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## Pathways toward evictions: an exploratory study of the inter-relational dynamics between evictees and service providers in the Netherlands

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**Abstract** Although evictions are a known pathway into homelessness, little is known about the dynamics between evictees and their social and professional networks during the sequence of events leading to evictions. Contributing to the knowledge that would help policies to improve the evictions prevention practice, we aimed to explore the inter-relational dynamics leading to evictions. In the Netherlands between 2008 and 2011, seven evictees and 77 people in their social and professional networks were approached for a semi-structured interview on what happened and what could have happened preceding the eviction. A conceptual framework was used to identify and rank mechanisms and determinants and was presented and discussed for clarification and consensus during panel discussions with the participants. The inter-relational dynamics leading to evictions appeared multifaceted and complex, and five determinants defined its course: actors becoming each other's opponents, the overestimating of clients' capabilities, the professional's need for recognition, the lack of concerted efforts between agencies and professionals, and insufficient capability of professionals to commute between hard and soft. For the eviction prevention practice, professionals involved might benefit from training to strengthen the ability to handle conflicts, sense early signs of escalation, and recognize hardening of positions. This implies a shift in policy and practice: from a legal driven conduct to one that seeks opportunities to learn, invests in de-escalation skills, and introduces community conferencing and mediation.

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## 1 Introduction

Housing associations in the Netherlands are nonprofit organizations that provide affordable homes for 2.4 million households. In 2009, 5,863 tenants were evicted from their homes (see Table 1). An eviction is a dramatic event for all actors. The ex-tenant must move to shelters or family or gets a new home under certain conditions. The ex-tenant must also face the fact that he or she failed to meet the requirements. The housing association should expect to see a loss of revenue and legal costs. But more important, the housing association cannot realize its social mission in this particular case. Also the support agencies fail. They do not succeed in organizing social services in a way that the eviction can be averted. In other words, an eviction is the culmination of a process with only losers.

In the Netherlands, over the last decades, promising interventions have been introduced to combat evictions and homelessness and include considerable national and local financial support, such as the social support act, a City Compass to monitor and reduce evictions and homelessness, agreements between social housing associations, and debt control agencies, academic research, and community public mental health care networks responding to signals of vulnerability in households with rent arrears and/or causing nuisance, and those with unmet care needs (Wolf 2006; Heinike et al. 2007; van Laere et al. 2009; Akkermans 2011). The number of evictions in the Dutch social rent sector (2.4 million dwellings, 34 % of the total housing stock) initially dropped from 8.550 (0.34 % of dwellings) in 2007 to 5.862 (0.24 % of dwellings) in 2009. However, over the last years of economic crisis, the number rose to 6.750 (0.28 % of dwellings) in 2012. The reasons for evictions were rent arrears (80 %), housing-related nuisance (5 %), and illegal subletting, squatting, and cannabis production (15 %) (Aedesnet n.d.). The official number of homeless people in the Netherlands increased by 16 %; from 24.300 in 2010 to 27.300 in 2012 (CBS, n.d.).

In the Netherlands, it is the practice that all evictions are reported to and addressed by public mental health care networks. Core of this service is to provide integrated care for people who are not sufficiently being helped within regular mental health settings. Clients are not sufficiently able to provide their own living conditions (shelter, food, income), have several problems simultaneously (mental problems, addictions, unhygienic living circumstances, and homelessness), and normally do not ask for help or avoid the care they actually need (Schout et al. 2011). The referral to these professional networks is an ultimate attempt to establish integrated care.

The main reason for eviction in the Netherlands by far is rent arrears (78 %, see Table 1). Social landlord evictions for antisocial behaviour account for some 4–8 % of the total in the Netherlands and Sweden and some 5–10 % in the UK (Aedes.nl.; Pawson et al. 2004; van Laere et al. 2008; Stenberg et al. 2011). Several researchers (Hartman and Robinson 2003; Crane et al. 2006; Padgett 2007; Van Laere 2010) reveal that evictions are connected with other problems such as divorce, unemployment, inability to build or maintain a social network, disputes with other tenants and neighbors, mental health problems, addictions, and poor independent living skills.

