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# The social fabric of voluntary and community initiatives

On crafting space for meaningful relationships

# Foreword

The typical picture painted of voluntary and community initiatives is that they strengthen the social fabric of a place, be it a street, a neighbourhood, or a city. The Dutch collaborative programme Growing Older Together therefore wanted to learn how voluntary and community initiatives add value to the life of older persons by doing so. What would a more attentive and inclusive social fabric look like, and what strategies and skills are involved in building one?

For this purpose, Laurine Blonk conducted an ethnographic study of voluntary and community initiatives in the Netherlands (2020-2022). This publication is an English translation of the Dutch book into which this has resulted, with the insights gained from this research. The most important insight is that voluntary and community initiatives do not simply strengthen social fabrics but perform the ongoing work of crafting space within these fabrics for something meaningful to emerge. At times, this results in special, lasting relationships between participants, but most often this pertains to fleeting moments which are easily overlooked.

Voluntary and community initiatives are very diverse, just like the different sorts of relationships they allow for. This publication highlights that simply bringing people together does not automatically add value to people's life. Amidst the help and activities on offer, spaces are needed for meaningful relationships to emerge – and crafting these is both an art and a skill required from those involved in an initiative.

*Petra van Loon – program leader Growing Older Together*

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# 1 Introduction



“I was looking for a buddy, but I turned out to be a support for her too.”

“I’m one of the regulars at the community centre. I first came here years ago when I just volunteered for an afternoon. Now, everyone who visits here knows who I am.”

“We often have special and personal conversations, but I don’t know what to call our relationship. Apart from the weekly meetings, we never speak to each other; we never visit each other at home, for instance.”

Throughout social policy and practice, calls are made to invest in the social fabric of neighbourhoods, villages, and cities<sup>1</sup>. Social ties outside the circle of family and friends enrich life. Moreover, the social fabric is increasingly called upon in the light of pressing societal issues. Can we live together in more attentive and inclusive ways? How should we provide support and care, now and in the future? How do we allow everyone to grow old with a good quality of life? Investing in the social fabric, hence, is considered of value for both individuals and society.

This publication considers the role that voluntary and community initiatives can play in this regard. How do they contribute to such a social fabric? In the literature, we find two contrasting perspectives. Time and time again, research confirms the expertise with which coordinators and social workers support specific connections for target beneficiary groups. For example, a buddy project offers friendly company to people who

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the recommendations of the Dutch Raad voor Volksgezondheid en Samenleving (Council for Public Health and Society) in ‘Ruimte maken voor ontmoeting. De buurt als sociale leefomgeving?’ [Making spaces for contact. The neighbourhood as a social environment?]

experience a lack of this sort of connections. With tailored support, an ‘odd job’ service creates opportunities for people who receive a lot of support to offer help to others as well. By contrast, it is often claimed that the real added value of voluntary and community initiatives lies in the social fabric that unfolds organically in the context of an initiative. Volunteers for that odd-job service listen to each other sympathetically while they are repairing someone’s fence, for example. Or someone who comes to a drop-in morning for help, gets talking to different participants and feels more connected to the neighbourhood.

For this reason, we have conducted a three-year study (2020-2022) into the social fabric of voluntary and community initiatives, in collaboration with the Dutch program Growing Older Together (Samen Ouder Worden, see Appendix 3). We followed a cross-section of Dutch initiatives run by or offering services to older persons. Older persons may receive help, participate in activities, or be involved as a volunteer. The initiatives under study range from a community initiative in a Groninger village to a buddy project in Zoetermeer (Appendix 1). We studied how older persons meet people and develop relationships over time in the context of the help or activities on offer (Appendix 2).

During this study, many situations arose that were not predicted on paper. For example, a person discovers that she is a good listener while walking with her volunteer-buddy. Participants at the weekly coffee morning have deep conversations while playing board games and doing handicrafts. A difficult, demanding buddy contact brings fulfilment to the volunteer whenever they go cycling together. We learned that these unpredicted situations can be highly meaningful, and that they do not just happen spontaneously. Voluntary and community initiatives do not only bring people together, but also carefully craft space with their initiatives for such situations to unfold.

This publication discusses how these situations emerge in the context of ongoing relationships – such as between a volunteer and a person receiving help – and what makes them meaningful. These fleeting or more enduring meaningful relationships do not stand out

as extraordinary but are intertwined with the help offered and the sociable activities that people engage in together. Furthermore, these do not only emerge under pleasurable or harmonious conditions, but precisely amid sad or tense situations as well. We highlight the important role that coordinators play in crafting and maintaining the space for meaningful relationships to emerge amidst the social fabric of participants, persons receiving help and volunteers, and we set out the art and skill required for doing so. This way, we come to a better understanding about the role that voluntary and community initiatives play in strengthening social fabrics, both in terms of the value for (older) individuals and in the light of societal issues such as care, inclusion, and cohesiveness.

## **Outline**

In chapter 2, we explore the relation between voluntary and community initiatives and the social fabric. We explore the variety of the field by discussing the different forms of encounter and intermingling, as well as the different kinds of communal and paid staff support. Moreover, we discuss the complications involved in the terminology of coordinator, volunteer, person receiving help and participant, and how we deal with these throughout this publication.

In chapter 3, we introduce meaningful relationships. We steer away from specified outcomes for target beneficiary groups, as well as from diffuse notions of the value of a vibrant social fabric, by focusing on meaningful situations that can emerge in ongoing relationships. We set out how we can understand these in terms of space in-between persons. We then describe the role that voluntary and community initiatives can play in crafting this space in the social fabric of participants, persons receiving help and volunteers, and consider the conditions under which this role can be particularly important.

In chapters 4 and 5, we describe how meaningful relationships emerge in the social fabric of participants, persons receiving help and volunteers. In doing so, we make an analytic distinction between two dimensions that often intertwine in practice. In chapter 4, we focus on meaningful

relationships from the perspective of the individual. In chapter 5, we focus on being significant to others.

Chapter 6 deals with the art and skill of crafting and maintaining space for meaningful relationships to emerge in the context of help and activities on offer. We describe how coordinators do so in designing the initiative, by supporting persons individually, and by responding to situations unfolding between participants, volunteers and persons receiving help. We show that, in doing so, coordinators must navigate between seeking opportunities and respecting limits.

In the conclusions, we discuss what we have learned about the distinctive contribution that voluntary and community initiatives can make to the social fabric, and how policymakers and practitioners may best invest in them accordingly.

### **A word of thanks**

This study is originated through the involvement of participants, the persons receiving help, volunteers, coordinators, and paid staff involved in the initiatives studied. We are extremely grateful for the openness and trust of the participants and volunteers who shared their experiences and who welcomed Laurine to participate in various activities. We would also like to thank the coordinators and social workers for sharing their creativity and ideals and offering insight into the uncertain and difficult aspects of their work. We are thankful to those involved in Growing Older Together for sharing their thoughts and for familiarising us with the field. We also thank the members of the advisory board for their time, helpful suggestions, and incisive questions.

## 2 Volunteering and the social fabric

The relationship between voluntary and community initiatives and the social fabric exceeds well-known sociable activities such as walk-in coffee mornings. In this chapter, we reflect on how voluntary and community initiatives bring people together, and which concepts we use to describe this throughout the publication.

Voluntary and community initiatives encompass all sorts of activities that people undertake with or for other people outside of their own circle of family, friends, or immediate neighbours. These activities are typically sustained and repeated over time and supported or supervised by one or more persons with a paid or volunteer coordinating role<sup>2</sup>. While some of these activities explicitly aim to bring people together and build social ties, such as buddy projects or walk-in coffee mornings, other sorts of activities bring people together as well. For example, volunteers in a sports club gradually get acquainted with one another.

Coordinators play different roles in supporting or supervising voluntary and community initiatives. Some coordinators facilitate activities for a broad and unspecified group of participants, such as easily accessible coffee mornings or neighbourhood ‘odd job’ services. Other coordinators specialise in complex needs or working with specific groups, such as grief or mental health issues. They focus their activities on addressing a specific subject or issue, and often work on them with paid staff. Consequently, coordinators also play different kinds of roles in the social fabric that unfolds in the context of their initiative.

