

# Exploring empowerment of participants and peer workers in a self-managed homeless shelter

**Author(s)**

Huber, Max A; Brown, Louis D; Metze, Rosalie N; Stam, Martin; van Regenmortel, Tine; Abma, Tineke N

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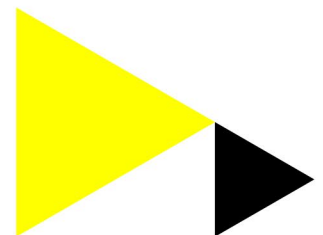
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Exploring empowerment of participants and peer workers in a self-managed homeless shelter

Max A. Huber<sup>1</sup>, Louis D. Brown<sup>2</sup>, Rosalie N. Metze<sup>1</sup>, Martin Stam<sup>1</sup>, Tine Van Regenmortel<sup>3</sup>,  
Tineke N. Abma<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Research center for Societal Innovation, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

<sup>2</sup> School of Public Health, University of Texas

<sup>3</sup> Academic collaborative center for social work, Tilburg University & HIVA - Research Institute for Work and Society, Catholic University Leuven

<sup>4</sup> Department of Medical Humanities, Free University Amsterdam

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Max Huber, Research center for Societal Innovation, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Wibautstraat 5, 1091 GH, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Contact: [a.huber@hva.nl](mailto:a.huber@hva.nl)

### *Summary*

Self-managed shelters claim that participants who have been homeless, are better able to run a shelter than regular providers. Little research has investigated self-managed shelters. In this paper we described the experiences of participants and peer workers with empowerment processes in Je Eigen Stek (Your own place, JES), a self-managed shelter, based on an eight year qualitative responsive evaluation.

### *Findings*

We distinguish three clusters of individual experiences: 1) enthusiastic, 2) moderate to critical, and 3) negative, respectively associated with decreasing engagement with social life in and management of JES. Those not engaged can still benefit materially and from the freedom of choice JES offers, which is generally appreciated. Empowerment provides a useful framework and JES in turn offers new insights into the dialectical nature of empowerment. Empowerment consists of freedom of choice and capacity development and neither should be emphasized over the other. The emphasis in JES is on freedom of choice, which does not automatically lead to developing capacities. Social workers try to balance both aspects of empowerment.

### *Applications*

Our analysis shows how offering freedom of choice can contribute to empowerment, although social workers need to be aware that participants might opt not to work on capacity development.

### **Exploring empowerment of participants and peer workers in a self-managed homeless shelter**

People without a home started self-managed homeless shelters in the Netherlands, together with social workers, as a protest against a lack of shelter and a perceived paternalistic approach in regular shelters (Tuynman & Huber, 2014). Self-managed shelters reach people who are not (yet) able to access housing or a Housing first program (Tuynman & Huber, 2014), although they share with Housing first an emphasis on self-determination (Padgett et al., 2016). Participants and peer workers are in charge of daily and strategic affairs in self-managed shelters (Tuynman & Huber, 2014). Little research has been done into self-managed shelters (Tuynman & Huber, 2014). More is known about other self-organized programs, from consumer-run centers (Brown, 2012) to peer-run respite houses (Ostrow & Croft, 2015). Self-organized programs are managed by participants and peer workers and emphasize empowerment (Brown, 2012; Ostrow & Croft, 2015). In this paper we explore how participants and peer workers in JES experience empowerment within the context of self-management. Stimulating and facilitating empowerment is an important purpose of social work (Lee & Hudson, 2017).

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment is described as a paradigm that operates on an individual, organizational, and political level (Van Regenmortel, 2011). Different empowerment levels are interdependent, strengthening or limiting one another (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). As a consequence, empowerment has many dimensions. we focus on the individual level.

Individual empowerment entails “a sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence” (Rappaport, 1987, p. 121). Zimmerman (1995, p. 588) distinguishes between aspects of individual empowerment: internal (motivation, perceived control), interactional (access to resources, critical consciousness) and behavioral (social participation). Critical consciousness describes individuals and groups becoming aware of

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

how society influences their life and how they can influence their societal circumstances and is seen as a starting point for empowerment (Freire, 2005).

Individual empowerment is only possible in a social environment (other people, organizational context, community) that enables empowerment by offering supportive social relations and opportunities for development (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Van Regenmortel, 2011).

There is also a dialectical tension within the concept of empowerment (Rappaport, 1981). Specifically, a tension that requires delicate balance is between freedom of choice (control) and capacity development (roles, skills). Recent literature frames empowerment less dialectically, arguing that capacity development contributes to freedom of choice, although the emphasis commonly lies on capacity development (Van Regenmortel, 2011; Zimmerman, 1995). Capacity development is related to the strength based approach in social work (Van Regenmortel, 2011).

