We are who we are today because of you who came before us.

–Xhosa proverb from Ubuntu philosophy

Neighbourhood-Reminiscence: Integrating Generations and Cultures in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT. Social cohesion is one of the key concepts of local social policy in the Netherlands, the basic assumption being that every neighbourhood needs a certain level of social cohesion in order to offer the residents a liveable community in which they feel comfortable and included. When working on social cohesion, special attention is paid to those groups who maintain little to no social contact or amongst whom tensions arise: different age groups and communities with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare (NIZW) has developed a new method for promoting the integration of generations and cultures: neighbourhood-reminiscence. This method uses memories and stories of neighbourhood residents in order to promote exchanges, mutual understanding and respect between different age- and cultural-groups. Neighbourhood-reminiscence is community development, based on the local
neighbourhood level, because the neighbourhood is where people live, where they meet each other and where tensions between citizens with different lifestyles and interests may erupt. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The streets in Dutch cities are characterized by a diversity of ages and cultures. Different generations and ethnic groups live side by side. They meet in the streets, at the bus stop or in the local shops and yet, real contacts between these groups are rare. Lombok, a neighbourhood in the Dutch city of Utrecht, forms an exception. There, on a cold December evening in 2000, Dutch, Moroccan and Turkish neighbourhood-residents celebrated Iftar (the festive meal after sundown during Ramadan) and Christmas, sharing different foods, stories and cultures. These neighbourhood-residents are the pioneers, the first participants, in a new project for community development aimed at integrating different generations and cultures: neighbourhood-reminiscence. After reminiscing in small, ethnically homogenous groups, the older participants came together to share memories and stories. Once a new, ethnically heterogeneous group was formed, the participants expanded their activities to the rest of the neighbourhood, inspiring other age groups and residents to reminisce and exchange stories.

A year after the festive Iftar celebrations had taken place the effects of the programme had become apparent. All over the neighbourhood generations and ethnic groups met and exchanged stories and experiences. New bonds, mutual respect and even friendships developed between age- and cultural-groups who until recently had little or no contact with each other. In the playground older residents shared the games they once played with the local children. In local shops, in schools, in the nursing home and in the streets memories and stories were shared. The pioneering older participants brought about new exchanges amongst new participants creating constantly bigger ripples, like a pebble thrown in the water, creating a neighbourhood full of stories, storytellers and listeners, where people know and respect each other.

The experiences of this pilot programme in Lombok and other programmes in the Netherlands, which used reminiscence to promote exchanges between generations and/or cultural groups, have formed the basis for the development
of neighbourhood-reminiscence as a new method for community development. This method was developed as part of the three-year national promotion-programme for intergenerational work in the Netherlands, *A Neighbourhood for all ages*, of the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (NIZW). This article will describe the goals and methodology of neighbourhood-reminiscence and provide insights into the need for integration between generations and ethnic groups in the Netherlands.

**SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF GENERATIONS AND CULTURES**

Consensus in the Netherlands seems to be that many Dutch neighbourhoods are plagued by a lack of social cohesion. Neighbours barely know each other, meaningful relationships are rare and more and more citizens feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods. In 2001 36% of the 15-24 year olds and 34,1% of those over 65 occasionally felt unsafe in their neighbourhood, opposed to 25,7% and 30,2% in 1997. It is therefore not surprising that social cohesion is one of the key concepts of local social policy in the Netherlands, the basic assumption being that every neighbourhood needs a certain level of social cohesion in order to offer the residents a liveable community in which they feel comfortable and included.

Every neighbourhood is a community, albeit a complex one with a diversity of arenas within and between which different groups move, dispute one another and whose lifestyles and interests sometimes collide. But it is also a community with universal interests, such as safety, liveability and a certain level of social cohesion. The local neighbourhood is the place where people live, where they meet and where tensions arise between residents with different lifestyles and interests. The neighbourhood plays an important role in defining the social dimension of people’s lives, in many cases even more so than family relationships (Bussing and De Boer, 1998). The promotion of social cohesion and integration therefore needs to happen on this local level where people live and meet one another, but also where they most strongly experience the negative effects of a lack of cohesion and integration.