In the international literature, there is relatively little attention for evictions. The scarce publications deal with risk factors and risk populations (Stenberg et al. 1995; Crane and Warnes 2000; Hartman and Robinson 2003; Mojtabei 2005; Phinney et al. 2007; Van Laere et al. 2008; Pevalin 2009; Van Laere et al. 2009; Van Laere 2010) or reflect on legal

**Table 1** Eviction figures in the Netherlands

Causes	Verdicts 2006	Evictions 2006	Percentage executed sentences (%)	Verdicts 2007	Evictions 2007 ( $\pm$ o.v. 2006)	Percentage executed sentences (%)
<i>Evictions 2006 and 2007</i>						
Rent arrears	17.112	5.956	35	20.333	6.705 (+13 %)	33
Sublet	758	733	97	937	917 (+25 %)	98
Nuisance	368	347	91	480	386 (+11 %)	80
Cannabis cultivation	243	224	92	391	330 (+47 %)	85
Other	270	247	91	472	212 (-14 %)	45
Total	18.751	7.529	40	22.605	8.550 (+14 %)	38
Causes	Verdicts 2008	Evictions 2008	Percentage executed sentences (%)	Verdicts 2009	Evictions 2009 ( $\pm$ o.v. 2008)	Percentage executed sentences (%)
<i>Evictions 2008 and 2009</i>						
Rent arrears	18,988	5,865	30.9	17,547	5,022 (-14 %)	28.6
Sublet	1,003	896	89.4	390	246 (-56 %)	63.1
Nuisance	365	296	81	390	245 (-17 %)	62.8
Cannabis cultivation	308	246	79.8	290	273 (+11 %)	94.1
Other	469	329	70.1	122	76 (-77 %)	62.3
Total	21,133	7,632	36.1	18,739	5,863 (-23 %)	31.3

Source: Aedesnet (n.d.)

or humanitarian aspects of evictions (Azuela et al. 1998; Hellegers 1999; Leckie and Farha 1999; Purdy 2003; AGFE 2007; Cemlyn 2008). There are some publications on the prevention of homelessness (Crane et al. 2004, 2006; Backer and Howard 2007; Burt et al. 2007; Culhane et al. 2011). But, as Culhane et al. (2011 p. 296) states, '[...] while these programs have demonstrated the basic elements of prevention services, there is much about homelessness prevention that still needs to be understood.' Prevention of homelessness, however, is not synonymous with averting evictions [although an imminent eviction can be seen as a major risk of becoming homeless (Culhane et al. 2011)]. The studies of Crane et al. (2006) and Burt et al. (2007), however, provide clues for this study. These researchers call for accurate targeting, a high level of jurisdictional commitment, agency involvement, and mechanisms for continuous system improvement. Recent publications specifically on the process that precedes evictions and how they can be averted are missing. On behalf of the Taskforce Housing Allocation in Groningen, the Netherlands, seven case studies were carried out between 2008 and 2010. The research question was how do evictions evolve and what lessons can be drawn from it for the practice of housing associations and support services? The aim of the research that underlies this article was (1) to understand the process leading up to an eviction in order (2) to lay the groundwork for a better and richer conceptual framework for understanding the nature and distribution of evictions.

## 2 Background

The figures in Table 2 show that in case of rent arrears, often an agreement is reached on payment despite a court order to evict. Housing associations in the Netherlands are

cooperating with debt agencies and social services to establish arrangements on payment with tenants who have rent arrears. Housing associations on the one hand try to prevent evictions through early identification of arrears and a strict collection policy. Illegal occupation, nuisance, or cannabis plantations on the other hand can count on a tough approach. The number of evictions due to illegal settlements and cannabis cultivation has increased especially since 2007. In these cases, the discrepancy between the number of sentences and its implementation is rather small. Unlike rent arrears, in two-thirds of the cases where a court order is pronounced, yet an arrangement is reached and the eviction is prevented. The figures in Table 2 relate to public housing and do not address evictions by landlords, housing repossessions or forced sales of private homes.

An eviction is the culmination of a series of events—events where tenants, housing professionals, attorneys, bailiffs and social workers and sometimes neighbors, relatives, or others are involved. Precisely, this sequence of events is subject of this study. In this study,

