Resident councils between lifeworld and system: Is there room for communicative action?

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Abstract

In long-term care facilities, the participation of older people relates to individual care provision (individual level) and to policy decisions that affect all residents in a care organization (collective level). In the Netherlands, resident councils are set up in order to improve resident participation on a collective level. However, our research shows that managers and resident councils are faced with mutual frustration and ineffective interaction. This article investigates the extent to which Habermasian communicative action (herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation) between resident councils and managers in residential elderly care is actually possible by examining the interaction between resident councils and managers in two case studies. We conclude that resident councils find themselves between lifeworld and system. There is communicative action between resident councils and managers, but it is easily dominated by strategic action. Therefore, space for communicative action needs to be deliberately created in order to support resident council participation and influence.

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Introduction

The ins and outs of democratic participation of older people in society have been the subject of scholarly research and discussion over the past decade (Abbott et al., 2000; Barnes, 2005; Carter & Beresford, 2000; Reed et al., 2008; Cook & Klein, 2005). Democratic participation refers to the influence people have on the decision-making processes. It is based on the democratic principle of giving a say to the population whose interests are at stake. Attention to the democratic participation of older people can be related to a long philosophical tradition affirming the value of participation of ordinary people in civic and public affairs, something that can be traced back to Rousseau and 19th century liberalism (Abbott et al., 2000).

Resident councils are a means to enhance the democratic participation of older people living in residential care homes. Resident councils are to be found in many Western European countries and in the United States (Devitt & Checkoway, 1982; Meyer, 1991; Van der Voet, 2004). Resident councils in the Netherlands are unique in that they are supported by legislation introduced in 1996 (Wet Medezeggenschap Cliënten Zorgsector) (Van der Voet, 2004). This Act is based on the notion of representative democracy, in other words the resident population chooses representatives i.e. council members, to speak on their behalf and represent the interests of the collective. Council members should understand and voice the interests of the residents they represent. Resident councils in the Netherlands are legally entitled to advise the organization on any policy issue that affects the day-to-day affairs and the future life of residents. The idea is that managers learn what residents actually think of the quality of care on offer and any relevant subjects. This enables managers to make informed policy decisions on matters pertaining to the residents’ experiences.

However, the democratic participation of older people in the institutional environment of long-term care facilities...
turns out to be rather complicated. Considering individualized care and the wider community, the challenges and obstacles against older people actively participating include a strict institutional regime and inflexible working routines, structural dependency, depersonalization, hospitalization and frailty (Abbott et al., 2000; Baltes & Wahl, 1992; Mitchell & Koch, 1997). As a result, resident councils’ active and interactive participation in policy processes tends to be difficult.

Habermas’ (1987) theory on the friction between life-world and system underscores just how difficult it can be for people to actually participate in complex systems of which a residential elderly care institution is a good example. The system colonizes the lifeworld and this leads to a lack of communicative action. In communicative action, people step out of their strategic, and ego-centric rationality, their formal role and identity. They open up to others as people with a name and a face with a view to engaging in processes towards reaching mutual understanding. Communicative action is an important prerequisite for older people and their representatives in residential care homes to be able to participate. There are four conditions for communicative action: 1) all those involved should have an equal opportunity to start a discourse in which validity claims can be put to the test of tenability; 2) all parties should have an equal opportunity to make statements, to bring opinions and criticism to the fore; 3) there should be no power differences between parties as it might prevent the expression of opinions or criticism; 4) all parties should be faithful and honest so that latent manipulation is ruled out.

The question that then arises is to what extent these basic conditions for communicative action are present in residential care homes, particularly when it comes to interaction between managers and resident councils. The purpose of this article is to investigate the extent to which communicative action between resident councils and managers in residential elderly care is actually possible. We do this by relating the four conditions for communicative action to the empirical data in our study in which we evaluated the participation of resident councils in an elderly care organization.

Methods

We present the findings of the responsive evaluation study we conducted in a care organization in the Netherlands over a period of six months in 2006. The research team consisted of Baur (PhD student) and Abma (supervisor).

