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ARTICLE

Community conferencing as a means of conflict resolution in social housing: challenges for civic engagement

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Abstract

Community conferencing (CC) holds promise in terms of complementing the existing conflict resolution strategies in social housing. Between January 2011 and September 2013, we examined the process and impact of eleven community conferences in social housing practices in the north of the Netherlands using a naturalistic case-study approach. These practices were all situated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods characterised by a combination of problems, such as poverty, high unemployment rates, and a relatively high number of residents with psychosocial problems. We highlight findings from three cases that brought four crucial conditions for CC to the surface: (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

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1. Introduction

In this article we question whether civic engagement can stop conflict in social housing practices. Because of recent policy reforms that are in line with Blond's 'big society' (Blond, 2010), there is an orientation in the Netherlands to restorative practices in general and more specifically to coordination of conferencing with family groups or communities. Local authorities are supportive of restorative practices but do not have the necessary background to be able to deploy such strategies. Family group conferencing (FGC) for groups ('Eigen Kracht-conferenties voor groepen'), a promising decision-making model that to date remains underresearched, helps residents to come to a settlement when they are involved in neighbourhood conflict. 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 the outplacement of children (Pennell, Edwards & Burford, 2010; Wang, Lambert, Johnson, Boudreau, Breidenbach & Baumann, 2012; Weigensberg, Barth & Guo, 2009) and restore broken relationships in communities where young people are involved in petty crime (Jeong, McGarrell & Kroovand Hipple, 2012). However, there is little evidence for the applicability of CC in social housing. Our assumption is that CC can offer solutions for conflict and trouble in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In the Netherlands, when neighbourhood conflict can get out of hand, public mental health care professionals often get involved, if necessary, by offering unsolicited assistance to residents in order to find a solution.

Early in 2011 we started a two-year investigation into the impact of FGC in the 23 public mental health care settings of Groningen, a province in the north of the Netherlands. We analysed 41 family group conferences, eleven of which were community conferences. This article reports and reflects on findings from three CC case studies that are illustrative of the other CC cases. The aim of this article is to reveal the underlying patterns that determine the process of this type of conferencing and indicate if CC is able to complement the existing conflict resolution strategies in social housing.

2. Public mental health care and community conferencing

Public mental health care (PMHC) in the Netherlands is a service provided by municipalities. It serves as a safety net for people who are not helped in regular care, such as people suffering from addictions, who are homeless or suffering from psychosis and who tend to avoid professional help (Schout, De Jong & Zeelen, 2011; Schout & De Jong, 2013). 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 people who are involved in residential conflicts and who are not necessarily recognised as clients with mental problems. Of particular focus are residents who are in conflict with each other and who commit disturbances

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within their residential 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 ambiance for the other tenants' (p. 724). Several researchers reveal that problems concerning this housing population are interwoven and reinforce each other (Crane & Warnes, 2000; Crane, Warnes & Fu, 2006; Gurstein & Small, 2005; Hartman & Robinson, 2003; Padgett, 2007; Van Laere, 2010; Warnes & Crane, 2006). 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. We aimed to investigate whether CC could offer a solution.

Like FGC, an important and fundamental pillar of CC in the Netherlands is that people who are involved in residential conflict should have the right to develop a plan on their own before the state intervenes. The starting point of CC is the capability of residents to act responsibly towards the liveability of their own neighbourhood. Their strengths and needs are addressed, not their problems and weaknesses. The foundation of CC is derived from traditions and customs of the indigenous Maori population of New Zealand (Matsinhe, 2008)—tribal people, part of extensive networks of extended families (*whanau*) who act as caring communities (Nikora, Masters-Awatere & Awekotuku, 2012). The model is culturally responsive to the communities it serves (e.g. Waites, Macgowan, Pennell, Carlton-LaNey & Weil, 2004). Most experience with CC is gained in situations of juvenile crime. In this context, there is a clear distinction between perpetrator and victim. In CC, both perpetrators and victims—supported by their social network—participate. The aim of the conference is to repair damaged relationships so that conditions for reconciliation in the community are created and consequently living conditions will improve. Truth-telling in one's own voice, repentance, acceptance of guilt and forgiveness, play crucial roles (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 operate 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 well-being 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 of improving living conditions in their own neighbourhood (see for instance Frieling, Lindenberg & Stokman, 2014; Hines & Bazemore, 2003).