**Table 2** Characteristics of cases studied

Cases (rural or urbanized area) ( <i>N</i> : 7)	Main problems	No. of tenants ( <i>N</i> : 10)	No. of social workers ( <i>N</i> : 11)	No. of Housing official ( <i>N</i> :11)	Network ( <i>N</i> : 33)	Other professionals ( <i>N</i> : 19)
Rural	Rent arrears, nuisance, problems with daily living	2 (couple, male 42y, female 39y)	2	2	1 father, 1 brother, 1 niece, 2 neighbors	1 police officer, 1 attorney, 1 bailiff
Rural	Rent arrears, problems with daily living	1 (male, 23y)	1	1	1 grandmother, both parents, 1 sister, 2 friends	1 community health nurse, 1 general practitioner
Rural	Rent arrears, nuisance, problems with daily living	1 (male, 48y)	2	2	2 brothers, 3 neighbors	1 police officer, 1 credit bank official, 1 community health nurse
Rural	Nuisance, problems with daily living	2 (couple, male 53y, female 51y)	1	1	1 sister, 1 brother, 2 neighbors	1 police officer, 1 alpha care official
Urban	Rent arrears, nuisance, problems with daily living	2 (couple, male 35y, female 29y)	2	2	4 neighbors, 1 friend	2 police officer, 1 bailiff, 1 credit bank official
Urban	Nuisance, problems with daily living	1 (male, 47y)	2	1	2 brothers, 3 neighbors	1 police officer, 1 community health nurse, 1 alpha care official
Urban	Rent arrears, problems with daily living	1 (female, 59y)	2	2	1 children, 1 brother, 1 niece, 1 neighbor	1 attorney, 1 community health nurse

In total 84 semi-structured interviews were executed

we make use of the distinction made by Van der Stel (2009) following Mario Bunge between determinants and mechanisms. Mechanisms refer to the generation of processes and events that makes a system work. Determinants refer to the properties and state of things. They determine the future states and their properties, but they cannot produce them. Determinants refer to the composition of a system or structure (pp. 65–66). Determinants limit or specify the mechanisms and processes of the evolution of a system. This perspective was meant to aware the researchers not only for contributing factors but also for the composition of processes.

The researchers who participated in this study were looking for determinants and mechanisms in the particular case, but realized that the determinants and mechanisms as a whole were often emergent, complex, contingent, inimitable, and startling. A structural analysis aimed at uncovering the basic patterns of events is complemented by an interpretive analysis in the tradition of critical realism (Archer et al. 1998). In this tradition, there is notice for the not observable, the attribution of meaning, the transitive, the layers of reality, and the interaction between social structures, without losing sight on functionality.

With all the actors involved, both former residents, housing professionals, social workers, and relevant others, semi-structured interviews were carried out to map the events accurately. A timeline was constructed that sometimes went back several years. All the events that influenced the process that ultimately led to the eviction were placed on this timeline. All actors were asked fixed questions around the main questions: ‘what happened?’ and ‘what could have happened?’ The following research questions were raised:

- How did the eviction evolve?
- What events, steps, and decisions preceded this eviction?
- What dynamics and patterns distinguished it?
- Could it have been prevented? If so, how?
- Can the evicted learn something? If so, what?
- What is their view on the events?
- What is the vision of the professionals who were involved?
- What can the local professionals learn from this eviction?
- What advice for the evicted and professionals can be derived from the research material of this case?

### 3 Method

The findings in this article are based on seven case studies (Yin 2009) conducted between September 2008 and December 2011. For the literature review we have described above we used search strings with the words ‘eviction(s),’ ‘forced eviction,’ ‘unstable housing,’ and ‘prevention of homelessness’ in the most common databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed and Picarta.

#### 3.1 Data collection and respondents

Local public mental health networks, municipality officials and housing associations in the province of Groningen could submit cases for the research project. Subsequently, the evicted tenants were asked permission to cooperate with the investigation. In all cases, they agreed hereon. In fact, they wanted their side of the story to be heard. In advance, the intention of the research was discussed with all actors; ‘to learn from the events’ and not

‘getting it right’ afterward. Together with the evicted residents, a list of persons involved in the evictions was compiled. Besides the evicted residents, interviews were held with housing professionals, hire employees, employees of debt collection agencies and cash aid, lawyers, social workers, relatives, and neighbors. The total number of respondents in all seven cases consisted of 84 respondents, between 10 and 15 per case (see Table 3). In order to represent the population of the evicted, we selected both families and singles, men and women, cases of evictions due to rent arrears and due to nuisance issues. These six categories were selected to comprise the population at risk of eviction described by Van Laere et al. (2008). Evictions due to cannabis plantations or illegal occupation were not included in the study as the background and manifestation of the evictions of cannabis plantation and illegal occupancy is connected to other social problems, respectively, criminality related to the fast money of cannabis and the exploitation of landlords and subcontractors whether or not related to illegal employment. The social reality of impotence (of professionals, agencies, and evictees) and criminality differ and would require another research approach. Interviews ranged in length from 60 to 90 min were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