Design

Responsive evaluation is a qualitative research method stemming from social constructivist epistemology (Abma & Widdershoven, 2008). The aim is to include as many perspectives as possible in order to gain a complete picture of the practice under evaluation. The exchange of experiences and perspectives between stakeholders through dialog, aimed at mutual understanding and practice improvements, is central to this approach (Abma, 2005; Abma & Widdershoven, 2005, 2006). The researcher acts as a dialog facilitator. He/she is not a distant expert, but engages with the stakeholders and consciously endeavors to create good social conditions and rapport with the stakeholders. The first stages of the research methodology map out the diverse perspectives and experiences of stakeholders through interviews and homogeneous focus groups. Dialog between stakeholders is central to the last stage of responsive evaluation, which is enhanced through heterogeneous dialog groups. This article focuses solely on the findings of the first part of the evaluation study, namely the findings from the in-depth interviews with stakeholders and the homogeneous focus groups. The diverse perspectives of resident councils and managers that we focus on in this article formed the basis for the dialogical interaction between these parties which we describe elsewhere (Baur, Abma, & Widdershoven, 2010).

Setting

At the time of the evaluation the Horizon (a pseudonym) care organization had eight separate departments. In total, the organization had 3316 residents and facilitated some 1085 full-time equivalent employees. Two locations were nursing homes for older people with physical and/or mental health problems. The other six locations were residential care departments, sometimes combined with sheltered home facilities. Each location had its own local resident council consisting of residents and relatives. The resident councils for the two nursing homes were an exception and consisted solely of relatives (spouses and partners) and volunteers, due to the high degree of physical and mental impediments of the residents themselves. The residents were aged 80+ throughout the entire organization. Apart from these eight local resident councils, the organization had set up a central resident council to cover more complex and general policy issues. The central council consisted of two representatives from each local resident council. Residents were not members of the central resident council, only relatives and volunteers. Residents could be members of the central council, but participating in the central council was felt to be too much of a burden in terms of energy, time and content.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection and analysis process was iterative which means that data were analyzed during the collection stage, and these findings steered the subsequent steps. At first, Abma had fact-finding discussions with a few key stakeholders (one member of the Board of Directors, the chair and secretary of the central resident council, and a member of the management team) to determine the reasons for conducting the evaluation study among the stakeholder groups in the organization. The aim of this initial stage was to help establish the research design. The knowledge gained from these conversations was used as a general starting point for interview topics. Then Baur conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders (members of local and central resident councils, managers, Board of Directors, and Board of Trustees) until saturation was reached.

Central to the interviews were the experiences of the stakeholders concerning resident council participation. The interviews were informal so that stakeholders could...
introduce a wide range of topics they deemed important. A topic list was also used to check whether all themes were covered during the interviews. The topic list included the following: mutual trust and mistrust and expectations, communication between management and councils, required competences, and representation and communication between councils and residents. The interviews took between 1.5 and 2 hours and were recorded, following approval. The interview reports were sent to the respondents for a member check (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Several official meetings between resident councils and managers (one meeting per resident council, eight in total) were attended by Baur as a way of participant observation. Field notes were taken.

Two homogeneous focus groups took place after this first stage. Homogeneous here means that participants in the focus groups had shared interests and functions. One focus group comprised members of resident councils, and the other consisted of managers. The findings from the interviews were discussed during these focus groups. This meant a further validation of the findings from the interviews. The participants recognized the issues that individual stakeholders had brought to the fore in the interviews. These homogeneous focus groups were also a means to stimulate conversation among participants to enable them to develop their own agenda. This formed the basis for the heterogeneous dialog, which we discuss elsewhere (Baur et al., 2010).

The data analysis was initially open and inductive. The data from the interviews were labeled and categorized in clusters. There was no theory that a priori guided the data analysis, and stakeholder issues were derived from the data. The main issues included communication and scope (Baur et al., 2010). These issues were further expanded upon with the concepts of Habermas’ theory on communicative action (1987).

Results

Managers and resident councils experienced several shortcomings in their communication and joint policymaking processes. The interviews and focus groups with these stakeholders revealed that resident councils experienced a lack of influence on complicated and long-term policy matters:

‘We agreed to that strategic alliance years ago, but now that we see what it actually means in practice…we could never have appreciated the impact of that alliance.’
‘Most of us don’t understand budgetary and financial topics. However, I don’t think that it really matters: we can’t change anything about these issues anyway.’
(members of resident councils)

Managers, in turn, were not convinced that members of the resident council were sufficiently competent to be equal partners in policymaking.

‘I always have to be careful that the resident council doesn’t become a complaints committee that only wants to talk about personal dissatisfaction with housekeeping and whether the potatoes are too hot or too cold.’
‘We ask the resident councils for advice on the budget, but I think we shouldn’t burden these elderly people with these issues. I can see they struggle with it.’
(managers)

What managers and resident councils consider important differed in scope. Whereas the resident councils’ main focus was on the daily lives of residents at the local level, the managers’ focus was on a mix of the policy interests of the organization at a central level and the daily lives of clients on site. In other words, they had different beliefs about what matters most: the daily lives of clients in the here and now, or the strategic continuation of the organization in the future.