A community conference is structured in four phases. First, a residential area characterised by conflict is referred to a community conference by a professional or the housing association. Second, a non-professional, independent CC coordinator prepares the conference by inviting every actor to be involved. He or she acts sensitively towards reluctance and motivates residents to participate. Professionals work closely together with coordinators to set clear frameworks for residents in order to come up with a workable plan that helps solve

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conflict and nuisances. Three, the purpose of the first stage of the conference is to address the events leading to the conflict and their origin. Following this, attention is paid to the consequences of the conflict—questions such as how people are affected or harmed by what happened, and how things can be made right are central during this stage. Only then can the future be addressed—how to repair damaged contacts and what needs to be done to prevent relapsing in old, destructive patterns? The focus of the conference gradually shifts from the past to the 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 and victims (e.g. Dzur & Olson, 2004). Finally, a month after the conference, the CC coordinator contacts every actor involved to see whether the plan is being implemented according to what was agreed upon. If necessary, another meeting is planned to come up with a plan that is more sustainable.

The main difference from 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 who is directly involved within the problem takes place; they are the participants who need to establish a plan. In the outer circle, professionals—such as PMHC case managers, municipality workers and housing association officials—can participate in order to review whether the plan is workable. If they have any doubts, they can force the participants in the inner circle to come up with a plan that is more convincing. The clear benefits from this method are that those who are directly involved actually come up with their own plan—with the assumption that actors will be more eager to carry it out than if it had been established by professionals (e.g. Asay & Lambert, 1999).

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

In a previous article we have addressed several reasons to start FGC pilots in PMHC (De Jong & Schout, 2011). A major reason clients in PMHC would be less reluctant to participate in a conference is that professionals only have a modest input—they are just one of the representatives sharing information in 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 (Schout, De Jong & Zeelen, 2010). 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 conflict in neighbourhoods, in the hope that coercive measures—such as evictions, 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 ground for people to

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discuss the impact of conflict in residential areas. Restrictions on problematic behaviour, restoration of relationships 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 conflict in social housing. In this paper, we discuss the underlying patterns that determine the course of these conferences. We highlight three CC cases that are illustrative for the other eight cases. All cases analysed took place in social housing practices in the north of the Netherlands. These practices were all situated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods characterised by a culmination of problems, such as poverty, high unemployment rates, and a relatively high number of residents with psychosocial problems. On the basis of our study findings, 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 having failed. We also examine the latter case, as, in line with Stake's (1995) findings, it is important to draw lessons from conferences that apparently did not succeed in reaching a workable plan. The three cases point predominantly to community tensions rather than to individual mental health issues, though they were all referred to CC by PMHC professionals who worked in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

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3. Methodology

From early 2011 until the end of 2012, eleven community conferences were organised in social housing practices in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. A naturalistic case study (Abma & Stake, 2014; Stake, 1995) was carried out on each conference. In each case we provided detailed investigations via semi-structured interviews into the personal experiences of participants of the interactions and process of the conference, as well as into its impact in terms of social support, 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 of the other eight cases. In the findings section we provide three separate case studies and reflect on insights that came to the surface, helping to provide a better understanding of how the conferences proceeded, as well as their impact. The highlighted cases hold learning potential for other social housing practices in a similar context where there is interest in organising CC in order to reach civic engagement among parties—residents and professionals—involved in residential and neighbourhood conflict (e.g. Abma & Stake, 2014).

3.1 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 the need to interview every participant in the conferences, representing different stakeholder groups. Stakeholders that were identified in our study included residents who were involved in conflict within 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; and 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 also deepened these new insights.

The topic list consisted of the main findings from our exploratory study into the opportunities and limitations of FGC in PMHC (De Jong & Schout, 2011). Central topics were as follows: (1) How can the living conditions in the neighbourhood be described before and after the conference? (2) How did the conference proceed? (3) Did the conference yield a plan, and if so, is everyone working according to the plan? (4) Do respondents feel empowered after 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 were involved in trouble or were directly affected by it) as well as members from the main actors' social network (family, friends and acquaintances); (2) neighbours and other local residents that were not directly involved; (3) professionals such as PMHC case managers (usually social workers and community mental health nurses), police 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 their workplace, during the day or in the evening. We interviewed ten participants in the first case, ten in the second as well, and 21 in the third. In all, a total of twelve main actors and seven participants from their social networks, fourteen neighbours/residents, thirteen professionals, and five coordinators were interviewed.[1] Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and ranged from 30 to 150 minutes, with an average length of 70 minutes.