**Table 3** Determinants of evictions

Determinants of evictions				
Micro-level	Hardening	Lack of recognition	Lack of a concerted plan	Accumulation of problems in postal codes
Impact	Overestimating the competencies of the tenant	When the tenant and professionals have ‘little common ground’. When clients have little moral competencies	Little attention for social integration due to overspecialization	Lack of personal competencies and cognitive flexibility, need for recognition, self-awareness
	Lack of methodical competencies such as the ability to ask for feedback on the relationship, to interrogate and if necessary re-examine with meta-communication the relationship, to commute between hard and soft	Failure to collaborate and utilize the threat of coercion	Culture of openness and feedback in the local network	Little margins for maneuver (for professionals)
Meso-level	Lack of case management			
	Loss of sensors in the neighborhood: less neighborhood police, less neighborhood oriented social work	Excessive specialization of agencies and professions	Treatment is popular, support is out of favor	Fractures in finance hinder the continuity of care/support
	Little support for integrated care and comprehensive collaboration	Whether or not professionals operate in a fixed territory	Accessibility, availability of facilities	Whether or not there is a client tracking system/registration

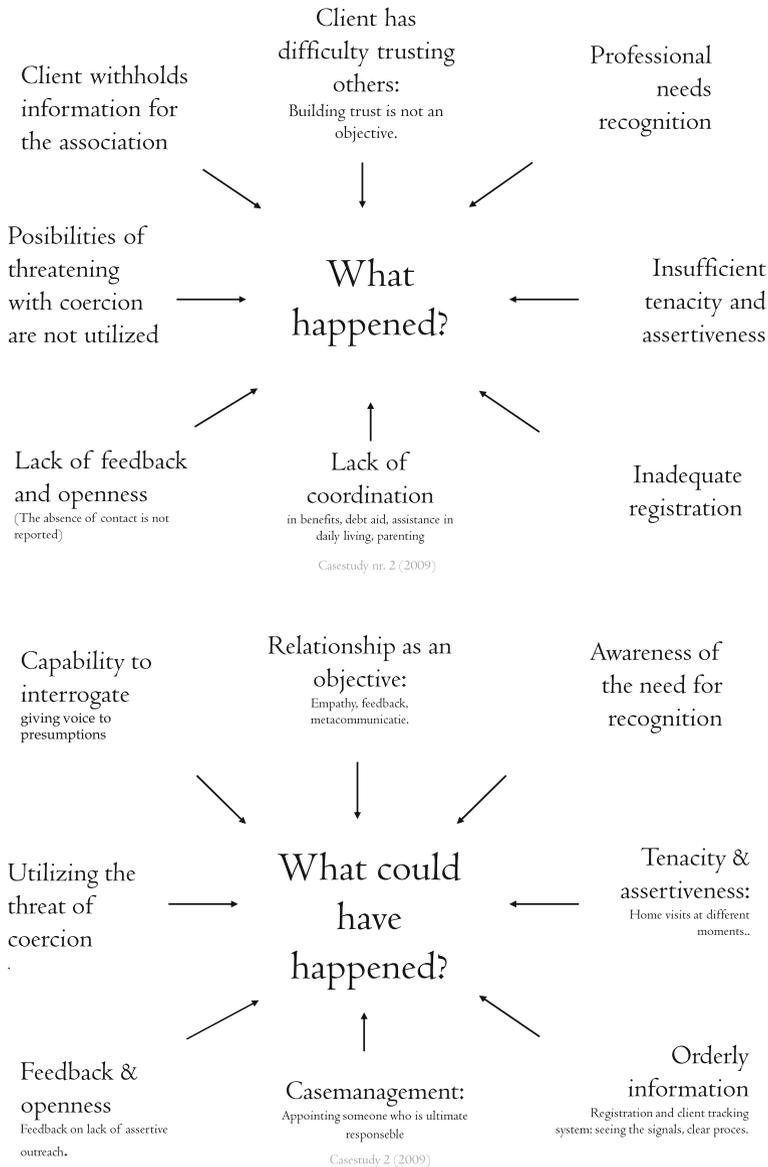
Participation in this study was sensitive for all actors. The research took place against the background of a recent legal conflict with the formation of opponent parties, allies, and the hardening that comes with it. For social workers and professionals of housing associations, it was also sensitive because their work, their decisions, and the nature of their collaboration were subject of investigation. In order to respond to the first four subquestions ('what happened?'), written sources were consulted by the interviewed professionals (official reports, records or registration, files) and by the evicted tenants (calendars), but not by the researchers.

