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It's the Family's Move

The effects of Eigen Kracht conferences within the context of youth protection and with respect to safety, social cohesion and control

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Preface

This report provides the findings of research into the situations of families who had arranged an Eigen Kracht conference (family group conference) and had also had contact with youth protection services. For the purpose of this study, researchers focused on these families' situations three and nine months after the meetings had been held. They examined a select number of very important aspects: the safety and welfare of children, the ties between the family and its social network, and the say that the person requesting help had in the matter. In essence: what were the enduring results, after certain lengths of time, of having families seek a solution within their own network?

Eigen Kracht (literally "own capabilities") conferences are prepared by independent coordinators: outsiders who have absolutely no other connection with the family. The family and their group of friends who are brought together want to create a plan that includes decisions intended to decrease or eliminate certain problems within the family. Together with professionals, the family and members of their social network share their concerns, knowledge and experience. Afterward, the family meets alone to draw up a plan that includes precisely described agreements. The legally appointed guardian/family supervisor then endorses the plan on the conditions that it is safe for the child and meets legal requirements. As part of this procedure, care professionals take on the role of "client".

The development of Eigen Kracht in the Netherlands was inspired by changes occurring in youth care in New Zealand. There, due to the impact of the Maori community, both the say over problems involving children and the solution to these problems was established by law in 1989 in the form of the Children, Young Persons and their Family Act. This legislation allows a family to apply this new decision-making model (later adopted as Eigen Kracht in the Netherlands) to any need they might have. Because we are so grateful to our colleagues in New Zealand, Europe and the United States, we are adding English and German translations of the preface, the conclusions and the recommendations to this report. In so doing, we hope that this study will contribute to the international practice of youth care and to the encouragement of democratic citizenship.

We want to disseminate the findings of this study because it answers important questions about the results of an Eigen Kracht conference in the long term. It provides a substantiated answer to the demand for certainty regarding the safety of children living in worrisome situations as well as an answer to the doubt often associated with daring to trust a family's own capabilities.

Since the very first Eigen Kracht conference, we have always included an amount in the conference fee to cover the recording of conference-related data. This means that we obtain an annual summary of the results of conferences and can thus improve our clinical practice. We learned much from international sources about conducting family group conferences and, by now, from our own practice in

conducting Eigen Kracht conferences. Over time, we have been able to answer significant questions, most of which came from care professionals who saw an approaching change in their roles. These questions often concerned the fears that such a conference would get out of hand, that no one would be willing to attend, and that families would be unable to make safe, long-lasting plans. Yet records, research and methodical inquiries among the participants in regard to their conference taught us that if requested, families and their social networks would accept responsibility for concerns in their own circle that were almost always of a serious nature. We also learned that relationships sometimes had to be sought or restored first, but that in around 75% of the referrals an independent coordinator was able to establish the cohesion needed to result in a conference. Half of the families in the remaining 25% of the cases arrived at a solution without the need for an official conference, and the other half was unable to organise a conference due either to the lack of safety this would involve or to other reasons.

On average, thirteen people take part in a conference and they arrive at eighteen agreements. A distinctive feature of these conferences is that they often ignore the tunnel vision approach typical of professional care providers and seek coherence in solutions involving an average of at least four general areas of their lives (such as housing, finances, health and education). Many agreements (around 80%) have the family group itself accept responsibility for what needs to be done. The other 20% involve having the family ask for assistance from subsidised professional services. Within three months, the majority of the agreements have been met by the family members. And satisfaction concerning the conference is great among children, parents, other family members and the professionals.

Over the years, these and other findings have already taught us many important things. These days, for instance, the Eigen Kracht coordinator encourages participants to draw up an emergency plan due to the fact that even the best of plans may not turn out as expected. Attention to a follow-up procedure after the Eigen Kracht conference and how the family and professionals start working on implementing agreements over a longer period of time have been other important lessons that have also been confirmed in this particular study.

