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Fostering supportive structures for families in the neighbourhood

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Introduction



INTRODUCTION

Social support and social ties in the local community are widely recognised as important to the well-being of children and their families (Fukuyama, 1995; Horan & Widom, 2015; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000; Taylor et al., 2015). Social support bolsters parenting skills (Caughy et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015) and this is associated with positive outcomes, such as increased social competences, for children (Taylor et al., 2015). Social support refers to the reciprocal interactions among families and other community members (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). These community interactions also involve civil society – the realm between state and market (Muukkonen, 2009). However, in societies where civil society is impoverished, community members cannot develop these supportive structures (Fukuyama, 1995; Kana'iaupuni et al., 2005; Nevard et al., 2020; Putnam, 2000; Teunissen et al., 2016). Therefore, the importance of promoting the supporting role of communities for families in the upbringing of children has received increased attention in policy and research in western welfare states since the 90s (Barrera, 2000; Korbin & Coulton, 1996; Putnam, 2000; RMO/RVZ, 2009; Tomison & Wise, 1999), the aim being to improve positive outcomes for parents and children. This supporting role varies from peer-to-peer support between parents to supportive responses from community members in the upbringing of children in the neighbourhood (see e.g. Kesselring et al., 2015; 2016). Here community members means people who are not primarily the caregiver, such as other parents, volunteers, neighbours and grandparents. Social work (SW) professionals may also have an important role in supporting communities (e.g. Kesselring et al., 2016; Kimbrough-Melton & Melton, 2015). These two groups can also be designated nonparental adults (see Chapter 3 and 4).

In the Netherlands, policy focus on the importance of communities has also grown over the last decades (RMO, 2008; RMO/RVZ, 2009; Rijksoverheid, 2013). Given the enormous increase in the use of youth care and the associated costs, the supportive role of the community became an important preventive instrument. In 2008, the Council for Social Development (RMO) published the advisory report 'Strengthening the village: pre-advice on families and their social environment'. Over time, the networks that families rely on had shrunk and they increasingly needed support from professional organisations (RMO, 2008; RMO/RVZ, 2009). In its advisory, the RMO referred to the proverbial 'village' that is needed to raise a child (see Clinton, 1996) and recommended strengthening the ties families have within their social environment. The RMO elaborated this in the report 'Investing around families' (RMO/RVZ, 2009), and stated that more attention should be paid to the social environment and its influence on children and their parents. This is what is referred to as 'educative civil society' (in Dutch: *pedagogische civil society*; RMO/RVZ, 2009; RMO, 2011; de Winter, 2008; 2011).

These developments were at the root of the Child and Youth Act (CYA) from 2015 that aimed to lend more focus to a strength-based approach, prevention, and the importance of the social environment. The objective of the act is for all youth to grow up healthy and safe, and to develop themselves optimally (Rijksoverheid, 2013). This Dutch trend was in line with similar policy changes in the European Union and other western countries such as Norway (Balazard et al., 2017; Brandsen et al., 2014; 2017; Jessen, 2019; Loga, 2018) that aim to engage communities and stress the importance of community social work¹ (Balazard et al., 2017; Loga, 2018; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013).

In parallel with the policy developments, the RMO started an extensive program 'Voluntary efforts for and by youth and family' (in Dutch: *Vrijwillige inzet voor en door jeugd en gezin*), including the project *Allemaal Opvoeders (AIOp – Partners in Parenting)*, with the aim of fostering social networks and supportive structures for children and families (i.e. educative civil society, NJi, 2010). Research within this program was, among others, focused on parents' attitudes towards sharing parenting responsibility (Kesselring et al., 2012; 2016), and its influence in private or public settings (Kesselring et al., 2016). The research found that adults' parenting involvement in communities is complicated, as was the development of an effective approach to supporting families (Kesselring et al., 2016; Scales et al., 2004). A better understanding of projects like AIOp would contribute to the development of effective interventions that meet the needs of parents and professionals. Furthermore, our own exploratory interviews (Rumping et al., 2018) on the subject showed that the definition of *educative civil society*, and its implications for social work practice and research, are insufficiently clear to allow the formulation of local policies to support communities for families.