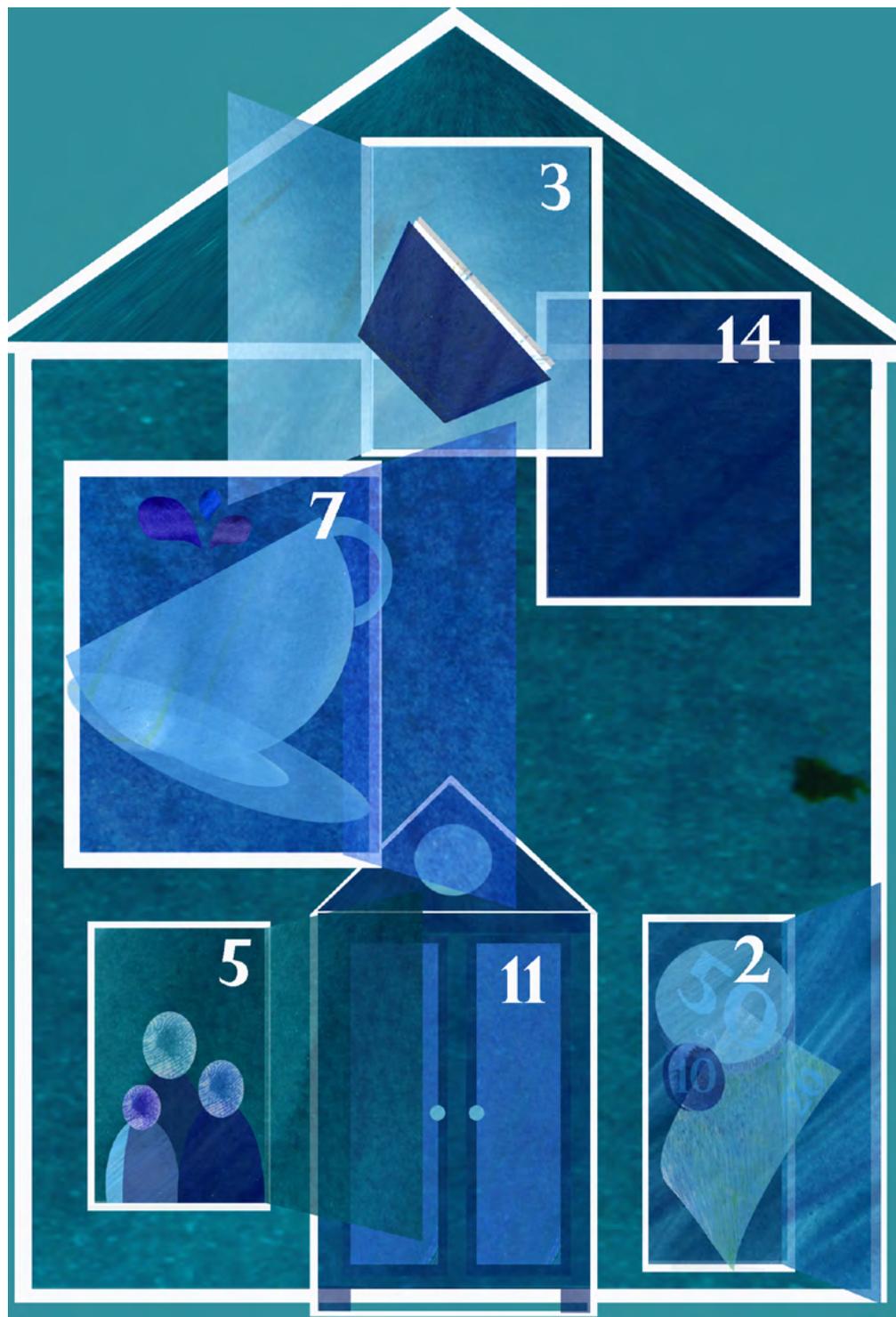
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2 Mourik et al., 2022

For example, they can match people with each other and offer specific guidance, set the tone and atmosphere of an activity, or offer training and consultation to volunteers.

We therefore consider in this publication the various ways in which people are brought together in the context of an initiative, irrespective of the degree to which this contact is specifically aimed for, or who is involved in bringing it about. This includes contact between persons receiving help and volunteers, but also contact between participants, between volunteers or between persons receiving help. Since roles and tasks cannot always be formally or strictly distinguished from each other, we mostly use the word 'participant' to refer to everyone involved in a voluntary or community initiative who is not a coordinator, rather than specifying whether they might be receiving help or be volunteering. Participants can also move between different roles or fulfil several roles in the course of time, which means that someone who receives help can also become a volunteer or be both at the same time. Whenever we refer to volunteer or person receiving help, we do so to clarify how their relation is shaped by the context of the initiative.

Coordinators may be a part of a specialist voluntary organisation (as a volunteer or in a paid post), but they may also work for a care or welfare organisation. Moreover, coordinator roles may also be adapted informally by participants. Whenever we discuss coordinators in this publication, we refer to everyone who performs a coordinating role on an institutional basis or a communal basis. We do not maintain a strict distinction between 'informal' initiatives and 'formal' organizations, which is why we use the term voluntary and community initiatives to refer to both.



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# “Those trips away, that’s what keeps me going”

**In our life we are used to show different aspects of ourselves in different relationships.**

Esther (84) has dealt with episodes of depression since adolescence. She doesn't regard them as an illness, but as a part of who she is. It's a part of her, just like her other qualities such as her empathy and appreciation of art. Luckily, her partner and her best friend know her through and through. It means a lot to her that a word is enough for them to understand what is going on with her. They know precisely how to react when things are difficult for her. These relationships have become deeper over the years. She, in turn, knows her partner and best friend inside out.

Esther knows that you must keep working on your relationships. When you struggle with depression for a long time, you can be too much of a burden for others. You can suddenly experience a relationship to be heavy, oppressive, or suffocating. That's why Esther sometimes looks for the levity in a relationship, by saying or doing something funny. This is why she

also watches stupid TV series with her partner. She doesn't like them, but it is a way for them to try to hold different kinds of conversation with each other.

Esther also finds this levity in her connection with people whom she doesn't have any personal connection. For a couple of years now, she and her partner have support from a voluntary organisation, because she can't do various things independently. Volunteers visit her at home from time to time to help in the garden, to assemble a cupboard or to clean the windows. There are different volunteers every time. So, she meets a lot of new people. In these little moments of contact, while doing something practical, Esther can chat about this and that and she can say funny things and make jokes. She knows that she won't see the volunteers again. Such a 'trip away' in a moment of contact, in her own words, makes her coping again for a while.

# Esther

## 3 Space in-between people

In this chapter, we introduce our theoretical lens in studying the social fabric of voluntary and community initiatives. We steer away from specified outcomes for target beneficiary groups, as well as from diffuse notions of the value of a vibrant social fabric. We introduce meaningful relationships and consider how these have to do with the space between persons. We also consider how voluntary and community initiatives can craft such space in the social fabric of participants, and under which conditions it is especially important that they do so.

### **Space between ourselves and others.**

We draw on existential phenomenology, a philosophical movement that places a particular emphasis on intersubjectivity. As relational beings, we are shaped by and shape ourselves in relationships with others. This means that social relationships are not just functional in terms of fulfilling specific social preferences or needs, such as social support or company, but also involve the care for who we are and become in relationships with others<sup>3</sup>. Various philosophers have therefore articulated relationships as a space ‘in-between’ persons. In this space, it is underdetermined who we are and which facets of ourselves make their appearance<sup>4</sup>.

This dimension of relationships is not only at stake when we reflect on who we want to be or what we value in our relationships with others, but permeates everyday life. Whether in intimate relationships or during fleeting encounters in public space<sup>5</sup>, we experience the social fabric we move in as a comfortable dwelling, or as limited or restrictive. Dwelling does not imply a pleasurable state, but an openness for a different side

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3 Ricoeur, 2007

4 Arendt, 1958

5 Loidolt, 2011

of self or a different way of relating, and this can be highly meaningful for who we can be and become in relation to others. We can discover new aspects of ourselves, for example, or spend time with one another differently over time. By contrast, if the space between ourselves and others is hampered or lacking, it is fixed how we may appear and who we can become in relation to others.