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 on deriving theory inductively from research findings (Flick, 2009). Central themes are partly based on

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

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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 observed similar patterns that describe how the conference proceeded, according to the respondents.

Findings from the interviews were presented to the respondents for feedback in every case study via so-called group member checks (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The purpose of these meetings was twofold: first to validate interim conclusions, second to gather new insights on the process and impact of the conference. These meetings each lasted an hour and a half, were recorded and later analysed. In the first case, six respondents participated (two residents, one social housing official, one social worker, one PMHC case manager and one CC coordinator); in the second, five (one resident, one mayor, one policeman, one PMHC case manager and one CC coordinator); and in the third, there were also five participants (one municipality worker, one PMHC case manager, one policeman, two CC coordinators).

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.

4. Findings from the case studies

In this section, we begin by sketching a brief outline of the background to each case prior to the conference, explaining the grounds there were for referral to a conference. We then elaborate on what happened during the conference itself, and whether the conference yielded a plan. In the following section we reflect on the main findings with the help of insights from the literature on CC and restorative justice.

4.1 Case 1: neighbours' quarrel

The first case concerns tensions that arose in a neighbourhood within a small town. Incremental nuisance resulted in frequent contacts with the housing association and police officers. Eventually, even the mayor of the town had to get involved. In the past, residents were satisfied with their living conditions, but things slowly deteriorated into a situation characterised by harassment and noise. Residents were continuously fru-

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strated. Eventually, they started to accuse each other while refusing to take responsibility for their own behaviour:

> No one is guilty, it is always the fault of the other: they are the ones who need to change, not me. (Housing association official)

No one had a grip on the situation. Social workers who got involved with residents individually did not succeed in coming up with a workable plan. The housing association organised six gatherings in an effort to find a solution, but it seemed impossible to disentangle accusations and a solution did not seem possible. Gossiping and nagging only seemed to escalate. The situation was therefore discussed within the PMHC network where a social worker, a police officer, an official from the housing association and the mayor of the town agreed to participate. The decision was taken to organise a community conference.

Process

It took a month for the coordinator to prepare the conference and persuade all the residents, professionals and officials from the municipality and housing association to participate. Some of them had doubts about the potential of a 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 persistent in reaching her goal. (Resident)

> From experience, I know that it is difficult to come to a solution in such a neighbourhood conflict. 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 when it came to organising CC, she consulted another coordinator for assistance. It was decided that he would support her during the conference. Because she had this backup, the coordinator was able to concentrate fully on the course of the conference. During 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 then reviewed by professionals and officials in the outer circle. It was decided to avoid deepening grievances, so little time was spent on 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—a method frequently used during CC and other restorative practices as a way of ensuring that only the person holding the stick can speak (e.g. Van Wormer, 2009):

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> 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 aimed at improving communication between the residents and setting clear frameworks to avoid future conflict was established, to which everyone agreed on and which convinced the representatives of the housing association and professionals that the quarrel would be settled.

In the group member check that was organised seven months after the conference, it became clear that because of the conference new conflicts had been prevented and the living conditions in the neighbourhood had been improved:

> The goal was that we could peacefully live together once again. I never thought that we would come to terms with our neighbours, as I really thought that the problems were so deep that it was impossible to make it right. But it is almost like it was before, as if nothing had happened. This I really never expected. I really thought: what is broken cannot be repaired. But apparently it is possible! (Resident)

> The pleasant atmosphere is back. We are greeting each other again. (Resident)

