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Fostering supportive structures for families in the neighbourhood

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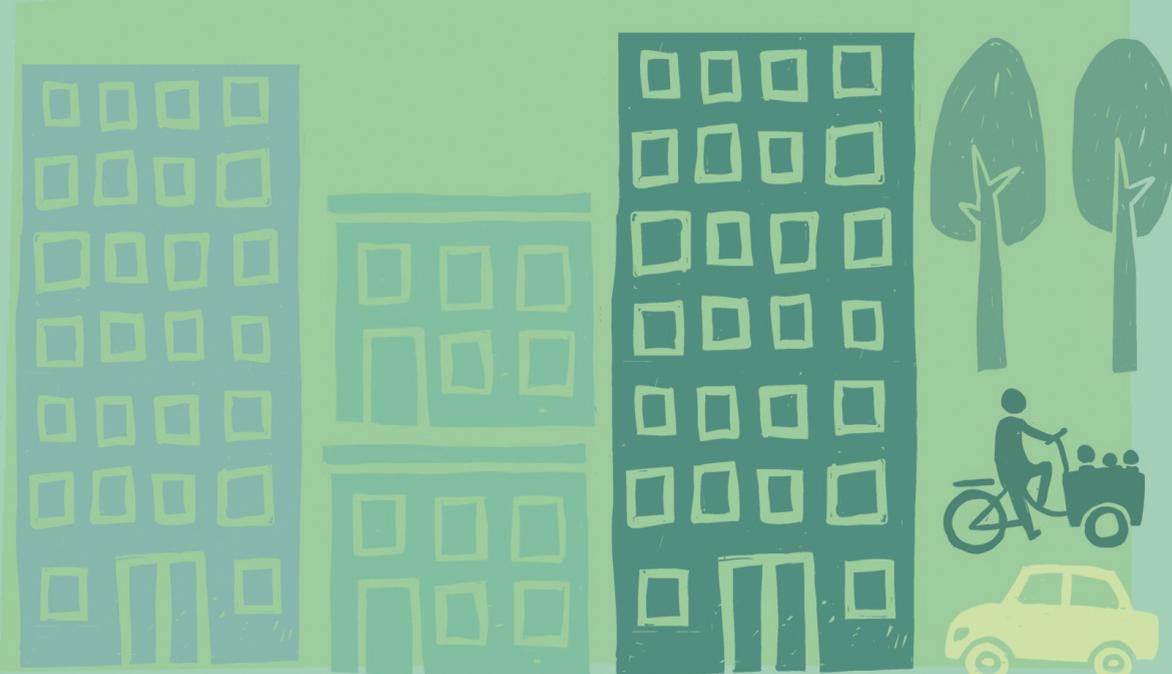
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General Discussion



This dissertation focused on the question of how to foster supportive structures for families in urban neighbourhoods. This final chapter gives a summary of the main findings, strengths and limitations, followed by a reflection on these main findings and implications for practice and research.

MAIN FINDINGS

Our analysis of Dutch urban (G4) youth and family policy documents (Chapter 2) underlines the importance of civil society (CS), with increasing focus on fostering strengths of families, supportive community structures and a preventive approach towards families from social work professionals at the local level within municipalities. An important finding was the poor operationalisation of key concepts like social networks, a strength-based approach, and responsibility of community members, whilst this operationalisation is important for fostering concrete social innovation. Another important finding was that the concept of CS is too diffuse and requires elaboration and guidelines for implementation in cities, with specific attention to superdiversity and varying levels of supportive networks (see also Biekart, 2008; Oosterlynck et al., 2018). Empirical knowledge and input from social work may help to bridge the gap between policy and practice, to develop and examine strategies to explore and foster the potential of civil society for urban families (De Vries & Wolbrink, 2018; Khan & Khandaker, 2016; Loga, 2018; Ponzoni et al., 2021).

Chapter 3 reported a realist synthesis to examine community interventions that aimed to strengthen neighbourhood structures for families. The findings from the study identified 10 context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations, which resulted in a better understanding of what the facilitators and barriers in community interventions are, and for whom (e.g. parents, professionals) these interventions work (Pawson, 2006; Jagosh, 2019). Mechanisms for positive outcomes for participants range from co-productivity and frequent meetings in which parents learn from exchanging experiences to skilled professionals (e.g. flexibility and proximity to parents) and proactive and flexible organisations. Mechanisms for negative outcomes are related to professionals' skills (e.g. lack of flexibility or no proximity to parents) and community members' skills (e.g. no normalisation of actions and a lack of the confidence in their skills for achieving the desired behaviour). The findings also show some important contextual factors related to the identified mechanisms from community interventions: the use of peer-to-peer groups, training of community members, supportive organisations, and a top-down and bottom-up strategy for implementing the community intervention.