The terms social cohesion and social integration refer to relationships among different groups of citizens and to the extent to which different groups meet, know, respect and understand each other. The promotion of social cohesion and integration is therefore aimed at those groups who maintain little or no contact. The Netherlands has two main social divisions: between generations and between communities with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

If we look at the level of social integration between generations in the Netherlands, we see that 63% of all senior citizens (over 65) have little to no per-
sonal contact with young people (Walker, 1993). The ethnic division is similar: 50% of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants maintain little to no contact with Dutch citizens (Dagevos, 2001). The divisions differ for each ethnic group. The social distance between Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and Dutch citizens, for example, is the largest while that between Surinam and Antillean immigrants and Dutch citizens is the smallest. Of the last group more than half maintain intensive contact with Dutch citizens.

The level of social integration of ethnic groups also differs for each generation. First generation immigrants have the least contact with the Dutch, while their children are more integrated: 62% of Moroccan and 53% of Turkish immigrants over 55 are never visited by a Dutch citizen in their home (Dagevos, 2001). Although the younger generations are more integrated, the level of social integration remains limited: 21% of Moroccan and 39% of Turkish youth between 12 and 24 are never visited by Dutch citizens. This difference between generations is similar within the Dutch population: More than one third of Dutch senior citizens have no contact with other ethnic groups, as opposed to 14% among the 14 to 44 year olds.

Not only is there little contact between generations and between ethnic groups, the effects of these divisions also show similarities. In both cases the social division leads to the Dutch saying ‘unknown makes unloved’ (onbekend maakt onbemind). Research in the Netherlands shows a correlation between the amount of contact with immigrants and attitudes towards them. Dutch citizens who come into contact with immigrants have a more positive attitude towards immigrants than those who do not come into contact with them (Esveldt and Traudes, 2001). The fact that generations and cultural groups in the Netherlands do not know each other leads to prejudice, stereotyping, distrust, discrimination and social tension. Young and old, immigrants and Dutch citizens live most of their lives in age- or cultural-enclaves and therefore know little about environments that are not their own. When generations or cultures meet the lack of knowledge of the other and existing prejudices make further contact difficult.

And yet the generations and cultural groups meet, albeit fleetingly, daily in their direct living environment. They shop in the same shops, play in the same playgrounds and walk in the same parks. They meet in their neighbourhood and share the same public spaces. Sometimes this leads to tensions and conflicts, but it also offers important opportunities to promote more intense contact and mutual understanding. The challenge is to use these opportunities and encourage different generations and cultures to more involvement with each other and with their living environment.

There are different possible levels of social cohesion, ranging from peacefully living side by side to mutual involvement and support among neighbours (Sprinkhuizen et al., 1998). The NIZW A Neighbourhood for all ages
programme uses an intergenerational step-model that distinguishes three levels, or steps, of social contact: meeting each other; knowing each other; and meaning something for each other. The first step, meeting each other, is aimed at incidental activities giving neighbours the chance to be aware of each other’s existence and meet without further obligation. On the next level, knowing each other, the contacts between neighbourhood-residents are deeper. The meetings are less superficial and people get to know each other not only as members of a certain group, but also as individuals. On the last level, meaning something for each other, the contact deepens further. Neighbourhood-residents feel personally involved with each other and influence one another. They discover mutual interests, offer each other support and feel responsible for each other.

Insight into the possible levels of social cohesion says nothing about the desired level of contact. The level of social cohesion aspired to depends on the wishes of policy makers, professionals and neighbourhood-residents, as well as on the existing level of social contact in the specific neighbourhood. Moreover, different groups and individuals aspire to different levels of social contact. Not everyone wants a close personal relationship with his or her neighbour.

The promotion of mutual involvement between neighbourhood-residents will only succeed if accessible activities are offered that appeal to all residents, despite age or cultural background. Setting up such activities is a challenge. The experiences with neighbourhood-reminiscence in the Netherlands have shown that this methodology and the activities it uses appeal to the young and old of different ethnic groups. The exchange of memories and stories offers neighbourhood-residents an enjoyable activity during which age and cultural groups meet, get to know each other and climb the steps of social cohesion. Not all participants will climb equally high. Most of them will join one or two exchange activities and gain insight into the environment and lives of others in their local community. Others will become more involved, meet more frequently, maintain more intense contact and get to know each other as individuals. Some of them will develop friendships and meet outside the programme. Not everyone will reach the top step. Different residents have different ambitions. But each one will contribute to the mosaic of memories, experiences and stories that create a cohesive narrative community.