However, doubts were shared on the sustainability of the positive outcomes. According to the residents, the lack of an evaluation undermined sustainability. Both during the interviews and the group member check, the residents indicated that the cause of the conflict was still simmering beneath the surface. As no evaluation had been organised, it was not possible to share positive developments and to discuss risk factors in terms of relapse into 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 the risk of relapse and escalation. During the group member check, however, participants argued that there was a need for a follow-up, preferably chaired by the coordinator. Despite these critical remarks, we can conclude that the conference was successful as it yielded a plan that up to this day holds the line against disruptive behaviour and therefore prevents the situation from deteriorating. Another positive side effect is that there is no longer any involvement by professionals 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 I could have never achieved that if I would have 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)

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4.2 Case 2: increasing nuisance in a neighbourhood

The second case is similar to the first as it also focuses on escalating nuisance in a small town. Conflict was centred on a square where several residents live. The composition of the neighbourhood is diverse. Although people feel at ease living there, the mayor of the town also emphasises that

> there are several persons who can be identified as being difficult to correct. Some of them are addicted to alcohol, they have difficulties in controlling themselves as they are heavily addicted. Several people are also living there who are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. (Mayor)

Three years ago a family moved into the area. They brought with them a lot of disturbance, such as frequent gatherings of people who caused inconvenience to other residents. Two particular incidents are worthy of attention. The first was during the Football World Cup of 2010. A tent was set up on the square within which people watched the football games on television and consumed a great deal of alcohol. This went hand in hand with noise and disruptive behaviour. Residents became frustrated as they had not been informed in advance. The second incident happened during New Year's Eve of 2010/2011. The municipality had granted a licence for fireworks, but these had lasted longer than agreed upon. Moreover, there was also an incident involving a fire on the square caused by the family during the New Year's celebration, accompanied by excessive alcohol consumption and threats towards other residents. Eventually, residents no longer felt safe in their homes and on the streets. Following these incidents, the mayor of the town decided to apply for a conference. The main actor—a man in his forties who was known for his excessive drinking and who was believed to be the instigator of the disturbances—was reluctant to participate in the conference. However, his wife decided to participate.

Process

Respondents interviewed 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 was 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)

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

> 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 an end, there was a negative turn as the wife of the perpetrator shared the outcomes with her husband who consequently came to the meeting furiously uttering threats to the participants and the coordinator. The meeting ended abruptly so no plan was established and ultimately there was no change to the threatening situation:

> 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 the participants and threatened the coordinator that he would kill him. That was really threatening! A couple of residents did not dare to go home afterwards. Consequently we called the police. They were there really quickly 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 failed terribly. (Social worker)

A positive note 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 troublemaker with his family have been offered another house. So finally something is happening. (Resident)

Overall, the residents felt encouraged by the conference—it was clear to them that everyone was displeased about 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 have the feeling that they are taken seriously and something will be done. (Resident)

Consequently, the residents were able to act as one body in dealing with the perpetrator. The conference was considered the last opportunity to improve the living conditions in the neighbourhood. When even this last resort did not yield the desired outcome, residents stated that they were totally ‘done’ with the situation. Meanwhile,

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the perpetrator and his family were offered another house and have recently moved there. In other words, a plan never came into force but because of the conference the neighbourhood and professionals could act as one front. Eventually, this led to a limitation in the unacceptable behaviour and a new start for the troublemaker and his family elsewhere. The group member check revealed that an apparently unsuccessful conference was redefined as a conference with a different but valuable outcome: although the family who caused the trouble was evicted and offered another house, due to the conference the residents were able to intervene as one body and deal with the antisocial behaviour.

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4.3 Case 3: loitering in a residential area

The last case we describe took place in a residential area of a medium-sized town. Trouble arose around a football pitch with about fifty young people involved. The young people were using alcohol and drugs and residents were confronted with increasing disturbance. Windows of some houses were smeared and broken. Residents repeatedly complained to the municipality. Consequently, the municipality decided to remove the football pitch, resulting in the young people dispersing across the whole district, taking with them the antisocial behaviour. Subsequently, the nuisance behaviour was mainly centred on the square of a primary school. They gathered there with other young people so that the group grew in size and with it, the problems:

> The pitch was finally removed, in the sense of, 'If we remove the pitch 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 into a bigger group. That resulted in a lot of disturbance and garbage. Every morning the teachers first needed to clean the square before their pupils came to school. (Youth worker)

Frequent threats, vandalism, noise and garbage lying around were reported to the municipality and police. Police officers patrolled on a daily basis through the district. As time passed, social workers and addiction care professionals also got involved. To reduce the nuisance behaviour, the police intensified observations where the group was hanging around. They even imposed a ban on gatherings. Despite all these measures, the behaviour persisted. The situation was getting out of control and professionals could not agree on a difficult solution. Finally, a community conference was requested by the municipality—first of all because all other ideas for dealing with the situation were exhausted, but also because in this period the municipality had become strongly oriented towards the possibilities of restorative practices.