### 3.2 Data analysis

Interviews and empirical memos were analyzed with ATLAS.ti, resulting in trends, patterns, and deviations of patterns, based on Flick's (2009) analytical methods to derive theory from data inductively. There were no themes or categories designed in advance to analyze the data. Selecting, coding, clustering, and theming took place inductive resulting in a theorizing text. From each individual case study, a draft report was made with three images: (1) the historical events on a timeline, (2) the provisional answers to the questions 'what happened,' and (3) 'what could have happened' (see Fig. 1). In each case, the determinants were ranked in order of dominance. The most influential determinants at the top, determinants with less impact at the bottom. Each case study was carried out by two researchers and a supervisor. All three independently ranked the determinants in a hierarchy (see Table 3). Discussions led to consensus on the ranking of determinants of each case. Table 3 is the result of clustering and hierarchical ranking of determinants in all seven case studies. In the phase of interviewing, the evicted tenants, professionals of housing associations, and care providers sometimes had different and sometimes conflicting views on the questions 'what happened?' and 'what could have happened?'. The interpretations and preliminary conclusions of the interviews were presented in a private panel discussion with the interviewees (Guba and Lincoln 1989). In this panel discussion, participants corrected interpretations or the chronology of events and contributed new insights. In two cases, the evicted tenants chose not to attend the panel discussion. Three types of triangulation were used in this study: (1) triangulation within each particular case study between interviews and (2) between the interviews and panel discussion. Eventually, after the panel discussion, a final report of each case study was prepared. (3) Combining dominant trends and notable deviations from the seven case studies is the last form of triangulation and forms the basis for this article.

### 3.3 Informed consent

Given the sensitive nature of the research activities, agreements were made in advance with all interviewees on how the data collection and the dissemination of information would be carried out. Although quotations from the research material were displayed anonymous, the actors knowing each other from local situations were traceable for each other. Interviewees were informed in advance that their statements would be compared against the views of other interviewees. An open conversation was therefore only possible within margins, and a noncommittal participation was out of the question. The reports of the seven case studies were sent only to the interviewees and with their permission later on circulated in the local care network. In the seven reports, all references to people, streets, neighborhoods, places, and names of organizations were redeemed for fictitious designations, so that the information was only traceable for the researchers. Also, all interviewees made clear beforehand



**Fig. 1** What happened and what could have happened

that after the interviews, a panel discussion with all interviewees would be held to verify preliminary findings of the investigators and derive lessons for local practice.

#### 4 Findings

On the one hand, the seven studied cases display a picture of a seemingly infinite variety of determinants and mechanisms, and on the other hand, we see mechanisms and

determinants that are always present and that have a strong impact. In order for frequency and impact, we discuss only the latter.

#### 4.1 Actors becoming each other's opponents

One determinant is dominant in all cases: the gradual hardening of the relationship between tenants and housing association wherein eventually actors become each other's opponents. In the study material, this is reflected in the changed indication of personal pronouns from 'we' to 'them,' or actors—unlike before—addressing each other in e-mails or letters in a formal way. Images of each other emerge indicating that the other has become a 'party.' The shift is irreversible when the tenant is seen as someone who owes the imminent eviction to himself. This process occurs gradually and for both actors partly unnoticed. We illustrate this as follows:

A family with four children cause nuisance in the neighbourhood. During summer evenings the children leave the streets much too late, they are cheeky and are not corrected. Tensions between parents and several neighbours get so far out of hand that the father of the family threatens with a gun. Later it proves to be a toy gun, but the neighbours were horrified. The residents demand that the housing association places the family out of the neighbourhood. With all the documented complaints from the neighbourhood an eviction is realized within a few months and the family moves elsewhere. It is the second time that the family is resettled by the association in connection with neighbourhood conflicts. The outrage by the housing association over what has happened, is expressed as follows: 'We have done so much for them, now they have to sit on the blisters.'

From the study material, it can be inferred that all family members in this case have at least moderate intellectual disabilities and probably cannot learn from the state of affairs. A complicating factor is that the tenants do not look as if they have an intellectual disability. When they do not return forms or leave letters unanswered, this is perceived as lack of cooperation and not as incapacity. *Overestimating the capabilities of clients* is a dominant determinant in all cases. This applies not only for reading and understanding official letters, but also in understanding the logic of bureaucracies and to cope with daily living.

