Non-take-up of social support and the implications for social policies

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Chapter 9

Conclusion

CHAPTER 9 - CONCLUSION

As set out at the beginning of this thesis, the central aim is to better understand the underexplored phenomenon of non-take-up of social support and the implications for social policies. While there is an abundance of academic research on help-seeking behavior in various contexts (e.g., healthcare utilization and take-up of social security benefits), this knowledge has not been directly applied to help-seeking for social support from third sector organizations. In addition, different academic disciplines have focused on different aspects of help-seeking behavior and have done so in relative isolation from one another. Overall, our empirical and theoretical understanding of this phenomenon is severely limited. This is highly problematic, as many contemporary social policies are founded on the premise – or, perhaps better phrased, the *expectation* – that individuals who are in need of social support will actively seek and ask for that support.

To address this lacuna in our knowledge, this in-depth study of non-take-up of social support in the Dutch municipality of The Hague (500,000+ inhabitants) has been conducted. More specifically, the four research objectives were 1) to examine the contents of the contemporary social policies of the municipality of The Hague to determine whether (and, if so, how) the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support is taken into account by policymakers; 2) to build our theoretical understanding of non-take-up of social support; 3) to shed light on the personal experiences and perceptions of a hidden and hard-to-reach group of individuals who are eligible for but do not receive social support; and 4) to critically reflect on the ramifications of these findings for social policies in The Hague.

This concluding chapter will first recapitulate the key findings and formulate an answer to the main research question. Second, it will discuss the broader implications of this study for the academic debate and for (policy) practice. Subsequently, it reflects on the limitations and shortcomings of this study and proposes some potentially fruitful routes for future research. Finally, it discusses some normative implications of the research outcomes and concludes with a final note.

9.1. RECAPITULATING THE KEY FINDINGS AND ANSWERING THE MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

This section will consecutively and concisely summarize the analytical framework, the overarching research strategy and the key findings from the three research stages. These form the ingredients to answer the main research question.

Analytical framework: multilevel influences on non-take-up of social support

Since no analytical framework of non-take-up of social support previously existed, it was first necessary to develop one to further guide and structure the theoretical and empirical research efforts. To do so, the help-seeking literature and the literature on non-take-up of social security benefits were both discussed, and their concepts and insights into help-seeking were evaluated (chapter 2). This literature review started with a critical discussion of the assumptions of help-seeking behavior. While most behavioral models in these two bodies of literature, either implicitly or explicitly, adhere to assumptions of the rational actor model, it was argued that this model is too limited and unproductive and is therefore inapplicable in the social domain. It provides an overly simplistic account of help-seeking for social support and fails to capture all the nuances and the complexities of this process.

Hence, an alternative, more realistic set of behavioral assumptions was formulated. Help-seeking behavior is *not* guided by rational calculations of objective, clear-cut measures of costs and (expected) benefits (as the rational actor model assumes) but depends on how individuals *subjectively* construe the world. The rational actor model also assumes that all individuals are (sufficiently and) equally self-confident, rational, active and competent, but in practice, this is unrealistic and therefore is an untenable assumption. Help-seeking (cap)abilities are not equally distributed but are *normally* distributed among the population. Individuals differ in, *inter alia*, their willpower, cognitive abilities, and bureaucratic competences. Hence, such aspects should be taken into account when investigating help-seeking behavior in the context of the social service system.

Having clarified the behavioral assumptions of help-seeking for social support, the literature review moved on to discuss the various ways in which help-seeking and (non-) take-up are conceptualized by scholars in the aforementioned bodies of literature. Based on this review, non-take-up of social support was conceptualized as a dynamic process, embedded in a multilayered social service system, in which various external actors play important roles and have major impacts on the help-seeking process. It is crucial not to focus only on the potential welfare recipient, as many conceptualizations of help-seeking behavior do, but to acknowledge and incorporate the positions, roles and responsibilities of other actors as well. In the context of help-seeking for social support, other relevant actors are representatives of third sector organizations and policymakers. The tailor-made analytical framework that was constructed (chapter 3) incorporates the entire path from social policies to – ultimately – the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals who are in need of social support. It consists of four levels that are relevant in this specific help-seeking context: 1) the individual level of the potential welfare recipient, 2) the organizational level of third sector providers and their representatives, 3) the social ser-

vice system level, and 4) the level of social policies. Figure 9.1 portrays this multilayered framework.

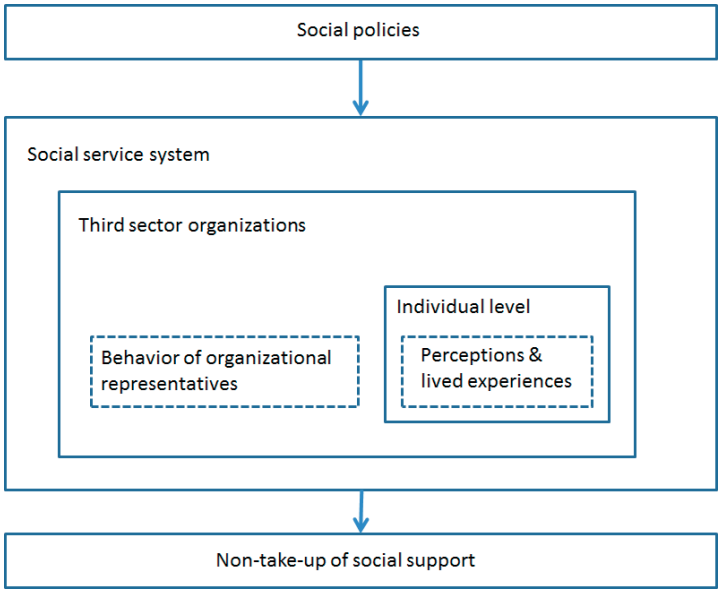

FIGURE 9.1: Analytical framework to understand non-take-up of social support from third sector organizations

In this study, two kinds of potential welfare clients, type I and type II, are discerned. What they have in common is that they are both eligible for social support from third sector organizations, but they do not use this support. What differentiates the two types of potential welfare recipients is 1) the 'position' they occupy within the social service system and 2) the purpose of the social support that is developed for and offered to them. Type I individuals are in need of social support to sustain or increase their self-reliance. Third sector organizations offer all sorts of support provisions that type I individuals are expected to use to strengthen their self-reliance and reduce their dependency on (more) expensive forms of care and support, for example, grocery delivery and shopping services, transportation services for disabled individuals to visit the doctor, debt counseling, buddy support and home care services.

As explained in chapter 4, the third sector organizations that offer such services vary widely in terms of geographical presence, organizational configuration, budget, clientele, level of specialization, and service supply. Some third sector organizations are spread out all over the city and have a presence in every neighborhood, while others operate only in specific areas of the city. Some have many physical locations, while others may be found only online. Some are very large and/or cater to many individuals with many different

welfare problems, while others remain small and/or provide more specialized services. Some offer highly specific services, while others offer very generic provisions that are intended for a much larger target group.