Process

Being a complex situation with many parties involved, two CC coordinators worked on the preparation and organisation of the conference. It was decided that all the young people and their parents should be invited, as well as all professionals involved (social and youth workers, an addiction care professional and a police officer) and an official from the municipality. However, none of the residents were invited:

> It was our idea to organise a meeting with the young people 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 had already got 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. The following aim for the conference was formulated: 'What is necessary to ensure the well-being of the young people in the neighbourhood, in order to reduce their anti-social behaviour?' After the conference it turned out that not everyone had agreed on this goal, feeling that the interests of the young people were being overemphasised, while little attention was being focussed on the problems that were being caused and their consequences for life in the residential area:

> The main issue of the conference was formulated as, 'What do the young people need so that disturbance will no longer occur?' We were really astonished, as I thought it was more important to formulate a plan on what the young people themselves would do to prevent nuisance and troubles. But it was already clear during the conference that this could not be changed … 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 quietly. Everyone was able to share his or her opinion. But as the conference went on, the young people 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 among some of the young people who eventually left the conference before its final stage. At this stage there were some agreements reached, but the conference lacked an overall concrete plan.

The impact of the conference differed for all parties. Although the municipality worker was not willing to agree to a youth centre as the young people and their parents wanted, 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)

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The budget for the furniture was provided by the municipality. However, the municipality did not fulfil any further commitments (such as opening a permanent hangout), causing frustration towards the municipality amongst the young people and their parents:

> 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, these 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 wanted to cooperate with the municipality. The temporary hangout space is hardly used nowadays, and the group is—as was the case prior to the conference—spending their free time hanging around in the area. All actors admit that the conference failed as the situation did not improve:

> The situation is still the same. It maybe even have gotten 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. Then do you think it is strange that there is disturbance? Last week they even broke a window of one of the residents! (Young person)

However, opinions on who should be held responsible differ. Some respondents indicate that municipality workers are to be blamed for the failure of the conference as it is said they did not fulfil their commitments (see one of the quotes above). Others point to the young persons, who behaved rebelliously during the conference and left before they had agreed 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 at 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 much more complex than first thought. Another benefit is that they now have a better idea of where the young persons are spending their time:

> 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 hangout space 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)

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The interviews and group member check brought to the surface how the conference had set off with a unilateral goal. Afterwards, both the group of young people as well as the professionals and municipality workers gathered again to establish new plans.

5. Reflections on findings

What does this study add to existing knowledge on community conferencing as a means to resolving conflicts within disadvantaged 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.

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

In each case analysed in this paper, 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 within the cases. In the first case, 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, in the second case, representatives from the housing association, municipality workers and professionals were more intensively involved in the situation prior to the conference as the inconvenience already lasted a longer time and several interventions were deployed 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 escalating as the key actor in the conflict entered the conference during its final stage and started threatening the participants and coordinator, meaning that the plan was thwarted.

In the last case study involving loitering, municipality workers and professionals decided to participate as interlocutors in the conference in order to influence the plan. It appears that prior to the conference the situation had already deteriorated to the point that two distinct camps had emerged: first, the group of young people causing inconvenience who were supported by their parents; second, municipality workers. The other professionals took a more neutral position. We wonder whether it was a wise decision to incorporate municipality workers and professionals in this case as interlocutors. Frieling et al. (2014) argue 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 policymakers involved, it can influence the