The space between ourselves and others is affected by the social context<sup>6</sup>. Stereotypes, for example, can fix people in a particular social identity, for example as needy or unpleasant company. This impedes the space they find in relations with others to make a different appearance. Personal circumstances can also impede space<sup>7</sup>. Unsettling events, for example illness or the loss of a loved one, leave us disoriented<sup>8</sup>. We can no longer go on as we used to do and have to figure out anew how we relate to others and may dwell in the space in-between.

### **Crafting space in voluntary and community initiatives**

We take this space as our point of departure to understand how meaningful relationships can emerge in the social fabric of voluntary and community initiatives. The relationship between a person receiving help and a volunteer can be defined by the help that that volunteer is offering, but the volunteer and the person can also relate in other ways. The person receiving help can offer a sympathetic ear, or they can discover shared interests. The one is not better than the other, but it matters whether the space is limited, and the relationship has already been specified beforehand, or whether the space between the person receiving help and the volunteer allows for something else to emerge as well.

We consider how meaningful relationships can emerge accordingly, whilst participants offer and receive help, or engage in sociable

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6 The role played by the social context in meaningful relationships is debated in 'critical phenomenology'.

7 Todres & Galvin, 2010

8 Harbin, 2016

activities together. We analytically distinguish finding meaning from a first-person perspective and being significant to other participants. Both play out in the space in-between, and therefore these typically overlap in the relationships that unfold in the context of voluntary and community initiatives. For example, a volunteer dwells in the space to discover the fulfilment she or he can gain from a helping relationship, and the person receiving help explores what she or he has to offer to the volunteer as well.

Social practices can actively craft such space<sup>9</sup>. We turn to the sociological work of the (phenomenologically inspired) philosopher Plessner<sup>10</sup>, to understand how voluntary and community initiatives may do so. Plessner rejects widespread contrasts between presumed natural and artificial relationships, which suggest that social roles hamper space in relationships while intimacy or spontaneity nurture it. On the contrary, he argues, roles grant such a space because they figure as masks that can leave the relationship and the people involved underdefined. For example, a person in need of help and a volunteer agree with the coordinator what help the volunteer can offer and how frequently they meet. Whether their relationship is defined solely in terms of the help that the volunteer is offering or whether they value each other's recurring company in and of itself as well is not made explicit. This makes it possible in the course of time to relate in different ways.

Plessner explains how social roles as masks does not pertain to a deliberate hiding of some part of oneself from view for the other. Social roles also leave something underdetermined in the relation to self. People have unknown, shifting and contradictory sides to them. Social roles, consequently, offer space for surprise, movement, and ambivalence in relationships. The abovementioned volunteer and person receiving help can switch over time between a sense of duty and pleasure, because the extent to which their role defines their relationship does not have

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9 Zigon, 2018; Westoby, 2019

10 2021

to be spelled out. Hence, social roles can craft space for meaningful relationships to emerge. In this regard, it does not matter whether social roles are formally structured in the context of a voluntary or community initiative, or whether they are created or adopted informally. In both cases, the roles can be employed to craft or maintain such space.

In the next two chapters, we discuss how meaningful relationships emerge in the space crafted for surprise, movement, and ambivalence in voluntary and community initiatives. After that, we address how coordinators craft this space in supporting and supervising initiatives. Coordinators herewith navigate both the social context as well as personal situations of participants and must balance between seeking opportunities and respecting limits.



# “I started to see myself differently”

**Profound changes in our lives provoke questions about who we can or want to be in relation to others. Connectedness can help develop a different attitude.**

Hannah (70) describes herself as a genuine people person. She used to own a supermarket in a village where she knew practically everyone. She was used to having a lot of things going on around her. Her door was always open, in both the literal and figurative sense. Whether someone was just popping in or was feeling down, you could always go to Hannah's. Then she got cancer and she had to sell her business. Against all odds, she recovered, but she was left with very little energy. She had to move to a ground floor flat for senior citizens in a city nearby.

Not only was her life radically different, but she also found that she had changed too. She has to say 'no' more often. When her friend telephoned the other day, she couldn't answer because she was just too tired. She is no longer the fun-filled Hannah she was. She is more serious now. She is supported by her friends. But she notices that they are looking at her in a different way now.

Hannah wanted to get to know more people. But she developed thoughts about not being a nice enough person to spend time with. When she told the voluntary initiative coordinator about

this, they introduced her to Irene. Hannah didn't know what to expect. Irene has a completely different life. She is a lot younger, has lived her whole life in the city and works in a top management job at a big company. But... Hannah soon realised that they got on very well with each other.

On their walks, they have serious conversations for hours about what is important in life. How do you connect with yourself and how do you deepen your relationship with the people around you? Hannah finds Irene's interests and topics of conversation stimulating and good for her, while Irene appreciates Hannah's understanding of human nature.

Not only does Hannah gain a lot of satisfaction from their conversations; she notices that she is doing it well. Gradually, she starts looking at herself, and the future, in a different way. She wonders whether she can do more, for example as a volunteer. She is hopeful that people who meet her now will get to know her as a social woman. Someone who you can go to, in times of need. Hannah understands what people are concerned about and what moves them.

Hannah

## 4 Finding meaning

In this chapter, we describe how meaningful relationships emerge amidst the help and activities on offer in voluntary and community initiatives. We discuss three ways in which these offer participants space to relate to one another in different ways and how this space can be meaningful to participants, namely as space for surprise, space for movement and space for ambivalence.

### Space for surprise

Participants find meaning through relating in new and unexpected ways. They discover sides of themselves in relation to others which they did not know yet. We can see this in Doris' situation, for example:



When Doris moved into an apartment on a housing estate on the edge of town after years in psychiatric care, her counsellor registered her for a buddy project. She was matched with Marrit, who is studying to be a doctor, because they both enjoy spending time in the countryside.

They go for a walk once a week in one of the conservation areas that surround their town. Doris really appreciates the conversations she has with Marrit while walking. She has often found communication difficult. She usually felt like she is trying too hard, but with Marrit, it is quite spontaneous.

When, after a time, Marrit reveals the pain of her family history, Doris is surprised that she can listen sympathetically and associate with Marrit together to come to a better understanding of her pain.

These experiences get Doris thinking. She realises that her sensitivity and associative mind can be a strength and not a problem and she aspires to do more with these qualities in the future, perhaps as a volunteer.

*“I didn’t have that in my current life. I have conversations on a café terrace, then it’s just a bit general. But I can do this, apparently, have conversations like that. I let myself be surprised, and that goes all right. And I would like more of that in my new life.”*

While walking together, Doris does not have to foreground her history with psychiatry, or how she has recovered from her admissions to psychiatric hospitals. This allows another side of herself to come to the fore. These qualities as a listener surprises Doris and she discovers that she wishes to be more of a listener in what she calls her ‘new life’.

Participants can also discover needs or wishes they were not aware of, through an unexpected way of relating. This happened to Pedro. He discovered what he was missing in his relationships with others while gardening together with volunteers.



A group of young people came to tidy up Pedro’s garden via a young people’s voluntary network. The garden had become completely overgrown since Pedro was no longer able to look after it. One of the young people who came to help, Xavier, shares Pedro’s Spanish background. They spent the rest of the afternoon conversating in Spanish. The coordinator asked Pedro if he would like to do that more often. Ever since, Xavier has been visiting him once a week.

Pedro realised that he had become rather down in the last few years, but that he cheered up when conversating with someone in his mother tongue.

A way of relating can also be unexpected and have a big effect on life more generally, as in Joop's situation.



Joop remembers little of the years after the death of his husband. What he does remember, however, is how he went to the community centre once with an acquaintance to attend the coffee morning. He hadn't had any particular interest, he didn't think that it had anything to offer him, but he went, nonetheless. At the end of the gathering, one of the participants offered him some soup, which is served every week for a reasonable price. Joop suddenly felt very cared for with this gesture. He explains that this showed him that, ultimately, you never have to face life alone. Whenever he returns to the community centre, he experiences this a little.

*"We went and sat there, and the cook came and asked: would you like something? Yes, he says, we would like some soup. Well, then we were given some soup. But he [the participant] found a new job, so he's gone. But I thought: why don't I just go to the community centre alone? So, I just come here on my own now. And then I might just eat soup with someone again."*

### **Space for movement**

Participants also find meaning by moving between different ways of relating. We see this in Aart's account.