Type II individuals are nonprofessional caregivers who provide care and support to someone in their social network (a family member, a friend, or a neighbor). Third sector organizations offer social support services that specifically target at these caregivers. Those social support services serve a different purpose, namely, that of building, sustaining, and/or strengthening the caregiving capabilities of caregivers, for example, household services (cleaning services, maintenance work, gardening, etc.) or administrative support (e.g., filling out tax forms). Importantly, these social support provisions are accessible only to caregivers, not to type I individuals. Again, third sector organizations that offer such services are very different from one another. For instance, some organizations have the sole purpose of helping overburdened caregivers, while for other organizations, this is just one aspect of the whole range of services they offer. Some target a specific group of caregivers (e.g., caregivers with a certain migrant background), while others offer social services to a broader group of caregivers. As a final example of how third sector organizations differ, some work only with volunteers, while others also employ professionals. Figure 9.2 portrays the different positions of both types of potential welfare clients as well as the different purposes of the social support services that are offered to them by third sector organizations.

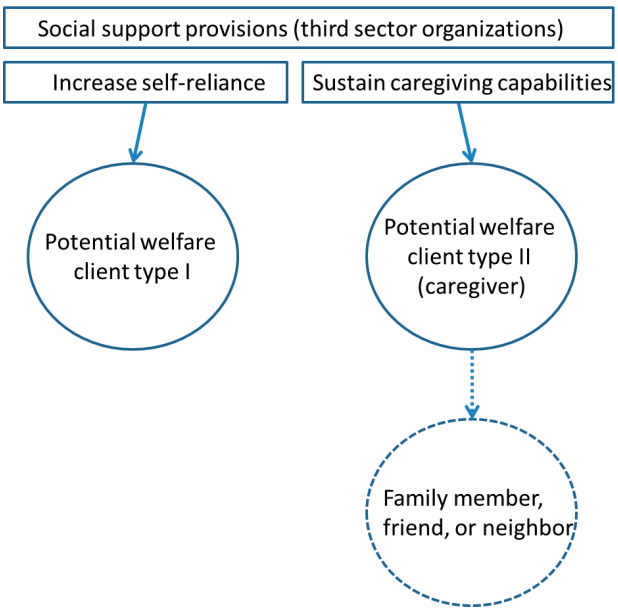

FIGURE 9.2: Visualizing support services for type I and type II potential welfare clients

In addition to illuminating the various levels and actors in relation to non-take-up of social support, the analytical framework also served as a heuristic device to further guide and structure the research efforts.

Empirical context of this study

The *local social service system of the Dutch municipality of The Hague* provides a key case to examine the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support and its implications for social policies. This particular social service system was selected for three main reasons. First, given the 'social profile' of this city, we expected to find individuals who encounter problems and barriers in asking for social support. In particular, this pertains to individuals with a non-Dutch sociocultural background, who are often underrepresented, or not represented at all, in research on help-seeking. In many regards, The Hague is a segregated city. It has some of the most prosperous, as well as some of the poorest, neighborhoods in The Netherlands. Furthermore, almost half of the population has an immigrant background, and just over half of The Hague's residents have a religious affiliation. Finally, compared to other major Dutch cities, The Hague has relatively high levels of social exclusion, functional illiteracy and debt problems. This 'sociocultural profile' of The Hague increases the likelihood of finding potential welfare clients for the investigation of non-take-up of social support. Since this target group constitutes a hard-to-reach population, it was crucial to take this consideration into account for the case selection.

The second reason why the local social service system of The Hague was chosen is related to the availability of secondary data sources. Importantly, The Hague has a digital database that contains all policy documents related to the local social service system and social support provisions. Not all Dutch municipalities have such a digital database. Fortunately, the municipality of The Hague offers the opportunity for researchers to collect, interpret and assess the contents of its social policy documents. The final reason to select The Hague's social service system is that we, as researchers, possessed in-depth knowledge of the local context. Such knowledge indeed proved crucial, particularly to recruit respondents from a hard-to-reach target population, as it facilitated finding and collaborating with local organizations, which, in turn, formed the 'gateways' to this study's target group.

The overarching three-stage research strategy

Based on the analytical framework, a research strategy was developed that consisted of three distinct but interrelated research stages (chapter 4). Each stage had its own focus, subquestion, theory, methods and data. The first stage concentrated on the contents of The Hague's social policy documents. The results of this content analysis provided the necessary groundwork to eventually assess the 'goodness of fit' between, on the one hand,

the content of contemporary social policies and, on the other hand, the perceptions and experiences of potential welfare recipients. The second stage consisted of two 'substages' in which we investigated why eligible individuals (type I and type II individuals in this study) refrain from asking for social support from third sector organizations. The third and final stage was focused on the policy implications of the findings on non-take-up of social support. Together, the three research stages tie in to and provide the ingredients to answer the main research question. Below, the key findings from each research stage will be highlighted, and thereafter, the main research question will be answered.

Key findings from research stage I: social policy analysis

This first stage of the empirical research delved into the contents of The Hague's contemporary social policies (chapter 5). The aim of this analysis was to 'uncover' and describe the main assumptions, expectations, and ideas of local policymakers about the social service system and about how third sector organizations and (potential) welfare clients that find themselves within this system (should) behave. More specifically, whether the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support is taken into account in these social policies – and, if so, *how* – was examined. Analyzing the contents of these social policies is highly relevant, as they form the basis of the local social service system. With these policies, local policymakers define the social rights of (potential) welfare recipients and categorize them into different target groups.

Furthermore, social policies shape the legal, budgetary, and organizational boundaries of the local social service system in which third sector organizational and (potential) welfare recipients find themselves. In addition to those aspects, social policies form an observable manifestation of the assumptions, expectations, ideas, frames, ambitions, goals, etc. of policymakers in relation to the governance of the local welfare system. Close scrutiny of social policy documents thereby provides a way to determine how the assumptions and ideas of policymakers actually have become solidified.

Based on the policy documents that were analyzed, it was observed that the local government in The Hague refrains from active, direct involvement in the social service system and focuses primarily on its role in policymaking. Local policymakers rely heavily on a wide array of third sector organizations to develop and deliver social support provisions. Furthermore, the (potential) welfare clients are expected by policymakers to play an active role in addressing their personal welfare problems. The content analysis further found that policymakers assume that when an integrated network of support sources is offered nearby, individuals who are in need of support will actively seek help as early as possible so that they can deal with their personal welfare problems before they worsen. Strikingly, however, the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support itself, and its potential

causes, receives inadequate attention in the policy documents under study, although other complex policy issues, such as social and emotional loneliness, debt problems, and population health, do receive in-depth attention from local policymakers. The 'how and why' of non-take-up of social support thus receive only scant attention. This is a salient and problematic blind spot in The Hague's social policies.