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course of the dialogue as voices of participants get co-opted by a more forceful discourse of agencies (Ney, Stoltz & Maloney, 2013). Care must be taken to ensure that the agenda of the conference is not predominantly determined by agencies (Morris, 2012). During the conference on loitering, an unconstructive discussion started between the young people and municipality workers. Consequently, several young people left the conference and no plan was established. The conference failed, insofar that the municipality relapsed into old reflexes, and coercive measures aimed at 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 the safety of the child is guaranteed by the plan and violence will no longer occur (see the recent impact studies by Pennell, Edwards & Burford, 2010; Wang et al., 2012; Weigensberg, Barth & Guo, 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 hand convinces the authorities, while on the other hand it is still the family themselves who are empowered to establish their own plan. Although not focused on one single family, this principle is likewise fundamental to CC as residents are also encouraged to settle conflict on their own before professionals intervene. One might wonder whether or not the conference in the third case would have succeeded if the municipality was not included as a discussion partner but just provided clear frameworks and limits for a constructive plan. In such a scenario, the young people 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 liveability in the residential area would be restored. Remarkably, no forms of symbolic reparations (see Stubbs, 2007; Van Wormer, 2009)—such as offering an apology and restoring broken relationships between the young people, local residents, housing association officials and municipality workers—were observed in cases two and three, even though there was reason to. If clear frameworks and limits towards the outcomes of the conference had been set, coercive measures could have been prevented. The young persons would have had a last chance to find a solution on their own with the support of 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 in our research, representatives of the Dutch FGC organisation we interviewed experienced difficulties in acting in complicated conferences such as in the loitering case. One can question if a fellow citizen is capable of helping establish a plan around a social problem of such magnitude as in the loitering case. Should coordinators have complementary skills—such as mediation techniques—to prevent conflict from escalating during conferences? Abramson and Moore (2001: 324) view mediation as a technique to minimise conflict that comes to the surface during a conference. CC aims to transform conflict in cooperation, therefore mediation can be useful. In the United States, several scholars argue that CC may be

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chaired by local police officers who are trained in mediation (see Calhoun & Borch, 2002; Hines & Bazemore, 2003; Hipple & McGarrell, 2008; Matsinhe, 2008). Precisely the strength of the Dutch model however is the independence of the coordinator—a citizen who is equal to those participating in the conference (see Van Beek & Muntendam, 2011). As many residents in disadvantaged areas have negative experiences with regular services, they could be suspicious towards a coordinator who has a background as a professional (Schout, De Jong & Van Laere, 2015). We assume that residents show more confidence in independent coordinators who treat them as fellow citizens. 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 CC organised within complex—and sometimes threatening—situations can produce the progress that is required. Was it not advisable that prior to the conference individual family group conferences were organised for those young people committing the most trouble? This, in addition to the conference preparation stage, could have yielded an opportunity for the young people 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' (Schout et al., 2015). On the one hand, measures create conditions so that every stakeholder can be present during the community conference, while on the other hand the young people 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. Would an individual conference for the troublemaker with his family have provided a plan that guaranteed that the nuisance would be stopped? In such a trajectory, the man who was deliberately not present at the conference could perhaps have been willing to participate so that increased attention would have been given to restoring relationships between residents prior to the development of a plan.

Moreover, an imposed conference for families can hinder the voluntary participation in a 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 the loitering and the neighbourhood nuisance cases, the conferences acted as a last resort—all other options were exhausted. Would both conferences have avoided an escalation of tensions if at an earlier stage clear limits were set for unacceptable behaviour, optionally backed-up by individual family group conferences?

5.2 Communication in the conference

Constructive communication in conferences is a challenge, especially when the group is large. To ensure that everyone has a say and to prevent participants speaking before their

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turn, a so-called talking stick could be used. A talking stick encourages participants to concentrate on listening, not on interrupting (Van Wormer, 2009). In addition, each participant has the opportunity to tell his or her view 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 their place in the outer circle. Children of the residents were given the opportunity to participate in either the inner circle (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.

