724). Several researchers (Crane & Warnes, 2000; Crane *et al.*, 2006; Gurstein & Small, 2005; Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Padgett, 2007; Van Laere, 2010; Warnes & Crane, 2006) reveal that problems of this housing population are interwoven and reinforce each other. Sometimes neighbourhoods end up in downward spirals of nuisance, conflict and deterioration. An eviction of the perpetrator or another form of coercion in such a scenario is often imminent. In our study we investigated whether or not CC could offer a solution.

Similar to FGC, the foundation of CC is derived from traditions and customs of the indigenous Maori population of New Zealand (Matsinhe, 2008) – tribal people that are part of extensive networks of extended families (*whanau*) who act as caring communities (Nikora *et al.*, 2012). The model is culturally responsive to the communities it serves (e.g. Waite *et al.*, 2004). Most experience with CC is gained in situations of juvenile crime. In here, there is a clear distinction between perpetrator and victim. In CC both perpetrators and victims – supported by their social network – participate. Aim of the conference is to repair damaged relationships so that reconciliation in the community can occur and consequently living conditions will improve. Truth telling in own’s one voice, repentance, acceptance of guilt and forgiveness play a central role (Calhoun & Borch, 2002; Matsinhe, 2008; Van Wormer, 2009). Stubbs (2007) points out that underlying the process of reaching a settlement, is the much less visible and more ambiguous process of symbolic reparation. This process involves social rituals of respect, courtesy, apology and forgiveness, which operates independently from the verbal agreements that are reached. These symbolic forms of reparation are of critical importance. CC contributes to social cohesion as it empowers citizens to take responsibility for the welfare in their own neighbourhood (Matsinhe, 2008). Although evidence is limited, some studies have proven that once citizens gather in a community conference, they are capable to improve living conditions in their neighbourhood (see for instance Frieling, 2008; Hines & Bazemore, 2003).

Like FGC, CC in the Netherlands is structured in four phases. (I) A residential area characterised by conflicts is referred to a community conference by a professional or the

housing association. (2) A non-professional, independent CC coordinator prepares the conference by inviting every actor being involved. He or she acts sensitive towards reluctance and motivates people to participate. Professionals work closely together with coordinators to set clear frames for residents to come up with a workable plan that helps solving conflicts and nuisance. (3) Purpose of the first stage of the conference itself is to address the events leading to the conflict and its origin. Following, attention is paid to the consequences of the conflict – questions such as how people are affected or harmed by what had happened and how things can be made right are central during this stage. Only then the future can be addressed – how to repair damaged contacts and what needs to be done to prevent relapsing in old, destructive patterns? Focus of the conference gradually shifts from past to present, and ultimately to the future. A shift from conflict to collaboration is central to CC (Abramson & Moore, 2001) in order to produce a mutually satisfactory resolution for both offenders as victims (e.g. Dzur & Olson, 2004). (4) One month after the conference, the coordinator contacts every actor involved if the plan is being implemented according to what they have agreed on. If necessary, another meeting will be planned to come up with a plan that is more sustainable.

The main difference with traditional FGC is that in CC there is no private (family) time during the conference itself. To assure that residents come up with their own plan, so-called ‘dialogue-circles’ are used. In the first circle every actor that is directly involved within the problem takes place; it are those participants who need to establish a plan. In the outer circle professionals, municipality workers and housing association officials can participate in order to review if the plan is workable. If they have doubts, they can impose the participants in the inner circle to come up with a plan that is more convincing. Benefits from this method is that those who are directly involved come up with their own plan – of which it is assumable that actors are more eager to carry it out than if it would have been established by professionals (e.g. Asay & Lambert, 1999) – that is being positively reviewed by agencies and their representatives.

CC in the Netherlands serves a wider spectrum than described in the international literature on CC (see Van Beek & Muntendam, 2011). In situations of conflicts in neighbourhoods, there are not always clearly identifiable perpetrators and victims – it involves two or more parties confronting each other. Important is that the coordinator who organises the conference acts as an independent fellow citizen. Someone who helps actors formulating their own plan, but who remains impartial (Abramson & Moore, 2001; Matsinhe, 2008). The coordinator ensures that participants are empowered to solve their own problems.