Developing self-sufficiency and self-improvement, has evolved into public policy and mainstream thinking (Abma, 2017; Van Regenmortel, 2011). Some authors warn that empowerment is instrumentally used as a new form of social control (Rivest & Moreau, 2015; Solvang & Juritzen, 2020). In the Netherlands there has been an increase in budget cuts and calls from the government for people to become more self-sufficient and offer support to each other (Metze, 2015; Stam, 2013). As a consequence people in vulnerable positions risk being neglected (Abma, 2017; Pommer et al., 2018).

Empowerment, stripped down to becoming self-sufficient and working on self-improvement, as an obligation rather than as emancipation, goes against empowerment principles (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Rappaport, 1987). Individuals in a vulnerable position might not be interested in developing self-sufficiency and psychological empowerment, especially if not combined with an increase in power (Abma, 2017;

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

Duyvendak, 1999). Therefore, they might opt to refrain from engagement with programs that encourage empowerment (Duyvendak, 1999; Freire, 2005). Participation in empowering practices by individuals in a vulnerable position might be hindered by barriers such as a lack of skills or resources (Boone et al., 2019).

Empowerment theory was in part developed by studies into self-organized care (Rappaport, 1987) and research into self-organized care builds on empowerment theory (Brown, 2012). Self-organized care can contribute to a feeling of competency, hope, social functioning, social support, role development and skills and a decrease in psychiatric care (Brown, 2012; Segal & Hayes, 2016). Participants who engage less with activities, social life, and program management, experience fewer benefits (Brown, 2012; Ostrow & Croft, 2015; Segal & Hayes, 2016). Self-organized care entails freedom of choice and capacity development, although research focuses on the latter (Brown, 2012).

To explore how participants and peer workers experience empowerment processes within self-managed programs, we use data from our study into *Je Eigen Stek* (Your Own Place, JES). JES is a self-managed shelter that started in 2008 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The program serves people who are homeless and are not yet able to obtain independent housing. Self-managed shelters claim to be an alternative to regular shelters, in offering more freedom to participants.

Although research on self-managed shelters is lacking, research into other self-organized programs suggests that they are associated with psychological empowerment (Brown, 2012). Our purpose is to describe how participants and peer workers experience empowerment processes in a self-managed shelter.

### **Method**

The empirical data for this paper stems from a 8-year participatory case study (2009-2016) (Abma & Stake, 2014) into empowerment processes in relation to self-management.

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

The research is part of the *Collaborative Center for the Social Domain* at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. In our research we have complied with APA ethical principles in the treatment of individuals. Executives of participating organizations assessed the legal and ethical implications of the study, and approved the procedures.

In our design we followed the principles of *responsive evaluation* (Abma et al., 2009), where stakeholders are engaged in the process of evaluation. Stakeholder issues form the starting point for a dialogue to develop mutual understanding, articulate different perspectives, and determine the merit of different practices, as part of an effort to improve evaluation quality.

The evaluation has been executed by a diverse research team, including researchers with lived experience. Participants, peer workers and social workers from JES engaged in co-designing the research, developing topic-lists, recruiting respondents, co-interviewing, discussing the analysis and contributing to publications.

### **Study Setting**

JES aims ‘to help people without a home, get a home’ through housing sixteen people, who want to work on their problems in their own way. Prospective participants have to be able to care for themselves. The majority of participants were male and single. Participants were of adult ages, with a few exceptions of late adolescents. JES did not register ethnicity. Most participants are dependent on welfare, some have a job. The sixteen participants together are responsible for the program management, from household to entrance and exit of participants and strategic issues. Participants choose a chairman among themselves, to chair meetings and represent JES in external affairs, together with other participants. JES is funded by the municipality of Amsterdam and is part of a larger regular homeless care organization. Unlike most self-organized programs, JES hired a social worker to support participants, the group and the program. The social worker collaborates with a peer worker, who has lived

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

experiences with homelessness and who was a participant before becoming a peer worker, although he does not live there anymore. Both the social worker and the peer worker are paid by JES and both are hired by the participants through a vote at a meeting.

In the first five years of JES (2009-2014), 72 people stayed there, from less than a day up to multiple years, fifteen months on average (excluding those who stay less than a week). Of the 72 participants, 51 stayed for more than three months, of whom 32 were explicitly spoken to (in an interview or through informal meetings), from seventeen others we have (some) secondary information.