The shift from tenant to opponent accelerates when the tenant's behavior is accompanied with hostility. When tenants are demanding, if they blame the authorities, if they attribute the cause of warnings, corrections or fines outside themselves, or when they are verbally aggressive, manipulate, split, or turn people against each other—than the shift from someone who needs help to opponent accelerates even faster. With reason, we put here 'someone who needs help', and not 'tenant' because the hardening of relationships not only occurs in the relationships between housing officials and tenants, but also in the relationships between the client (the tenant) and agencies and care providers; only the shift in the relationship between tenant and housing association takes a legal form in the end. The willingness to help comes under pressure by care and service providers as well. The inability of the client to share problems, to show vulnerability, and to seek help, generates hardening in relationships with professionals too. They want to help but are not allowed to. Not being trusted by, the client requires of professionals a particular cognitive flexibility. They have to help someone who has not asked them to. Indeed, sometimes clients not even admit that there are reasons for assistance or do not acknowledge 'doing stupid things.' An example:

A tenant buys an expensive flat screen television from an accidentally received holiday bonus. Instead of paying off urgent rent arrears, the tenant pays the money – he was not entitled to – in a way that generates the anger of the credit bank and housing association officials. Especially when the tenant seeks the responsibility for this behaviour outside himself: ‘It is not my fault; they should not have transferred the money to me.’

Spending money in another way than intended, failing to meet agreements, not speaking the truth or simply lie, denying, shirking responsibilities, fraud, and other expressions of little moral competencies—all this sharpens the division between the ones we want to help and who not.

The moment that ‘enough is enough’ and the actors accept the transition from tenant to opponent is the harbinger of a new phase in dealing with the tenant. The phase of building up a dossier, the notification of the eviction and the enabling of bailiffs, is accompanied by panic and often with persistency of the tenant/client. The panic and persistency generate, however, aversion and paralysis. Under pressure, few professionals are willing to help a person who apparently has to blame himself for his fate. The formal and legal switch of position from ‘someone who needs help’ to ‘an opponent’ is not identical for all professionals. Victims generate pity and new forms of solidarity. Most care providers realize themselves that they need to assist the client in the future with finance, parenting, dealing with disorders or addictions, and ensure that they do not become an opponent. Anger, compassion, and utile considerations run through one another.

#### 4.2 The professional needs recognition the client does not give

Socially vulnerable people often do not get what they need (Schout et al. 2010). We illustrate this by means of a case (see Fig. 1).

A single mother with a young child withholds for the current housing association that she was evicted from her previous house because of serious pollution and rent arrears. The previous association was left with unpaid rent and considerable costs for cleaning. When the employee of the current housing association later found out, he responded: ‘[...] *she is on her own now.*’

In an informal meeting professionals from the local public mental health care network were told that the client ‘deceived us all’. When the client did not open the door for the housing official and later not for a social worker who came to check up, no further action was taken until she and her daughter were eventually evicted. In the panel discussion of this case study the essence of this case was summarized as follows: ‘The ex-tenant is someone who has difficulties trusting others [...] while the determination to make contact and gain trust – what she essentially needed – was not present.’

In all cases, this mechanism is dominant; professionals are in need for something that the tenant does not give—recognition and cooperation. Signs of appreciation and goodwill which fuel further trust are absent. Without these subtle forms of recognition, the determination of professionals to help is hindered. And that is precisely what these clients need: a persistent effort to gain trust despite the initial lack of recognition and cooperation. To walk the extra mile for someone who apparently shows no gratitude seems difficult.

### 4.3 Lack of a concerted effort to avoid the eviction

Although the housing associations build up a registration of rent arrears or nuisance recorded by date, a shared objective to avoid the eviction or a planned approach on how to deal with the imminent evictions was lacking in all studied cases. All agencies and care providers are led by objectives, but a common goal aiming for successful social and cultural integration was missing. In the research material, three disparate explanations can be found for this absence. Two were described earlier: (1) clients manipulate, split, or turn people against each other and therefore drive a wedge between the authorities and professionals and (2) social workers and officials of the housing association become opposed to each other as professionals show empathy for the pitiful state of the client. A third explanation is that (3) integrated care is difficult to establish in an arena of specialized professionals. An example:

A family with financial problems, parenting problems, problems in dealing with neighbours and psychiatric problems tend to express their needs in a demanding way. Receptionists, desk clerks and care providers of various agencies find it difficult to set aside their reluctance and help. Black and white thinking and the difficulty of separating major issues from secondary points lead to small and major conflicts. The housing association in this case has to deal with neighbours and professionals of debt aid, social services, social work and health agencies.