The study in Chapter 4 showed when and how community members and professionals would respond in parenting interactions with other adults and children in the neighbourhood. In a mixed-method vignette study, we examined what factors (i.e. parenting style, type of child behaviour, and location in the neighbourhood) in the vignettes (i.e. hypothesised parenting situations in the neighbourhood) influence these interactions. The findings show that all three factors influence whether and how participants (i.e. community members and professionals) are willing to respond and may influence the level of social support in the neighbourhood. Another important finding is that when interactions took place around school, professionals felt more responsibility for the parenting situation as described in the vignette than parents and volunteers did. The study underlines the need for discussion about the role and responsibility of community members and professionals (Kesselring et al., 2016; Scales et al., 2001), including barriers to intervention, to be able to strengthen social supportive structures for families in the neighbourhood. The study shows that community members and professionals do not always know how to address the (negative) behaviour of a parent and/or a child in neighbourhoods, but see it as important to do so. The vignettes we developed could be used to examine, reflect on, and discuss (Bernabeo et al., 2013) the connections and differences between the perceptions and responses of professionals and community members. We used the vignettes and qualitative findings from this study to develop two instruments (see Chapters 5 and 6) that aim to contribute to new insights in fostering neighbourhood structures for families.

Chapter 5 described a validation study of the above-mentioned vignettes about parenting interactions in the neighbourhood. In order to gain structurally validated in-depth data from a community perspective and to measure neighbourhood interactions, which underlines the importance of social contexts for parenting, the Vignettes Parenting Interactions in the Neighbourhood (V-PIN) was developed. This captures the in-depth perspective of individual community members in the neighbourhood (e.g. under which circumstances would they respond and which not, and why/how would they respond?). The corresponding scales of the vignette questions were based on the findings of Chapter 4 to match the real-life experiences of community members. The vignettes were validated in a quantitative survey of 134 parents. The findings show that the reliability and validity of the V-PIN proved to be good in respect of the first results, and the V-PIN seemed to be a useful instrument for exploring the perspective and dynamics of community members in parent-child interactions in the neighbourhood, which is needed to measure social supportive interactions in the community. Additionally, 12 visualisations were developed and primarily based on the vignettes, containing three corresponding pictures about

a parenting situation in the neighbourhood. The V-PIN, supplemented by the visualisations, can be used by social work professionals to examine social supportive interactions for families in the neighbourhood and stimulate discussions and dialogues between community members, and is also the basis for the development of a community intervention (Pastor Seller, 2015) named the Visualised Narratives Parenting Interactions in the Neighbourhood (VN-PIN).

Chapter 6 presented an evaluation study of the application of the VN-PIN (with 24 visualisations) in social work practice. The VN-PIN is a further development of the above-mentioned 12 visualisations and is based, among others, on the important mechanism of co-production (see Chapter 3). The visualisations were used as an intervention to foster parenting dialogues between community members in social work practice, with the aim of fostering supportive neighbourhood structures for families. The application of the VN-PIN was evaluated, with observations in 14 meetings, with individual interviews and focus groups. In total, 83 participants were involved in the study. The evaluation gave a better understanding of the process, including organisational and professional tasks, and goals. This need is in line with the findings of Chapter 3 about the need for a better understanding of underlying mechanisms in order to develop supportive neighbourhood structures. The findings show that during the VN-PIN sessions valuable dialogues about parenting in superdiverse neighbourhoods emerged. Parents recognised the themes from the VN-PIN, reflected on parenting behaviour in the neighbourhood, including reflection on their own behaviour, which gives them a voice in building supportive community structures. The findings underline the fact that the visualisations helped all types of participants to express their feelings and deepen dialogues regarding parenting in the neighbourhood in diverse groups. Another important finding was that the intervention contributed to the inclusion of participants with various cultural and linguistic backgrounds in group meetings. The use and recognition of pre-defined visualised narratives developed in co-production helped to address sensitive topics (e.g. conflicts) and positive topics that occur in the neighbourhood, and to foster supportive neighbourhood structures for families.

In summary, in this dissertation new mechanisms in community interventions were exposed and important insights in community members and professionals' attitude regarding supportive neighbourhood interactions were found. Both insights were needed to develop instruments (i.e. V-PIN and VN-PIN) that contribute to new insights in fostering supportive neighbourhood structures for families. The V-PIN proved to be a valid tool for examining interactions. The VN-PIN proved a promising intervention that generally meets the needs of parents and can be used as a strategy by social work

professionals to support community dialogues and foster supportive structures for families in neighbourhoods.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation has strengths as well as limitations. First, one of the main strengths is that the research topic of this dissertation is an underexplored area in research. Therefore, a variety of participants and contexts in the Metropolitan Region Amsterdam (MRA) were explored. This ensured a group of participants that is ethnically and culturally diverse and also diverse in terms of literacy level, which contributes to the credibility of the results. This is often lacking in social research (Williamson et al. 2022). Additionally, the topic was explored with multiple research designs: theoretical, and qualitative as well as quantitative designs. The use of multiple designs enabled us to provide depth and strengthen the research findings (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

A third strength is that the research was developed in close collaboration with social work organisations and a voluntary organisation from the MRA. The ongoing working group (see Chapters 3, 5, 6) involving SW professionals, and their close contacts with parents, enabled the researchers to develop these relationships, validate the results, and apply the results to improve social work practice. This 'co-production of knowledge' (see Ostrom, 2009), also referred to as co-creation (Van de Mheen, 2019), requires long-term personal collaborations, exchange, equality and reciprocity between researchers, professionals and target group (Van de Mheen, 2019).