### **Data Collection**

Our formal data consist mainly of interviews, with participants (N=27), peer workers (N=3), social workers (N=2) and other stakeholders (e.g. policy advisors from the mother organization, managers from partner organizations) (N=10). Several participants, peer workers and social workers have been interviewed on two to four instances, resulting in 56 interviews in total. The interviews come from two sub-projects. The first was a narrative study into experiences with JES, in 2009-2010, based on the *learning history* method (Kleiner & Roth, 1996), focused on the experiences of stakeholders over time. Narrative interviews explored what participants saw as the purpose of self-management, what their own motivation was, and how they experienced living/working in self-management. The second sub-project, in 2013-2014, focused on how former JES-participants looked back at their participation, using a semi-structured format (Bryman, 2008). The interviews with former participants focused on several life domains (e.g. housing, finances, social contacts, day activities), at three points (before, during and after their stay at JES).

The interviews from the first narrative study have been done by two academic researchers, one of whom is the first author. The interviews in the study into former participants were done by couples of participants and students, supervised by experienced



## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

researchers, among who the first author. All interviews from the first and second study were recorded and transcribed. In providing consent, respondents were given the option to withdraw their consent at any time, which was done by one participant, whose interviews were directly deleted.

In the result section we describe different subgroups of participants and how they are represented in our data-collection. We included as many participants as possible, though those who were negative and less engaged are underrepresented, because they did not want to participate in the research. In our analysis, we paid specific attention to this underrepresentation. We interviewed participants from all years between 2008 to 2014. Some were interviewed during their stay, most were interviewed after their stay. We found no substantial differences between participants from different years.

Several additional measures ensure the diversity and representativity of the interviews. Documents were analyzed (e.g. project-plans, auto-publications by participants) and we processed administrative data recorded by JES on participant' demographics and length of stay . For both studies a draft version was discussed with respondents and other stakeholders (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315). Finally,

from the first study up until the present, the first author engaged with JES, based on an ethnographic and participatory approach (O'Reilly, 2012). Developing long lasting relations with participants, peer workers and social workers involved with JES from 2009 to the present allowed the first author to observe the interaction between participants, peer workers and social workers among themselves and with outsiders (including the researchers). The interactions and observations done in this time focused on gaining insight into how participants and other stakeholders experienced self-management over time. The prolonged engagement and persistent observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allowed the first author to

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

gain a deeper understanding of interview data and the representativity of the interview data, and to observe changes over time.

### **Analysis**

In our analysis, we employed an iterative approach, going back and forth between empirical data and the discussed theory, combining interpretation and systematic coding, using MAXqda (Abma et al., 2019; O'Reilly, 2012). We started with a preliminary open analysis. Based on the 'plugging in' approach, proposed by Jackson & Mazzei (2013), we employed several theoretical lenses to increase our understanding of the data and to enrich the data. Empowerment theory appeared to be the most fruitful for the purpose of our paper. To manage our large dataset, we started by creating thematic categories, based on the preliminary open analysis and the concept of empowerment, to guide our focus (O'Reilly, 2012). Based on the coding of the first interviews, our code-list was revised, applied to new interviews and so on, until code-saturation was achieved, after which the first interviews were recoded with the final code-tree (Bryman, 2008; O'Reilly, 2012). The analysis has been executed by the first author, under supervision of the other authors.

The richness of perspectives and the different theoretical approaches, allowed us to make room for competing explanations (Abma et al., 2009). We strived for an authentic and recognized representation of the different perspectives involved with JES (Abma & Stake, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), paying explicit attention to the risk of overrepresenting more reflexive respondents (Bryman, 2008). We used several forms of triangulation: different types of data gathering, different researchers and different analytical approaches to limit the risk of bias (Denzin, 1989; Kimchi et al., 1991).

Throughout the analysis we remained in contact with JES, discussing preliminary analyses and working hypotheses with participants, peer workers and social workers,

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

sharpening the analysis and increasing the authenticity and shared understanding of core findings (Doyle, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Results**

The result section entails two smaller themes (practical benefits and freedom of choice) and three larger themes (different clusters of experiences, living together and engaging with self-management). The results described in this paper are based on statements made by participants and peer workers. Statements from social workers are explicitly mentioned. The cited respondent quotes are translated from Dutch by the first author. The quotes from participants are numbered. Participants 15, 17, 19, 21 & 24 were interviewed in the first sub-project, participants 1, 2, 4-6, 8-14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23 were interviewed in the second sub-project.