Another issue that emerged from this research was the top-down communication between resident councils and managers. The resident council members were not actively involved in decision-making processes, as the processes were often overshadowed by the top-down dictatorial attitude of managers.

‘Items on the agenda always come from the boss himself.’
(member of resident council)

‘The resident council is rather acquiescent, they never object to anything I talk about.’
(manager)

Participation was therefore poor and may even be labeled tokenistic. This is frustrating for both parties. Although some managers did not appreciate the desirability of the resident council and wanted it abolished altogether, most managers’ frustration sprang from their wish for a resident council to be critical and proactive. However, managers could not see how the voice and influence of resident councils could be improved. Some resident council members were satisfied with the managers’ authoritarian attitude and their own lack of real influence on issues that had already been decided upon. However, many resident council members were frustrated by this lack of influence and they were unable to see how they might create opportunities to have their say.

Two cases

The following two cases illustrate a situation in which a resident council experienced top-down communication and a lack of influence, and a situation in which a resident council believed it had been successful and actually inspired other resident councils. The first case is based on participant observations and field notes of Baur during a meeting between a resident council and a manager. The second case was shared by a resident council member during the focus group with resident council members.

Case 1: Intruders

The managers at one of the Horizon locations informed the resident council at one of their monthly meetings that another care organization would be renting part of one of the Horizon buildings to use as a care unit for its own clients. The manager explained that Horizon would not benefit directly from this decision because of cuts in other areas. The resident council members were not happy with this decision and
asked questions and protested. The manager attempted to suppress the dissent by claiming that in the long term Horizon would benefit from this arrangement because it put the likelihood of a merger on the cards. This would be advantageous for Horizon as a whole. The financial interests that the manager explained caused quite an uproar, since the resident council told the manager that their priorities lay elsewhere, i.e. a garden for their clients which could also be let to and used by the other organization. The resident council claimed that what the manager was proposing would not be fair on Horizon residents. However, the manager informed the council that he was not in a position to reverse the decisions that had already been taken by the Board of Directors. However, the resident council seemed to have received different information through the central resident council, which had been informed by the Board of Directors that Sunset, the new partner, was not interested in renting the garden. The manager finally reluctantly promised the resident council to ask the Board of Directors what was going to happen with the garden. The council members felt this was how things often went: ‘Negotiations are already cut and dried before we’re even told anything.’

Case 2: Speak up!

In the focus group with members of resident councils, a member shared what she thought was a success story with the other participants. She told of how her resident council had insisted on the gardens being tidied up. This resident council did not initially think its request would be honored. However, the resident council members continued to complain about the state of the gardens and they stood up for the clients they represented. To their surprise, the manager took care of the problem and had the gardens tidied up. Moreover, he even invited the resident council to dinner. The story was particularly inspiring for the other participants in the focus group. It started a dialog about how resident councils themselves could turn the disappointing experiences of being let down by managers (leading to a passive attitude of the resident councils) around into a more proactive attitude. The message that the participants came up with, for themselves was clear: as a resident council, you should speak up for your clients about concrete matters and you can actually get things done, without everything being completely in the hands of managers and their policy subjects. This attitude was summarized in the powerful slogan: ‘Don’t just grumble, speak up!’ (resident council member).

Analysis

In these two cases, the interaction between resident councils and managers is shaped by different forms of rationality, identity and power structures. In the first case, we see the preponderance of strategic rationality, formal identities and hierarchical power structures. In the second case, we see more communicative rationality, lifeworld identities and a shift in hierarchical power structures. These concepts relate to Habermas’ theory on system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). He describes how, in modern times, a process of rationalization has led to a divergence between the lifeworld, characterized by communicative action, on the one hand, and systems that function on the basis of strategic action, on the other hand. Communicative action can be understood as coordinated action through a focus on consensus and mutual understanding. Strategic action refers to situations in which individuals coordinate their actions through money and power.

The interaction between resident councils and managers can be highly strategic. Managers and resident councils may both have their own agendas. We saw this in the first case: the manager had a strategic goal—to let part of the site. The strategic goal of the resident council was for the residents’ wellbeing, in this case a garden and a ‘fair’ division of goods. Although these are typical lifeworld issues, the council members presented them strategically. For instance, they referred to the fact that the gardens could be saved without losing money. They knew this was how they could make themselves heard, and accommodated the strategic action performed by the manager. The interaction between this manager and the resident council functioned through the material reproductive forces of money and power. The manager was initially reluctant and also said he was powerless. He passed responsibility on to the Board of Directors. He played with his power, paradoxically by keeping up the appearance that he did not have any authority over the issue under discussion.