As a result of the study presented here, we now know much more about the situation of these families several months after their conference took place. The data also gives cause to engage in more reflection with care professionals as to their role and position. As an example, one of the “discoveries” resulting from this study was the fact that both professionals and family members think in the same terms and apply the same criteria when it comes to the essential objectives of the conference: the safety of children. This leads to mutual trust. An obvious consequence would be for both professionals and family members to start expressing this trust.

This relates to a question asked by Geert van der Laan at the Marie Kamphuis Lecture given by Peter Marsh in 2007*. In his role as respondent, Van der Laan asked about whether we could refer to “the client as object” and “the professional (and also the researcher) as subject” in client / care professional relationships. He would rather speak of “discovering and encountering” (Van der Laan, 2007) so that both evidence-based products of research and experience could be considered sources of knowledge. In terms of professionalism, the adding of experience would lead to a broader responsibility of those in professional practice. Professional care providers would be operating based not only on evidence but equally as much on experience. With the expression of mutual feelings and considerations, the possibilities of how an Eigen Kracht conference can be integrated into today’s clinical practice of youth care, particularly with regard to judicial family supervision, suddenly become that much more fascinating. What binds professionals and researchers with

family members in this regard is citizenship or, in the words of Geert van der Laan, “making a contribution to the state under the rule of law and the welfare state”.

It is our hope that the findings of this study will contribute to a greater trust in the capabilities of clients and their family group and thus to the improvement of clinical practice. Or, to reiterate the objectives of Minister Rouvoet, “Eigen Kracht conferences: more the rule than the exception.”

We heartily recommend the study for reading, and we look forward to receiving responses from readers. robvanpagee@eigen-kracht.nl

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*) Every two years, the Marie Kamphuis Foundation holds a lecture about developments in the field of social work. At the 2007 lecture, Peter Marsh, Professor at the University of Sheffield, spoke about the interrelationship of social work practice and research. Geert van der Laan, who holds an endowed chair in social work at the University for Humanistics in Utrecht to study the foundations of social work, acted as respondent. (Marsh & van der Laan, 2007; Annual Figures, Eigen Kracht, 2007; Ministry for Youth and Families, 2007).

10. Summary, conclusions and recommendations

10.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of the study including its intended objective, design and progression. Conclusions are then described as based on the research questions and mention is made of a number of other important findings. Finally, certain recommendations are directed to youth protection professionals and the staff of Eigen Kracht Centrale whilst other recommendations are made for further study. This report is available in two versions: one version written entirely in Dutch, and another that includes both English and German sections.

10.2 Review of the study

Background

Dutch youth care services have been conducting Eigen Kracht conferences (EKC's) since 2001. The EKC approach involves having an independent coordinator convene a meeting of the parents, children, other family members, and others in their supportive social network. The meeting results in a number of decisions (a plan) regarding the assistance that the social network can offer the family in solving the observed problems as well as what kinds of professional and other assistance will be enlisted from outside the family's own network. The plan is then put into action by those involved unless the professionals deem that it conflicts with the children's right to safety or that it conflicts with Dutch law. An EKC is not a form of assistance but a method of arriving at decisions about the desired kind of assistance provided to a family. Help is thought necessary because the welfare and safety of one or more children in the family is threatened to such an extent that action is required.

Studies conducted in other countries show that beneficial results are being reached by applying this method. The intention of this study was to show whether this method would demonstrate similar results when applied within the specific Dutch context of youth protection.

The research questions to be answered in this study were as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of the families who are referred to an Eigen Kracht conference, and are these characteristics the same as those of the intended target group?
2. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to a reduction in the concerns for the safety and welfare of the children?
3. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to an increase in the social support received by the parents in carrying out their tasks and also to an increase in social cohesion?
4. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to a shift away from the social service system to the social network in regard to: (1) the control function regarding the safety and welfare of the children and (2) the functioning of the parents?

Conducting the study

The study was conducted between 2005 and 2007 and consisted of both quantitative and qualitative parts, the quantitative part, conducted by PI Research (in collaboration with the VU University) and WESP Jeugdzorg, respectively. The

quantitative part consisted of using surveys and checklists to collect information, and conducting reviews of client files. Some of the data related to previously finalised Eigen Kracht conferences (retrospective research). The other families were followed starting from their referral to attend an Eigen Kracht conference (prospective research). In the case of these families, data was collected on the date of referral as well as three and nine months after the conference (follow-up). For this quantitative part of the study, data from and about 113 families was collected.