The role and responsibilities of community members and social work professionals in the development of supportive structures (i.e. social support, social networks) for families, is not well elaborated in the empirical literature (Clark et al., 2020; Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2018; Rumping et al., 2018). Especially in informal urban settings like the neighbourhood, where social work professionals work at playgrounds, in community centres, and at schools, for example (i.e. the so-called third living environment, El Hadioui, 2011), this role is a challenging one (Clark et al., 2020). For instance, in urban areas we see highly diverse groups of community members (see CBS, 2015; Geldof, 2017), which means that diversity-sensitive social work professionals are required (Ambrosini, 2017; Clark et al., 2020; Crul et al., 2019; Geldof, 2017). Understanding the role of community members and social work professionals in developing these supportive structures would help foster these structures for families in neighbourhoods, and help

¹ Further details about international developments regarding the CS are described in Chapter 2.

develop neighbourhood interventions that are suitable for informal urban contexts. Although there is growing interest in this field from social science, including social work (Dunne et al., 2014; Loef, 2021; Sonneveld et al., 2022), research into this role and into fostering these supportive neighbourhood structures for families is lacking (Clark et al., 2020; Loef, 2021). In this dissertation, the following general research question regarding the development of supportive structures for families in the neighbourhood is the central focus: How can we foster supportive structures for families in urban neighbourhoods? The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the knowledge base on fostering supportive neighbourhood structures for families in order to improve the outcomes for children and their family.

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES FOR FAMILIES

Implementation of new child and family policies, such as the CYA, and the development and promotion of innovations in practice requires a clear operationalisation and theoretical substantiation (Bartholomew et al., 2016; Veerman & van Yperen, 2008). The evaluation of the CYA (Friele et al., 2018) showed that the operationalisation of the CYA goals was not clear. Moreover, the way policy is represented influences how the shape policy 'problems' and policy 'solutions' take at local level and in social work practices (Bacchi, 2009; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). Little is known, however, about how the CYA is elaborated at the local level. Insight into underlying policy mechanisms and into what is lacking (Bacchi, 2009), may help us understand how policy influences families and social work (Bacchi, 2009; Jansen et al., 2021), including the development of supportive structures for families.

Empirical knowledge on important contextual factors may help to operationalise complex policies, such as the CYA, into concrete program strategies (Jagosh, 2019; Pawson et al., 2005). This knowledge can also help to inform policymakers about what works in neighbourhood interventions (Lerner et al., 2000; Pawson, 2006) and to develop interventions that positively influence and support families. Community interventions refer to activities and interactions between various community members in complex systems (Hawe et al., 2009), and are often implemented in neighbourhoods (McLeroy et al., 2003). Community interventions can vary from social work professionals supporting peer-to-peer parent groups to programs with outreach workers supporting individual community members. However, previous studies of community interventions (e.g. Van Dijken et al., 2016) focused mainly on outcomes (e.g. child safety) and not on the important underlying mechanisms (e.g. skills of professionals) and contextual factors (e.g. type of community intervention) (Bach-Mortensen et al., 2018; Fazzi, 2019).

Additionally, interventions in superdiverse urban neighbourhood contexts do not automatically lead to social support between community members (De Winter et al., 2017). Interaction between community members is not self-evident, especially in superdiverse urban neighbourhoods (Crul et al., 2019; Geens et al., 2019). Insight into the attitudes and interactions of community members and professionals would help us understand the development of social support, networks and social norms in which children in neighbourhoods grow up (Minh et al., 2017; Sampson et al., 1999). However, little attention is being paid to the concrete attitudes and supportive relations (e.g. parenting interactions) of community members and professionals in the neighbourhood (Geens et al., 2019; Negash & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Turner & Brown, 2010). Therefore it is important to gain insight into the attitude and intentions of community members and professionals regarding the upbringing of children in urban neighbourhoods.

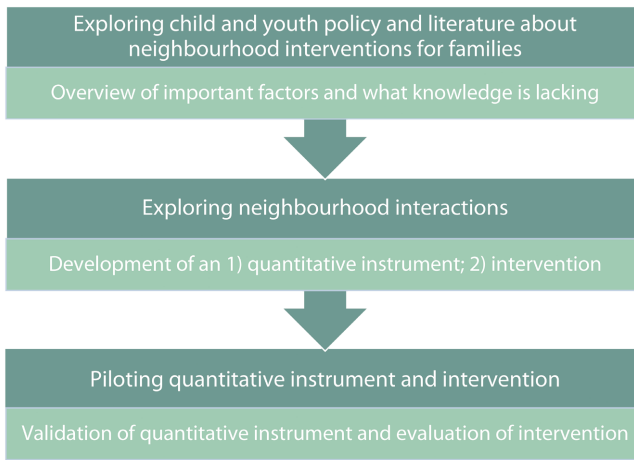
Examining specific neighbourhood interactions is, however, complex, due to the multiple types of interactions, places and types of community members. Most instruments devote attention to general attitudes regarding, for example, social networks (see e.g. Mishra, 2020), without focusing specifically on families and underlying mechanisms. Research into the role and attitude of multiple types of community members and important elements in neighbourhoods requires innovative and validated methods to explore and question community members and social workers about their attitude and role (e.g. Ganzevles et al., 2020). These innovative methods may contribute to measuring supportive structures for families and to better understanding where support is needed.