#### **Practical benefits**

All participants described various practical benefits they experienced and appreciated (to various degrees), and for most this was an important goal for joining JES. Examples included stable shelter (in comparison to night-shelters or sleeping outside), low living costs, access to computer and telephone and, if desired, practical assistance. JES provided access to independent housing for a substantial number of participants. These practical benefits are often lacking in regular shelters, although they can be achieved there as well.

#### **Freedom of Choice**

Most of those involved with JES expect and want JES to be an alternative to regular care with less interference from group workers and more freedom for individual choice. Participants and peer workers in JES stated that self-management offers (or should offer) freedom of choice and that they appreciated and benefited from the freedom of choice JES offered. Freedom of choice is symbolized in JES through a key that all participants get,

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

allowing them to come and go at any given time. Symbolically, the key represents the choice participants have to work on problems in their own way. According to multiple participants and peer workers, in self-management, you “have to do it yourself”. For a substantial number of participants, JES was a negative choice. They either did not have access to or were fed up with regular shelters, because of a perceived lack of choice and perspective. One participant (#2) for instance states:

“You had more freedom [in JES] than in regular care. [...] [In regular homeless care] they are constantly watching you, to see if they can tell you off, and you are obligated to get up at a certain time, and you have to be back at a certain time.”

### **Three Clusters of Individual Experience**

We categorized experiences of participants and peer workers in three clusters of stories. The first cluster is enthusiastic and engaged with the program, the second cluster is moderate to critical and minimally engaged. The third is mostly negative and disengaged. The clusters overlap and participants move between clusters, e.g. start active, get disappointed and focus on themselves, or get stuck, drop out, come back and become very active. The three described clusters give different interpretations to freedom of choice.

From 53 of the 72 participants who stayed at JES during the first five years (2009-2014) we have sufficient information to say with some certainty to which cluster they belong. The first cluster (engaged) consists of 27 (of 53) participants. Ten participants of the first cluster (temporarily) moved to cluster two or three. Members of the first cluster stayed longer at JES than members of the second cluster. The second cluster (moderately critical and minimally engaged) is the second best represented in our data-collection, with seventeen members (of 53), four of whom started out in cluster one. The third cluster (negative and disengaged) had nineteen members (of 53), of which six started or ended in the first cluster. It

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

is also the cluster of which we know the least, as members of the third cluster typically stayed at JES for less time and were less likely to participate in interviews.

**Engaged cluster.** Participants and peer workers belonging to the enthusiastic cluster described how interaction with others helped them. Participants for instance mentioned that when they saw someone with whom they identified preparing to move to independent housing, they got active themselves.

Processes of social support, social comparison and social motivation enabled these enthusiastic participants to make choices and become active. Several participants stated that, through participating in JES and gaining independent housing, they developed hope and perspective for the future: “[my life] went wrong, but through JES I got back on track” (participants #4). In that process, they developed practical skills (such as organizing their administration) and increased their ability to self-direct their life.

**Moderate cluster.** Members of the second cluster, who were less engaged with the program, emphasized the importance of self-reliance and the absence of interference from other participants and workers. They appreciated freedom and practical opportunities. In JES they could work on their problems in their own way, as illustrated by this participant (#5): “JES for me was a bridging place, so I could get my affairs in order”.

They didn’t want others to support them, and they didn’t want to support others. Participants in this cluster, argued that if you are not able to take care of yourself, you are not suited for self-management.

A minority of participants got stuck in what peer workers and social workers called the “fyke [trap] of self-management”, a term describing participants who appeared to have adapted to life in the program. A participant (#8) stated:

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

“There were people, who did nothing, truly nothing, to improve their situation. They didn’t want to move on. They resigned themselves. They had food, they could sleep, could watch television and it cost them almost nothing.”

Participants stuck in the fyke of self-management did not use the freedom JES offered to work on their problems. Respondents had different views on whether participants got stuck out of convenience, lack of skills or resistance to interference from others. Over time, these participants dropped-out or became active again, inspired or urged by other participants.

Participants from the different clusters and peer workers pointed out that participants have to follow their own unique trajectory, in their own time. To what extent the trajectory can be stimulated and articulated, was subject to discussion. Some participants argued that participants have to initiate progress themselves:

“I had no pressure, you are not obligated to do anything at JES, it is your mess. If you do not want to be helped, or you don’t do anything, you are burning your fingers, because the longer you wait to get your affairs in order, the longer you have to wait for a house. That is a good incentive” (participant #10).