The qualitative part of the study consisted of holding interviews with the professionals who referred clients to an EKC conference, the parents, and the children (aged 8 - 18). Interviews were also held with persons in a parallel group who did not attend an Eigen Kracht conference but for whom a decision arrived at through standard methods was made about the child's future. These interviews, which involved the situations of 20 families, were held nine months after the conference or after the date on which other means were used to arrive at a decision. In all, a total of 52 persons were interviewed for this part of the study.

The study as a whole involved three groups of subjects: families who attended an Eigen Kracht conference and for whom a plan was created, families who had been selected to attend an Eigen Kracht conference but for whom a conference was not held, and families for whom no conference was held but for whom a decision was arrived at using the standard method (including the enlisting of professional care providers).

Before presenting the most significant findings from this study, it is important to gauge the degree to which the collected data is representative of all the families selected for the study. The review of client files involving families in both the prospective and retrospective part of the study was carried out. For 79 of the 113 families (70%), this was actually successful. In addition, information from families in the prospective part was collected by means of surveys and checklists at the start of their Eigen Kracht conference and then three and nine months thereafter. The initial response rate among the parents at the time of the conference was 70% but this dropped to 35% at the three-month follow-up session and to 30% at the nine-month follow-up session. The response rate among family informants at the time of the follow-up sessions was comparable to those of the parents. The response rate among those who had been referred for assistance was higher: 90% initially, 70% at the three-month follow-up, and 50% at the nine-month follow-up. In short, the review of client files and the measurements taken at the beginning offer a more than sufficient basis for arriving at valid conclusions. The response rate at the follow-up sessions, particularly among parents and family informants, left so much to be desired that conclusions based on them could not be considered sufficiently reliable.

In regard to the cases in which an Eigen Kracht conference was held, the response rate was 83%, a rate sufficient for being able to draw reliable conclusions. The groups of referring professionals, family members and family networks were sufficiently represented as well. Among the parallel group, the response rate was less than half (41%) of the response rate for EKC cases. Because the response rate of the referring professionals was 100%, they were sufficiently represented for the purpose of arriving at valid conclusions. This did not apply, however, to the family members and their networks in the parallel group; their response rate was too low (21%) to be able to arrive at valid conclusions.

10.3 Answering the research questions

The objective of this study was to establish the impact that Eigen Kracht conferences had on families in which the safety and welfare of one or more children was at issue and for whom decisions had to be made in regard to the kind of assistance to be enlisted (which might or might not include professional help). This section provides answers to the research questions derived from this objective.

1. What are the characteristics of the families who are referred to an Eigen Kracht conference, and are these characteristics the same as those of the intended target group?

This section begins with the first research question addressing the characteristics of the target group and is followed by research questions 2 through 4 that address the intended results of Eigen Kracht conferences. Data about the characteristics of the target group – in this case, the families for whom an EKC was held – were necessary in order to place the results achieved by the Eigen Kracht conferences in the right perspective. After all, it was important to know whether the desired results were achieved among families for whom the EKC was originally intended.

On average, the families that participated in the study had one or two children. Almost half of these children were between the ages of 13 and 18; somewhat more than a third of them were of primary school age. Boys and girls were represented about equally. About half of the families had an ethnic background. In terms of these demographic aspects, the research group was very much the same as the families who are usually referred to an Eigen Kracht conference (this latter category being referred to as the “originally intended target group”).

Unlike the originally intended target group, this study focused only on children and youth who had been in contact with youth protection services so that children in the research group resided less often with their parents. In addition, more young people in the research group were living in a residential care or crisis group. And, taken as a whole, the research group had more prolonged contact with professional support agencies than did the originally intended target group. Finally, the number of cases in which a referral led to an Eigen Kracht conference resulting in a plan was higher among those in the research group than among those in the originally intended target group.