Money also played an important strategic role in this case. It is of strategic, financial interest for Horizon if they can let part of the site to other organizations. The resident council, in turn, uses its authority by referring to their communication with the central resident council and the knowledge they have. They know things that the manager does not know. This helped them grow stronger, even though it might only be a subtle part of their interaction with little long-lasting effect. In the first case, both groups act formally. Their identities are primarily determined by the formal functions and roles within the organization, and there is little room for dialog and mutual understanding.

What is happening in the first case between the manager and the resident council is an example of what Habermas (1987) calls strategic action. It is directed at the agency of people to reach their goals, taking into account that others do the same. Strategic action relates to the non-verbal influence that people exert on each other and on situations (Habermas, 1988). Processes of material reproduction take place that aim at maintaining bodies embedded in economy and state. This is what Habermas summarizes by the word system. The system concentrates on economy, bureaucracy, market and state. Not mutual understanding, but the instruments of power and money are central to the interaction between people who act according to the purposive rationality of the system.

The second case displays the interaction between a manager and a resident council in which the power relations are more balanced. The resident council played a significant role in arranging for the gardens to be tidied up. The manager was open to what the resident council had to say about the gardens and he used his authority to improve things so that the residents could again enjoy them. In this case we can see a shift of power relations, and this is part of the process that Habermas (1987) calls communicative action. Habermas (1987) states that meaningful action, social integration and
order are constituted by communicative action. In commu-
nicative action, people step out of their strategic (and ego-
centric) rationality and formal role and identity. They open up
to others to be able to engage in processes of reaching
understanding, as people with a name and face. According to
Habermas, the quality of life depends on the undisrupted
processes in the lifeworld in which people engage in
communicative action.

The lifeworld can be considered to be the backdrop against which daily interaction between people takes place. It
is the process of maintaining the objective, the social and the
individual world, which is concentrated in culture, society
and personality. Culture, society and personality are sources
from which the individual can draw to act communicatively.
Communicative action is also a circular process in which the
lifeworld is not merely the source, but also the product of
communicative action. In the lifeworld, people coordinate
their actions by developing mutual understanding.

In both cases we saw how the resident councils stood up
for the gardens being maintained. The resident councils
believe that gardens are salutary for residents: they can go
there for short walks, or relax and enjoy the fresh air and
nature. These values are lifeworld values. By putting lifeworld
topics on the policy agenda, resident councils are protesting
against the financial and strategic values of the system, and
are promoting another value-driven rationality, a mutual
sharing of influence and power, and a more personalized
identity. The resident council in the second case succeeded in
bringing these values to the fore. They did not have to defend
their perspective as a response to the issues put forward by
management. There was no struggle as in the first case.
Instead of being defensive, the council members proactively
communicated their issues through a genuine and open
dialog with the manager. They wanted attention to be given
to the quality of public space, and the manager welcomed
their ideas, listened attentively, and constructively acted
upon their suggestions. He did even more than expected.

These research findings show that communicative action
between resident councils and managers, which focuses on
mutual understanding and consensus, is complicated, though
not impossible. The interaction between managers and
resident councils is strongly influenced by system: asymmet-
ric relations, hierarchies and money (the financial existence
of the organization, cutbacks, and lack of staff, etc.). However,
system and lifeworld are interdependent and intersect. This
coherence is not problematic in itself. Problems occur when
system mechanisms gain the upper hand over lifeworld.

Discussion

It is possible to enhance communicative action between
managers and resident councils. What is needed if these
parties are to build their communicative action in the light of
Habermas’ ideal of herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation? This ideal,
which Habermas believes to be almost infeasible, is based on
four conditions (Belderok, 2002): 1) all those concerned
should have an equal opportunity to start a discourse in
which validity claims can be put to the test of tenability; 2) all
parties should have an equal opportunity to make statements,
to state opinions and bring criticism to the fore; 3) no power
differences, which might obstruct the expression of opinions
or criticism, should exist between parties; 4) all parties
should be faithful and honest so that latent manipulation is
ruled out. The question arises as to what extent these basic
conditions for communicative action are present in residen-
tial care homes, particularly when it comes to interaction
between managers and resident councils.