**NEIGHBOURHOOD-REMINISCENCE**

Neighbourhood-reminiscence is an adapted form of reminiscence, that uses triggers (objects, photographs, aromas or other people’s stories) to stimulate memories of the past. It is a structured activity that requires purposeful guidance. The triggered memories are used to promote contact and exchange be-
tween people. Reminiscence and the memories of the participants are a means to achieve certain goals; they are never the goals themselves. In the case of neighbourhood-reminiscence the goals are:

- Promoting social participation among neighbourhood-residents;
- Promoting contact and exchange between residents from different age- and cultural-groups;
- Improving the quality of social relationships and the level of social cohesion in the neighbourhood.

A neighbourhood-reminiscence project is run by a local organisation or cooperation among organisations aimed at improving social cohesion and with knowledge of and contact with different target groups; such as social services, youth work, libraries, schools, and residential homes. Neighbourhood-reminiscence comprises of three phases. Each phase is characterised by the expansion of participants: (1) learning to reminisce, (2) learning to exchange stories, (3) learning to create a narrative neighbourhood.

1. Learning to Reminisce

*It is important that others hear our stories. Only then will they know who we are.*

–Turkish participant

The first step of neighbourhood-reminiscence is to create a feeling of trust and acknowledgement among the older participants. This is done in small groups of eight to ten senior citizens, divided by ethnic background and sometimes, if considered necessary by cultural values, gender. Within these closed, ethnically homogenous groups the participants learn to reminisce, to share their memories and most importantly, to learn that their stories and experiences are of value. They develop feelings of pride and self-confidence. At the end of the first phase they are ready to share their memories and stories with others.

Goals of phase 1:

- Creating a safe and familiar environment;
- Teaching participants to reminisce;
- Encouraging participants to share stories with each other;
- Helping participants to discover what a ‘good story’ is;
- Preparing participants for the next phase.
Set up of phase 1:

- Duration: two to three months.
- Seven weekly reminiscence meetings led by two reminiscence workers, if necessary in the mother tongue of the participants.
- Two or three informal meetings among the different homogeneous groups.

Outcomes of phase 1:

- The participants know the goals of the programme and what is expected of them;
- The participants recognise a ‘good story’;
- The participants are able to share stories and listen to others;
- The participants have developed self-confidence and feel confident about their stories;
- The participants are ready to share their stories with others;
- The participants have met the other ethnic groups and the other reminiscence workers.

2. Learning to Exchange

You can read a cookbook to know how to make an exotic meal, but the book will never let you know what it tastes like. Someone will have to cook the food first. It’s the same with our stories. In a way, we are cooking for each other here and tasting each other’s lives.

–Moroccan participant

The second step of neighbourhood-reminiscence is to teach the participants to exchange stories with people from different cultural backgrounds on a small and safe scale. The groups from the first phase are now mixed, creating new, ethnically heterogeneous groups in which all cultural backgrounds are represented. The participants get to know each other and develop the awareness that they are working together and need each other’s memories and stories to create a full picture of the neighbourhood. At the end of the second phase the participants are ready to fulfil their pioneering role and encourage other residents of all ages and cultural backgrounds to exchange memories and stories.

Goals of phase 2:

- Teaching participants to exchange stories with people from different cultural backgrounds;
• Stimulating participants to discover similarities;
• Practicing different exchange techniques;
• Teaching participants how to encourage others to reminisce and exchange stories;
• Preparing participants for the next phase.

Set up of phase 2:
• Duration: one to two months.
• Five weekly reminiscence meetings led by two reminiscence workers, in Dutch.
• One or two reminiscence meetings with the previous homogeneous group from the first phase.
• One reminiscence meeting with new, invited guest participants.

Outcomes of phase 2:
• The participants have developed a group-feeling;
• The participants know different exchange techniques;
• The participants know how to encourage others to share stories;
• The participants are confident about their role as pioneers;
• The participants are ready to exchange stories in a variety of culturally diverse locations in the neighbourhood.

3. Learning to Create a Narrative Neighbourhood

Hey Leen, tell me about the dime store again!
—ten year old boy’s call to an older participant

The last phase of neighbourhood-reminiscence, learning to create a narrative neighbourhood, strives to create a neighbourhood where residents of different ages and cultures exchange stories and memories in a variety of locations. The participants of the first two phases go into the neighbourhood and encourage other residents to reminisce and exchange stories. The goal is to create ‘continuous loops’ from central locations in the neighbourhood, or in other words to organise reminiscence activities that bring new activities about or include new groups. The outcome is a neighbourhood full of stories, where residents of all ages and cultural backgrounds meet and exchange stories in schools, playgrounds, restaurants, stores, libraries, nursing homes, cultural centres and in the streets.
This last phase is the most complex and requires creativity, structured organisation and cooperation among a large diversity of organisations and businesses. The central question is always: where do residents meet and where can we reach them? Not all residents are attracted by the same locations and activities, not everyone visits a library. The programme coordinator faces two challenges: finding and using different locations to reach a diverse as possible population, and creating durable cooperation to ensure an enduring process of social integration in the local community.

