Being inclusive across cultural and ethnic differences continues to be an important and topical challenge for public services in European societies that host large immigrant communities and that are facing new immigration flows. Concurrently, welfare states are changing, and often, as in the Netherlands, an active role for citizens, as well as partnerships between government, professional expertise and civil society are deemed crucial for the welfare state’s survival. If the ideal of citizen responsibilization is to be realised in a manner that is also inclusive, this requires European societies to engage with ‘difference’ in a way that departs from seeing immigrants and refugees primarily as vulnerable groups in need of help and as lacking the resources to fully contribute to host societies.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation examines how socio-scientific research can contribute to social development in relation to complex social issues through the use of and reflection on participative research practices. The dissertation is based primarily on work done in the context of research project Disclosing Cooperation, which focussed on the relationship between immigrant grass root organisations and formal services for parenting support in the Netherlands (chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5). The first chapter, however, is based on an earlier research project concerning mechanisms of exclusion or inclusion of refugees in Dutch organisations. In relation to the remainder of the dissertation, this is best seen as a preparatory project as regards the dissertation’s methodology.

The research Disclosing Cooperation was conducted within the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus, a research and learning lab (Academische Werkplaats) part of the ZonMW research program Diversity in Youth Policy, in which researchers, policymakers, professionals and volunteers cooperated to create knowledge for the development of an inclusive system of parenting support. Disclosing Cooperation involved an analysis of the relationship between immigrant organisations and statutory services in different districts of Amsterdam. By ‘immigrant organisations’ I mean voluntary organisations set up by Dutch citizens with an immigrant background, which support families (often also with immigrant backgrounds) in their neighborhood with various activities, including parenting support. Research methods included interviews, focus groups and observations involving twenty different organizations, policy document analysis and fieldnotes of eleven workshops or conference meetings in which cooperation between those parties was discussed. Also, the research included different participatory sub-parts, one of which is extensively described in chapter 4. Through analysing the experiences of volunteers active in immigrant organisations and professionals and managers from statutory services, the study aimed at identifying the main obstacles to and chances for the emergence of cooperation. The study focused on the actors’ different conceptualizations of cooperation and the respective roles of those actors in collaborative practices. Central to the study was the use of frame analysis (i.e., the study of systems of meaning...
actors use to interpret reality) to examine the role that different frames played in shaping interactions between volunteers and professional parenting counsellors.

This thesis contributes to the discussion on the role of immigrant organisations in the system of Dutch social work. It does so by deconstructing dominant discourse centred on accessibility or barriers removal and by connecting the Dutch policy discourse on the role of immigrant organisations to the current policy expectations regarding civil society actors, in the context of what is called the ‘participation society’. Moreover, the dissertation reflects critically on the type of knowledge production that is pursued in a co-generative venture such as the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus, and shows that the contribution of such a research and development lab in terms of inclusive knowledge is not straightforward. This reflection on knowledge practices is embedded in a broader discussion of the role of academic researchers in the changing landscape of science and society relations. This discussion currently is focused on the natural and life sciences and technological innovation, but here I dedicate attention specifically to the unique contribution social sciences can make to connecting science and society.

The role of the social sciences is highlighted particularly in light of the call for ‘technologies of humility’ (Jasanoff 2003) that make explicit the normative assumptions of scientific research and stress the importance of framing and uncertainty. This becomes possible by involving societal actors in reflective processes. With the ambition to provide an example of this type of research, tentative as it might be, this work displays and discusses complexities and struggles one encounters in striving for more democratic forms of knowledge production. Specifically, forms of knowledge production that potentially use co-creation to revisit the very research problem at stake and do so in a way that does not reproduce discourses of exclusion. The initial discursive framework provided within the program Diversity in Youth Policy, which informed the original research description, was partly challenged and broadened as a result of the co-generative dialogue with participants, especially the participatory project that is described in chapter 4. Specifically, the co-generative process enabled the uncovering of alternative ways of framing cooperation that proved to be enlightening also in the analysis of the overall research material of Disclosing Cooperation.

The research presented here underscores social sciences’ ability to produce ‘enabling knowledge’: knowledge that considers the existing social conditions and shows the possibility of new courses of action, by producing ways of conceptualizing and acting upon social realities that enable social development (as explained in chapter 5). This research provides direction for rethinking the role of immigrant organisations but also the role of professionals. It implies, for instance, that professionals become competent in facilitating efforts made within voluntary organisations to make explicit themes that immigrant parents experience as crucial, but which are not yet articulated—not in the expertise of professionals nor in their dialogue with parents.

In the remainder of this summary I will briefly present the central findings and arguments presented in the chapters, which were (or will be) published as separate articles or book-chapters. Chapter 1, 2 and 5 have been co-authored.
Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces the investigation—which continues in the rest of the dissertation—on how participatory research can help to counter exclusion by supporting people in reflecting on their position in discursive structures that maintain exclusion in place. It focuses on the issue of inclusion of refugees in the Dutch labour market, which, despite efforts of various Dutch enterprises to open their doors to newcomers, is still quite low. The chapter is based on the masterclass Management of Diversity, a participatory research project that reunited participants from refugee organisations and management departments of Dutch organisations interested in offering access to diverse groups.