The first condition – that all parties have an equal opportunity
to start a discourse in which validity claims can be tested – is
problematic. If resident councils and managers do not agree on an
issue, resident councils can start to discuss the underlying validity
claims with the manager. This is, in fact, the basic reason behind
resident councils existing in the first place: to make a connection
between abstract policy and the concrete lived experience of
residents. However, in practice, managers and resident councils
claim that it is a challenge for them to discuss matters properly,
particularly those issues about which opinions differ.

Where there is a lack of consensus, communicative action
would also mean that the resident council has an equal
opportunity to open a discussion on the manager’s validity
claims. Officially, resident councils do have this equal
opportunity because they are asked for advice. The meetings
between resident councils and managers could be used to
discuss validity claims: for managers to critically reflect on
the impact policy has on practice; for resident councils to
speak up in favor of the residents’ quality of life. However,
resident councils and managers observed in the interviews
and focus groups that, in practice, decisions have often been
taken before resident councils have had a real chance to
discuss the underlying values and implications. Resident
councils are asked for advice on issues that are difficult to
understand or whose long-term implications are difficult to
put to the test. On the other hand, managers complain that
discussion on an equal footing with resident councils is
impossible because a lot of unclear or complex policy issues
have to be explained first. This is time consuming and the
discussion often fails to get round to the actual content. We
therefore argue that the first condition for communicative
action between resident councils and managers is barely
evident at all in their interactions. Case two demonstrates
that council members are more successful, in terms of
influence, if they set the agenda proactively. They are then
not called upon to defend their own perspective for political
emancipation, but they are able to constructively act on their
own strength that is grounded in lifeworld.

The second condition – that all parties should have an equal
opportunity to make statements, to state opinions and bring
criticism to the fore – would be met if it were purely dependent
on the legal framework. Legislation stipulates that resident

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councils are entitled to give negative advice, thereby bringing criticism to the fore. There are even several areas that managers cannot disregard in light of negative advice from resident councils. If a manager chooses to do this, then the resident council can call on a commission of intermediaries to give binding advice. One step further would be for the resident council to involve a cantonal judge to enable them to regain their influence. However, in practice, resident councils rarely go this far in order to defend their negative advice on a particular issue. Managers and resident council members said that they consider it very important that their mutual relationship continues to be positive and that any disagreements are dealt with in interaction. They would prefer to rely on their joint effort for communicative action rather than to find refuge in the system mechanisms of power imposed by the cantonal judge. However, this does not automatically mean that resident councils have an equal opportunity to be critical. Power differences between managers and resident councils continue to impede this process. However, the second case shows that power relations can change if there is dialog. Hierarchical power relations, as in the first case, may then shift to more equal partnerships, where manager and council members find common ground to improve the residents’ wellbeing.

Power is one of the steering media of strategic action (Habermas, 1987), which in itself is not a problematic concept. Power can be seen as a natural act of human life (Foucault, 1977; 1979) and it is also part of the lifeworld. However, asymmetric power relations among people involved in communicative action, whereby parties are striving for consensus and mutual understanding, can be a problem. Hierarchical authority in care institutions traditionally lies with managers and professionals. The fact that resident councils exist at all can be seen as a means to democratize institutions. Nonetheless, managers’ communication styles are often still paternalistic. This happens, for example, when managers set the agenda rather than the resident council, or when managers have to play the role of ‘educator’ because issues are often complicated or difficult for resident council members to understand, or when managers demonstrate latent strategic behavior by telling the resident council that they have no authority to change things when, in fact, they actually do have the authority. Managers and resident councils stated in the interviews and focus groups that there actually are many examples of the above scenarios. In spite of the legal framework, resident councils tend to feel powerless because they have very little real influence, and the effect is a vicious circle: when resident councils believe they have no influence, they tend not to speak up against managers and, as a consequence, they have no influence. As a result, power differences between managers and resident councils impede communicative action. Yet when council members and managers do engage in dialog and establish common ground, as in the second case, asymmetric power relations may become more equal. Both parties will then be the object as well as the subject of power. There is evidence of relational empowerment in the second case as both parties felt empowered (VanderPlaat, 1999). The resident council and the manager succeeded in improving a situation for the residents. Power relations are not static.

