



The potential of Family Group Conferencing for the resilience and relational autonomy of older adults

Rosalie N. Metze^{a,*}, Rick H. Kwekkeboom^a, Tineke A. Abma^b

^a Amsterdam University of Applied Social Sciences, Amsterdam Research Center for Societal Innovation, Wibautstraat 5a, 1091 GH Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b Dept. of Medical Humanities, VU University Medical Centre and EMGO+ Research Institute, De Boelelaan 1117, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 October 2014

Received in revised form 20 April 2015

Accepted 20 April 2015

Available online 15 May 2015

Keywords:

Family Group Conferencing

Older adults

Relational autonomy

Resilience

ABSTRACT

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is emerging in the field of elderly care, as a method to enhance the resilience and relational autonomy of older persons. In this article, we want to explore the appropriateness of these two concepts to understand the FGC process in older adults. Using a case study design, we researched eight FGC cases for older adults, and selected two cases for further analysis and comparison. We found that the concepts of relational autonomy and resilience provide insight in the FGC process. Compassionately interfering social contacts, showing respect for the older person's needs and wishes gave older adults an impulse to take action to solve their problems. The capacity of a person to initiate and maintain social relations, and his or her willingness to ask for help, seemed essential to foster behavioral change. But apart from these, other, contextual factors seem to be important, which are currently not included in the theoretical framework for FGC, such as the nature of the problems, the involvement and capacities of the social network, and the older person's background.

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Introduction

During the last two decades, a shift has become visible in industrialized Western countries in the approach towards aging and older adults. The focus on physical impairments and increasing dependency on professional care has shifted to ideas about positive aging and self-mastery (Lamb, 2014). This shift comes from politicians, who search for ways to cut rising care expenses, but partly also responds to older persons themselves, who increasingly start to express their wish of being treated as valuable individuals with their own needs and desires (WHO, 2002).

An example of this is Wise Older Women (WOW), an action group of women aged 50 and over. WOW has been defending the rights of women aged 50+ since 1981, by trying to influence political decision making, promoting a positive, non-traditional imaging of older women by showing their strengths

and experiences, and supporting each other in work and daily activities (www.wouw-amsterdam.nl). They noticed a fear among their peers of losing control over their lives once they would grow more dependent on care. In more traditional forms of elderly care, it is common that several social workers and/or health care workers are involved, each following their own care plan. These care plans are usually discussed with the older adult, but the social or health care professionals are in the lead. Looking for new approaches, WOW asked our academic department to start a research project focusing on Family Group Conferences (FGC) for older adults.

A FGC is a meeting between a person with a problem or issue – the 'central' person – and his social network, in which they discuss the problems and possible solutions, and set up a care plan. It is a decision-making model which is based on the premises that people have the right to make their own decisions and that the central person and his¹ social network bear the primary responsibility for the central person's problems and for finding solutions for these problems (van

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 6 21156080.

E-mail addresses: r.n.metze@hva.nl (R.N. Metze), r.kwekkeboom@hva.nl (R.H. Kwekkeboom), t.abma@vumc.nl (T.A. Abma).

¹ When we use the masculine form, it can also be read as the feminine form.

Pag e, 2006). This 'right' is an important notion, and in some countries – such as New Zealand, Sweden and Northern Ireland (Brown, 2003) – this right to make your own care plan has even been captured in a law. In other countries, such as The Netherlands, the use of FGC is not guaranteed by law and is for a large part determined by social workers who do or do not offer FGC to their clients. However, if citizens ask for a FGC and the expenses are covered, social workers cannot deny it based on their own hesitations. Additionally, it is important to mention the voluntary nature of FGC; individuals or families can never be forced to participate. The FGC follows a three-phase structure (see Fig. 1).