Aart is a serious man who values the friendships that he has maintained for years. His friends know him inside out, know what is important to him and how they can support him when he is suffering from his bouts of depression. However, he also enjoys the contact with volunteers a lot who come to help him at home with practical things that he can't do himself anymore. If there is a 'click', he can spontaneously make crazy jokes with the volunteers or say daft things. According to Aart, as he gets older with his chronic health problems, it is an art to not just be serious, but also to be able

to have a laugh now and then. This is much easier with people who don't know what is going on. It is for this reason that even if there is a 'click', he doesn't feel the need to become more personal with the volunteers.

*"They don't need to ask: how are things now? How's your depression? It's nice to be incognito. I really enjoy just being able to have a chat with them. That might be superficial, but I really feel like I'm being taken seriously."*

His interactions with volunteers are important to Aart, because these differ from his intercourse with friends who know him through and through. With volunteers, there is an aspect of himself he doesn't have to discuss and another aspect that can come to the fore. Aart moves between who he is and who he can also be in relating to others.

The space for such movements can also be meaningful when a participant is confronted by upsetting life events and does not know how he or she wants to be in contact with others. We see this in Rosa's situation:



Rosa has been a carer for her parents who have been suffering from dementia for several years. Partly consequently, her marriage failed. After this difficult period, a friend, Marie, suggested that they go and do voluntary work together at a coffee morning. Marie wanted to help her meet more people, because Rosa used to enjoy company and a good atmosphere and was the life and soul of a party. Rosa thought it would be nice to do something with Marie but didn't know what else to expect from doing voluntary work.

They started going to the coffee morning as volunteers together and Rosa looks to see what she can do each time. Sometimes she is at the forefront, and she talks to people while she brings the coffee and tea round to everyone. Another time she might sit at a table herself. Sometimes the roles are switched, so that Marrie is the one who shows her

social side and Rosa is the one who is busy in the kitchen or with cleaning up.

*“For example, Marrie goes and sits at the end of a table and starts talking about something, so that people begin to gossip themselves - or she begins to collect the cups from the table at the end of the morning, so that people know that they must leave. She can do that very well. It is always nice this way. Relaxed for me. I do it simply so that I can get away for a bit.”*

Now that her situation has changed so drastically, Rosa’s qualities and needs seem to shift from moment to moment. With her role as a volunteer, she doesn’t have to spell out precisely what she wishes in her contact with others. In performing her role, she figures out incrementally who she can and wishes to be.

### **Space for ambivalence**

Participants also find space in voluntary and community initiatives to deal with contradictory aspects of themselves or their situation. The space allows the different sides of themselves to exist alongside one another, without one overshadowing the other. Sometimes, meaningful relationships emerge amidst this ambivalence, as is the case with Maria.



Maria is one of the regular participants of the weekly coffee morning in the community centre near her in town. She sometimes sits at a table for a little while, but mostly, she can be found in the adjoining room, the charity shop, where she helps with sorting out donated items and placing them on display. She finds the conversations at the coffee table superficial, and she wishes there were more like-minded people in her town. She would like to have the opportunity to engage in more serious conversations about things that concern her, like her worries about the end of her life as a single woman. That said, she can also enjoy the coffee mornings, because the atmosphere is lively and positive. She is looking forward every week.

*“This way, I don’t have to take part, but I can be there in-between”.*

As a volunteer, Maria doesn’t have to specify whether she can relate to the atmosphere of the coffee table. On the one hand, she doesn’t like it and doesn’t want to be a part of it; on the other, she enjoys the atmosphere, and she likes to be there. She can allow contradictory sides of herself to co-exist in relating to others. What she finds lacking doesn’t overshadow what she values about the coffee morning.

We also see how this space can allow for meaningful relationships in Els’ situation.



Els mourns about the broken contact with her family and misses the bond with her children and grandchildren. She has done everything she possibly could to change the situation, but, after such a long time, she finally had to conclude that there was nothing more to be done. Two years ago, she registered for an ‘bonus grandmother/dad project’ and she is very happy with her new family with two ‘bonus granddaughters’. She does things with these girls that she always wanted to do as a grandmother, like handicrafts, eating ice cream together and trips to the petting farm. However, it is not the same as one’s own family, and that wouldn’t be right either. For that reason, she has asked them not to call her ‘Grandma’, but Els.

The role as ‘bonus grandmother’ offers space for Els’ ambivalence. On the one hand, Els can do ‘grandmotherly things’, which she enjoys very much; and on the other hand, she feels that the contact is not the same as her family relationships.

P



B

# “Bart knows me as I am now”

**Our identity is constantly evolving. Others don't always see this change and keep seeing us how they learnt to see us. This can all be changed by an unprejudiced view.**

For the last two months, a kitchen island has adorned the middle of Peter's (74) apartment in a striking combination of ochre and aluminium. Peter describes how his apartment finally feels like a home now that he has been able to refurbish it to his own taste. He moved to this quiet suburb after he divorced twenty years ago. It is only since he has become free of debt, three years ago, that he can buy things that he likes. He chooses lighter colours and more modern furniture than what he used to find in charity shops.

Two years ago, he became a network coach for Bart who lives two streets away from him. Initially, he was meant to support Bart in undertaking more social activities and in getting to know new people. At the introduction, however, it clicked immediately between the two men. The coordinator noticed it as well. Peter and Bart have gone out a couple of times together, but it soon became apparent that they enjoyed being at home more. When they now agree to meet up, it is generally to listen to music

from the 60s and 70s and they play board games for hours. Sometimes they invite Bart's neighbour or Peter's nephew, who like board games as well. For his birthday, Peter received two puzzles as a present from Bart in the shape of Rolling Stones LPs. They are now hanging on the wall in the living room.

Peter doesn't really see himself as Bart's coach. They both enjoy seeing each other a lot. As far as he's concerned, they will continue to do that even when the coaching period has finished. What he really likes is that he can completely be himself around Bart. He finds himself changed over the years and this is particularly apparent when he is with Bart. Peter maintains good contact with his family, but they still see him as the person he was when he was still dealing with his divorce. With Bart, however, Peter can easily talk to him about his attitude to life now. He has learnt to be more open; he talks about it if things aren't going well, and he knows that he can ask for help if things get on top of him.

# Peter

## 5 Being significant to others

In this chapter, we describe how participants endeavour to be significant to others, through the space found in the help and activities of voluntary and community initiatives. Meaningful relationships can emerge accordingly in the space for surprise, space for movement and space for ambivalence.

### Space for surprise

Participants conduct modest experiments and employ different facets of themselves to find new, unexpected ways of relating to others. They meet up, for example, in one of their homes instead of a public place or they deliberately share some of their interests with a person receiving help. We see this in Sarah's case. She explains how she does this to find new forms of contact as a volunteer in her helping relationship.



*“At a given moment, I told her things about my personal life, and she began to look after me a little bit instead of me just being there for her. So, by creating that openness, a real relationship was established, instead of me just giving and she just receiving.”*

Sometimes participants discover new or unexpected ways of relating spontaneously, without deliberately trying something out, as in Berend's case.



Berend has had a volunteer 'buddy', Ben, for a year. Ben helps with practical things like tidying up and renovating his house. This was something that Berend found difficult to face on his own, he never got it done. Once, Berend and Ben were taking chairs to the local dump by bicycle. It was very difficult that way, they were floundering about, and they had to laugh at themselves. Since that time though, they always have lots of fun when they are tidying up or working on the house together. Berend was amazed. Ben really does come to help him and doesn't shirk from anything. While there is nothing wrong with these clearly defined roles, now that they have discovered that it can also be very enjoyable together, Ben thinks that he finds much more fulfilment in meeting each other.

*"We did a lot of work on the house last year. At first, I was a bit ashamed of myself, because I didn't do it myself... But now I've found that it's just fun. It doesn't matter what we do, it's always fun. We're sort of mates."*

The relationship between Berend and Ben did not suddenly change from a volunteer-buddy contact to another sort of relationship when they found out that they could have a laugh together, it illustrates how there is space for different ways of relating within their relationship.

Sometimes, new ways of relating emerges when participants must respond to situations that present themselves. Mahmut, for example, figured out a new role for himself when he discovered that other participants in the coffee morning needed transport.