New insights into community interactions also provide input for the development of interventions that aim to foster neighbourhood structures for families (Pastor Seller, 2015). Social work professionals have an important role in implementing community interventions and strengthening these structures (De Corte & Roose, 2021; Kesselring, 2016; Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2018). For example, in the connection with the community. Nevertheless, the role of social work professionals is complex due to the sensitivity of differing social norms, feelings, or perceived responsibilities of community members in superdiverse urban neighbourhoods (Clark et al., 2020; Ponzoni & Kaulingsfrenks, 2021).

To venture into the complicated field of supportive structures for families in the neighbourhood, the following steps have been taken in this dissertation (see also Figure 1.1). First, we explored underlying mechanisms in local child and youth policies. Second, we examined literature about neighbourhood interventions for families to understand what knowledge on working elements is known and what knowledge

is lacking. Then we further explored neighbourhood parenting interactions in social work practice. Based on these results, we developed two types of instrument: one for examining neighbourhood interactions (a quantitative instrument) and one for fostering supportive neighbourhood structures (an intervention). We piloted the quantitative instrument and the intervention to verify the use of these tools. Finally, we validated the quantitative instrument and evaluated the intervention to better understand important elements of their application in social work practice (Damschroder et al., 2009; Omlo et al., 2013).

■ **Figure 1.1** *Steps taken in this dissertation on supportive neighbourhood structures for families*



GOALS AND OUTLINE OF THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation comprises five studies that aim to contribute to the current knowledge about how to foster supportive structures in the neighbourhood for families. A sequential design (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2007) was applied, where different types of questions and data from this thesis (see Table 1.1) build on each other in complementary fashion.

Chapter 2 gives a policy analysis of how the Dutch youth and family policies of four superdiverse cities are operationalised into social work practice, what the underlying mechanisms are, and what is lacking in current policy. We applied the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ methodology (Bacchi, 2007) in an analysis of urban local policy documents.

Chapter 3 reports a realist synthesis of neighbourhood interventions for families in the community. The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of what the facilitators and barriers in community interventions are, for whom these interventions work, and what further knowledge is needed to develop neighbourhood interventions.

Chapter 4 is an empirical study focusing on how three type of factors (i.e. parenting styles, types of child behaviour, and location in the neighbourhood) influence the attitudes of parents, volunteers and SW professionals regarding supportive interactions in neighbourhoods. The aim was to better understand how this may influence social support in the neighbourhood. This was examined with an empirical mixed-method vignette study about how community members and professionals would respond to neighbourhood interactions with other adults and children.

In Chapters 5 and 6, we use the vignettes and qualitative findings from the study reported in Chapter 3 and 4 to develop two instruments that aim to contribute to new insights into fostering neighbourhood structures for families. For the study reported in Chapter 5, we developed a new quantitative instrument, named the Vignettes Parenting Interactions Neighbourhood (V-PIN). The aim was to validate this instrument, because in social research little attention is currently paid to the psychometric qualities of vignettes (Kandemir & Budd, 2018). We validated the instrument with a quantitative survey among parents, and supplemented the instrument with visualisations (i.e. visualised narratives). For the study reported in Chapter 6, we developed an intervention to foster supportive interactions in social work practice, named the Visualised Narratives Parenting Interactions Neighbourhood (VN-PIN). The prototype of the VN-PIN was piloted, refined, and the new version of the VN-PIN was tested among a heterogeneous sample of families and professionals. The application of the intervention in social work practice and experiences of community members and social work professionals was evaluated through interviews – with groups and individuals – and observations.

In the final section, Chapter 7, we present the main findings and conclusions of this dissertation, including a reflection on the findings, implications for social work practice and recommendations for future research.

■ **Table 1.1** Overview of the chapters in this dissertation

Chapter	Aim	Method	Type of data/participant	Level	Funding
1	General introduction	-	-	-	-
2	Theoretical exploration of policy implementation	'What's the problem represented to be' Policy Analysis -Theoretical	Policy papers	G4 cities, including Amsterdam	Dutch Research Council (NWO)/Dutch Research Agenda (NWA)
3	Theoretical study of what works for whom in community interventions to foster neighbourhood interactions	Realist Synthesis -Theoretical	Primary studies with children, parents, community members, volunteers, and SW professionals	Western countries	Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (AUAS), Centre of Expertise (previously; priority area) Urban Education (UE) 2020
4	Empirical study of neighbourhood interactions	Mixed-method - Vignette study	Parents, volunteers, SW professionals	Metropole Region Amsterdam	NWO/NWA and Priority area UE 2019
5	Validation of vignettes measure to examine neighbourhood interactions	Validation study - Quantitative	Parents	The Urban Agglomeration Netherlands	NWO/ NWA
6	Empirical field study of the use of visualised narratives as intervention to foster neighbourhood interactions	Process evaluation - Qualitative	Parents, grandparents, volunteers, SW professionals	Metropolitan Region Amsterdam	Centre of Expertise UE 2020
7	General discussion: overview main findings, strengths, limitations and recommendations	-	-	-	-