The loitering case was characterised by many parties all with their own interests. In the initial stage, a conflict between the young people and municipality workers arose. The parents who were present supported their children. Professionals, such as social workers and case managers, kept themselves out of the conflict. Nobody intervened which meant that the atmosphere became tense, even threatening. Municipality workers could not make promises, consequently giving rise to frustration among the young people who left the conference before agreeing on a plan. The moment defined by Abramson and Moore (2001: 327) of 'collective vulnerability' was therefore never reached—a crucial breakpoint where emotions are deepened resulting in a collective catharsis where a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the community develops in each actor. Ultimately no plan was established. We wonder whether the decision to work towards a plan was not made too quickly. It would probably had 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 restoring damaged relationships (Braithwaite, 1989; Harris, 2006; Strang & Braithwaite, 2001; Stubbs, 2007; Van Wormer, 2009), while at the same time preventing perpetrators feeling as if they were on trial and consequently stigmatised (e.g. Prichard, 2002). In the preparation and process of the conference in this case it would have been helpful to follow these principles in the structure of the conference itself: beginning with a description of the loitering and the harm it caused, then making apologies and taking responsibility for the damage caused. The essence of this case is, however, that the preparation of this conference did not lead to a shared definition of the problem, a shared goal (how can we live together?). An unbalanced representation (residents were not present) completed this failure. Without these elements, the restoration of relationships is not attainable.

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

In cases two and three, several key actors did not participate in the conference. In case two this was the man the residents designated as the 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 young people and the municipality. Following Calhoun and Borch (2002), Dzur and Olson (2004) and Hines and Bazemore (2003), we also argue that it is necessary to include members from the community who are not directly involved in the conflict. Those members could offer creative solutions for the problems and could help ensuring social control and provide support after the conference.

The question in cases 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 prevented from recognising the damage they have done to others. They do not have the chance to learn from it (Schout et al., 2015). The concept of 'blaming and shaming' (see Braithwaite, 1989; Harris, 2006) could have played a crucial role in both cases. If other residents would have shared the impact of the problems caused by the troublemaker, he could have offered an apology, and relations could have been restored. If community members had been invited in the case on loitering, the young people may have faced the consequences of their behaviour and consequently realised its impact on life 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, Bazemore & Brown, 2011). Or as Matsinhe (2008: 13) argues: '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.'

6. Study limitations

We have analysed only eleven community conferences, some modesty in making far-reaching conclusions is thus required. We have highlighted three CC cases that are illustrative of the other eight conferences. Our aim was to understand how CC in social housing practices proceeds and what the underlying factors are that help determine the perceived success or failure of these conferences by participants. We do not claim universal knowledge. However, our study reveals the positive impact CC can have in disadvantaged neighbourhoods that are characterised by nuisance and conflict. It therefore has implications for social housing associations, municipalities and PMHC practices in which CC can offer solutions for conflict and nuisance behaviour within

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neighbourhoods, and how they could encourage civic engagement, not only among professionals but also among residents.

The 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 and officials from housing associations) bystanders (local residents who were 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 emerged (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Small, 2009'). In this we partly succeeded. Should we carry out new case studies, we will probably find other patterns, but some of the patterns described in this paper would most probably emerge again.

7. Conclusion

Our study delineates that CC holds potential for solving problems in social housing practices in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and residential areas characterised by conflics and nuisance behaviour. The first case described yielded a positive outcome: one and a half years after the conference, the situation in the neighbourhood is still liveable for residents—who prior to the conference were bullying each other. Although the eviction of the family and the unsolved loitering problem as described in cases two and three suggest otherwise, the two group 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 act together 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, can because of the conference intervene as one group and therefore take a clearer position towards the actors causing the problems. Besides, as one unit they can have a stronger influence on housing associations and municipalities in order to solve conflicts and improve their neighbourhood. In other words, CC ensures that actors hold each other accountable for the quality of living conditions in residential areas and provides a safe ground where everyone feels at ease in sharing his or her opinion. The conference as described in case three made municipality workers and professionals realise that the loitering problem was much more complex than first thought. Although the conference did not yield a clear plan, they were convinced that something

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needed to be done to solve the problem. What we can learn from this case is that prior to a conference professionals should reflect on whether a 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 behaviour in social housing practices characterised by a culmination of psychosocial problems. 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 the escalation of conflict; (3) using so-called dialogue circles to ensure that every actor of the conference is empowered to participate; and (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 other citizens 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 the escalation of conflict. On the other hand, the fact that it is an independent citizen who helps fellow citizens establishing their plan is of significant importance in disadvantaged neighbourhoods where residents frequently have mistrust in institutions and its representatives.

Can civic engagement stop conflict in social housing practices? CC seems a promising strategy for taking ownership and realising resident participation.

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