The feelings of powerlessness by the housing association are not only enhanced because they cannot get a grip on this family, but also not on the relatively large number of agencies and professionals involved. No one in this case oversees the whole of interventions and objectives. In these confusing situations, professionals tend to withdraw within the institutional boundaries of their agencies. An example of this sounds as follows:

'I only come here for the children.'

Or in the words of a social worker in a review of an eviction of an ex-addict who, while not drinking, but living at odds with his neighbors in the doorway.

'If I only looked beyond his addiction ....'

Where these clients need integrated care and a case manager who claims the final responsibility, these people generate so much powerlessness that professionals stick to a limited responsibility. The seven tenants in this study would have benefited from someone who helps them in dealing with neighbors or authorities, or someone who helps them to express their desires in an acceptable way. What, however, mostly misses is the absence of a common goal to avert the eviction and someone who convenes all actors in order to achieve that objective. Time and energy are wasted because the narrow missions of the separate professionals and agencies lead to the circulation of difficult clients and not to successful social integration.

### 4.4 Playing hard and soft

Much is asked of the professionals in these seven cases, especially of their personal qualities and methodical competencies. The seven cases reveal also that their interference can make the difference between eviction and successful habitation. Making house calls and finding a closed door several times require tenacity and assertiveness not all professionals possess. A certain degree of self-awareness is necessary to continue, despite the

absence of appreciation. Sometimes clients need encouragement and shortly afterward correction or empathy and then confrontation; it seems that the person of the professional and his cognitive flexibility plays a decisive role in the process that precedes the imminent evictions. What is essential is not only the person, but also the methodical competence as the ability to ask for feedback on their relationship, to interrogate and if necessary re-examine with meta-communication their relationship and to give voice to presumptions that something is wrong.

Housing associations are highly dependent on the presence or absence of professionals in their area with these capabilities. More precisely, they rely heavily on a permanent partnership of professionals in a fixed area wherein the ability to commute between hard and soft can be developed, and in doing so, the exclusion of 'annoying people' can be prevented. With the latter, we mean those who speculate, manipulate and turn people against each other, who split and can bring in so little empathy and moral development that they require professionals who are able to suspend their moral judgments, who are able to put aside their indignation (for a moment) and subsequently pursue pertinent, directive, with structure and surveillance, to help people who only understand the language, 'what's in it for me?' (see Broek 2010). We illustrate this with a quote:

As long as you drive much too fast through the neighbourhood, as long as your wife reports bruises from domestic violence to the general practitioner, as long as your neighbours are so afraid of you that they do not dare to submit complaints to the hotline of the council, as long as you continue with illegal indwelling, so long we will monitor your movements, we will execute all sorts of control of illegal occupancy, fraud run, moreover we will regularly ask your neighbours if they can still persevere in living next to you, if necessary we will check your tail light daily.

Thus, preventing exclusion is by no means soft. It is conceivable that professionals who have the ability to commute between hard and soft would have made a difference in these seven cases.

#### 4.5 Accumulation of problems in postal areas

The seven cases we have examined are all set in areas with an overrepresentation of people with social problems. The accumulation of problems makes it difficult to trace which determinants cause which problem, and making it difficult to act, especially in a context of opposed interest and contrary views.

Mrs S. has lived for over 9 years in neighbourhood X. She is divorced and lives with four of her five children, aged between 5 and 21 years. There has been frequently unrest and rumour in the street where Mrs. S lives. It is '[...] a street with a lot of difficulties' according to one of the interviewees. Mrs. S had been friends with her neighbour for years. But when Mrs. S. refused to testify in a trial involving her neighbour, problems between them arose. Children of Mrs S. and her neighbour started to harass each other, resulting in tumult between all of them. Three other neighbours reported several times inconvenience at a local hotline of the council for nuisance and underserved groups. According to some respondents, these reports actually consisted of distorted information. The reports have prompted the housing association to initiate an eviction procedure. Not only Mrs S., also her social worker denied that she caused troubles and therefore supported her. One of the interviewees

concludes: 'everybody in this neighbourhood is home all day long, the residents live too close to each other.'