**Goals of phase 3:**

- Bringing about exchanges in varied locations in the neighbourhood;
- Expanding the programme to include a broad range of new target groups (both in age and cultural background);
- To create ‘continuous loops,’ activities that promote new activities and the involvement of new participants;
- Creating new forms of cooperation that secure the continuation of reminiscence activities in the neighbourhood.

**Set up of phase 3:**

- Duration: four to five months.
- Five to eight reminiscence activities involving new participants of different ages and cultural backgrounds in different locations in the neighbourhood.
- One to two preparation meetings with the participants from the first phases for every new location.

**Outcomes of phase 3:**

- The participants of the first two phases have developed new social contacts in the neighbourhood and are considered to be the pioneers of the narrative neighbourhood;
- Neighbourhood residents know the programme and are aware of the reminiscence activities available to them;
- Neighbourhood residents of all ages and cultural backgrounds have joined in at least one reminiscence activity and are enthusiastic about neighbourhood-reminiscence;
- New storytellers and volunteers have enlisted themselves for reminiscence activities in the future;
- New forms of cooperation, with concrete plans for future activities, have developed.
The target groups of a programme depend on the profile of the neighbourhood, that is to say, the age and cultural groups living in the specific neighbourhood and between whom social contact is non-existent or rare. In Lombok these were mainly Dutch, Turkish, and Moroccan citizens. The senior groups in the first two phases of the programme consisted of ten Dutch citizens (two men and eight women, aged 68 and older), nine Turkish men and seven Moroccan men (all aged 57 and older). The Dutch participants had all lived in the neighbourhood since childhood and had little to no contact with their immigrant neighbours or with children or youth in the neighbourhood, who are predominantly Turkish and Moroccan. The Turkish and Moroccan participants had lived in the neighbourhood since the late sixties and early seventies, when they immigrated to the Netherlands, and had little to no contact with Dutch society. No Turkish or Moroccan women were recruited for the first phase. Because of cultural norms it is difficult for these Islamic men and women to openly talk in each others’ presence and the programme funding did not allow for more than three initial groups. The Islamic women were involved later in the programme. The Dutch participants were recruited through the local senior-centre. The Turkish and Moroccan participants were recruited through self-organisations, such as the local Mosque. During recruitment it became clear that the intergenerational component is essential. A major motivation for most participants was to create intergenerational contacts upon the conclusion of the program. They felt it was important that the young heard their stories (to give them a sense of history) or felt the need to hear the stories of the young in order to understand them better (which was especially the case for young people aged 16-19). The programme helped them find a way to communicate and share with younger people.

During the last phase neighbourhood exchanges were organised with residents of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Special attention was paid to the inclusion of youth and Turkish and Moroccan women. Examples of exchanges and participants are:

- **Playground:** two exchanges were organised with 22 children with different ethnic background, aged 7 to 11 years old and 12 Moroccan, Turkish and Dutch Seniors. The playground staff recruited and prepared the children. The central theme was: games of the present and the past.
- **School:** two exchanges were organised with 25 schoolchildren aged 8 to 9. The schoolteacher helped the children prepare and conduct interviews. The central theme was: neighbourhood life and history.
- **Dinner:** a lively dinner debate was organised with Turkish and Moroccan street youth aged 17 to 24 in the local museum café. Because the lo-
cal youth work could not be convinced to join the programme, individual youth were recruited by visiting them in their local hangout, a cafeteria. The central themes of the dinner debates between the street youth and eight seniors with different ethnic backgrounds were: discrimination and prejudice and street life in the past and present.