Key findings from research stage IIa: non-take-up of social support by type I individuals

Chapter 6 investigated the lived experiences and personal perceptions of potential welfare recipients (type I individuals in this study) in The Hague. The focus was on the determinants of non-take-up and on how different types of factors, 'operating' at different levels of the social service system, negatively impact the help-seeking process. Therefore, guided by the analytical framework, the academic literature was scrutinized to derive potential determinants of non-take-up of social support. From various streams in the academic literature, including social psychology, epidemiology, public administration, and law, the following four determinants for non-take-up of social support were derived: 1) the desire to retain one's (feeling of) independence and self-esteem, 2) socialization, 3) feeling rules, and 4) practical and bureaucratic thresholds.

Adopting a qualitative approach, this chapter then examined the extent to which empirical evidence is found for these determinants, based on the narratives (interviews) of 55 individuals and two focus groups (n=16) in The Hague. Given the challenging nature of recruiting interviewees from this hidden or hard-to-reach population, respondents were selectively sampled at different locations where individuals, perforce, come to meet (some of) their other help needs. In this study, these locations were the emergency room of a local hospital, different food bank locations and the offices of social work counselors. The two focus groups were organized to further deepen our understanding of reasons for non-take-up and to strengthen the internal validity of this study. The empirical results indicated that (perceived) bureaucratic obstacles and the desire to maintain one's (feeling of) independence are critical barriers to help-seeking behavior for social support from third sector providers.

Key findings from research stage IIb: non-take-up of social support by type II individuals

Although an estimated 4,000 organizations offer some form of social support to nonprofessional caregivers (type II individuals in this study), non-take-up of support services also occurs in The Hague. However, our understanding of this non-take-up of social support by caregivers is still limited. This second substage (chapter 7) concentrated on how bureaucratic barriers inhibit help-seeking for social support from third sector organiza-

tions by caregivers. To do so, the theoretical concept of *administrative burdens* from the public administration was applied. This theoretical concept is useful, as it unifies different types of administrative costs that caregivers may encounter in their help-seeking process. This concept allows for a more in-depth and nuanced investigation of administrative burdens in the interaction between third sector organizations and potential recipients of social support services, i.e., caregivers. A qualitative research approach was adopted, and empirical data were collected from focus groups (semistructured interview format) of caregivers in The Hague who were recruited by collaborating with a local organization that could contact hard-to-reach caregivers. The focus groups consisted of caregivers of Dutch, Surinamese, Turkish, Moroccan, The Netherlands Antilles & Aruban, and Chinese sociocultural backgrounds.

Based on the three components of the administrative burdens concept (i.e., learning costs, psychological costs, and compliance costs), the empirical findings indicate and illustrate that different types of learning costs and psychological costs are highly pronounced in the help-seeking process of caregivers. While compliance costs also seem to exert a negative effect on help-seeking, due to low levels of actual service use in the samples of respondents, few data were collected on this specific component. Finally, variation was found between different sociocultural groups of caregivers, particularly between Dutch and non-Dutch groups. By comparison, non-Dutch-speaking caregivers faced more learning costs due to language barriers, experienced specific 'cultural-psychological' costs in seeking help from third sector providers (on top of the 'normal' psychological costs caregivers face when deciding to ask for support) and were more inclined to ask for support from within their personal social network.

Similar to the previous substage (IIa), this chapter provided crucial knowledge regarding the complex phenomenon of non-take-up of social support – this time in relation to caregivers (type II individuals). Importantly, the findings of this second research stage (IIa and IIb) do not allow for generalization to the total population of potential welfare recipients, as the samples include the perceptions and experiences of a relatively small number of respondents. Nevertheless, the qualitative research design did allow for an in-depth understanding of the problems and barriers in the help-seeking process of potential welfare recipients. In all, the second research stage has substantially improved our understanding of 'the why and how' of the underexplored phenomenon of non-take-up of social support.

Key findings from research stage III: policy implications

The third and final research stage revisited the contents of The Hague's social policies (chapter 8) and addressed the following questions: *What are the implications for contem-*

porary social policies that emanate from our study on the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support in the municipality of The Hague? Using the newly acquired knowledge and insights on non-take-up of social support (chapters 6 and 7), the implications of our findings for the demarcation and definition of actor roles, the categorization of target groups and the policy assumptions suggested by local policymakers in social policy documents were discussed. It seems that policymakers underestimate the complexity of help-seeking for social support. The reality is that in spite of – or perhaps even because of – the emphasis on values such as participation, self-reliance and individual responsibility, it is not self-evident that all eligible individuals will seek social support.

Help-seeking for social support is more complex than is often suggested or assumed. Non-take-up is caused by an intricate interplay of different factors at different levels of the social service system, ranging from the personal level to the interpersonal, social level and the broader organizational/system level. How the intricate, multilayered process of help-seeking for social support fundamentally 'works' is something we are only now beginning to understand. Moreover, even though this is (often) assumed by policymakers, third sector organizations are not able to reach all potential welfare clients. Finally, with regard to the categorization of target groups in social policies, it remains largely unclear why, how and which target groups are defined and selected by policymakers. In this respect, more (methodological) transparency would be beneficial in order to better understand the considerations of local policymakers.

Answering the main research question

Having summarized the key findings of the three research stages, we will now answer the main research question: *Why do potential welfare recipients not take up social support provisions offered by third sector organizations, and what are the implications of this phenomenon for the contemporary social policies of the Dutch municipality of The Hague?* In highly condensed form, the answer is that there is a low 'goodness of fit' between, on the one hand, the contents of The Hague's contemporary social policies and, on the other hand, the daily reality of potential welfare clients – those individuals who are eligible for yet who do not receive social support. What this means is that 1) non-take-up of social support is caused by a range of different factors at different levels of the social service system that are not sufficiently recognized by or adequately incorporated into contemporary social policies; 2) there is a rather one-sided emphasis in social policies on promoting an active attitude, self-reliance, independence, and so forth and too little attention to the problems and barriers potential welfare clients perceive and experience in their daily lives; and 3) policymakers' ideas and expectations about help-seeking behavior are not congruent with the complexity and multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support.

Differently put: there are important disjunctions between 'policy on paper' and what actually happens in practice in regard to non-take-up of social support in the municipality of The Hague. Contrary to what is often (implicitly) assumed by policymakers, it is not self-evident that all eligible individuals will always seek social support. As this study has found and illustrated, when individuals are in (dire) need of social support, they often perceive or experience all kinds of problems and barriers that inhibit them from effectively seeking and utilizing support sources. Therefore, if the take-up of social support from third sector organizations is indeed considered an important policy goal, then the phenomenon of non-take-up should be taken more seriously.

This study has also yielded important knowledge of and insights into non-take-up of social support that form a fertile basis for further research and future (policy) actions. The next section will therefore further elaborate on the implications of the findings for the academic debate as well as the implications for (policy) practice.

9.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC DEBATE

In light of fast-paced societal developments and policy reforms in the world of social welfare, more research on help-seeking behavior and non-take-up of social support is paramount. This study has the following implications for academic research.