At the time of the referral for a conference, the child's behavioural problems were dominating the issue in about one out of four families. The referring professionals estimated that somewhat more than half of these youths had more than a fifty percent chance of being placed in custodial situations. In the case histories consulted, how the child was functioning was the focus of most concerns: on average, almost three concerns (e.g. emotional problems, delayed development, anti-social behaviour). On average, concern in the area of “family/upbringing environment” (family conflicts, neglect), as well as concerns regarding the larger network of social contacts (inadequate social network, school problems) were reported less often (one or two concerns).

When asked, forty percent of the parents said that the upbringing of their children was causing them very severe stress. Unlike the “average” parent in the Netherlands, thirty percent of the parents said that they received little if any support from others in their network (partner, family members, friends, etc.) in regard to the upbringing of their child/children. When it came to the capability of dealing with everyday problems (the ability to cope), somewhat more than twenty percent of these parents were

experiencing substantially to very severe problems in this area. These findings were based on standardised surveys. In the corresponding norm groups consisting of cross-sections of the Dutch adult population (with children), the percentage for the category “substantially to very serious” was ten percent.

The above describes the characteristics of families referred to an Eigen Kracht conference. This was a special group due to the fact that these were families in which one or more children had been in contact with youth protection agencies (Youth Care Agency, Child Care and Protection Board). Due to this fact, as well as to characteristics connected with it (such as a history of receiving assistance from support agencies, a child/children no longer living with the parents, threats to safety, etc.), the families in this study were unlike those in the originally intended target group. The families in the study were often confronted with multiple issues in which the most serious concern appeared to be related to aspects of how the child was functioning (welfare, hindrances to development, behavioural problems). The fact that relatively many of these parents indicated that they experienced the upbringing of their children to be stressful or extremely stressful, that they said that they received little if any support from their surroundings, and that they said that they were lacking or seriously lacking in the capacity to cope with their problems, emphasises once again the seriousness of the situation in which these children and their families find themselves as well as the necessity to take action. It is for these kinds of situations that desperately require taking action in order to face up to problems that the Eigen Kracht conference was originally intended. The conclusion, thus, is that the characteristics of the target group actually being reached (the group of young people and families described here) agreed with the characteristics of the intended target group.

2. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to a reduction in the concerns for the safety and welfare of the children?

All the families in the research group had fewer concerns nine months after their conference (in which they created a plan) than when they came to the conference in the first place. This finding was not remarkable considering that a family supervisor or guardian was working with these families; for this reason, such results would be expected. Three months after a conference, these families had demonstrably fewer concerns than families who had not attended a conference. Among families who had attended a conference, the average number of concerns decreased dramatically during the period immediately after the conference and then stabilised; the number of concerns for families who had not attended a conference decreased gradually. Attending an Eigen Kracht conference seemed to accelerate the rate at which the number of concerns decreased during the first three months following the conference. Among the families who were referred to an Eigen Kracht conference but did not attend an EKC, the average number of concerns after nine months was comparable to those of the families for whom an Eigen Kracht conference was held. For these families, the number of concerns decreased more gradually.

On average, during the sessions held three and nine months after the EKC, referring professionals and family informants mentioned a slight improvement in the safety and welfare of the children involved. Based on information obtained from the interviews, the situation of most of the interviewed children was safer nine months after the conference than it was at the time of the conference. Safety among children in the parallel group also increased nine months after a decision was made about their situations. The ways in which these safer situations were reached, however, differed. In the parallel group, the child was moved to a placement outside of the family

setting. Among the children attending an Eigen Kracht conference, this was not the case; they more often remained among family and their network.

Although it was possible to observe that the safety and welfare of the children had improved three and nine months after the Eigen Kracht conference, the study offers no grounds for arriving at the conclusion that the reduced number of concerns could be completely attributed to attending a conference. After all, it was also observed that families who did not attend an Eigen Kracht conference and who were offered a form of standard professional care made progress in these areas. In short, the second research question can be answered in the affirmative: Eigen Kracht conferences generally provide beneficial results in regard to the safety and welfare of the children in these families. It cannot be concluded, however, that these beneficial results could be attributed solely to the holding of an Eigen Kracht conference.

3. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to an increase in the social support received by the parents in carrying out their tasks and also to an increase in social cohesion?

Nine months after their Eigen Kracht conference, parents generally indicate that they are receiving somewhat more support in upbringing and also require less support than at the time of the conference. In addition, most of the parents are more satisfied with their social contacts and have more confidence in them nine months after the conference; this observed difference could be demonstrated statistically. By and large, at the time of the three-month follow-up, both referring professionals and family informants confirmed that, as compared to the time when the conference was held, the support from the family's network in carrying out upbringing tasks had increased. Six months later, during the second follow-up session (nine months after the conference) their evaluation had not changed all that much and was therefore still equally positive. The interview findings supported this development. According to half of the care professionals interviewed, the amount of support from within the families and the network of the families in the parallel group (who had not attended an Eigen Kracht conference) decreased during the nine months following a decision about their case whilst these professionals said that this kind of support had increased in the majority of cases using EKC's.

All in all, it seems that the social support being received by parents in carrying out their upbringing tasks, as well as the cohesion within their social network, increased during the period following their Eigen Kracht conference. Several sources offered support for the existence of this development. On the other hand, considering the data that was collected on the same subject during the interviews with families in the parallel group, this study provides an insufficient basis for the conclusion that these beneficial results could be attributed solely to the holding of an Eigen Kracht conference.

4. Do Eigen Kracht conferences lead to a shift away from the social service system to the social network in regard to: (1) the control function regarding the safety and welfare of the children and (2) the functioning of the parents?

Both the referring professionals and the family informants judged that the control function had been taken over more by the social network (the nuclear family, members of the extended family and the surrounding social network) three months after the conference as compared to the time of the conference. What this meant, among other things, was that families were quicker to ask for help when they needed it and that the amount of professional help received by the family decreased. Nine months after the conference, their assessments were even more positive. Based on the data collected from the parents about their feeling of autonomy (an estimate of their coping capacity, the feeling of having control over their own lives, etc.), it cannot

be concluded that improvements occurred in this regard between the time of the conference and at the times of follow-ups.

The assessment of the family's coping capacity and what it had to cope with were the same after three and nine months. Referring professionals thought that the relationship between both of these aspects was unchanged following the Eigen Kracht conference.

The interviews that were held supported this point somewhat. In half of the cases in which an Eigen Kracht conference was held, it was thought that control shifted more toward the family and its network; in one-fifth of the cases, control was thought to have shifted away from the family and its network. In two-thirds of the cases in the parallel group (in which no Eigen Kracht conferences were offered), control shifted more to the family supervisor; in the remaining cases, there was no shift in control.

The answer to the fourth research question is also confirmed but with a certain amount of reticence. According to the study, indications from various perspectives were obtained that confirmed that control shifted somewhat from the social service system to the family's social network after the Eigen Kracht conference was held. The reserve that has to be exercised concerns the scope to which the conclusion can be applied: the study did not demonstrate that this result could be attributed solely to the holding of an Eigen Kracht conference.

10.4 Other findings

Besides answering the research questions, the study also generated a number of other interesting findings:

- a. Referring professionals and members of the family and social network were aware of the same issues when it came to assessing the safety of the child. Even so, compared to the referring professionals, the family members and their network emphasised more aspects related to welfare such as maintaining contacts with family and friends, the freedom of movement and possibilities for doing things for fun and relaxation.
- b. In their standard practice, professionals sought little if any contact with anyone besides the nuclear family or those with authority. This was sometimes due to a negative image they had of the network. Another factor in this regard is that including the opinions of others in the decision-making process is not required. Professionals indicated that by being involved in an Eigen Kracht conference that they became acquainted with more people from the family's network and felt that this improved the quality of their relationship with the family.
- c. Families for whom an Eigen Kracht conference was not held received ambulatory services more often after being referred for a conference than did families for whom a conference was held. In addition, families who had not attended a conference received a type of ambulatory care applied to more acute situations [e.g. Families First and IAG (intensive ambulatory family counselling)] than families that participated in a conference.
- d. About the same number of custodial placements were made among families who had had a conference and those who had not. The average duration of these custodial placements were somewhat shorter (by almost three months) among families who had attended a conference than among families who had not attended a conference. When a custodial placement was employed during the period following the conference/referral for a conference, this was

usually realised within the network if the case involved a family attending a conference.