**No benefits cluster.** Members of the third cluster, who experienced no apparent benefits, mostly emphasized conflicts with others. One participant (#11) for instance said: “I was labeled a thief, and I wasn’t allowed to have a say, because they already had their judgement ready: you have to go, and there I was outside”. Other participants and peer workers point out that self-management was not a good fit for participants who left, because they could not deal with the freedom self-management offered, were not able to adjust to living with other people, or had overwhelming personal problems.

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

“It won’t work for everyone. There are people who drop out, because they think that, within their private space in their room, they can do things [e.g. consume drugs, alcohol] that were in fact a cause of their homelessness” (peer worker).

Several participants and peer workers stated that being homeless causes traumas that are an important factor in dropping out.

Members of the three clusters described different views on what self-management means and how participants should use the offered freedom. One cluster pleaded for the importance of being left alone, others argued for the value of offering social support, and a minority stated that more push should be given towards people who by themselves do not make progress. Several participants used their freedom to deflect from working on their problems. Respondents disagreed on whether participants should engage with the program or that they should focus on their individual life.

### **Living Together**

In self-managed programs, participants live together. How participants experienced living together varies substantially.

**Benefits of living together.** Enthusiastic participants appreciated sharing practical resources (information, suggestions) and lived experiences, while developing experiential knowledge. “Often people fill out forms for each other. Or they make a call, look on the internet or suggest someone to talk to for advice” (participant #12). Another participant (#13) stated: Although they had conflicts with other participants, they saw these conflicts as part of living together and adapting to each other, or as a participant (#13) states: “even if you don’t get along, you have to help each other.” They were often able to solve conflicts themselves.

**Drawbacks of living together.** Participants who were less enthusiastic about self-management described how they kept a distance from other participants, because they wanted

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

to focus on their own life and / or because they did not trust other participants: “I went my own way” (participant #14). These participants experienced interactions as social control. They complained about always being watched and being reproached by other participants and not having space for their individual choices as a consequence of living together. “Sometimes you just want to be alone. Well, you can’t” (participant #15). The lack of private space was mostly experienced by participants who were negative or moderately enthusiastic, though even some of the enthusiastic participants were critical on this subject. Participants who were less enthusiastic about self-management tried not to bother others, although they experienced being bothered by others. Example nuisances included having to share a room and a general lack of privacy.

Enthusiastic participants struggled to interact with participants who are more individually oriented and less keen on adapting to social life in JES:

“If you mean well, then you can say something to someone else, but they can experience it as unwanted interference [...] even though you mean it well, the other person can experience it very differently, and then you have friction” (participant #16).

**Dealing with vulnerability of other participants.** Participants and peer workers struggled with vulnerabilities, including problems with mental health and substance abuse, that might lie behind conflicts and complicated behavior (aggression, irrational behavior). Several participants acknowledged the negative influence that having been homeless and still being in a financially and socially vulnerable position has on participants’ ability to work, live and learn together. “Those people are all individually oriented, from the streets, have their own worries, are shaped a certain way, and are there for their own benefit” (peer worker). Another peer worker adds that he hopes that through living together, participants become more socially oriented: “it is about becoming aware: I don’t live alone anymore, I live in a group. In the group it is give and take, and more often than not, more giving than taking”.



## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

Social workers, most peer workers and several participants repeatedly pleaded for including struggling participants, referring to the experience of exclusion that most participants share. “Participants are very critical and harsh towards each other, judging each other, why people don’t fit in this system [JES], while they themselves dropped out and were forced out the system, it repeats itself” (social worker). Other participants felt that if a participant cannot behave or follow the rules, he should be evicted. “If you don’t abide to the rules, then you are done. We’re not giving you another month, no, right away” (participant #6).

Participants from the enthusiastic cluster, peer workers and social workers claimed that even those who did not like living together benefited from it, because it helped to socially prepare them for independent living. In interviews, critical participants stated they received no social support and no social benefits, while a few minutes later sharing how they appreciated talking about the day with their roommate or how they learned to deal with different opinions.

### **Engagement in Program Management**

Participants met every Monday evening to discuss all relevant program aspects, from day to day affairs and deciding who gets to enroll to strategic decisions on moving to a different location and hiring a social worker. Participant #9 describes his experiences: “I decided on all important issues [...] every Monday in the meeting [...] discussed, votes counted and then we simply make a decision”. Another added: “I thought it was one of the most important aspects of JES. That you have insight into what’s going on” (participant #4).