1) Formulate realistic assumptions about help-seeking behavior. When investigating help-seeking for social support, behavioral assumptions that stem from or are associated with the rational actor model should be abandoned in favor of other, more realistic assumptions. Adhering to the behavioral assumptions of the rational actor model would debouch into an overly simplistic conceptualization of help-seeking for social support and put the researcher on the wrong track. Behavioral economics and (behavioral) public administration, as well as academic disciplines such as sociology, philosophy and epidemiology, provide the means to criticize the rational actor model as well as the building blocks to construct an alternative. This thesis has synthesized different critical views into such an alternative behavioral model, but more effort should be put into this synthesis before a full-blown behavioral model for help-seeking for social support is firmly established. The way, for example, in which bureaucratic competences are distributed among potential welfare clients is an aspect of the behavioral model that still requires additional attention. It was assumed that such competences are normally distributed, but the distribution was not actually measured among respondents in this study. Future research should address this aspect of help-seeking (*cf.* Moynihan, Herd & Harvey, 2015; Dijkstra, 1991; Galanter, 1974). It is important to determine how cognitive capabilities, stress, and other psychosomatic factors influence help-seeking for social support (*cf.* WRR, 2017;

WRR, 2014; Tiemeijer, Thomas & Prast, 2009). Knowledge, insights and methods from the academic disciplines of neuroscience and (medical) biology would be very useful in this regard.

2) Adopt a more integrative theoretical approach. It is necessary to move towards a more integrative approach to study the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support. While different academic disciplines have unquestionably yielded relevant knowledge and insights into help-seeking behavior in a range of contexts (e.g., help-seeking for professional medical care), research on non-take-up of social support is still far behind. Overall, this thesis suggests that the causes of non-take-up of social support are neither confined merely to 'external' barriers nor limited to factors at the individual level. Instead, it seems that non-take-up of social support is caused by an intricate interplay of different factors that 'operate' at different levels of the social welfare system. To fully understand the underlying mechanisms and dynamics, it is necessary to develop a more integrative approach.[37] The analytical framework that has been developed in this thesis (chapter 3) is an important step in this process, as it incorporates the multilevel influences on non-take-up of social support. Moreover, the framework can be used as a heuristic device to navigate the various academic disciplines in order to identify relevant concepts and insights. However, further developing such an integrative approach will not be easy (not least because of the different theoretical and methodological 'languages and cultures' in various academic fields of research).

3) Adopt a more comprehensive view of help-seeking for social support. In addition to the previous point, help-seeking for social support should be conceptualized as a dynamic process that is embedded in a multilayered social service system rather than reducing it to a static choice by an individual to seek or not to seek help. The help-seeking process is not located in some sort of vacuum but is shaped and affected by a complex interaction of different (f)actors at different levels of the social service system. The findings in chapters 6 and 7 provide empirical illustrations. Had this study adopted an isolated view of help-seeking for social support (e.g., by focusing only on whether help sources are utilized, yes or no), it would have ignored a number of relevant aspects of that help-seeking process. Hence, it is necessary to adopt a more comprehensive, 'holistic' view on help-seeking for social support.

37 To be clear, this is not to devaluate or denounce the value of monodisciplinary research. We merely argue here that (more) academic pluralism is beneficial in the pursuit of understanding a complex, multidimensional phenomenon such as non-take-up of social support.

4) Reaching the hard-to-reach. More attention should be devoted to (the difficulties of) reaching hidden or hard-to-reach individuals. Most studies pay insufficient attention to (the methodological challenges of) reaching and including hard-to-reach target groups. In fact, many studies do not reach this 'invisible' population at all. That locating and recruiting respondents from this target population is not a straightforward affair has been illustrated by the unsuccessful attempts to do so (see also §4.4). However, the fact that something is challenging does not mean one should not do it. This study therefore adopted an alternative method by collaborating with various local experts and organizations to locate and recruit respondents for interviews and focus groups. Therefore, from a more methodological point of view, the implication of this thesis for the academic debate is that researchers should a) pay more attention to sampling issues and recruitment strategies and b) put more effort into reaching individuals from hard-to-reach populations and learn from their perceptions and lived experiences of help-seeking for social support.

5) Forge a strong and lively link between research and practice. The connection between academic research and (policy) practice can and should be strengthened. Of course, much has already been said about this relation (see Cairney, 2016; Bovens, 2016; Head & Alford, 2015; Braun *et al*., 2015; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Raadschelders & Lee, 2011; Heinrich, 2007). As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the usefulness of academic knowledge and insights for (policy) practitioners depends on their professional position, personal preferences, and the type of knowledge one is seeking (utility function). Nevertheless, a lively link between research and practice is a necessary condition for arriving at a better understanding of a complicated topic such as non-take-up of social support. The current study would not have been possible without cooperating with local practitioners who helped us gain access to the hard-to-reach target groups. Conversely, the outcomes of the critical analysis of The Hague's social policies may be used by policymakers to improve future social policies. Hopefully, the research efforts here will contribute to connecting research and practice – or perhaps better put, to *re*connecting research and practice, as it seems that a gap between the two has been widening over recent decades (see Raadschelders & Lee, 2011).

6) Collaborate to better understand and monitor non-take-up. In line with the previous point, researchers and practitioners should collaborate to gather more empirical data on non-take-up of social support. They should devise ways to systematically monitor the effects of (policy) interventions on the reduction of non-take-up of social support at the local level. A better understanding of non-take-up of social support at the local level is crucial to improve the effectiveness of (future) social policies. In other words, the decentralization of the social policies system and the transformation of the local social service system must be accompanied by a local knowledge infrastructure (*cf*. Putters,

2017; 2014). Social policies and interventions that have been tailored to the specific characteristics of the local situation should also be monitored and evaluated at the local level. To put it even more succinctly, social policy decentralization requires knowledge decentralization. However, researchers should not focus only on 'easy-to-measure' indicators, which may produce all sorts of perverse effects (*cf.* Putters, 2018). They should be open and acknowledge that measuring and monitoring non-take-up of social support is fraught with all kinds of difficulties and (methodological) challenges.

9.3. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This section sketches an action perspective for policymakers, representatives of third sector organizations and others who are active in the social domain. First and foremost, the points of advice apply to the specificities of the social service system of the Dutch municipality of The Hague. Social service systems in other (Dutch) municipalities may be different and may require other types of actions. This disclaimer should be taken into account when reading this action perspective:

1) Pay more attention to the non-take-up of social support. It is recommended that The Hague's future social policies 1) incorporate the needs and preferences of hard-to-reach target groups as much as possible; 2) include more 'unusual' locations and actors (e.g., taxi and transportation services, student associations, supermarkets, restaurants, etc.) to inform potential welfare recipients about social support provisions; and 3) stimulate specific, tailor-made social support services for various target groups in The Hague. Based on the findings in chapters 6 and 7, a more comprehensive image of the help-seeking process of potential welfare clients (type I and type II) has been developed that may serve as a reference point for policymakers when designing future social policies. At a more abstract level, it is important for policymakers to be more explicit about the assumptions they make with regard to help-seeking for social support. As the findings of this thesis indicate, many assumptions in The Hague's social policies remain implicit and unclear. This is problematic, as such assumptions play a crucial role in social policies. To be clear, this does not mean that social policies should become lengthy, complicated philosophical treatises, but they can truly benefit from increased transparency and more clarity.