In a previous article we addressed several reasons to start pilots with FGC in PMHC (De Jong & Schout, 2011). A major reason why clients in PMHC would be less

reluctant to participate in a conference is that professionals act modest – they are one of the representatives sharing their information for a joint effort. The acceptance of informal help from the social network and the denial of regular care by clients, are often fuelled by negative experiences with professionals in the past (Schout *et al.*, 2011, 2011). FGC offers clients the opportunity to establish their own plan with the help of their social network. We assume that CC can prevent further deterioration of conflicts in neighbourhoods so that coercive measures – such as an eviction, outplacement of children and involuntary admission to a psychiatric ward – can be averted. It is plausible that a conference can prevent coercion as it provides safe grounds for people to discuss the impact of conflicts in residential areas. Restrictions to problematic behaviour, restoration of contacts and a sustainable plan to ensure quality of living conditions in neighbourhoods and residential districts are central to CC. The aim of our study is to determine whether CC can be a valuable addition to strategies that confront conflicts in social housing practices wherein PMHC-clients are living. This paper is delineated on revealing the underlying patterns that determine the course of these conferences in PMHC. We highlight three CC cases that are illustrative for the other eight cases. All analysed cases took place in social housing practices of a disadvantaged region in the north of the Netherlands. On the basis of individual interviews and member checks we can conclude that the first case yielded a successful plan with sustainable outcomes in the long run, while the second case yielded both positive as negative outcomes. The third case is described by participants as failed. We also highlight this case, as in line with Stake (1995) it is important to draw lessons from conferences that apparently did not succeed in reaching a workable plan.

Methodology

From early 2011 until end 2012 eleven community conferences were organised in social housing practices in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. On each conference a naturalistic case study was carried out (Abma & Stake, 2014; Stake, 1995). In each case we provided detailed investigations via semi-structured interviews into the personal experiences of participants on the interactions and process of the conference as well as its outcomes in terms of an increase of social support, less demand for professional care, and achievement of goals as formulated in the plan. In this article we focus on the process findings of three community conferences that are illustrative for the other eight cases.

Data collection

Naturalistic case studies aim to understand the case from multiple stakeholder perspectives (Abma & Stake, 2014). To get an impression of the process of CC it was important to describe the conference from different points of view. Therefore, we were aware of choosing the right respondents, representing various stakeholder groups. Stakeholders that were identified in our study include: PMHC clients and residents that are being involved within conflicts in neighbourhoods (referred to in this article as ‘main actors’); professionals such as social workers, mental health nurses and police officers; representatives of municipalities and housing associations; CC coordinators. Semi-structured interviews were carried out using a topic list. We were open to new clues that arose during the interviews, reflected on them and in addition deepened these new insights.

The topic list consisted of the main finding from our exploratory study into the opportunities and limitations of FGC in PMHC (see De Jong & Schout, 2011). Central topics were: 1) how can the living conditions in the neighbourhood be described before and after the community conference; 2) how did the conference proceed; 3) did the conference yield a plan, and if so, is everyone working according the plan; 4) do respondents experience an increase of grip on the situation due to the conference?

The aim was to interview every participant of the conferences. Four groups of respondents can be distinguished: 1) the main actor(s) (those who committed troubles or were directly affected by it); 2) neighbours and other local residents that were not directly involved as well as persons from the main actors’ social network; 3) professionals (such as social workers, community mental health nurses, policy officers) and representatives from housing associations and municipalities and; 4) the coordinator from the Dutch FGC organisation (Eigen Kracht Centrale, see www.eigen-kracht.nl).

Every actor involved was asked to reflect on the process and outcomes of the conference. Interviews were held at locations where respondents felt at ease and during a time schedule that suited them best – at their home or the organisations where they were employed, during daytime or in the evening. We have interviewed 10 participants in the first case, in the second 10 as well, and in the third 21 (in total 12 main actors and 7 participants from their social network, 14 neighbours, 13 professionals, 5 coordinators).¹ All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews ranged from 20 to 150 minutes, with an average length of 70 minutes.

¹ In total we have interviewed 97 respondents in the II cases out of a possible total of 155 conference participants (including 12 CC coordinators).

Data analysis and validation of research findings

Transcribed interviews were analysed using the software program ATLAS.ti, resulting in trends and alterations on trends according to Flick's methodology to derive theory from research findings inductively (Flick, 2009). Central themes are partly based on the topics that were already formulated prior to the interviews, such as 'proceeding of the conference', 'living conditions prior to and after the conference' and 'role of the coordinator'. These themes were extended with newly emerging themes. A certain degree of saturation in our study did occur – in each case study we can observe similar patterns that describe how the conference according to the respondents proceeded.

Findings from the interviews were in every case study presented to the respondents for feedback via so-called member checks (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Purpose of these meetings was twofold: first to validate interim conclusions, on the other hand to gather new insights on the process and outcomes of the conference. These meetings lasted each one hour and a half, were recorded and later on analysed.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by both the ethics committee of the VU University Medical Centre and the Hanze University of Applied Sciences. All ethical considerations were addressed, including informed consent. During the study, all participants were treated as experts on the study topic and were asked to provide feedback after transcription of the audio documents.