Participants were expected to partake in meetings, although there were few consequences for those who did not. Only a minority was enthusiastic about these Monday evening meetings, though a majority appreciated the concept of shared program management and several participants felt ownership and developed organizational awareness (financially, strategically). The latter often became an (informal) peer worker and / or chairman (chosen by

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

the participants). JES had little formal hierarchy, although active participants sometimes formed working groups. Participants who were active often engaged in advocacy for JES or individuals. Advocacy focused on access to housing, fighting financial constraints or creating awareness about the plight of homelessness and the possibilities of self-management. “M. [social worker] asked: the district attorney wants to meet with people from JES and find a solution. So I said ok [...] and I asked S. [another participant] to join [...] ever since we have been doing things I would normally never do” (participant #17).

**Capacity-building for self-management.** Participants and peer workers described how they tried to stimulate capacity development, participants talents and strengths and use existing participant capacities. One participant for instance had a background in accounting, another used to be a social worker and a third used to be a cook. “It was already you. Only now it showed. Maybe that is what I learned, recognizing and acknowledging your own talents” (participant #6).

A peer worker stated: “don’t focus on what you can’t, focus on what a person can do. And then let him do it.” Another participant (#18), who claimed to be neither good at reading nor physically well, said: “someone needed to stay at the house at all times. I was often inside, or I sat outside, but someone always had to be there.” This participant contributed within his ability. Participants who were able to develop and employ their capacities experienced this as positive and as contributing to their self-image. “It is so important that you show that people have talents themselves. That they can do things themselves. That definitely happened at JES” (participant #6).

Participants either offered their skills themselves, or were invited to do so by other participants, peer workers or a social worker. A number of participants felt their capacities were underappreciated by participants, peer workers and social workers. One participant who offered to contribute said: “There is no reaction, it fell on deaf ears” (participant #19). Several

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

interpretations are given by respondents on why some capacities were not recognized or employed: as a consequence of conflict, carelessness of peer workers and social workers and/or participant's distrust and insecurity. A participant (#8) realized when he left:

“that you can underestimate people, of what they are capable of. You have people who look a bit sluggish [.....] and then you get to know someone a bit better and you see that in fact he does have something to offer. That is something I have learned.”

Less than half of the participants actively engaged in program management, beyond partaking in the weekly meeting. Those who did, stated that it contributed to their self-worth, a form of helper-therapy (Brown, 2012). Besides their self-worth, several participants stated that managing together contributed to their self-confidence, personal insight, their ability to make choices and developing social and role specific skills (for instance in leading meetings or negotiating with managers). “You need to talk, listen, share an idea, use an idea” (participant #20).

“[you learn to] become more patient with other people's opinions, you become more lenient. You have to understand that your opinion is not the opinion of everyone else, even when you think ‘I see it this way, and that's the way it is’, no that is not the way it is” (participant #21).

Most peer workers emphasized the importance of participants engaging with program management: “you need to keep involving people, you shouldn't give up” (peer worker). Those participants who were less engaged, experienced fewer explicit benefits.

**Barriers to self-management.** All participants and peer workers described negative aspects of managing the program together, even those who were enthusiastic about self-management. “We got really tired of all those meetings” (participant #16). “If these meetings would have content [...] but it was about nothing. We were talking about meeting with the

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

municipality, and then someone brought up a small hook in their bathroom that was tilted” (participant #2).

The level of participant engagement was not fixed. Several participants started hesitant, because of an overly active management-group, which eventually dissolved, after which the newcomers grew to become active members as well. Others started very enthusiastic, taking up different roles and activities, after which they were disappointed by other participants who did not share their enthusiasm or because of external factors (such as unsuccessfully advocating for JES). At multiple points in time, the collective management process was experienced by respondents as stuck, for which several causes are mentioned. Firstly, several participants and peer workers stated that it was difficult to find capable and motivated participants. Participants who stated that they were motivated and capable to contribute at the start, turned out, according to others, to be less motivated and / or capable. Some participants explicitly stated that they had no interest in contributing to self-management. “You have a lot of people who do many things for JES. And that is not me, I focused on my own things” (participant #23). Participants also mentioned they lost motivation because they felt too many other participants contributed too little. Another participant (#6) added:

“And then I noticed that there are other participants who seem to think ‘I’m here but I don’t care for JES, as long as I have a room and can move to my own place in a bit’. And that is discouraging.”

**Informal leaders and followers.** Several participants said they started motivated, but lost that motivation because of (perceived) hierarchy by the “bosses of JES”, a term used by multiple participants, referring to an informal group of active participants. “There is no room allowed to participate. In the beginning I said that I wanted to do it ...it was a specific group who were in charge, and who took a lot away from the other participants” (participant #19).