2) Acknowledge complexity and be realistic. Simply put, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to 'solving' all the problems associated with non-take-up of social support. It requires various types of (coordinated) actions and interventions by different actors at different levels of the social service system. This study finds that to improve service delivery by reducing non-take-up of services, policymakers and other practitioners should be more attentive to the various types of bureaucratic obstacles at the organizational

and system level instead of (only) trying to change individual help-seeking behavior. This study also indicates that take-up of social support can be hindered by a complex of personal feelings and emotions that we are only now beginning to understand. There is still a long way to go before we will be able to effectively address and amend such deeply rooted psychological factors – if doing so is even possible. Therefore, political debates and decisions about this topic should always be infused with a healthy dose of realism.

3) Recognize the cultural dimensions of help-seeking. When the objective is to stimulate the take-up of social services from third sector providers, it is crucial to recognize and take into account the cultural dimensions of the help-seeking process. Take-up is expected to increase when information and communication (both on- and offline) are provided in different languages, including Chinese and Arabic, and when specific cultural factors are accounted for. If not, the take-up of social support will remain problematic for individuals with a non-Dutch background who do not sufficiently master the Dutch language.

4) Systematically map the service capacity of third sector organizations and (start to) assess the quality of those services. Many potential welfare clients lack sufficient knowledge not only of the availability of social services but also of their quality levels. This requires close collaboration between local government (which can adopt a coordinating role in composing such an overview of available support services) and third sector providers (who have a role in delivering relevant information about their service supply). Subsequently, the results of this assessment should be communicated transparently and comprehensibly so that potential welfare recipients know what they may expect in terms of service quality.

5) Circumvent or simplify technical, bureaucratic terms in (public) communications about social services. In chapters 6 and 7, where the personal experiences and perceptions of potential welfare clients were investigated, it was observed that complicated bureaucratic language poses a hindrance to help-seeking for social support. More specifically, nonprofessional caregivers were not familiar with technical policy terms, such as respite care (*respijtzorg*), which is a substantial problem that has been reported in other studies as well (see, e.g., PEP Den Haag, 2016; Bogaart & De Kleuver, 2014). The caregivers from the focus groups argued that using alternative, more 'day-to-day' wording would be helpful to increase the visibility and 'findability' of social support services.

6) Harness the power of word-of-mouth communication. The findings in this thesis suggest that if potential clients hear about others' experiences with social services, they will be more inclined to use such services themselves. Word-of-mouth communication

provides potential clients with more information about the (quality of) social services and breeds trust, both of which lower the threshold for service use. Though it is difficult to steer and control directly, further investigating the possibilities of tapping into this particular type of communication is worthwhile.

7) Be strategic in how you deal with non-take-up of social support. Reducing non-take-up of social support from third sector providers means that more social needs are attended to, which is likely to save welfare costs in the long term. Some causes and effects of non-take-up are probably more difficult for policymakers and practitioners to amend, for example, deeply rooted personal feelings and emotions – such as a strong desire to retain one's (feeling of) independence – that may inhibit help-seeking. In contrast, other causes and effects are relatively easier to address by implementing certain reforms to the social service system – as already hinted in some of the previous points. However, again, it is easier said than done to reform (parts of) the social service system. As chapter 5 describes, over the past decades, social service delivery has been increasingly externalized by public authorities to third sector organizations. This has resulted in complex governance networks with a flurry of third sector party involvement. Successful public management reforms therefore also depend on the effective coordination of and cooperation by a range of different actors within these governance networks who often have divergent and sometimes even contradictory "institutional logics" (*cf.* Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011; Greenwood *et al.*, 2011; Thornton *et al.*, 2008; Alford & Friedland, 1985; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Fortunately, public administration research has produced valuable knowledge about such governance processes, so it also makes sense to further explore and exploit ways to apply that knowledge in this specific domain. Hence, a key question for future research is as follows: How can PA knowledge be applied to improve the social service system and social service delivery?

9.4. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

Although this qualitative, explorative study takes an important first step, it does not provide an exhaustive account of non-take-up of social support. There are several limitations. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the relatively small sample sizes. This study has collected, described and analyzed the perceptions and experiences of a relatively small number of individuals in one Dutch municipality. Nonetheless, despite the limited statistical generalizability, it provides a basis for future research in terms of *analytical generalizability* (see Yin, 2013).

A logical next step would be to extend this research to include more respondents and, if possible, extend it to other Dutch municipalities (and other countries as well). The analytical framework that has been developed here (chapter 3) can be used in such follow-up research. It may be adapted to suit a longitudinal research design so that changes over time can be taken into consideration (e.g., to account for the dynamics of non-take-up of social support). It may also take on a comparative research design so that multiple social service systems can be included and compared.

At the same time, there are several major methodological challenges that are endemic to research on non-take-up of social support. The first is the unknown size of the total population of individuals with (multiple) 'hidden' help needs. A second challenge is the unavailability of registers of individuals with latent help needs (which are more readily available in research on social security benefits, for instance). A third challenge is the actual recruitment of respondents from the target populations, as they form a hidden or hard-to-reach population. These methodological challenges severely complicate the research process. From a methodological point of view, this implies that researchers should pay special attention to sampling and recruitment strategies.

Another limitation of this thesis is that personal perceptions and self-reported experiences have been measured, not the *actual* help-seeking behavior of potential welfare recipients. Moreover, to a large degree, this study depended on what was said by the respondents in the interviews and focus groups. Due to (obvious) ethical and privacy considerations, it was not possible to consult personal files to 'check' statements about individual situations. However, there is no reason to doubt the answers that the respondents provided, as confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and the research had no consequences for their social rights.

A final limitation is that this study has focused primarily on the perspective and experiences of (potential) welfare recipients but not on those of the representatives of third sector organizations and local policymakers. In that sense, this is a rather one-sided approach. An interesting and useful next step would be to include the perspectives of those other actors as well. This would not only enable an investigation of their perceptions of the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support and how they try to cope with it but would also allow us to investigate the underlying rationales of the social service system. After all, the current shape and state of the local social service system are the outcomes of a complex interplay of past actions and choices by these actors.

Paving the way for future research: towards a theory of non-take-up of social support

Before starting this research, no analytical framework, let alone any theory of non-take-up of social support, existed. Therefore, an important objective of this thesis was to build a theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. Developing a full-blown theory, however, takes time. The work that has been done in this thesis is the impetus for developing a more "mature theory" (Snellen & Van de Donk, 1998) of non-take-up of social support. A number of important steps have been taken along this theory-building path.