A more elaborate description of FGC and its history is given, among others, by Cosner Berzin, Cohen, Thomas, and Dawson (2008). FGC was developed for and within child care in New Zealand and is currently used for troubled families with children, in many countries. It has barely been applied in elderly care, and to our best knowledge, there are no scientific publications on FGC in that field. In 2010, we started our research project, funded by ZonMw (the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development), as part of the National Elderly Care Program. The aim was to monitor forty older adults through their FGC process, to find out whether and how FGC could be applied for older adults living at home. As part of the research project we developed a theoretical foundation for FGC. It is generally accepted that the FGC goal is to help to empower people, but a more thorough conceptual understanding of the psychological and social processes in FGC was still lacking. In this article, we report on the process and the outcomes of two specific cases, which we selected from eight cases and analyzed using the theoretical foundation of the FGC laid out in the next section and more thoroughly described elsewhere (Metzke, Kwekkeboom, & Abma, 2013). The key concepts in this foundation are resilience and relational autonomy. The question we wish to answer is to what extent the concepts underlying FGC are appropriate for understanding the differences in the way older adults experience their FGC process and its outcomes.

FGC and the underlying theory

The deployment of FGC for older adults is still unexplored terrain. The same – albeit to a lesser extent – applies to theories which lay a foundation under the FGC model. We developed a theoretical underpinning for FGC (Metzke et al., 2013), which we summarize in this section. In Fig. 2 we present a schematic view of the concepts and their relation to each other, which we clarify in the following section.

The Dutch FGC Foundation² formulated some basic assumptions for FGC. The most important are: 1) that people and their social networks are perfectly able to make their own plan, and that doing so will result in a stronger feeling of ownership of the problems at hand and in a support plan which better matches their particular needs and circumstances, and 2) that people need support from their social network to deal with difficult situations in life and to make sure their support plan achieves sustainable results (van Beek, 2013). From these two

assumptions, we can derive the more general vision on human beings which underlies the FGC method: the vision that people are social beings and depend on each other for their well-being and happiness, especially when they feel vulnerable.

A theoretical concept that fits in well with these basic assumptions is relational empowerment, a concept which can be developed further by applying two sub-concepts: relational autonomy (on the interpersonal level) and resilience (on the intrapersonal level).

In our application of the concept of relational autonomy, we follow Schipper, Widdershoven, and Abma (2011) who define the process of acquiring autonomy as “[...] finding a way to live in line with one's values and identity” (2011: 526). According to MacKenzie (2008) people's values and identities are constituted by their interpersonal relationships and in their social environments. The extent to which people have the opportunity to live according to their own values and identity, depends at least partly on the amount of support and/or adversity they encounter (Barvosa-Carter, 2007). This might especially be the case when they are vulnerable because of their age, social situation or physical or mental handicap. This means that people depend on others supporting them in the process of acquiring more autonomy.

Self-respect is an important determining factor for the extent to which people will strive for and achieve autonomy. As their values and identities are constituted by social relationships, the way they are treated by the people surrounding them, the *respect they receive*, influences their self-respect and therefore their autonomy. We would even go as far as stating that operating from the concept of relational autonomy not only entails respecting people's decisions and acts, but also trying to change their mind when people close to them believe a decision is impairing instead of promoting their autonomy. This can be labeled as *compassionate interference* (Verkerk, 2001). It is important to note that compassionate interference can turn into ageism when it is based on a lack of respect for the older person, and when the interference fails to contribute to the older adult's development and self-respect.

Contrary to relational autonomy the concept of resilience refers to the intrapersonal level. We have adopted the following definition: resilience is the capacity for, or outcome of a successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (derived from Masten et al., 1988). As a contributing factor to, and possible outcome of, a process of growing stronger and regaining control after negative circumstances, resilience has a strong link with empowerment and with the philosophy behind FGC. Resilience is stimulated by *self-reflection* and entails, for instance, being able to accept one's situation if one cannot change it, putting one's situation into perspective, and refusing to be the victim of one's situation (Janssen, van Regenmortel, & Abma, 2011). Resilience also has interactional aspects such as telling family members and friends about one's situation, being able to share one's difficulties, receiving advice and compassion (*social support*) and being able to do something in return (*reciprocity*).

In this article, we will explore if the theoretical foundation as outlined above can be used to understand the differences in the way older adults experience their FGC process and its outcomes. By analyzing and interpreting two individual cases we aim to explore its appropriateness, and the need for changes or expansions.

² The FGC foundation – in Dutch the 'Eigen Kracht Centrale' – is a Dutch foundation which disseminates the FGC vision and mission, educates FGC coordinators, and organizes the FGCs (www.eigen-kracht.nl).

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