The last condition for communicative action – that all parties are faithful and honest so that latent manipulation is ruled out – is partly achieved in residential care homes. People often join a resident council generally do so because they want to do well, and because they want to help others. However, resident council members and managers maintained that some members do seem to participate in the council because they want to exert influence on personal issues. This hampers communicative action, not only between council and manager, but also among resident council members. Dialog about the overall interest of residents becomes quite difficult when individual members of a resident council are unable or unwilling to look beyond their own personal interests. The managers we spoke with appeared to have a genuine ambition to have their resident councils speak up. However, we should also bear in mind that managers may show latent strategic behavior. This happens when they create the impression that they are listening to the resident council and that they are striving for mutual understanding, while in actual fact they may only have their own strategic agendas in mind. Even though latent strategic behavior could be the result of the challenging position managers find themselves in i.e. between the interests of residents on the one hand, and the overall organization interests on the other, this behavior cannot be deemed faithful and honest if it is latent. Managers could get past this latent strategic behavior if they talked to the resident council about difficulties and dilemmas they experience in performing their multiple responsibilities as a manager. Vulnerability and interdependency between people are also inherent to the lifeworld. By creating room for these kinds of values and expressions, managers can help enhance communicative action by entering into dialog with resident councils about the challenges they experience as managers. The view resident councils have of managers may then shift from their being seeing as pragmatic, rigid and one-dimensional, to their being seeing as human beings with weaknesses just like everyone else.

In sum, the basic conditions for communicative action between managers and resident councils are presupposed in the legislative framework that supports the very existence of resident councils. However, reality is much more complex and shows that several factors impede the conditions for communicative action in residential care homes. Even though this is the case, we also saw a few good examples of communicative action between resident councils and managers. In these cases, managers were willing to share their authority with resident councils, and council members stood up for themselves, as illustrated in the second case. Managers sometimes sincerely wanted the resident council to hold up a mirror to establish whether the policy processes were actually in the residents’ best interests. These managers constructively supported and encouraged the resident council to form an opinion and give advice. They helped create preconditions for more equal communication, for example by allowing resident councils to set the agenda. In this way, dialog can result in a shift of rationalities, identities and power relations between system and lifeworld. If room is created for reflection, managers and councils are able to find common ground, become partners, share power and include value-laden considerations in their mutual deliberations (Baur et al., 2010).

Of course this present study does have its limitations. In our approach, the issue of generalizability should be linked to another category of judging rigor in research, namely transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Transferability involves the researcher’s ability to provide descriptions of the research setting, context and process, so that readers can assess
the extent to which the results of the study can be transferred to a
different situation. The intention behind using Habermas’ theory
as we do here to analyze the outcomes of the interviews and
focus groups is not to arrive at ‘grand generalizations’ (Stake,
2004). We want to give readers a guideline for thinking about
these kinds of situations in (elderly) care institutions or
elsewhere. We want readers to relate our analysis to their own
experiences. We create space for naturalistic generalizations in
which readers add new experiences to their existing knowledge
(Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

Conclusion

The democratic participation of resident councils presupposes
an active attitude on the part of residents, an ability to think not
only for themselves but also for other residents, and an ability
to think beyond the here and now, particularly when more complex
policy issues are at hand, such as renovations or mergers.
Managers are expected to be able to relate policy issues to the
lived and narrative experiences of resident council members,
they need to be able to put themselves in the shoes of residents
to understand what they are talking about, and they are expected
to be patient and invest time and energy in the meetings with
resident councils without rushing the policy process forward
towards undemocratic decision-making. However, it turns out
that resident councils and managers both struggle to
find grounds for this kind of communicative action in practice.

This article analyzed our research findings against the
background of Habermas’ theory on system and lifeworld. We
argue that there are numerous pitfalls surrounding the
participation of resident councils in residential care homes’
policy processes. The colonization of lifeworld by system
makes communicative action between resident councils and
managers difficult. This also becomes clear when we discuss
the conditions for communicative action against the back-
drop of the reality resident councils and managers face. These
conditions appear to be rarely present, due to power
differences and asymmetric relations.

Therefore, the existence of resident councils in long-term
care is not, in itself, a guarantee of participative and interactive
policy processes. Attention should be devoted to creating good
conditions for communicative action between resident councils
and managers. New forms of democratic participation, in which
dialogical interaction between residents and professionals is
central, should be explored in residential care practice. Such
attempts should be realistic, and informed by the pitfalls of
current participation mechanisms. Habermas’ theory of the
colonization of the lifeworld by systems can be useful to
prevent undue optimism. Habermas’ ideal of herrschaftsfreie
Kommunikation can also help to make true communicative action
and dialog transparent. Communicative action between
managers and resident councils requires ongoing dialog,
creative thinking and openness among all those involved.

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