The conceptual exercise in chapters 2 and 3 has demarcated the phenomenon of non-take-up, providing a useful starting position for the further collection and analysis of empirical data in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Overall, this has resulted in an improved understanding of how and why of non-take-up of social support. Based on these empirical findings, the section below will formulate a set of hypotheses that can be addressed in future research. These hypotheses relate to the different levels of the analytical framework of non-take-up of social support: 1) the individual level, 2) the level of third sector organizations, 3) the level of the social service system, and 4) the level of social policy.

1) Individual-level hypotheses. At the individual level of potential welfare recipients, this study distinguished between two types of individuals (type I and type II). Regarding type I individuals, there are several interesting directions for further empirical research. This study suggests that there is a relation between the 'degree of intimacy' of help needs and the desire to maintain one's (feeling of) independence. For example, when emotional support or personal care is needed, the (feeling of the) loss of personal freedom is more likely to be a barrier to help-seeking compared to when an individual requires an instrumental form of support. However, the findings in this thesis are still tentative. They require more empirical scrutiny to be confirmed (or disproved, for that matter). Therefore, the following expectation can be formulated:

> *Hypothesis 1a: The more 'intimate' or personal the help need, the more probable that the potential welfare client experiences a (feeling of a) loss of independence and will therefore not utilize social support from a third sector provider.*

Furthermore, there is the tentative finding of a so-called *spillover effect*. It seems that a negative past experience with representatives of a particular public or third sector organization can have an impact on an individual's willingness to seek help from other – oftentimes entirely unrelated – organizations. A conflict about a tax return, a dispute about a permit for renovating one's house, or other negative encounters can 'spill over' and negatively affect help-seeking behavior for social services from completely different

third sector organizations. To determine whether this is indeed the case, the following hypothesis may be subjected to further empirical testing:

Hypothesis 1b: A negative encounter with a representative of a public or third sector organization 'spills over' and leads to a decreased willingness to seek social support from another, oftentimes completely unrelated third sector organization. Conversely, a positive encounter is expected to 'positively spill over' and will lead to an increase in the willingness to seek social support from another third sector organization. It may furthermore be expected that the effect is stronger in the case of a negative encounter.

With regard to the type 2 potential welfare recipient, the nonprofessional caregiver, this study leads to two theoretical expectations. In the focus groups of caregivers, none of the respondents was aware of the existence of and difference between primary and secondary forms of social support (see chapter 7). Primary social support services refer to caring tasks, and secondary services pertain to other, 'indirect' tasks, such as administrative work, housecleaning, and shopping for groceries. Once this difference was explained in the focus groups, some caregivers indicated that they would find it easier to use secondary services. If this indeed holds true, it has important implications for how social services are offered to potential welfare clients. To determine whether it indeed is true, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1c: For nonprofessional caregivers, the threshold for using secondary forms of social support services (e.g., grocery delivery, household cleaning services) is lower than that for using primary forms of social support (e.g., personal care, emotional support). Additionally, compared to caregivers with a non-Dutch background, Dutch caregivers are more likely to take up secondary social services.

The fourth and final hypothesis at the individual level concerns the need to distinguish between 'usual' or 'general' psychological costs and 'cultural-psychological costs'. The former is to be understood as psychological costs that caregivers face when they deal with the choice of (temporarily) handing over caring tasks and responsibilities to others. The latter is regarded as specific psychological costs incurred by caregivers with migrant backgrounds. Examples in this study pertain to sociocultural factors such as family obligation, tradition, a specific sense of pride, and feelings of shame. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1d: Caregivers with a non-Dutch sociocultural background are less likely to take up social support from third sector providers, as they are more susceptible to the

cumulative negative effects of cultural-psychological costs and the 'usual' psychological costs that occur in help-seeking for social support.

2) Hypotheses relating to third sector organizations. As extensively described in the previous chapters, third sector organizations form an essential pillar of the social service system. They offer a broad range of social support services. Examples thereof are free grocery delivery services, care co-ops that offer personal care, and organizations offering support to prevent caregivers from becoming overburdened. The recent decentralization of social policies has further amplified the importance of these support providers. Moreover, analysts predict that the strength and availability of personal social networks in The Netherlands will further dwindle in the future (see, e.g., Putters, 2017), which is likely to place even more demands – and pressures – on third sector organizations in the years to come.

As local governments themselves withdraw from direct service delivery and increasingly appeal to and rely on citizens' personal responsibility to organize their own support, individuals with virtually absent, or weak social network ties (*cf.* Mazelis, 2017; Granovetter, 1973) will increasingly depend on social support from third sector organizations. Therefore, investigating third sector agencies more thoroughly becomes even more important. The two theoretical hypotheses below pertain to the role that these organizations have in relation to social support provision.

First, if representatives of third sector organizations adopt a more active role and try to find potential clients from hard-to-reach target groups – which is also known as "outreach" (see, e.g., Szeintuch, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 1994; Buckwalter *et al.*, 1991) – this will probably have a positive effect on social support utilization (in terms of leading to higher take-up rates among individuals of hard-to-reach groups). This study's findings seem to warrant a plea for (adding more) generalist social workers to 'reach out' and guide individuals who are in need of support so that their – often complex – personal welfare problems are better addressed. It seems likely that many individuals who are in need of social support could benefit from such generalists and a more generalist approach (see also Raeymaeckers, 2016; Blom, 2004). Nevertheless, more research is needed to affirm (or disprove) this suggestion. The following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 2a: The more representatives of third sector organizations actively 'reach out' to potential clients in hidden or hard-to-reach populations, the higher the take-up rates of social support services will be among those individuals.

Another aspect that was derived from the focus group conversations with caregivers is about the transparency of service quality, as already alluded to in a previous section (see §9.3, recommendation 4). The following hypothesis aims to capture this:

> *Hypothesis 2b: If a third sector provider is transparent about its service quality, a nonprofessional caregiver is more likely to ask for social support from that third sector organization than from a provider that does not provide such information.*

3) Hypotheses related to the system level. In relation to the system level, it is relevant and worthwhile to investigate the relation between types of help needs and locations where individuals, perforce, go to meet their help needs. For example, it was found that social support needs among individuals at the food bank were different from those among individuals at the emergency room of the hospital. The former sample group required more administrative support (due to debt problems), while the latter sample group – being relatively older – was more in need of home care services. However, due to the relatively small-N samples, this study could not determine whether there was a significant relation between help needs and locations.