Mahmut heard one of the other participants in the weekly coffee morning tell the community worker that he had to go to the hospital, but that he didn't have his own means of transport and he didn't want to ask his family. Mahmut joined the conversation and said that he had a car and would be happy to take him to the hospital. The participant was surprised by the offer and happily accepted. The community worker thanked Mahmut. Since then, Mahmut sometimes says spontaneously during the coffee morning: if you need someone to take you anywhere, I can probably do it. Just let me know.

*"It's what we're supposed to do, help each other. I don't call it voluntary work."*

### **Space for movement**

Participants also move in the space offered by voluntary and community initiatives between different ways of relating. They do not define who or what they are in respect of each other and therefore, they can be significant to others by moving along with changing situations. They do this by developing habits and codes for doing so in the help and activities on offer.



Irene helps slice the vegetables for the meals that the volunteers prepare. When the first dish is in the oven, one of the volunteers from the community centre comes and sits next to her to talk about the situation with her husband and to ask if she can help them in some way.

The volunteer and Irene have found a way for Irene to be a 'volunteer' one moment helping another volunteer, and a 'person in need of help' the next, when she is being supported by the volunteer in a difficult situation with her husband. They can switch in their relationship, without words, between the different ways of relating, without one excluding the other.

Participants also develop habits and codes to move between different ways of spending time together, such as between a light-hearted activity and a serious conversation, for example, like these participants in the coffee morning.

 Several activities take place during the coffee morning: a group of participants play a board game, some do crossword puzzles or read, and a couple of other participants do handwork, like knitting. Some weeks, despite the noise of the other activities, two or three participants remain at the coffee table for personal and more serious conversations with each other about their worries about family members at the epicentre of the Groningen earthquake zone<sup>11</sup>.

Participants also react to changing situations accordingly. Astrid and Janet switched roles once, for example, when Janet's situation suddenly altered.

 Astrid is a voluntary 'buddy' for Janet. Every week, Astrid goes to Janet's, and they play board and card games together. When Astrid became so sick that she couldn't leave the house for a few months, they kept to their weekly schedule of playing games together, only this time, Janet went to Astrid's house. She also sometimes brought shopping for Astrid with her sister.

*"Yes, when I was sick, when she came to visit me at home, she liked that I wasn't alone. Thursday afternoons, that was the rhythm, but then the other way round. Without being asked. She sent a WhatsApp message: Would you mind if I came round for a bit on Thursday? Yes, good. Yes, she knew that I was sick, of course, and that I couldn't [go out]. The roles were reversed. She helped me instead of me helping her."*

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11 Gas extractions from the northern region of Groningen has caused thousands of earthquakes, which have severely damaged entire neighbourhoods and trigger mental health issues for residents. The governmental response is highly controversial as many people feel that the wealth of the nation was put ahead of the mental health of its citizens.

When Astrid had completely recovered, the roles were switched again, and Janet has never been back to Astrid's house. The rhythm of seeing each other weekly and playing games together offers the opportunity to relate differently for a while and switch back later without causing any confusion as to what Astrid and Janet can ask and expect of each other.

## Space for ambivalence

In some situations, participants use the space to establish and maintain contradictory relationships. They may discover during activities, for example, that there are several, contradictory ways of being of significance to others. What can be significant for one can come at the cost of what is important to the other. This happens, for example, at a twice weekly coffee morning in a village in Groningen.



Supported by two volunteers, the group has been meeting every fortnight for six months to play board and card games and to eat lunch together in the community hall. Once, they played bingo for the first time and by mid-morning, one of the participants, Jan, had won twice. This became a source of disagreement amongst a few of the group. One of the participants, Stella, said that it wasn't right. Everyone had brought a prize, and it wouldn't be fair if some people went home with empty hands and others had several prizes. Bart, who had been calling the bingo numbers, was irritated by this, and said that it's no fun if you can't win any more, that Jan might as well go home. Various participants began to talk over each other, and it started to become heated. Then Greet raised her voice and said: "Jan can decide for himself what he wants to do with the second prize, because he's the one who won it. He could perhaps give it to someone who hasn't won anything at the end of the morning." The entire group went quiet, and several participants nodded in agreement. Greet seemed slightly bewildered by the effect of her words. Then Jan broke the silence: "Yes, if anyone wants this present, you can have it, otherwise I will give it to someone at the end."

During the bingo, the participants discovered that the joy of some players came at the cost of the joy of others. The question arose how they wanted to spend their time together, and what they could or could not offer to each other in this regard.

This is why participants sometimes balance between different, contradictory sides of their relationship, by leaving something undefined.



Every Monday morning, the group gathers at 10 am at the communal table. For some of the participants, they do so for the sake of spending time together. For other participants, they do so because the community worker supports them with practical matters. Consequently, some of the participants go home promptly at the end at 11 am, while others stay for a little while.

The participants leave something undefined in their contact by shifting attention away from their relationships to the activity of drinking coffee together. They fill each other's cup, they take newspapers with them to read together, and they discuss what activities they want to undertake at the next coffee morning. They know what they do together, but it is left unsaid who they are precisely in relation to each other.

By leaving something undefined, participants keep exploring how they can be significant to others. We see, for example, how Petra develops a contradictory relationship with her buddy Maaïke. Even though she struggles with their relationship and is sometimes at the limit of what she is willing to accept, Petra keeps on searching how they can be together meaningfully.



Petra and Maaïke got to know each other on a buddy initiative, because they both like cycling. Petra, however, questioned herself whether she finds anything of value in the relationship, or whether she is only continuing out of a sense of duty. Because of her mental health issues, Maaïke can be difficult to be with. This takes up a lot of Petra's energy, which is why she considered to quit.

At the end of the official buddying period (a year), Petra and Maaïke agreed to see each other every fortnight instead of every week. It's left undefined whether cycling together is still voluntary work or whether they have become some sort of acquaintances. Petra now thinks that it is both and neither. It'll never be something spontaneous, the difficulties will always be there, but she has started to enjoy and find fulfilment in cycling together.

*"And I was thinking... How does this feel now? And it feels equal. We just enjoying cycling together. I feel kind of useful, or I gain a positivity... Yes, I don't know how to describe it... Because we came together in a different way, of course. As someone needing help and someone providing that help, if that isn't overstating it, but... We came together in a different way."*

By leaving it unsaid whether cycling together is still voluntary work or a friendly relationship, Petra can allow contradictory feelings about their relationship to co-exist. On the one hand, the relationship is still complicated and continued out of a sense of duty; on the other, she enjoys and finds fulfilment in being together while cycling.



# “I learn to let go of things more easily”

**If there is a connection with someone, you just feel it. It helps you to discover new aspects or a new attitude.**

Gerda (76) is a regular volunteer at the residents' association of her block of flats. When she went for a drink for the first time four years ago, she got to talk with a member of the board. He asked her if she liked to help with the film night. After that, she started helping with other activities. This is typical for who Gerda is. She has a strong sense of responsibility and likes to contribute. People know that they can rely on her.

Gerda is proud of who she is, but also knows that she can be too committed. She has learnt the hard way that she sometimes goes too far. She once had a conflict with the homecare organisation for which she worked, because she stood up for a client. It hit her so hard that she opted for early retirement. She had also a few conflict situations in her family. All of this has made her learn to just leave some things the way they are to preserve her peace of mind and to keep enjoying the things she does. Despite this, however, she still feels responsible. Her partner and daughter often try to tackle her about this, albeit lovingly.

Another resident in the block of flats, Natasha, is also a regular volunteer. She and Gerda often form a duo. They take care of the drinks and snacks, for instance.

Natasha is somewhat slapdash, perhaps, in what she does. She doesn't get rattled if things don't go as planned. Although Gerda and Natasha both want to make their collaboration work, their differences could lead to irritation. Gerda thought that Natasha regarded her efforts to ensure an atmospheric, stress-free get-together for participants as meddling.

After they talked it over, Gerda noticed that, not only their attitude to each other had changed, but that something changed in herself. She finds Natasha's approach inspiring. It surprises her how, because of this, it is now easier to let go of her sense of responsibility more often. One night, it became apparent that a couple of the participants were not taking the Corona rules too seriously. Gerda was going to tell them off straightaway, but Natasha wanted to wait a little to see if the situation wouldn't resolve itself. And indeed, that's what happened after one of the participants made it clear that he didn't feel comfortable. Gerda gets a lot of satisfaction by trying to follow Natasha's example. What helps is that they enjoy being together. They joke a lot about their differences. It is in their humour that they express their appreciation of each other.