Findings from the case studies

In this section, we first sketch a brief outline of the background situation of each case prior to the conference and which grounds there were for reference to a conference. Subsequently, we elaborate on what had happened during the conference itself and if the conference yielded a plan. In the following section we will reflect on the main findings with the help of insights from the literature on CC and restorative justice.

Case I – Neighbours' quarrel

The first case is about a quarrel in a neighbourhood of a small village. Incremental nuisance arose with frequent contacts with the housing association and police officers as a result. Finally, even the mayor of town got involved. In the past, residents were satisfied with their living conditions, but it slightly turned into a situation characterised by harassment and noise wherein residents were continuously frustrated and agitated at

each other. Eventually, residents started to accuse each other, without taking responsibility for their own behaviour:

No one is guilty, it is always the fault of the other: they are the ones that need to change, not me. [*According the housing association official*]

No one had grip on the situation. Social workers who got involved with residents individually did not succeed coming up with a workable plan. The housing association organised six gatherings in order to find a solution, but it appeared impossible to entangle accusations, a solution was not available. Gossiping and nagging seemed to escalate. Hence the situation was discussed within the PMHC network wherein a social worker, a police officer, an official of the housing association and the mayor of town participated. It was decided to organise a community conference.

Process of the conference

It took one month for the coordinator to prepare the conference and motivate all residents, professionals and officials from the municipality and housing association to participate. Some of them had doubts by the potency of the conference:

Before the conference I told the coordinator that I had doubts: 'I will participate and of course I hope its outcome will be positive, but I doubt if it will work.' [...] But the coordinator did not give up easily; she was persistently reaching her goal. [*Resident*]

From experience I know that in such a neighbourhood quarrel it is difficult to come to a solution. I had little faith, however I was motivated and hoped that something could change. [*Social worker*]

As the coordinator – a woman in her fifties who had been working as a secretary – was inexperienced with organising CC, she consulted another coordinator for assistance. It was decided that he would support her during the conference. Because she was backed-up, the coordinator was able to fully concentrate on the course of the conference. In the conference there was an arrangement of two 'dialogue circles'. The inner circle provided grounds for the residents to participate in the discussion and come up with their own plan that was being reviewed by professionals and officials who took place in the outer circle. It was decided not to deepen grievances, so little time was spent to what had happened. There was a clear focus on the present and the future, creating conditions for a constructive discussion between the neighbours. Beneficial in this case was working with a so-called 'talking stick' (an attribute frequently used during CC and other

restorative practices as a way to let only the person speak who holds the stick in the hand, e.g. Van Wormer, 2009) as it prevented participants from interrupting what was being said:

Some of them found that really difficult, but it was really effective. How childish it may look, but this talking stick made it possible that everyone was able to say what was on his mind. *[Social worker]*

In addition, a plan with an aim on improving communication between the residents and to set clear frames for when latent conflicts seem to get out of hand was established whereon everyone agreed and that convinced the representatives of the housing association and professionals that the quarrel would be settled.

The member check – organised seven months after the conference – revealed that due to the conference the situation was being prevented from escalation and that the living conditions in the neighbourhood had been improved:

The goal was that we could peacefully live together again. I never thought that we would come to terms with our neighbours, as I really thought that the problems were so deepened that it was impossible to make it right. But it is almost like it was before, as nothing has happened. This I really never expected. I really thought: what is broken cannot be fixed. But apparently that is possible! *[Resident]*

The pleasant atmosphere is back. We are greeting each other again. *[Resident]*

However, doubts were shared about the sustainability of the positive outcomes. According residents, the lack of an evaluation undermines sustainability. Both during the interviews and member check, the residents indicated that the cause of the conflict is still beneath the surface. As no evaluation was organised, it was not possible to share positive developments and to discuss risk factors for relapse in old reflexes. The housing association however concluded after individual consultations with all residents that an evaluation was not deemed necessary because the situation at that time was stable and there was fear that raking up issues would increase risk of relapse and escalation. During the member check however, participants agreed that there is a need for a follow-up, preferably chaired by the coordinator. Despite these critical remarks it can be concluded that the conference was successful as it yielded a plan that up to this date holds the line against disruptive behaviour and therefore prevents the situation from deterioration. Another positive side-effect is that there is no involvement of professionals any longer in this case:

I am really satisfied with the outcomes. I am also not any longer involved. They are treating each other with respect again. And that I could have never realised if I needed to do it all myself. But the conference was able to do so, as it appealed to the responsibilities of everyone involved. *[Social worker]*

Case 2 – Increasing nuisance in a neighbourhood

The second case appears similar to the first one as it focuses on increasing nuisance in a neighbourhood of a small village as well. Conflict was centred on a square where several residents are living. Composition of the neighbourhood is diverse. Although people feel at ease living there, the mayor of town also emphasise that:

[...] there are several persons to be appointed who are difficult to be corrected. Some of them are addicted to alcohol, they have difficulties to control themselves, they are really addicted. There are also several people living who are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. *[Mayor]*

Three years ago a family moved into the area. With them they brought a lot of turmoil, such as frequent gatherings of people who caused inconvenience to other residents. Two particular incidents catch the eye wherein a lot of alcohol was consumed and in addition noise and nuisance occurred. The first one was during the World Cup Football of 2010. A tent was set up on the square wherein people attended football games on television and consumed a lot of alcohol. This went hand in hand with noise and turmoil. Residents acted frustrated as they were not informed about this event. The second incident happened during New Year's Eve of 2010-2011. There was a license for fireworks issued by the municipality, but the fireworks lasted longer than agreed on. Besides, there was also a fire incident on the square caused by the family during New Year's celebration, accompanied by excessive alcohol consumption and threats towards residents. Eventually, residents felt no longer safe in their homes and on the streets. After these incidents, the mayor of town decided to apply for a community conference. The main actor – a man in his forties who had been known for drinking extensively was held as instigator of the disturbance – was reluctant towards the conference. However, his wife decided to participate.

Process of the conference

Respondents interviewed on the conference emphasised that the outcomes during the initial stage of the conference were positive:

I look back very positively on the conference itself. The main person himself was not there, but his wife participated and a lot of local residents were there as well. They were able to

come to terms with each other, although it took the whole day. Everyone acted euphoric when they finally reached a plan. *[CC coordinator]*

Everyone was being heard and there was a pleasant atmosphere:

Everybody had the chance to cry out his heart, and people were sincerely listening to each other. *[Resident]*

Participants were even able to discuss long lasting conflicts, as the PMHC case manager emphasise:

During the break I heard a woman talking to her daughter. A difficult family as well so to say. And they said to each other that they have come to terms with their neighbours. I thought: that is really fantastic! *[PMHC case manager]*

But as the conference came to its end, there was a negative switch as the wife of the perpetrator shared the outcomes with her husband who in addition angrily entered the meeting and uttered threats to the participants and the coordinator. The meeting ended abruptly so there was no plan established and ultimately no change to the threatening situation:

Until the turmoil that started at the end. One of the women who participated left the meeting with the paper on which she had written the outcomes of the conference. Other participants were convinced that she was gonna inform the troublemaker. Her husband suddenly entered the meeting and started yelling and screaming to other participants and threatened the coordinator that he would kill him. That was really threatening! A couple of residents did not dare going home afterwards. Consequently we called the police. They were really quickly present as they knew things could get out of hand. They more or less pulled the fighting parties apart. When the conference ended nobody signed the plan that was being made. On one hand you could say that the residents were able to come to a workable solution, but on the other hand you could say that the conference terribly failed. *[Social worker]*

Plus point is that the course of the conference made professionals, the housing association and municipality aware of the seriousness of this troubled situation, as two residents describe:

The mayor is really concerned. He even visited all residents about what needs to be done. *[Resident]*

The social worker is still heavily involved. The trouble maker with his family have been offered another house. So finally something is happening. *[Resident]*

Besides, the residents felt encouraged by the conference – it made clear to everyone that there was a collective displeasure on the whole situation:

I think it is really positive that there are more victims who can discuss the problematic situation with each other. On the street people are afraid to discuss this issue, but during a conference they feel empowered, they would have the feeling that they are taken seriously and something will be done. *[Resident]*

Consequently, the residents were able to intervene as one entity towards the perpetrator. The conference was considered the last opportunity to improve the living conditions in the neighbourhood. Now that even this last resort did not yield the desired effect, residents stated that they were totally 'done' with the situation. Meanwhile, the perpetrator and his family were offered another house and have recently moved there. In other words, a plan never came into force but due to the conference the neighbourhood and professionals could act as one unit. Eventually, this led to limitation of unacceptable behaviour and a new start for the troublemaker and his family elsewhere. The member check revealed that an apparently unsuccessful conference was redefined as a conference with a different but valuable outcome: although the family who caused nuisance and troubles was evicted and offered another house, due to the conference the residents could intervene as one unit and hold a line against antisocial behaviour.