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

A divide between leaders and followers also leads to stereotyping (they decide everything vs. they don't do anything). One group of participants said they did not feel heard, others said that there were too many opinions, not enough actions. Participants who belonged to the management group, stated that a stronger focus on rules was necessary: "it should have been stricter. If you neglected your duties, it took quite some time before action was undertaken" (participant #2).

Multiple respondents described power play and cronyism, or described how they distrusted the motives of other participants or how others distrusted their motives: "people thought I had a hidden agenda" (peer worker). Others emphasized that JES' strength was its openness: "it happens openly, everyone can hear it, experience it. [...] there is no hidden agenda, it really is in your face" (participant #1). A divide between leaders and followers, a focus on rules and regulations, and distrust towards the 'other' party's sincerity resembled the relations between group workers and residents in regular institutional programs. Participants mentioned this resemblance themselves, stating "[in the previous program] I had much more opportunities and choices" (participant #11). Another participant states:

"The risk of course is that you make too many rules, just like in regular shelters [...]. But you have to keep in mind, the rules that you make, they are meant to stimulate, to move forward, to help people get back in to society" (participant #6).

**Conflict in self-management.** The way participants and peer workers experienced self-managed programs was influenced by stress and conflicts caused by living, working and managing together. A substantial number of participants and peer workers were disappointed by the complications of self-managing a program. One stated: "JES just doesn't work, it turned out it was an utopia" (participant #24) The few participants that left involuntary or after a conflict were especially negative, although several stated that their negativity was mostly related to the behavior of and conflicts with specific individuals, rather than self-

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

management in general. Other participants were more positive about self-management. One participant (#12) even stated: “self-management is the way to go, self-management is the future.”

Through managing the program together, gaining control and developing capacities come together. Multiple participants and peer workers described how, through participating in management, they gained skills, self-esteem and social roles. Other participants used their individual choice to not participate in program management, either out of disinterest, focus on individual interest, resistance to perceived social control, disappointment in the managing process, or an experienced lack of encouragement from others.

**Role of social workers in self-management.** Participants and peer workers in JES regularly pointed to the important role social workers play. Social workers supported and advocated for individual participants, which the participants appreciated. Social workers also facilitated the process of self-management and related group processes. According to participants in JES, social workers tended to be too idealistic in their focus on inclusion and deliberation and should be more interventionist when it comes to conflicts. Social workers stated that their role was to facilitate, not guide.

### Discussion

In this paper we described participants and peer workers experiences with JES, a self-managed shelter, in relation to empowerment processes. Although our analysis reveals several issues related to experiences with self-management, discussed below, it is worth noting that people who are homeless appear to be able to self-manage a shelter. The freedom of choice JES offers, in combination with material benefits (stable shelter, low cost), makes JES a preferred choice for most participants, even for participants who were generally negative about JES. A majority of participants we have information on are (moderately) positive about JES.

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

We distinguish three clusters of experiences: 1) positive, 2) moderate, and 3) negative, each with a related level of engagement, respectively high, moderate to low, and no engagement. Participants in the first cluster described experiences that are similar to those in other self-organized programs, like improvement in self-image and role- and skill development (Brown, 2012). The second moderate cluster used JES to work on their problems in their own way, although it is suggested they also implicitly develop social skills. The third cluster of participants does not (directly) benefit from participating in the program. The powerlessness most participants experienced in regular homeless care, which was the reason for starting JES, remained problematic for a number of participants within JES. The position of participants sometimes changed over time, from negative to more enthusiastic, and vice versa. Our findings support the proposed relation between level of engagement with JES and the explicit benefits (Brown & Townley, 2015; Segal & Hayes, 2016). JES served as a space to work on individual problems, even without (active) engagement in JES. Although self-management was empowering for a majority of participants, it was not helpful for everyone. Future research is needed to identify individual characteristics that increase the likelihood of benefitting from JES.

Unlike in most self-organized care, participants of JES live together. Enthusiastic participants described living together as a positive experience, both the casual interactions and social learning (Brown, 2012), although they acknowledge challenges such as adapting to other participants. Other participants described having to adapt as problematic, interfering with their ability to make individual choices. Participants in the moderate and negative cluster experience social processes in JES as social control. For the negative cluster of participants, living and managing together was a reason to drop-out. More study is needed into negative experiences related to living together, especially to understand how rules are made, shaped, changed and experienced within JES.