This dissertation has five overarching limitations. First, although the developed and validated vignettes were based on empirical data and theory, which are both important for bridging the differences between science and practice, the vignettes provide only limited information. For example, personal characteristics of the main characters (e.g. parent, child) were only briefly described (Chapter 3-4), whereas in practice, neighbourhood situations are more complex.

Another important limitation is that participants may have responded differently to vignettes or visualisations than they would do to situations in reality. However, it is worth noting that participants did not give uniform answers in the interviews and questionnaire (Chapter 3-4), and that participants gave various types of answers in the dialogues (Chapter 6), which suggests that participants did not only give what they perceived to be socially acceptable answers.

Third, the majority of the participants (Chapter 4-6) were female and from urban areas. It remains unclear how gender might have influenced (the exchange of) experiences,

discussions among different types of participants, and thus the outcomes of the use of the intervention.

Additionally, the quantitative studies (Chapter 4-5) have a relatively small sample and their statistical power is therefore low.

Finally, the steps taken in this dissertation can be seen as an example of intervention development, which fits in with intervention development frameworks such as intervention mapping (Bartholomew et al., 2016). We showed that various complex steps about the 'what, why and how' in intervention development are important for developing (Chapter 2-5) and evaluating (Chapter 6) interventions. Although several steps were taken, the empirical data to substantiate the content of the intervention was mainly based on data from the MRA. A more extensive needs assessment and a program design with a wider scope would have strengthened the substantiation of the intervention.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

This dissertation showed that implementation of the Civil Society (CS) concept in urban areas is complex. For social work professionals and community members in urban areas it is therefore important to develop strategies on how to implement this concept and the underlying ideas, in order to develop supportive structures for families (see Chapter 2). The studies (Chapter 3-4) showed that more attention and discussion about supportive structures in SW organisations is needed, specifically about the role professionals play.

With the use of the VN-PIN, social work professionals can motivate community members to have dialogues about neighbourhood interactions and foster supportive structures (see Chapter 6). Especially in an increasingly individualised society and in urban contexts with community members from superdiverse backgrounds, it may be important to work with the pre-defined narratives of the VN-PIN, as norms and values may differ (see Chapter 6). The application of the VN-PIN can be used as a strategy to promote the dialogue on these norms and values and can be an important step in working on the ideal image of CS.

Implementing intervention activities in the neighbourhood does not automatically have an effect in the long term. Fostering supportive neighbourhood structures takes time (see Chapter 2-3-6). This fact emphasises the importance of implementation and application at the local level, where governance and social work professionals with knowledge of the local population and contextual factors have an important

role (see also Chapter 2). In order to apply the VN-PIN in a structured and sustainable manner, and to bridge the differences between the CS concept, policy and social work practice, SW organisations might develop learning networks (see Sloep et al., 2011) as an implementation strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The vignettes and visualisations appeared to be a valuable approach for fostering community dialogues about parenting in the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, further development is needed. Since this study showed that contexts can be extremely diverse, the recommendation is to further apply and study the use of the V-PIN (Chapter 5) and VN-PIN (Chapter 6) in diverse urban contexts, including in low-literacy groups. Quantitative research with pre- and posttests would contribute to the substantiation of the intervention and to its effectiveness.

For community members and professionals, children in neighbourhoods are an important partner in developing supportive neighbourhood structures, but they are underexposed in this dissertation. Including children's perception in the further development of the VN-PIN would help their needs regarding parenting interactions in the neighbourhood to be met. Furthermore, qualitative research into how parents and professionals in social work and education would apply the VN-PIN to communicate with children at primary school, which would include children's perception of this application, would contribute to a better understanding of parent-child relationships, and the child's perspective on neighbourhood interactions and structures.

In order to develop supportive structures in the long term, the recommendation is to foster VN-PIN learning networks for SW professionals and to examine how these networks can be used as an implementation tool. It is important to keep track of the extent to which professionals and community members can identify with the visualisations, and to evaluate the application and implementation process of the VN-PIN (Damschroder et al., 2009; 2015). Qualitative and quantitative research into these learning networks, including formative and summative research evaluations, is important to understand whether learning networks are an effective method for implementation.