Case 3 - Loitering in a residential area

The last case we describe takes places in a residential area of a medium-sized town. Troubles arose around a football cage with about fifty young people involved. They used a lot of alcohol and drugs. Residents experienced increasingly nuisance. Windows of some houses were smeared and broken. Residents repeatedly complained to the municipality. Consequently, the municipality decided to remove the cage, resulting in that the youth started spreading across the whole district, and with them the problems. Nuisance mainly centred on the square of a primary school. There they gathered with other young people so that the group grew and simultaneously the problems:

The cage was finally removed, in the sense of: 'As we remove the cage the problems will disappear.' But the group of course still existed: you do not get rid of the core of the problem. The group moved to another area. They finally gathered at the square of a primary school. There was already another group as well, so they melted to a bigger group. That resulted in a lot of turmoil and garbage. Every morning the teachers first needed to

clean the square before their pupils came to school. [*Youth worker*]

Frequently threats, vandalism, noise and garbage lying around were reported to the municipality and police. Police officers patrolled daily through the district. As time passed by, also social workers and case managers from addiction care got involved. To reduce nuisance, the police intensified observations where the group was hanging out. They even imposed a ban on gatherings. Despite all these measures, nuisance persisted. Grip on the situation was totally lost and professionals could not agree on an unambiguous solution. Finally, a community conference was requested by the municipality, first of all because other ideas how to approach the situation were exhausted, but also because in this period the municipality strongly oriented on the possibilities of restorative practices.

Process of the conference

Being a complex situation with many parties involved, two CC coordinators were working on the preparation and organisation of the conference. It was decided to invite all youth and their parents, as well as all involved professionals (social and youth workers, a case manager from addiction care and a police officer) and an official from the municipality. However, none of the residents participated:

It was our idea to organise a meeting with the youth and their parents. We hoped that through their parents we would let them realise the impact of the trouble they were making. Afterwards we came to the conclusion we made a mistake not inviting the residents. But they were not eager to participate as things already got way out of hand in their opinion.
[*Municipality worker*]

Prior to the conference, there was a preparatory meeting with the professionals and representatives of the municipality. In here, the following objective for the conference was formulated: *what is necessary to ensure wellbeing of the youth in the neighbourhood, so that in addition their committed inconvenience and problems reduce?* After the conference it turned out that not everyone agreed on this goal – the interests of the youth were too much emphasised, while on the other hand there was no attention paid to the problems they were actually causing and its consequences for the liveability in the residential area:

The main issue of the conference was formulated as: What do the youth need so that turbulence will no longer occur? We were really astonished, as I thought it was more important to formulate a plan on what the youth themselves would do to prevent nuisance and troubles. But it was already clear during the conference that this could not be changed

anymore. [...] And as a result they all started yelling that they wanted to have their own youth centre. [*Municipality worker*]

The initial phase of the conference proceeded fairly quiet. Everyone was able to share his or her opinion. But as the conference lasted too long, the youth lost patience.

It lasted too long, finally things got a bit out of hand. [*Young person*]

Finally the situation got grim. It lasted too long so no decisions were made. [*Police officer*]

No commitments were made by the municipality, giving rise to frustration of the youth who eventually left the conference before its final stage. At that time there were some agreements made, but the conference lacked a concrete plan.

The impact of the conference differs for all parties. Although the municipality worker was not willing to realise a youth centre as the young people and their parents wanted the municipality to build, with the help of one parent the group received a temporary hangout:

Finally, one of the parents said: 'I could offer a temporary hangout in my garage. We can find furniture for this hangout and I am willing to keep an eye on them.' [*Municipality worker*]

Budget for its furniture was provided by the municipality. However, the municipality did not fulfil further agreements (realising a permanent hangout), creating frustration amongst the youth and their parents towards the municipality:

One of the municipality workers said: 'We will review what is possible and will let you know about our conclusions later on.' When I came back to the topic a few weeks later, she said: 'No, I did not say that.' [...] And I responded: 'If I remember well, it were your words! You told us that you would review what is possible and the next time we meet you would let us know!' [*Father*]

They [the municipality] should come up with a new hangout. That was one of the agreements we had made! [*Young person*]

The group of young people and their parents no longer want to cooperate with the municipality. The temporary hangout nowadays is hardly used, and the group is – like prior to the conference – hanging around in the area. All actors admit that the conference had failed as the situation did not improve:

The situation is still the same. It maybe even got worse as there is more resistance from everyone involved. *[Father]*

When you look at the street right now, you will always see a group here and a group there. During the evening they always gather. Than do you think it is strange that there is turmoil? Last week they even broke a window of one of the residents. *[Young person]*

However, opinions on who is the scapegoat differ. Some respondents indicate that municipality workers are to be held responsible for failure of the conference as it is said they did not fulfil their commitments (see one of the previous quotes). Others point to the youth, who behaved rebellious during the conference and left before there was agreement on a plan:

When it was their turn to speak, they did not want the talking stick, they started to laugh about it and threw it to each other. The coordinators did not intervene. Everyone was screaming. Finally we all left the conference angrily. *[Municipality worker]*

A positive effect of the conference is that the municipality and professionals now recognise that the situation is way more complex than how they approached it before the conference. Another benefit is that they now know better where the youth are hanging out:

We still put the same amount of time and energy in the situation, but at least we have a number of them in the picture right now, thanks to the garage we know where to find them. However, there is still a group on the street that is more difficult to get a grip on. *[Case manager addiction care]*

The evaluation brought to surface that the conference set off with a unilateral goal. Both the group of young people as professionals and municipality workers gathered again to establish new plans.