Nevertheless, it is highly relevant to determine whether there is such a relation, as it will be very helpful for practitioners and may be used to further improve social service delivery. Practitioners may, for example, deploy different types of strategies at different locations to increase take-up of social support by the clients they meet. Future large-N research could address this issue (while bearing in mind that it is difficult to reach such large numbers of potential welfare recipients). This leads to the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 3a: There is a correlation between certain social support needs and help locations where individuals, perforce, go to meet (some of) their help needs.*

Second, it was observed that fragmentation of service supply, lack of information, and general system complexity pose important obstacles to effectively seeking help. For many potential welfare clients, it is difficult to navigate the fragmented and complex system of social support services. Many are unaware of the existing supply of services and their eligibility for (free) social services offered by third sector organizations. Thus, that the following hypothesis is suggested:

> *Hypothesis 3b: Social service systems with higher levels of coordination between third sector providers have higher rates of take-up of social support. In other words, the more fragmented a social service system, the higher the non-take-up of social support services from third sector organizations by potential welfare clients.*

4) Policy-related hypotheses. Last, several theoretical expectations can be derived in relation to social policies. The first hypothesis pertains to the effect of social policy *reforms* on the help-seeking behavior of potential welfare clients. Decisions to alter social welfare services often infringe on what welfare subjects have come to regard as their social right. Frequently, this leads to politicization and social unrest that become highly visible in the form of protests, political advocacy, lawsuits and other types of (political) action. At the same time, there are more 'silent effects' of social policy reforms that remain unnoticed by the broader public.

The finding in this thesis that some respondents show 'resistance behavior' while actually being in need of social support (see chapter 6) provides an illustration of such a 'silent effect' of social policy reforms. There is a real risk of exacerbating non-take-up of social support when individuals lose existing help due to budget cuts or other types of policy reforms and feel 'forced' to find substitute help. Consequently, some individuals even start to resist asking for substitute help when they actually are in need of help. Anecdotal evidence in other studies corroborates this finding (see Grootegoed, 2013; Grootegoed & Van Dijk, 2012).

In other words, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that non-take-up of social support occurs in situations of *policy stability* but that it may be further aggravated under circumstances of *policy turbulence*. More research is needed to more thoroughly investigate this specific type of behavior under such circumstances. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be addressed in follow-up research:

> *Hypothesis 4a: The more policy stability there is, the lower the level of 'resistance behavior' (or the higher the willingness) of potential welfare clients to utilize social support from third sector providers. Conversely, the more policy turbulence there is, the higher the level of 'resistance behavior' (or the lower the willingness) of potential welfare clients.*

Finally, as chapters 6 and 7 indicated, a wide array of bureaucratic factors can inhibit help-seeking for social support. In The Hague's social policies, only scarce attention was paid to potential barriers and problems in the help-seeking process. Instead, The Hague's social policies heavily rely on promoting behavioral changes among (potential) welfare recipients: they should become more self-reliant, active, and independent. The findings in this study, however, indicate that changing help-seeking behavior, especially among people from hard-to-reach populations, is highly complex and difficult. Much more is to be gained from addressing all sorts of external barriers that now inhibit help-seeking for social support.

It can be expected, based on the data gathered so far, that if policymakers take into account the barriers and problems more seriously in making social policies, this will increase the effectiveness of such policies. In particular, much more attention should be devoted to the role and impact of a wide range of bureaucratic factors that may inhibit help-seeking. Less is to be expected of social policies that (primarily) emphasize the necessity of behavioral change of potential welfare clients. This can be translated into the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 4b: Social policies that explicitly address and aim to reduce bureaucratic barriers are more successful (in terms of increasing take-up of social support services among hard-to-reach target groups) than social policies that primarily focus on changing individual help-seeking behavior (by emphasizing individual responsibility, self-reliance, an active help-seeking attitude, etc.).*

In summary, a number of hypotheses have been formulated that relate to the various levels of the analytical framework of non-take-up of social support. These form the basis for future theory building efforts in the pursuit of a more or less "mature theory" (Snellen & Van de Donk, 1998). Such a theory will help us better understand all the intricacies and complexities of non-take-up of social support. This will also be beneficial for (policy) practitioners working in and around the social domain. Improved theoretical and empirical knowledge likely increases the effectiveness and quality of social services that are being offered to potential welfare clients by third sector organizations. However, there is still much work to be done before a full-fledged theory is realized. In that sense, this study should be regarded as the starting point of that endeavor, definitely not its end point.

9.5. NORMATIVE IMPLICATIONS

The findings of study are also relevant in light of normative debates about social policies, social service delivery, and, more generally, the state of the welfare state. To keep this discussion within reasonable limits, this section will focus on three normative issues, namely, 1) how policymakers should deal with those who have become distanced and disenfranchised from social services (should they regard this as a fact of life and accept that no more can be done to reach this population, or should they keep trying?); 2) the ethics of interventions in the social domain; and 3) debates of accessibility, distributive justice and social (in)equality. Obviously, many more issues can be considered, but these three are selected, as the research outcomes of this thesis offer some guidance in how to deal with them.

How should social policies deal with hard-to-reach populations?

There is a long-standing discussion on how social policies (should) deal with individuals who have become distanced and disenfranchised from social services and who are variously labeled as unreachable, indigent, hard to reach, chronically uninformed, etc. (see Marshall & McKeon, 2013). One provocative viewpoint in this discussion is that of Dalrymple (2010; 2001), who, in his polemical style, posits that a proportion of potential clients will never be reached – and one should accept this as a fact of life. It would simply be a waste of public resources to try to reach individuals from that group, according to Dalrymple. Critics, however, argue that he is too one-sided in his analysis (see Linders, 2010), that his argument is mostly normative and that he uses only anecdotal evidence to support his argument (Schokkaert, 2007; Debaene, 2007). In addition, he can be criticized for lacking sufficient transparency with regard to his research methods. Finally, his argument comes dangerously close to what Young refers to as the rhetoric of the blame game in her book *Responsibility for Justice* (2011). According to this rhetoric, individuals are responsible for their bad situation without any acknowledgement of the role and influence of the behavior of other actors within the broader context.

Framing the debate about social policies in such a way is not only counterproductive from a normative point of view, but is also in conflict with the empirical findings in this thesis. As chapters 6 and 7 have elaborately illustrated, reasons for non-take-up do not stem only from the individual level of potential clients. In fact, a multitude of external barriers at the organizational, systemic and policy levels of the social service system pose serious obstacles to help-seeking for social support. It is therefore both incorrect and unfair to blame potential welfare clients for not using social support services (*cf*. Young, 2011). On all of the above grounds, this thesis fundamentally disagrees with Dalrymple's position and argument. Instead, this thesis argues that social policies should more adequately incorporate the perceptions, experiences and needs of potential welfare clients into social policies (see also chapter 8 and §9.3).

However, when one accepts the line of reasoning in this thesis, it does produce a whole new set of issues, such as 'How much time, money and energy should be devoted to reaching individuals from hard-to-reach groups?', 'What are the target groups, and who decides what the target groups will be?', 'What if potential clients *refuse* to take up social support services from third sector providers?', and, more generally, 'How and where do we draw the line between personal and collective responsibilities with regard to social welfare policies – and who draws that line?' These are difficult questions indeed, but if social policies are to become more effective, it is necessary to provide satisfactory answers to such questions. However, one must remain realistic and accept that not all eligible clients can be reached. In that sense, this thesis rejects both too-pessimistic and too-optimistic

views of the role and impact of social policies on the lives of citizens. Social policies can definitely be improved, but there is no 'magical policy recipe' that solves everything. This thesis does not wish to suggest that social policies are capable of reaching *all* potential welfare clients and remedying *all* their social problems.[38] Such would be too naïve.