- **The old mill**: 100 neighbourhood residents (including the senior participants from the first two phases), aged 16 to 98, men and women from diverse cultural backgrounds visited a special reminiscence exchange in the local windmill, including the sharing of food and music.
- **Shops**: exchanges were organized in four different local shops (from a butcher to a music store) during which the shopkeepers and shoppers joined in.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

Although the pilot programme in Lombok was successful and the expected outcomes were met, it was, nevertheless, a process of trial and error. The programme frequently had to be adjusted and improved and many important lessons were learned along the way. The most important ones are:

- **Promote exchanges, not presentations**: many reminiscence projects use different forms of presentation, such as plays, books and exhibitions. Experience in Lombok soon showed that these presentations only bring about one-way communication. There is no actual exchange between participants. Real exchange occurs when both the new and the existing participants are able to share stories, games, foods or music.
- **Only a ‘good story’ promotes interest and exchange**: not all stories promoted mutual interest or exchange. Many stories are ‘safe stories,’ anecdotal stories told many times before. A ‘good story’ on the other hand lets the listener identify with the storyteller and stimulates mutual understanding. A ‘good story’ is a story with a personal note, with a time and a place (a social context), with a universal theme that others can identify with (such as friendship, pride or fear) and that gives insight into the storyteller’s perception of his or her environment. It is the reminiscence worker’s task to encourage ‘good stories’ by asking open questions and delving into the sensory and emotional aspects of a memory.
- **Be aware of cultural bias**: although the programme was aimed at including different ethnic groups, the reminiscence workers discovered many cultural biases along the way. The triggers and themes chosen were predominantly Dutch. An attempt was made to avoid this by recruiting reminiscence workers with different ethnic backgrounds, but this was not always successful, as many of them were second or third generation im-
migrants who had grown up in the Netherlands and had become ‘more Dutch than Turkish or Moroccan.’ During the programme the reminiscence workers learned to consult the participants and use their suggestions for triggers, themes and activities and in doing so avoiding cultural bias.

- **Work with themes**: reminiscence is an associative activity that is difficult to structure. A certain level of structure is required for successful exchanges. This can be done by using universal themes that appeal to all, such as festivals, games, school, moving, family, work or clothes.

- **Offer a variety of reminiscence activities and triggers**: not all activities appeal to all people and not all triggers will have the same effect. It is therefore important to offer a variety of triggers (smells, such as cinnamon, photographs, kitchen appliances, coal, religious artefacts, etc.) that appeal to different senses and are appropriate in a variety of activities, such as roundtable sharing of stories, playing musical instruments, or childhood games, interviews, and shopping.

- **Do not try and record everything**: at the start of the programme the idea was that no story should be lost: The reminiscence groups were recorded, transcribed and translated. This process cost a lot of time, was cumbersome and led to immense files. As a result the stories were lost in the sheer vastness of paper. This led to the development of a new method for recording stories. When a story was shared the group would give it a name (a title, such as ‘my sister’s old shoes’). The title of the story, the name of the storyteller and a few key words (such as poverty, jealousy, sibling rivalry) were then recorded. The story could then be easily retrieved if necessary in the future.

### PROMOTING NEIGHBOURHOOD-REMINISCENCE

In order to encourage the development of similar programmes in the Netherlands the NIZW has published the book *Een buurt vol verhalen (A neighbourhood full of stories)*. This book gives insight into the importance and theory of neighbourhood-reminiscence and offers practical information for running a neighbourhood-reminiscence programme and starting an enduring process of social integration in the local community. There is also a documentary with the same name, a co production of NIZW and the Netherlands Programme Service (NPS). The documentary offers an honest insight into the experiences with neighbourhood-reminiscence in Lombok. It was aired on national television and is available on video. In order to offer training to neighbourhood-reminiscence workers and programme coordinators, the NIZW worked together with Odyssee, a training institute, to develop specific training courses. Hopefully the book, the video and the training possibilities will encourage other neighbourhoods in the Netherlands and elsewhere to embark on
the exciting road towards a narrative neighbourhood and the integration of
generations and cultures in local communities.

The experiences in Lombok have shown that neighbourhood-reminiscence
appeals to a variety of ages and ethnic groups. The enjoyment of sharing sto-
ries seems to be universal. Moreover, the developed method is flexible and can
easily be adjusted to local situations, values and participants, making it a
model that can be extended to a wide range of environments.

The Lombok programme was aimed mainly at the development of a new
method for reminiscence. Further research of neighbourhood-reminiscence is
necessary to gain more insight into its possibilities for diminishing cultural and
ageist stereotypes, and improving mutual understanding and local social cohe-
sion (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Photographer Betty Schmitz. This was an entry in the Generations United 2001
Intergenerational Photography Contest.
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