## 6 The art and skill of crafting space

In this chapter, we discuss how the coordinator of a voluntary or community initiative may craft space for meaningful relationships to emerge amidst the help or activities on offer. This is a different aspect of coordinating than providing help or support directly or organizing something to bring people together. We found that in some initiatives, coordinators do this deliberately and regard it as an important part of their coordinating role. In other initiatives, coordinators do it as a matter of course in the way they go about and respond to situations. There are also voluntary and community initiatives where coordinators do not craft space.

In the next paragraph, we first describe how coordinators can craft space in different ways. We show the creativity with which they do so in the organisation of the help and activities on offer, in supporting participants individually, and by responding to situations that arise between participants. It is not just a question of skill here, but how they navigate between seeking opportunities and respecting limits. This is because crafted spaces do not always turn out as hoped, they can also lead to tensions and pitfalls in relationships between participants. We therefore also consider in conclusion why and how coordinators sometimes do the opposite and actively close off space in the relationships between participants.

### **Crafting space**

Coordinators craft space in the relationships that participants develop in two ways. Firstly, they do so by supporting them to relate differently. This frees participants from being defined by a particular version of themselves regarding others in the context of the help and activities on offer. For example, someone who usually encounters with others as a person in need of help can also, via the initiative, come into contact

with others as a volunteer. Secondly, coordinators can craft space by helping participants leave some things unsaid or undefined. It doesn't have to be spelled out if someone is a person receiving help or a volunteer offering help, for example.

## **Organisation of the help and activities on offer**

Coordinators craft space by 'staging' alternative manners of relating with the organisation of the help and activities on offer. They deliberately furnish the space in which an activity takes place accordingly. Participants can adopt these manners, like roles in a scene, and relate in other ways than they usually do outside the setting of the initiative.

A community worker places newspapers on the communal table, for example.



The communal table is located in a center where people go to ask for some help or support from the municipality. Various newspapers are placed in the middle of the table. The first person to take a seat starts reading the local newspaper. When another person joins, they start talking about the news. More people come and sit at the table and join the conversation. They talk about what they might be able to do for their neighbourhood together.

By reading and discussing the news together, the participants do not relate to one another as 'persons in need of help', but as a group that concerns itself with affairs in the neighbourhood.

Coordinators also introduce alternative phrases for concepts like 'person receiving help' and 'volunteer' when organising their initiative, so that the relationships between participants can remain unspecified. A coordinator addresses all the persons receiving help and volunteers of her initiative in her newsletter as 'members of the network', for example. The newsletter itself contains various reports and requests. Both persons receiving help and volunteers are addressed as people who may perform different roles in the initiative, now or in the future.

Coordinators do not just create alternative terms, however. They play with language to give expression to the multi-sidedness of participants, and that roles do not define who they are or how they may appear to others. A coordinator wrote in an annual report, for example, that persons receiving help, volunteers and participants are all ‘people with a little problem’ to put such distinctions into question.



This “inclusive facility” is for people with a little problem: informal carers, the lonely, the long-term unemployed, active pensioners, burnt-out hard workers, children, musicians, salespeople, bookworms, insecure people, eavesdroppers, townspeople, gardeners, makers, historians, connoisseurs and chefs, cake eaters, coffee guzzlers, crossword puzzlers, hikers, cyclists, dignitaries, tree huggers... in short, everyone.

### **Supporting participants individually**

By supporting participants individually, coordinators craft space for participants to explore different ways of relating. They let participants envision possibilities that they might not have considered before or that they couldn't imagine.

In a ‘bonus grandmother and grandfather’ project, for example, the coordinator employs the roles of bonus grandmother and grandfather to help participants envision that they are not only looking to fulfil their own wish in a relationship with a bonus family, but that can also be significant to the bonus grandchild.



The coordinator talks to an older couple who wants to register as bonus grandmother and grandfather. The couple has doubts, because they have a rough sense of their own motives, but they do not know whether they have something to offer to a bonus family. The coordinator responds: “Isn’t it fine that you are going to do typically grandmotherly and grandfatherly things? What do grandmothers and granddads do?” The couple is silent. The coordinator continues: *“They go to the petting farm, they eat ice cream... It really is about those small, everyday things. That’s how you will be a grandad and grandmother to your bonus family.”* The couple decides to sign up.

Coordinators also support participants to keep the relationships they build with others somewhat undefined. They emphasize that participants do not need to wonder whether they are taking sufficiently care of one another’s needs or issues. The coordinator can always step in to help or support in the background.



After the introduction, the coordinator explains to a volunteer: *“It’s about doing something together that you both enjoy. You don’t have to worry about your buddy’s schizophrenia, but if you want to ask me something about it, you can always give me a call.”*

Coordinators do not inquire into the precise nature or status of the relationships that participants build with others. They focus on participant’s experiences and acknowledge that these can vary and not always need to be ‘positive’.



Participants in a buddy project are matched with each other for a year. They sign a contract to that effect. Participants often continue to meet one another after the one-year period. Some while after the year has passed, the coordinator telephones them to ask how they feel it is going. Whether the continuation of their relationship is then still voluntary work, under supervision from the buddy project, is never addressed.

### **Responding to situations arising between participants**

Coordinators are often co-present when participants engage in activities together. This way, they can respond to situations that arise between them. They can, for example, offer suggestions to relate differently, by setting an example.



The community worker always starts the coffee morning with a question: *“Who isn’t here this week?”* She then telephones the person who is absent: *“Hello, it’s us, the group. We miss you, you’re not here. Is everything all right? Are you still coming for coffee?”* Some participants have adopted this role in the course of time and telephone participants themselves if they are not there. *“Hello, it’s me. We miss you. Is everything all right? Are you still coming for coffee?”*

Many of the participants are dealing with complex problems and receive multiple forms of care and support. The community worker sets an example of how they relate to one another in a different way, namely as people taking care of others by means of concrete action.

Coordinators can also assist individual participants during an activity.

 Sylvia, the coordinator, is walking around the community centre. One participant is sitting at the coffee table but does not seem at ease. She is not taking part in the discussion. Sylvia sits down next to her. Martin is busy tidying up the cupboard where the board games are. It would be good to get that finished. The participant replies: *“Yes, I’ll go and help him.”*

This way, coordinators support participants who get stuck in a certain situation to relate differently again.

Coordinators also support participants to leave undefined who they are with regard to one another. For example, by responding with humour whenever participants seek to clarify this.

 At the communal table in the community centre, the participants discuss whether the group needs a coordinator to deal with differences between them. The coordinator sits down with them and responds, jokingly: *“Okay, I’ll be your mother then.”* The participants respond with exaggerated emphasis: *“Yes, you’re our mother! We don’t need a coordinator, but a mother!”* Everyone laughs. The coordinator leaves the table and the participants start discussing current affairs.

## **Tensions and pitfalls of crafted space**

Such crafted space does not only allow for meaningful relationships to emerge; it also comes with pitfalls and can lead to tensions. Participants can adopt roles that they do not perform well or even problematically, for example. The space crafted for one participant then comes at the cost of other participants.



The daughter of a mother with dementia requested a volunteer to work with her mother in the garden. Her mother gains a lot of satisfaction from gardening, but she is no longer able to do this alone. However, the volunteer keeps cancelling at the last minute. One moment because she has a headache, the next because of stress. The daughter ultimately ends the voluntary work, because the volunteer brings more worry and disruption for her and her mother instead of being a help.

Tensions can also arise between participants if the coordinator leaves something unsaid or ill defined. This became apparent for visitors to the community centre who did not know that one of the volunteers was difficult to get on with because of a particular disorder.



Several visitors to the community centre were irritated by the behaviour of one of the volunteers in the charity shop. He was often rude and snappy and drove customers away consequently. Visitors felt that they always needed to correct the volunteer and tell him how he should be doing his job.

The coordinator chose not to inform visitors about the volunteer's disorder, because she did not want to fixate on certain facets of him in contact with others. The other participants, however, did not understand the volunteer's behaviour and did not know how to deal with these.