Reflections on findings

What does this study add to existing knowledge on Community Conferencing as a means to resolve conflicts within neighbourhoods? With the help of literature on CC, FGC and Restorative Justice we will reflect on three patterns that determine the course of the conferences.

A clear framework set by an independent agency and supportive conferences for individuals

In each analysed case, the housing association, municipality and professionals played a crucial role. However, it is striking that the extent to which they were involved before, during and after the conference differs between the cases. In the first case on the quarrel, housing association officials, municipality workers and professionals had no involvement in establishing a plan – residents established a plan that sufficiently convinced the housing association that the quarrel would be settled.

In contrast, representatives from the housing association, municipality workers and professionals in the second case on the neighbourhood nuisance caused by one family were more intensively involved in the situation prior to the conference as the inconvenience already lasted a longer time and several interventions were carried out in order to stabilise the situation, all with little or no effect. Professionals such as the PMHC case manager, a social worker and a municipality worker were involved in the conference as interlocutors so that they could exert influence in establishing a plan. Nevertheless, it did not prevent the situation from escalation as the key actor in the conflict deliberately entered the conference during its final stage and started threatening the participants and coordinator so that the plan was thwarted.

Interference by the municipality and professionals in the case on loitering was so deepened that both decided to participate as interlocutors in the conference to have influence on the plan. It appears that prior to the conference the situation was already deeply deteriorated so that two distinct camps had emerged: first, the young persons causing inconvenience who were supported by their parents; second, municipality workers (as the football case was already removed, the group spreaded around in the district so it was decided not to invite local residents for the conference). The other professionals took a more neutral position. We wonder whether it was a wise idea to incorporate municipality workers and professionals in this case as interlocutors. Frieling (2008) argues that representatives from the municipality should not participate in establishing a plan during the conference as their role becomes blurry and their interests entangled. If the outcome of the dialogue process is not consistent with the interests of the involved policymakers, it can influence the course of the dialogue as voices of participants get co-opted by a more forceful discourse of agencies (Ney *et al.*, 2013). It must be prevented that the agenda of the conference is dominantly determined by agencies (Morris, 2012). During the conference on loitering, an unconstructive discussion started between the youth and municipality workers. Consequently, several young persons left the conference and no plan was established. The conference failed,

insofar that the municipality relapsed in old reflexes, and coercive measures for individuals were carried out afterwards.

International experience with FGC in cases of child abuse and domestic violence has proven that families are able to establish a plan that convinces the authorities that due to agreements in the plan the safety of the child would be guaranteed and violence will no longer occur (see the following recent impact studies: Pennell *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Weigensberg *et al.*, 2009). If the plan offers insufficient guarantees, the family is urged to establish a new plan that ensures safety. Normally this yields a plan that on one side convinces the authorities, while on the other side it is still the family themselves who is empowered to establish their own plan. One might wonder whether or not the conference in case three would have succeeded if the municipality was not included as discussion partner but just provided clear frames and limits for a constructive plan. In such a scenario, the youth would still have had the chance to establish a plan on their own in cooperation with their social network that would have convinced both representatives from the municipality and professionals that the liveability in the residential area would be restored. Remarkable, no forms of symbolic reparations (see Stubbs, 2007; Van Wormer, 2009) – such as offering apology and in addition restoration of broken relationships between the youth, local residents, housing association officials and municipality workers – were observed in case two and three although there was reason to. If clear frames and limits towards the outcomes of the conference had been set, coercive measures could have been prevented. The youth would have had a last chance to find a solution on their own with the support from their social network, in order to prevent escalation and avert mandatory sanctions.

Another question arises here, namely if civic engagement alone can correct unacceptable behaviour. As in other cases of our research, interviewed representatives of the Dutch FGC organisation experience difficulties to act in complicated community conferences such as in the loitering case. One can question if a fellow citizen is capable to help establishing a plan around a social problem of such magnitude as the loitering case. Should coordinators have complementary skills – such as mediation techniques – to prevent conflicts from escalation during conferences? Abramson and Moore (2001) view mediation as a technique to minimise conflicts. While a community conference aims to transform conflict in cooperation, mediation can be useful. In the literature on CC conferences are described that are chaired by local police officers or facilitators with whom the housing association and municipality are familiar and in whom there is trust that they are capable to organise a constructive conference (see Calhoun & Borch, 2002; Hines & Bazemore, 2003; Hipple & McGarrell, 2008; Matsinhe, 2008). Precisely the strength of the Dutch model is the independence of the coordinator – a citizen who is

equal to those participating in the conference (see Van Beek & Muntendam, 2011). As many clients of the PMHC target group have negative experiences with regular services, they could be suspicious towards a coordinator who has a background as a professional. We assume that clients show more confidence in independent coordinators who treat them as fellow citizens (see De Jong & Schout, 2011). Ultimately, it is not only important that clients but also representatives of the institutions have trust in coordinators (Calhoun & Borch, 2002).