- e. The plans resulting from an Eigen Kracht conference were often not included in the case file and the plans for care made by care professionals did not systematically include information about the progression and results of the conference and the post-EKC period. This is of note because in most cases the family supervisor was the professional who made the referral for an EKC.
- f. The agreements arrived at in the plan made during the Eigen Kracht conference did not provide sufficient clarity as to whom would be responsible for the its implementation and coordination processes following the Eigen Kracht conference.

10.5 Conclusions to be drawn from the study

This study, for which the most significant findings are listed in the previous sections, offers the basis for two important conclusions. Firstly, families who have participated in an Eigen Kracht conference experience a generally positive development. In general, the study shows that by three months after the conference, they have made progress with regard to the safety and welfare of the children involved. There are also indications that the social support received by the parents and the cohesion within the family's social network has increased and that the control function has shifted from the professional care system to the social network. Six months later, at the time of the second follow-up, these changes are still largely observable; a certain level of stabilisation has been reached. It is important to note in this regard that the indications of change or progress were based on various sources, a fact that strengthens the basis for this conclusion.

Secondly, this study leads to the conclusion that the Eigen Kracht conference – as an alternative decision-making model in cases involving the safety and welfare of juveniles – performs at least as well as standard youth protection practices, and also over the longer term. In other words, holding a conference that results in a plan that has been drawn up and agreed upon by the family and its network and which is then implemented by the parties involved, leads to a reduction of concerns (with respect to safety and welfare) that is comparable to the results generated by the standard approach applied to similar cases by the Youth Care Agency. These findings offer no basis for the opinion that Eigen Kracht conferences cannot be employed in youth protection because they would have an adverse impact on the safety of these children. There is also no basis for the supposition that parents and families are unable to create a safe plan for children in youth protection cases.

In regard to this last conclusion, it should be noted that, in addition to a comparable result or achievement, the Eigen Kracht conference has a number of other attractive aspects or characteristics. Firstly, as demonstrated in this study and compared with standard practice, the conference acts as a kind of catalyst. During the first three months after the conference, a decrease in concerns occurs at a faster pace. The occurrence of an Eigen Kracht conference, like a booster rocket, generated extra energy and momentum within the social network and this was then employed to eliminate concerns within a shorter period of time. The Eigen Kracht conference is like "the first blow that's half the battle". The value of this from the perspective of development psychology cannot be underestimated, because the turnaround from a problematic to a healthy development can take place at an earlier point in time. Such an acceleration of results could also be seen as advantageous from an economic standpoint. Secondly, the approach of an Eigen Kracht conference corresponds very well with modern opinions about the provision of demand-driven social services with an accent on empowerment, activating help-seekers, and shifting the focus from the

problem to the ability to cope with it (see, for example, Van Montfoort & Slot, 2008). Thirdly, inherent in employing an Eigen Kracht conference is the fact that an appeal is being made to a broader social network of families. In many professional forms of assistance and support, enlisting family and other involved parties is much less taken for granted and occurs much less routinely – and this is sometimes seen as a shortcoming.

Finally, yet another comment of a more general nature: this document emphasises that the conclusions drawn here in regard to the results of the Eigen Kracht conferences apply solely to a specific subgroup: families with one or more children for whom a youth protection measure is being taken or is impending.

10.6 The validity of the research findings

In the introduction to this report, it was proposed that this study should show whether the Eigen Kracht conference method would also be effective within a specifically Dutch context (with other patterns of standards and values, other legislation and regulations, another structure and organisation for care provided to juveniles). To be able to conclude this, what would have to be answered was whether the findings reported in this study (the “effects”) could be attributed to the occurrence of an Eigen Kracht conference (the “intervention”). This question addresses the internal validity of the research findings. The higher the internal validity, the greater the certainty that the conference may be held responsible for the specified effects.