Crafted space can also bring about tensions and pitfalls for participants themselves. We see this in Lars' situation, who ended up overworked after he started to do more and more for a person in need of help.



Lars wants to be of service to other people. For this reason, he went shopping for an older woman. When she started asking him to help her out with other errands, he figured that he should happily do so, but gradually he started doing more and more. Lars worried that she could not turn to anyone else, and that if he were to say no, she would have to fend for herself.

Moreover, it can also be trying for participants to keep relationships undefined, and even put these relationships into question, such as in Margo's situation.



Officially, you just have a network coach for a year. And she has been here for almost two years. I thought we got on very well, but she wants to meet less often now. She said: *'By now, you know how to build your network in the neighbourhood, and you really can do that yourself if you want to.'* *Of course, she has to quit at a given moment, but we could still keep in touch now and then perhaps, I don't know. You can't ever tell what someone else is thinking."*

Margo does not know where she stands but does not discuss this explicitly with the volunteer either. It is never made explicit whether the relationship is still voluntary work or whether it has turned into something else over time.

### **Navigating possibilities and limits**

Coordinators therefore must navigate between possibilities and limits when organising and supporting their initiative. They must weigh up whether they want to craft space for what may emerge between participants or whether it is better to close off space.

Coordinators can close off space in different ways. They can do so by formalising roles and setting conditions.



The coordinator spoke to an older couple who had registered as a 'bonus grandmother and grandfather'. The family's mother had been in touch because she had the sense that the couple did not really want to build a personal connection. The first time the children came, the couple had left them in front of the television. The coordinator talked to the older couple and concluded to end their connection with the bonus family.

Coordinators can also close off space by discussing explicitly with participants how they should treat one another and make agreements with them.



There was disquiet at the coffee morning when two new men suddenly walked in and sat at the table. People worried who should take responsibility for ensuring that everyone feels welcome in these sorts of situations? Some believed this should be the job of the coordinator. The coordinator, however, thought it was important that participants can easily take up informal volunteer roles as host or hostess and be the person to welcome the guests. The participants and the coordinator then agreed with each other to make the role more formal: there always has to be one person assigned as volunteer who is responsible for welcoming the guests.

The coordinator first sought to craft space by leaving undefined who could take up roles as 'volunteer'. However, this space raised concerns for other participants. Therefore, the space was closed off again to make clear for everyone who is responsible for welcoming any guests.

Coordinators do not only do this when tensions arise, they can also close off space preventatively to avoid these in the first place.



*A coordinator warns student-volunteers: “You are enthusiastic now and you want to arrange to meet with your buddy a lot, but how are you going to do that during exam period? It’s better to arrange something with your buddy now that you can continue even when you are busy with your studies. It’s better to agree to meet once a fortnight than once a week.”*

In this example, the coordinator seeks to avoid tensions for the volunteers themselves as well as for their buddies.

## 7 Conclusions

Voluntary and community initiatives are very diverse, just like the different sorts of relationships they allow for. They do not just address requests for help, but they also provide opportunities to meet new people and build relationships. This provided the impetus for this study. In this conclusion, we discuss what we have learned about the role that voluntary and community initiatives play in strengthening social fabrics, both in terms of the value for individuals and in the light of societal issues.

Whenever participants help one another or engage in sociable activities, often something different unfolds between people than what the activity was initially aimed at. Voluntary and community initiatives do not only bring people together, but carefully craft space for such situations to emerge. The meaning of these situations demonstrates the importance of places where people can relate to one another differently and keep exploring who they want to be and become.

### **The value for individuals**

The value of social relationships for meaning and quality of life is well-known<sup>12</sup>, as well as the expertise with which voluntary and community initiatives, such as buddy projects, can support specific social relationships for target beneficiary groups. Voluntary and community initiatives do not only aim for specific relationships, but also craft open-ended space 'within' relationships in the context of help and activities on offer for meaningful situations to emerge. This space deepens our understanding of how these initiatives add value to people's lives.

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12 Machielse, 2021

Firstly, this space does not stand out as extraordinary, but is intertwined with everyday situations. This way, the possibilities of voluntary and community initiatives differ from and complement other forms of (paid) care or support. For example, someone who is always addressed as a patient finds space in voluntary and community initiatives to discover how she can be significant to someone else or just to enjoy being in the company of others. The voluntary initiative allows them to free themselves from versions of themselves they have often been defined as in contact with help providers or other people and discover new aspects of themselves.

Secondly, this space does not just pertain to pleasant and enjoyable situations, but also to persistent tensions or unresolvable issues. Voluntary and community initiatives do not only bring people together, but also deal with complex requests for help in which wants, needs and possibilities can be unclear or contradictory, and work with target groups who require specific expertise and support. These initiatives then offer participants a space for experiment as it were<sup>13</sup> to discover who they can and wish to be in a situation in which they find themselves.

## **Societal value**

Policy cannot formulate an answer to every social issue. It cannot invent manners of relating that do justice to mutual differences, or impose social bounds in neighbourhoods, towns and cities that ensure that everyone can grow older together with a good quality of life. This is why high expectations are placed on strengthening the social fabric, as to allow for people to shape mutual help, involvement, and solidarity themselves. This study demonstrates, however, that diffuse notions of a vibrant social fabric are ill-suited for understanding the role that voluntary and community can play.

Firstly, the study underlines the criticism that simply bringing people together is not inherently desirable or positive<sup>14</sup>, and that barriers

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13 Mattingly, 2014

14 Blonk et al., 2019

and thresholds have to be considered. People do not just need to get acquainted; they need space to explore how they can relate to one another and be significant to each other. As a counterweight to societal images or expectations from policy and practice, which can put people off or mismatch with participants' situations, voluntary and community initiatives can support participants to explore how their relationships with each other can be and what they want them to become.

Secondly, the study shows that voluntary and community initiatives not only facilitate new connections, but also perform maintenance work on connections that have already been established. By crafting space, voluntary and community initiatives ensure that the social fabric also accommodates for the tensions and difficult aspects of living together, and that people maintain contact also when relationships are put under strain by these. Moreover, they allow for something meaningful to emerge amidst these situations as well. This distinct contribution deserves more recognition.

### **Role of the coordinator**

The role of the coordinator to craft space is crucial in the help or activities on offer by voluntary and community initiatives. A lot is already known about the expertise of coordinators in supporting and supervising matches (for example, in 'buddy projects') and various activities. This study spotlights a different side of their role, namely the creativity which they use in what they have to offer to craft space in the relationships that participants develop, and the sensitivity to respond to specific situations that arise between them.

The study also shows how coordinators must navigate between seeking possibilities and respecting limits. There is not one effective way to bring people together and strengthen the social fabric. For each situation, coordinators must consider what is the most important. In some situations, they might choose to avoid the possible negative experiences, pitfalls, and tensions in relationships between participants. They close off space, but in doing so, they also limit possibilities for meaningful relationships to emerge. In other situations, they decide that the possibilities for something else to unfold outweigh the risks involved in crafting and maintaining space.

## Questions for follow-up research

To invest in voluntary and community initiatives accordingly, some important questions have risen that call for further research. We discuss three questions for follow-up research.

The first question is how we may promote the art and skill of crafting space. We found that coordinators, initiatives, and the organisations behind them deal very differently with crafting and closing off space. Some coordinators deliberately do so, others do not regard it as part of their role. Does it require certain characteristics or skills, and can these be taught? An additional question is whether the coordinator should always be the one to craft space, or whether participants or volunteers (on certain conditions) can also perform this role.

A second question is how these insights can be differentiated to the diverse range of informal help, civic action, and social practice. On one hand, we should consider low-key initiatives, such as sports associations. Do volunteers from a football association, for example, find space to explore how they want to relate to one another? And if that is the case, how is that space crafted and is there someone who plays a coordinating role in that? On the other hand, we should also consider the relationships that unfold in the context of paid help and care provision.

The third and final question pertains to the conditions under which voluntary and community initiatives can add value in response to complex issues that require specific expertise. The study has shown that initiatives do so, and herewith make their own contribution alongside the expertise of the paid provision of assistance and care. More research is needed to understand how coordinators work together with partners, such as paid providers of assistance and care, to craft this space in response to complex issues<sup>15</sup> and what are the limits of doing so in difficult and complex situations.