It is questionable if community conferences organised within complex – and sometimes threatening – situations can produce the progress that is required. Was it not recommendable that prior to the community conference individual family group conferences were organised for those young persons committing most trouble? This addition to the preparation stage towards the community conference could have yielded an opportunity for the youth to work on their personal problems first. A young person may be obliged to cooperate in the community conference – if he or she is reluctant, the path of coercive measures is still open. It is more or less playing the game of ‘hard and soft’ (see Schout *et al.*, 2014). On the one hand measures could create conditions so that every stakeholder will be present during the community conference, while on the other hand the youth still have the opportunity to establish a plan on their own that is convincing and wherein signs of symbolic reparation are shown (e.g. Stubbs, 2007).

We can also imagine that such a trajectory could have offered a solution as well in case two on the neighbourhood nuisance. Should an individual conference for the troublemaker with his family have provided a plan that guaranteed nuisance would be solved? In such a trajectory, the man who was deliberately not present at the conference was perhaps willing to participate so that prominent attention could have been paid to recovery between residents prior to the development of a plan.

Besides, an imposed conference for families can hinder the voluntary participation in a community conference. Despite the use of coercion, there are still opportunities for people to establish their own plan although the conference is imposed on them. In both the loitering as the neighbourhood nuisance cases, the community conferences acted as a last resort, all other options were exhausted. Would both community conferences have been prevented from escalation if in an earlier stage clear limits were set for unacceptable behaviour, optionally backed-up by individual family group conferences?

Communication in the conference

Constructive communication in community conferences is a challenge, especially when the group is big. To ensure that everyone has a say and prevent that participants talk before their turn, a so-called ‘talking stick’ could be used. A talking stick stimulates

participants to concentrate on listening, not on interrupting (Van Wormer, 2009). In addition, each participant has the opportunity to tell his or her opinion, without being interrupted by a verbally dominant actor.

In the case of the quarrel, the conference was set up in two circles. This provided a clear division of roles, as the main actors (the residents) were able to take part in the inner circle while housing association officials and professionals took place in the outer circle. Children of the residents were given the opportunity to participate in either the inner (for a more active contribution) or the outer circle (so they still had the opportunity to participate and contribute when they deemed this necessary). By this arrangement, responsibility for establishing their own plan was fully given to the residents, but at the same time they needed to ensure that the outcomes would convince the participants in the second circle of efficacy.

In the loitering case many parties who all had their own interests participated. In the initial stage, a conflict between the group of young people and municipality workers occurred. The parents who were present supported their children. Professionals, such as social workers and case managers, kept themselves out of the conflict. Nobody intervened so that the atmosphere got tense, even threatening. Municipality workers could not make promises, consequently giving rise to frustration among the youth who left the conference before agreeing on a plan. The by Abramson and Moore (2001, p. 327) defined moment of “collective vulnerability” was therefore never reached – a crucial breakpoint wherein emotions are extremely deepened resulting in a collective catharsis whereupon every actor would develop a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the community. Ultimately no plan was established. We wonder whether it was not decided too quickly to work towards a plan. It would probably have been better to recover damaged contacts first by using the principles from the literature on Reintegrative Shaming and Restorative Justice, such as expressing guilt, offering forgiveness and in addition restore damaged contacts (Braithwaite, 1989; Harris, 2006; Strang & Braithwaite, 2001; Stubbs, 2007; Van Wormer, 2009), while simultaneously preventing that perpetrators and their supporters experience that they are on trial and consequently feel stigmatised (e.g. Prichard, 2002).

Involvement of key actors and the added value of involving community members

In both case two and three several key actors did not participate in the conference. In case two this was the man who the residents appointed as instigator of the disturbance – however, his wife was present. In case three no local members from the community participated as it was considered a conflict between the youth and the municipality. Following Calhoun and Borch (2002), Dzur and Olson (2004) and Hines and

Bazemore (2003), we argue to it is necessary to include members from the community who are not directly involved in the residential conflict. Those members could offer creative solutions for problems and can help in ensuring social control and provide social support after the conference.