In this study, internal validity is undermined for various reasons. Firstly, in the quantitative part of the study, the response rates were low, particularly for the two follow-up points. The chance of a distortion of the research findings (bias) is high; consequently, this increases the risk of invalid conclusions. In particular, these risks have an impact on the effects based on survey data. The validity concerning the review of client files – on which, among other conclusions, the important conclusion about the decrease in the number of concerns was based – is much less undermined by a low response rate. In the interviews, a low response rate was a factor only in the case of the parallel group in which it was particularly difficult to find respondents from among the circle of family and social network. A second factor that prejudices internal validity is the consequence of the low response rate that occurred: because data was obtained from a smaller number of informants, there is often too little authorisation for statistically demonstrating differences between groups (e.g. between families who did and did not participate in a conference) and between assessment points (initial data versus follow-up data). A third limitation to internal validity that applied to the quantitative part of the study involved the research topic. Except for the review of client files, the study could largely be characterised as a progress study. According to this design, a certain group (in this case, the group of families that had participated in a conference) is assessed two or more times. Due to this design, validity is rather limited because the data collected cannot be compared with the data collected from a group for whom no intervention has taken place. The review of client files was based on a quasi-experimental design. In principle, this kind of design, in which a group of families that had participated in a conference and another that had not were subject to repeated assessments, would have a higher internal validity. The resulting research findings would provide a relatively high degree of certainty about the causal relationship between intervention and effect.

In short, the internal validity offers no basis for arriving at definite (causal) conclusions about the effectiveness of Eigen Kracht conferences. Instead, this study shows the degree of progress made by the families that participated in a conference and the improvements that were realised without being able to supply a definite explanation as to whether these changes could be attributed solely to the

conference. As previously noted in Chapter 2 within the framework of the “effect ladder”, this was referred to as “indicative evidential value”.

The observed impediments to internal validity are compensated for to a certain degree by certain other characteristics of this study. Firstly, the findings of the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study, which were conducted independently from one another, were mutually supportive. The consistency of the findings made a meaningful contribution to the validity of the study. A second indication for the validity of the research findings is derived from the largely identical findings generated by studies conducted into family group conferences in other countries (see Chapter 1). Here again, there is a consistency of findings that strengthens the basis of the conclusions of this report.

10.7 Recommendations

The conclusions about the results of an Eigen Kracht conference in families with one or more children for whom a youth protection measure is being taken or is impending give cause for making the following recommendations:

Recommendations for youth protection professionals:

1. In view of the predominantly positive findings generated by this study, consider the systematic employment of an Eigen Kracht conference when decisions have to be made in youth protection cases.
2. Promote a system-oriented practice of professionals by means of training and supporting them in involving families and networks in general as well as in working together with the social network during the implementation of the plan created in the Eigen Kracht conference.
3. As standard procedure, bring the family and its network into focus, and seek and maintain more contact with persons in the family and their network who do not belong to the nuclear family and who are not in authority.
4. As standard procedure, include the referral to Eigen Kracht and in the plan made during the Eigen Kracht conference in the case file. Also as standard procedure, include a detailed report in the care plans of the degree to which the plan developed during the EKC was implemented during the post-EKC period.

Recommendations for Eigen Kracht *Centrale*:

1. Devote more attention to what happens during the first months following the Eigen Kracht conference, both at the organisational level when setting up projects as well as during the provision of information to professionals and families. Provide more clarity and arrive at agreements about who will be responsible for follow-up, implementing the plan, and evaluation.
2. Devote more attention to the advantages of an Eigen Kracht conference for professionals such as becoming acquainted with and gaining insight into the social network and developing a better relationship with the family.

Recommendations for further study:

1. It would be advisable to design a system for the systematic gathering of quantitative and other data from and about the participants in Eigen Kracht conferences. This would enable the continual monitoring of important conference results such as the safety and welfare of children, the social support received by parents, the social cohesion of the social network and

- which parties are implementing control. This would also make data available for additional change or effectiveness research.
2. It would be advisable to examine whether it would be effective to employ Eigen Kracht in cases that have not resulted in an Eigen Kracht conference and cases that have led to an Eigen Kracht conference but not to the development of a plan.