The ethics of interventions in the social domain

Reducing non-take-up requires new ideas and innovative interventions, but at the same time, there must be sufficient ethical safeguards to ensure that nothing bad happens. While this thesis has made use of valuable insights from behavioral public administration and behavioral economics, this does not automatically imply that solutions proposed by scholars in these fields are also applicable in the context of help-seeking for social support. A case in point is that many behavioral scholars contend that *nudging* is useful to subtly 'seduce' people into desired behavior.

Thaler & Sunstein define a nudge as "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (2008: p. 6).[39] Scholars propose implementing nudges in *inter alia* environmental, healthcare, governmental, physical, and financial domains (see Battaglio *et al*., 2019; Benartzi *et al*., 2017; WRR, 2017; Marteau *et al*., 2011). However, there are at least three good reasons not to immediately implement nudges in the social domain to influence the help-seeking behavior of potential welfare clients.

First, the ethical aspects of nudging deserve more thoughtful deliberation (see also Battaglio *et al*., 2019). Relevant questions would be, for instance, 'Who is/are responsible for the choice architecture within the social domain?', 'What exactly are the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the social service system in relation to non-take-up of social support?' and 'What are the normative assumptions underlying the social interventions?'

Second, more clarity is required in terms of the goals of contemporary social policies. It remains unclear whether social policy reforms are aimed primarily at curbing public

38 Such is often suggested by policymakers, although perhaps not always so explicitly. For example, as the *Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur* (ROB) puts it in their report *Het einde van het blauwdruk-denken*, "Het geloof in de maakbaarheid van de samenleving door overheidshandelen lijkt op dit moment groter dan ooit tevoren. De ambities en pretenties zijn omvangrijk en verstrekkend; het verwachtingspatroon van de kant van burgers is uitgebreid" (2010: p. 57).

39 Oft-cited examples of nudges pertain to promoting healthy food items in supermarkets (Downs, Loewenstein & Wisdom, 2009), digital apps to stimulate healthy behavior (Sunstein, 2014), responsible default options for student loans (Van der Steeg & Waterreus, 2015), and nudges to improve school choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

expenditure on social welfare or if they are indeed intended to enable the policies to reach all individuals who are in need of help. Current social policies are still limping along in relation to these two thoughts and are still too ambiguous.

Third, without any additional research on non-take-up of social support, and without any more empirical evidence on how potential welfare recipients actually behave, it makes no sense to implement nudges at this point in time because they could very well be founded on the wrong ideas about help-seeking behavior – running the risk of producing adverse effects. Overall, a skeptical approach to the possibilities and pitfalls of nudging in the social domain is necessary (*cf.* Feitsma, 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2016).

More generally, policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike should be attentive to the ethics of intervening in the social domain in the pursuit of reducing non-take-up of support. As Rittel & Webber (1973) in their famous article on wicked problems compellingly remind us, social interventions carry real consequences and have a real impact on people's lives. As they put it,

> "(…) *Every* implemented solution is consequential. It leaves 'traces' that cannot be undone (…). Whenever actions are effectively irreversible and whenever the half-lives of the consequences are long, *every trial counts*. And every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemma" (italics original, 1973: p. 163).

While this 'warning' is sensible and justifiable, it must not debouch into a passive stance or even a fear of implementing any interventions at all. With the right knowledge base, sufficient professional training and the appropriate consultation and oversight mechanisms in place, interventions aimed at reducing non-take-up are indeed possible. Additionally, there are many guidelines, ethical codes, best practices, articles and books available that are useful for making the right choices when designing, implementing and evaluating such interventions (see, e.g., ZonMw, 2018; World Health Organization, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Banks, 2012). Therefore, in regard to the ethics of interventions in the social domain, caution is required, but it must not lead to inertia.

A hidden inequality in society

Third, the research outcomes of this thesis point to the presence of a *hidden inequality* in society: those individuals who realize their social rights by successfully utilizing social support versus those who do not succeed and who remain (largely) invisible to the outside world. However, we do not know the full extent of this hidden inequality. We have no estimates of the size of the total population of potential welfare clients. We do not know

the type and severity of the problems they have. We do not know how non-take-up is distributed among the population (e.g., are non-take-up rates higher among inhabitants of deprived neighborhoods, or do we see different patterns?

Are take-up rates higher among citizens with sufficient social and economic resources than among those who have fewer resources?). We do not know whether some (groups of) clients acquire a disproportionate share of social support services offered by third sector organizations. We do not know how many individuals access services, but do not (fully) utilize those services (so-called partial non-take-up). It is also unknown how patterns of (non-)take-up evolve over time; there is no reliable, systematically collected longitudinal data available about social service use.

Finally, we do not sufficiently know the role and impact of bureaucratic competences on help-seeking for social support (e.g., what knowledge and competences are needed to effectively navigate the social service domain?). These types of questions need to be answered to determine the full extent of this hidden inequality. And even though this study has focused solely on The Hague, it seems plausible that this hidden inequality is present in other cities as well – be it probably in different ways and to different degrees. Therefore, it is imperative to connect the issue of non-take-up of social support to the 'big debate' about accessibility, distributive justice and social (in)equality.

9.6. FINAL NOTE

Overall, the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support has important implications for contemporary policies and practices in the social domain. Over the past decades, values of self-reliance, personal responsibility, demand-driven and tailor-made services, personal control, independence and client participation have become dominant terms in policy discourse. People who are in need of social support should become less dependent on expensive, publicly funded forms of help. They are expected to turn to third sector organizations that offer a wide variety of support services. Prevention is a key policy term as well: the idea is that if support is provided in an early phase, it will reduce the chance of social problems worsening and the client becoming dependent on more expensive forms of help. In a nutshell, the dominant image of the potential welfare client is that of a rational individual who is (cap)able of seeking, finding and utilizing the right form(s) of social support services that are offered by third sector organizations.

However, in reality, not all eligible individuals will actually seek, find and utilize those social support services. They may perceive or experience all kinds of problems and barriers in the course of their help-seeking trajectory. For many, the social domain constitutes

a highly complex system. Effectively navigating this system often proves to be a challenge – for many, even a real struggle. Despite the many and variegated social services offered by third sector organizations, not all eligible individuals succeed in realizing their social rights. This thesis aimed to improve our fundamental understanding of the 'how and why' of this non-take-up of social support.

This brings us back to the introduction to this thesis: we now have a better grasp of the problems faced by potential welfare clients such as the elderly woman, the nonprofessional caregiver and the middle-aged man in help-seeking for social support. Reaching such difficult-to-reach individuals, documenting their lived experiences, gaining a grasp on the problems and barriers they encounter, and understanding their reasons for not asking for social support are vital for further improving policies and practices in the social domain. In light of all the expected trends and developments that will further impact the social domain in the years to come, this is more important than ever before.