The question in case two and three is whether everything had been done to ensure every key actor's involvement. If troublemakers are excluded from participating in the conference – or when not enough effort is made to ensure their involvement – they are held back from recognising the damage they have done to others. They do not have the chance to learn from it (see also Schout *et al.*, 2014). The concept of 'blaming and shaming' (see Braithwaite, 1989; Harris, 2006) could have played in both cases a crucial role. If other residents would have shared the impact of the problems caused by the troublemaker, he could have offered apology and in addition contacts could have been restored. If community members were invited in the case on loitering, the young people may have faced the consequences of their behaviour and consequently realised its impact on the liveability in the neighbourhood. They could have been held accountable for their behaviour, but at the same time conditions could have been created so that they feel accepted and valued by the community (e.g. Schiff *et al.*, 2011). Or as Matsinhe (2008) argue: "the more [young people] feel respected, the more they feel trusted, the more they feel valued, the more they feel empowered, then the more they feel accountable to their communities" (p. 13).

Study limitations

We have analysed eleven community conferences, some modesty is thus required. We have highlighted three CC cases that are illustrative for the other eight conferences. Our aim was to understand how community conferences in social housing practices wherein PMHC-clients are living proceed and what are the underlying factors that help determining the success or failure of these conferences. We do not claim universal knowledge, however our study reveals the positive impact CC can have in neighbourhoods wherein PMHC-clients can be appointed and that are characterised by nuisance and conflicts. It holds therefore implications for representatives of housing associations, municipality workers and professionals in PMHC in which situations CC can offer solutions for conflicts and nuisance within neighbourhoods.

Main strength of our study is that we have evaluated the process of the conferences from different angles (e.g. Abma & Stake, 2014): we did not only interview the main actors of the conferences (perpetrators and victims), but we also asked other

stakeholders involved to reflect on the process of the conferences, such as professionals (social workers, community mental health nurses, police officers), municipalities workers, officials from housing associations, bystanders (local residents that are not directly involved in the conflict and representatives from the social network of main actors), and CC coordinators. In almost every case it was therefore possible to reach a certain level of saturation as the respondents from the different stakeholder groups agreed on how the conference proceeded. Achieving substantive saturation in this type of research is indicative for methodological quality. Our intention was to continue with collecting data until no new patterns would emerge (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Small, 2009). In this we partly succeeded. Should we execute new case studies, we will probably find other patterns, but the patterns as described in this paper would probably emerge again.

Conclusion

Can Community Conferencing *alone* produce the progress that is needed? This study delineates that CC can yield positive effects in solving situations in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and residential areas characterised by conflicts and nuisance. The first described case yielded a positive outcome: one and a half year after the conference, the situation in the neighbourhood is still liveable as residents – who prior to the conference were bullying each other – nowadays pay attention to each other's wellbeing. Although the eviction of the family and the unsolved loitering problem as described in case two and three suggest otherwise, the two member-checks that followed the interviews and reflections on the situation brought positive angles to the surface. In case two, with help of the conference residents who were suffering from the nuisance of the troublemaker were able to intervene as a unified entity so they could stand strong against the inconvenience. We expect that in situations where residents who until recently had no knowledge of each other's displeasure, due to a conference can intervene as one unit and therefore take a clearer position against actors who cause problems. Besides, as one unit they can have a stronger influence on housing associations and municipalities in order to solve conflicts and ensure the liveability in neighbourhoods. In other words, CC ensures that actors held each other accountable for the quality of living conditions in residential areas and provides a safe ground wherein everyone feels at ease to share his or her opinion. The conference as described in case three, made municipality workers and professionals realise that the loitering problem is way more complex than how they approached it prior to the conference. Although the conference did not yield a clear plan, they were convinced that something needed to be done to solve the problem. What we

can learn from this case is that prior to a conference there must be reflection on whether a community conference *alone* can produce the progress that is needed.

The aim of this article was to examine if CC is a valuable addition to the existing strategies to confront neighbourhood conflicts and nuisance in social housing practices wherein PMHC-clients can be appointed. In order to ensure that civic engagement fully comes to fruition, four conditions are crucial: 1) impartiality of the housing association and municipality, and their capacity to establish a clear framework for a plan; 2) the need of a non-professional, independent coordinator who is engaged as a citizen and can prevent escalation of conflicts; 3) using so called 'dialogue circles' to ensure that every actor of the conference is empowered to participate; 4) widening the circle in the conference by involving community members.

Our empirical research leaves several questions unanswered. Two questions are central for further research. First, we wonder whether a fellow citizen who facilitates others establishing a plan in complex situations such as the loitering case is feasible. In addition, we question whether coordinators should have complementary skills such as mediation techniques in order to prevent escalation of conflicts. On the other hand, the fact that an independent citizen who helps fellow citizens establishing their own plan is of significant importance in public mental health care where clients frequently have mistrust in institutions and its representatives.

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