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15 Grootegoed et al., 2018; Blonk, 2019

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# Appendix 1 Voluntary and community initiatives under study

In this appendix, we provide brief descriptions of the initiatives that have participated in this study.

## **Netwerk Nieuw Rotterdam, Rotterdam**

Netwerk Nieuw Rotterdam is a local branch of the young people's volunteer network TijdVoorActie, where young people do one-off, temporary, or structural volunteer work for people in Rotterdam. The network also organises different activities for the young volunteers themselves so that they can develop themselves and meet other people of the same age. For this study, we focussed on buddying between young and older people and practical help for older people.

## **Handjehelpen, Utrecht region**

Handjehelpen is a voluntary organisation that matches volunteers and students seeking work placements with people requesting help. They work intensively with paid care organisations, social workers, and social vocational education to find buddies for groups where specific supervision, expertise or experience is required. For this study, we focussed on buddies that Handjehelpen had arranged for older persons with mental health issues.

## **Group for older men with a migratory background, Alkmaar**

Various older men with a migratory background come together every week. The group was initiated by the community centre and is supported by the community worker from Vrouwenkracht ['Women's Power'] Alkmaar. The group endeavours to cultivate involvement mutual support and civic engagement, within the group as well as in the neighbourhood. A regular group of participants has emerged over the course of time who sometimes undertake activities beyond the coffee table, such as walking football.

## **Activities in an apartment block formerly for older people, Groningen**

A handful of regular volunteers and the residents' committee have been organising activities for older residents in the apartment block for decades. They continued to do this when the building was sold to another owner who changed its use into social housing for other renters, not just older people. They meet in the communal area of the apartment block for a coffee morning twice a week and drinks once a month. During most of the course of this study, these activities were supported by a community worker.

## **Bonus oma en opa (grandmother and -dad), Stichting Present, Zoetermeer**

Parents who do not have grandchildren of their own are put in contact with young families in the neighbourhood. The aim is for long-lasting, permanent contact based on the development of a reciprocal relationship. This project was a pilot for Growing Older Together conducted by Stichting Present Zoetermeer.

## **Bommelthoes, Mensenwerk Hogeland, Uithuizermeeden**

Older residents of the town come together in the community hall every fortnight. In 2021 two people took over from the previous volunteers and during the study they were joined by a third volunteer. The volunteers organise different activities, like a film show, games, and creative work. The morning is always concluded with a communal hot lunch, for which participants pay a small contribution. Bommelthoes was developed with the paid care organization Mensenwerk Hogeland. They support neighbouring towns and villages to set up and run similar 'Thuis kamers' ('Home Rooms').

## **Thuis kamer, De Holm, Den Andel**

A former school building was converted by three villagers into the De Holm meeting place, offering various activities for and by local people. One of these activities is the Thuis kamer ('Home Room') - where older villager can drop-in for a cup of coffee and a snack. While the coffee is on, other activities also take place in the building, such as a knitting

club, gardening, and the construction of a space for DIY and similar. Once a month after the coffee morning, there is a communal, three-course lunch provided by a cook from the village. The Thuiskamer was developed with Mensenwerk Hogeland. They support neighbouring towns and villages to set up and run similar Thuiskamers.

### **Up! telephone conversations, Humanitas Groningen**

During Corona, Humanitas Groningen organised with Up! group telephone conversations for older residents of the city. Participants could register for a series of discussions in which various subjects were addressed, such as regret, friendship, or parting. The volunteers were recruited by Humanitas and trained as group facilitators by Up!

## Appendix 2 Research Approach

In this appendix, we outline the research and its approach, underlying this publication.

The aim of the research was to gain more insight into voluntary and community initiatives as sites that facilitate meaningful social relationships for independently living older people. The question for research was therefore: *What are meaningful social relationships for independently living older people and what role do voluntary and community initiatives play in bringing these about?* We have chosen to interpret 'independently living older people' in the broadest sense of the word, that is, everyone older than 54. This is in line with the diversity of voluntary and community initiatives and the increasing focus of social policies on the potential of volunteering in the period before retirement age.

### **Data collection**

To study voluntary and community initiatives accordingly, we have opted for an ethnographic approach. In the period March 2020 up to and including October 2022, we followed eight different initiatives and applied a combination of data collection methods to gain an insight into the different ways people meet each other, spend time together and develop relationships in the context of these initiatives.

For this purpose, we selected initiatives that were different from one another in the kinds of relationships they bring about. We formulated the following criteria: variation in the duration of relationships (one-off, defined period or indefinite); variation in the degree to which relationships are supervised by a coordinator; variation in target beneficiary groups and variation in the homo- or heterogeneity of the participants. We also endeavoured to select initiatives based on how they were spread out across the Netherlands.

All research data were collected by the first author. We first sought to gain an impression of an initiative’s way of working by means of exploratory discussions and interviews with coordinators and involved professionals. With the application of a combination of data collection methods (participatory observation, informal conversations, and interviews), we subsequently ‘followed’ relationships unfolding between people over time and how they were experienced by the participants. In the interviews, we asked the participants to talk about their experience with the initiative, how they became involved (as a participant, person needing help or volunteer), how they meet other people through the initiative and the place that these relationships have in their daily life. In second and third follow-up interviews, we asked how these relationships developed and deepened into subjects that had risen in the earlier interviews. Through the combination of data collection methods, we could consider not only what participants expressed verbally about the meaning of these relationships, but also what was expressed through their interactions. Finally, we interviewed some coordinators and held a focus group with eight coordinators about our research findings to deepen our understanding of their role and way of working.

**Table 1** Overview of respondents (N=54)

Volunteers	16
Persons receiving support	19
Participants	9
Coordinators and paid staff	10

## Appendix 3 Growing Older Together

Like in many European countries, the population of the Netherlands is ageing rapidly. Staying active, especially as a volunteer, is a proven way to remain healthy, prevent loneliness and postpone healthcare costs. However, both government and volunteer involving organisations often talk about older persons instead of with them. Moreover, older persons are still framed as a burden for society. To break this practice and come up with viable alternatives, we started a nationwide programme: Growing Older Together, with 11 national volunteer involving organisations. The first four years, together with older persons and local networks, we developed projects in almost 40 municipalities, focusing on themes such as meaningful contact through volunteering, community building and intergenerational and culture-sensitive volunteering. We also designed training modules, tools and materials and engaged in action research.

The starting point for all actions and projects always was to encounter with older persons and ask them about their ideas, needs and wishes. In this way, we spoke with hundreds of older volunteers, active citizens, and informal caregivers. Both locally and nationally, individual older volunteers and older persons' associations were involved in the design and implementation of projects, training sessions and materials. Depending on the municipality, older persons' local associations or other volunteer involving organisations took the lead in approaching, recruiting, and managing older volunteers. Because of our emphasis on intergenerational volunteering, hundreds of young volunteers and student volunteers were involved. All in all, thousands of volunteers from all ages were active during the first four years. They told their inspirational stories which were spread locally and nationally. They were trained in dialogue methods to engage in conversations about life-changing events. They acted as hosts in communal living-rooms, serving coffee, tea, and attention. They visited vulnerable groups in their own homes. In this way, they connected to and made a difference in thousands of lives. An important sidenote: many of the older persons

we reached did not relate to or identify as volunteers. Instead, we have learned to use ‘becoming or staying active in the community.’

Apart from what is said above about the impact volunteers have made, it is important to note that the programme Growing Older Together emphasizes sustainable cooperation, both locally and nationally. Building and sustaining viable, volunteer- and age-inclusive communities can be seen as the long-term goal of the programme. This means that we have invested heavily and will continue to invest in getting all relevant partners on board. At the national level, this means that we invited Ministries, the Association of Dutch municipalities, universities, research institutes, the national council for older persons, employers’ associations, and workers associations to think and work along, using our reframing approach of the role of older persons in society. At the local level, older persons’ associations, municipalities, welfare and care organisations, volunteer involving organisations, citizens’ initiatives, cultural organisations, and companies were approached and often became part of local networks. These networks became and still are responsible for the local projects and activities, often in a project team that is a mix of older volunteers and paid staff.

## Colofon

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