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

The different experiences of social processes echo Berlin's (1969) distinction between positive and negative freedom: one participant experiences freedom as being left alone without interference from participants and peer workers (negative freedom), while another participant experiences freedom as helping each other (positive freedom). According to respondents, the former position might be caused by an inability to form supportive social relations with others and might be a coping strategy to deal with traumas that are caused by homelessness. Critical participants themselves stated they left regular care because they did not want to work on alleged mental health problems and continued to refuse at JES, in line with Scott's (2010) argument that self-help programs risk becoming *reinvented institutions*, enacting subtle social control.

In some cases, exclusion processes were reproduced. Although all participants have experienced social exclusion, only few shared these experiences with others and a substantial number of participants reproduced social exclusion by rejecting participants who struggled to fit in. Researchers and practitioners must critically reflect on how to label respondents who refuse to acknowledge vulnerability, as it may be a coping strategy or a strategy to resist social control.

Most participants experience control over their own life within JES and, in various levels, over the program. For some, experiencing control has a positive influence on capacity development, although other participants use their control to deflect from (explicitly) working on their capacities. JES emphasizes control by participants, rather than capacity development. While it is argued that empowerment without control cannot be empowerment (Rappaport, 1987; Van Regenmortel, 2011), our analysis shows that having control does not automatically lead to capacity development either. Attempts to start working on empowerment beyond control are rejected by some participants, who use their control to avoid unwanted capacity development. Those who focus mainly on their control still can benefit from participating in



## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

JES. Our findings support Rappaport's (1981, 1987) description of empowerment as a dialectical concept, of which researchers and practitioners need to be aware.

The role of social workers and peer workers in JES is contested, especially in relation to program management and in dealing with participants who are less able to work on their problems or to engage in social life. Social workers and peer workers regularly pleaded for inclusion, even though multiple participants pleaded for less tolerance. Some participants wanted more intervention from social workers, while social workers wanted to focus on facilitation. Social workers and peer workers wanted to promote freedom of choice and wanted to offer support needed to develop capacities, which created tensions in relation to participants who did not want support. Facilitating both aspects of individual empowerment (freedom of choice and capacity development) is an important purpose of social work in general (Lee & Hudson, 2017). JES offers a unique perspective on how social workers balance the dialectical nature of individual empowerment and a focus on individual needs with the importance of social change (Boone et al., 2019; Lee & Hudson, 2017).

Further study is needed into the role of social workers and peer workers, as the literature on self-organized care gives this issue little attention.

### **Limitations to the study**

Our data is predominantly narrative, with an emphasis on respondents reflective and verbal capacities, which entails the risk of underrepresentation of less verbal respondents (Bryman, 2008). Participants who were less enthusiastic about JES are underrepresented in our data, because they were more difficult to approach and less willing to be interviewed. In our analysis and our presentation of the data we emphasized the perspective of less verbal and of critical participants, to counter underrepresentation, and to explore alternative and competing explanations in the analysis (Abma et al., 2009). Non-verbal or more structured (less reflexive) data gathering in future research can triangulate our findings (Bryman, 2008).

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

A strength of our research is the first author's prolonged engagement with JES, which enabled him to observe developments, gain insight into the dynamics of self-management and increase the representativity of observations (Bryman, 2008). Engagement of participants, peer workers and social workers in the research increased the authenticity of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Conclusion**

Our data suggest engagement in self-management promotes empowerment. People who are homeless are able to manage a shelter together, which is preferred by most participants over regular care. Participants chose their own trajectory within JES. To what extent other participants, peer workers and social workers are able and allowed to support the development of empowerment, remains subject to ongoing discussion. To create individual opportunities for empowerment, it is important that social workers, peer workers and participants stimulate (other) participants to engage with self-management. Participants can benefit from JES without engaging. Our analysis shows the importance of offering people in a vulnerable position freedom of choice and stimulating engagement with capacity development. Our study contributes to the knowledge on empowering social work practices (Lee & Hudson, 2017). Our research articulated the dialectical nature of self-management, entailing capacity development and freedom of choice. Social workers and peer workers need to be aware of this dialectical nature in supporting and eliciting empowerment processes.

### **Ethics**

Because our research does not have a medical nature and no medical information was processed, we did not submit our research to a medical-ethical review board. We complied with APA ethical principles in the treatment of individuals. Executives of participating organizations assessed the legal and ethical implications of the study, and approved the

## EXPLORING EMPOWERMENT IN A SELF-MANAGED SHELTER

procedures. Our research meets the requirements of ethical research, including anonymity, informed consent and non-maleficence.

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