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Annica Brummel, senior researcher at HAN University of Applied sciences & Pluryn

The grass is always greener in the other neighborhood: does public image hamper of neighborhoods social inclusion?

Introduction

Social inclusion and community dwelling is an important goal in the UN convention for people with a disability. This convention was only recently ratified in the Netherlands (2016), despite processes of decentralization of social policies, which had been introduced already in 2007 (e.g. the Social Support Act). The Social Support Act is a person-centered policy idea, and emphasizes the balance between informal and formal support thereby stimulating community care and community development. As a result interest in social networks and community-based small groups of policymakers and social professionals has increased.

Although community-based small groups could provide good opportunities for people with a disability to participate in daily life, these neighborhood social networks are not inclusive per se (Brummel, 2017). In this presentation we focus on an indirectly limiting aspect of neighborhoods: the public image of neighborhoods and the mechanisms by which this creates or hampers opportunities for dwellers' capabilities and aspirations. Therefore our research question is formulated as follows: *How do public images of neighborhoods influence the opportunities for social inclusion of people with a disability in local communities?*

Methods

Data were gathered for a larger qualitative case study in three different neighborhoods in the mid-sized urban town of Nijmegen (<200.000 inhabitants). In total 34 individual in-depth interviews were conducted with dwellers with mental health problems and intellectual and developmental disabilities and their ego-networks were mapped. Further, 27 volunteers, active in 15 community-based small groups in the neighborhoods were interviewed. Finally, we organized 4 focus groups, in which 17 respondents participated. During the focus groups we used the methods of q-sort and vignettes, focusing on public image of the neighborhoods and preconceptions towards people with disabilities. We analyzed these data using a conceptual framework from Robeyns (2005), adding the concept of adaptive preferences (Terlazzo, 2015).

Results and conclusion

We found that the neighborhood inhibited the conversion of various capabilities only in a few cases, but this was not confined to a particular neighborhood irrespective of public image being positive or negative. Some respondents with a disability did have concrete negative experiences, such as other dwellers uttering personal threats towards them. Other respondents experienced more passive negativity, such as being ignored. These negative experiences primarily hindered neighbor contacts and community participation.

For respondents who had no regular daily routines, jobs or daycare activities, the neighborhood was the last resort to form social networks. Particularly, for these respondents, the inhibiting effects in each neighborhood had a large impact. Moving to another neighborhood seemed a reasonable option, but

current housing policies yield long waiting lists. Housing policies can be considered to function as structural constraints on their capability expansion.

Whereas direct influences across neighborhoods could not be established, public image of neighborhoods did seem to activate limiting mechanisms. Public neighborhood image did not always match with real-life experiences. For instance, respondents could report a very positive neighborhood image, whereas their real-life experience showed a large number of incidents of social intolerance. This public image seemed primarily a social construction for outsiders, like residents of other neighborhoods or social workers. Thus, public neighborhood image not only appeared to inform individual choices of dwellers with a disability but also influenced professional decisions.

In this presentation we want to contribute to social work practices by exploring the meaning of working *within* the physical and social community in order for people with a disability being able to connect and belong in the neighborhood.