In this and three other cases, there are different versions of what actually happened, and that an effort to hear both sides and to objectify the accounts on what really happened, was missing. All cases are complex and lack transparency. There are different accounts on what happened, on who did or said what in what sequence. It is also striking that in these disadvantaged neighborhoods, strong coalitions exist between neighbors who intimately socialize with each other, but those who do not take part in these coalitions can become caught up in an arena of gossip and exclusion. In three studied cases, the hotline of the council and in addition the housing association chose side for the person who notified the conflicts, while there were grounds for hearing both sides of the story. In fact, there were good reasons for mediation or a community conference (see Donaldson and Moore 2001).

All determinants in order of impact are represented in Table 3. Micro-level refers to determinants that directly affects the course of events and according to the interviewees has the most impact on the cases. Meso-level refers to polices and circumstances that contributed to the context wherein the eviction occurred. The impact is indirect and according to the interviewees has the least effect on the case.

## 5 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal what happens in the process that precedes an eviction. It complements the work of Van Laere et al. (2008) and Pevalin (2009), both focussing on the epidemiology of home evictions. Like this study, Crane et al. (2006) also report literacy problems and tenants dealing with demands of daily living. Where Crane et al. underline 'the need to identify the sequences of events that precede homelessness' (p. 164), this study identifies the sequences of events that precede evictions. The findings of this study show similarities with the stages of conflict escalation as described by Glasl (1999). These similarities are as follows: unfulfilled mutual expectations, distorted perception, hardening, defining and enlarging of fait accompli, polarization, emphasizing ones' own opinion, the 'point of no return,' and fear for losing face. The influence of written information (letters and e-mails) as a trigger for further estrangement between actors while the subtle influence of the spoken word and nonverbal communication is absent, also correspondents with Glasl's findings. Our study reveals clues for all actors who are involved in evictions to invest in conflict capability: the ability of institutions and their representatives to constructively deal with conflicts (Zapf and Gross 2001, Mason and Rychard 2005; Yasmi 2007). The ability to handle conflicts is especially important because the unfulfilled expectations of cooperation and the lack of recognition easily lead to stereotyping and false images that are difficult to revise. If people do not confirm with mainstream values, rules are applied more strictly (see also Herzfeld 1993). In our study, it becomes clear that in the process of imminent evictions, there is an emphasis on legalism, not on learning. All seven studied evictions could have been averted and could potentially offer learning opportunities for the actors. Precisely, tenants with limited moral values and mild cognitive disabilities have reason to be confronted with learning experiences. In other words, tenants who are buying an expensive television of someone else's money instead of paying their monthly rent must learn that their choices hinder what they want most (successful habitation). In the struggle to triumph over conflicts, actors are not confronted with learning assignments, while these learning experiences are needed to move forward. What this study adds to what is already

known on the process, and prevention of evictions is that the threat of eviction is a source of learning that can contribute to the ability to deal with conflicts.

Achieving substantive saturation in this type of research is indicative for methodological quality. Our intention was to continue with collecting data until no new determinants and mechanisms would emerge (Guba and Lincoln 1989; Guest et al. 2006). In this, we partly succeeded. Should we carry out new case studies, we will probably find other determinants and mechanisms, but the first five main findings from the results section of this article are likely to emerge again. We have the impression that our findings are of value for all housing associations and social practices that strive for the prevention of evictions. However, our findings cannot be designated as timeless and contexts-free instructions. Its value will depend on the already existing conflict capability of professionals and agencies and the degree of collaboration in the inter-organisational network. Additional research is needed first to test the conceptual framework and second to determine whether our findings can strengthen the conflict capabilities of actors in housing practices.

## 6 Conclusion

The process of an eviction is multifaceted and complex, but five determinants define its course; these are: actors becoming each other's opponents; overestimating the capabilities of clients; the professional's need for recognition the client does not give; the lack of a concerted effort to avoid the eviction; and the capability to commute between hard and soft.

What clues can be derived from this study for the practice of housing associations and professionals? Firstly, institutionalize the capability of confronting conflicts constructively. This means the ability to handle conflicts by getting sensitive for signs of escalation, recognizing signs of hardening of positions, investing in de-escalating skills such as meta-communication and negotiation skills. Secondly, the concentration of people with social problems in a neighborhood might not easily be reduced; it is however achievable to designate the 'owners of problems' as the 'owners of solutions.' This means building conflict capability within neighborhoods and communities by means of community conferencing and mediation, preferably by residents themselves. This also is the institutionalization of conflict capability. Finally, a housing association depends in a special way on a sustainable partnership of professionals who recognize that the prevention of evictions is an integral assignment that provides opportunities to learn for all actors.

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