The project shows the importance of becoming aware of discursive structures that impact on people’s daily lives and of making time and space for discourses of power to emerge in contrast with the disempowering images of refugees that keep exclusion in place. One basic assumption in this approach is that both majority members and minority members are caught in discursive structures that perpetuate exclusion. The researchers selected literature that offered a socio-historical analysis of the position of immigrants and refugees in the Netherlands, literature on Dutch diversity discourses within organisations and additional literature on the conditions for creating space for reflection. Through the intersection of theoretical input and personal and organizational experiences, a space emerged for participants to reflect on their positioning vis-à-vis discourses on refugees and on diversity within organisations. The masterclass provided examples of participants who challenged their own discursive positioning through theoretically informed reflection and shared analyses of their own experiences of inclusion/exclusion with others.

This approach offered the opportunity to create interspaces for interaction between participants across different discursive positionings, providing a common ground to link experiences from groups who perceived each other as distant. It enabled creating alternative forms of connection and achieving a collective sense of solidarity and engagement of participants to challenge the negative assumptions regarding refugees within society. For the research, combining these two levels (the narration of participants’ experiences and sharing a theoretical framework with them) proved valuable because it provided insights into the ways that a power-sharing environment can be created through critical reflection. The limiting effect of negative discourses about refugees emerged by contrast through the effects in terms of agency and connection that were achieved when participants succeeded in reflecting on and distancing themselves from those discourses.

Chapter 1 paves the way for the exploration of participative processes in research concerning inclusion and discursive power that was carried on in the research Disclosing Cooperation.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 introduces the subject of the research Disclosing Cooperation, on which chapters 2-5 are based. Mapping the way in which immigrant grass root organisations have been approached in social policy in the Netherlands from the early 1980ies, the chapter examines the context in which contemporary discourses that frame cooperation between professional youth services and immigrant organisations emerge. The paper uses literature on voluntary work in social policy to show that the way immigrant organisation’s role has been framed throughout the history of Dutch
social policy reflects only one possible way of understanding the role of grass root organizations. That is: as organisations that should prove their usefulness by linking people to statutory services and institutions. This one-dimensionality presently obscures the potential of immigrant organisations to contribute in meaningful ways to present policy challenges, as grass root initiatives that can articulate local perspectives ‘from the margins’. This is the case while immigrant organisations themselves in fact strongly identify with this role (as chapter 3 describes). By combining different dimensions to evaluate the role of immigrant organisations, chapter 2 proposes a bi-dimensional picture. Juxtaposing the axis of local empowerment to the one of social unity, as I call the two dimensions, creates a new field for the assessment of the role of migrant organisations by (local) policy, which takes into account the risks and advantages expressed in the literature on voluntarism in a more complete way.

From this perspective, creating safe spaces for the expression of specific local dilemmas can become a precondition for a connection, or exchange, between the lived experiences of migrants concerning a specific social issue (such as parental insecurity) and the perspective that is dominant in the statutory support system. This will be hard to achieve when the role of immigrant organisations is limited to that of linking or ‘channelling’, since the creation of safe spaces involves forms of (informal) intervention and support by the voluntary organisation itself.

Chapter 2 provides a basis to understand the context in which contemporary discourses that frame cooperation between professional youth services and immigrant organisations emerge. How this is reflected in the actual dynamic of interaction between professionals from the youth services and volunteers is described in chapter 3.

Chapter 3
Collaborations between statutory services and immigrant organisations with regard to parenting support often fail. In this chapter I present my research into the reasons for this failure and search for chances for connection. The chapter identifies a frame divergence in the way actors from professional services (from now: ‘professionals’) and from voluntary immigrant organisations (from now: volunteers) frame the need of mutual cooperation and the type of cooperation desired. It uses frame analysis and the concepts of frame reflection and reframing (Shön and Rein 1994) to inquire whether the frame divergence can act as a potential resource and increase the value of cooperation between the fields.

The analysis shows that the frame divergence affects professionals’ and volunteers’ attempts to understand each other’s expectations and their ability to reinforce each other in supporting immigrant families. Professional workers in public services conceptualise cooperation with immigrant organisations from what I have called the frame of access, a frame that emphasizes the bridging role of immigrant organisations and clearly resonates with the established view of the contribution of immigrant organisations to social policy aims, identified in chapter two as the axis of social unity. The frame of access defines cooperation in terms of stimulating more families with immigrant backgrounds to employ professional parenting support services and youth care. Immigrant organisations have the role of intermediaries that should help families in need find their way to the available services. The dominance of this frame in both policy and support oriented
research impairs the possibility to build fruitful cooperation with voluntary organisations that work from a different frame that I have identified: the frame of shared spaces.

The frame of shared spaces defines cooperation in terms of professionals and volunteers participating together in a process of consciousness raising and emancipation of immigrant communities, in which (groups of) people are supported in reflecting actively on parenting issues, making these a subject of mutual exchange, and formulating their own questions and insecurities from their own perspective and priorities. Seen through this frame, in the cooperation with immigrant organisations professionals make their expertise available and use it to strengthen this process, in which immigrant organisations are often already involved and in which core volunteers are experts themselves. In the conception of cooperation that goes together with this frame, the roles of professionals and volunteers are more equal than in the case of cooperation seen from the frame of access. That is to say, seen through this frame both parties are considered to have a specific expertise which the other can learn from. This frame is mostly confined to the circle of immigrant organisations. However, it shares striking commonalities with the general policy discourse on the role of informal support and civil society actors that goes with the current transformation of Dutch youth policy. This discourse, which does not concern the role of immigrant organisations specifically, but concerns a more general notion of ‘informal support’ emphasises the importance of bonds between citizens and of informal networks existing around families in need of help. Also, it underscores that citizens need to become more active in defining both the problems they experience and the possible solutions on the basis of their own perspective and possibility for chance.

Through the use of the different frames, professional and volunteer actors in this study negotiate boundaries between different fields, including responsibilities, areas of competence, and expertise that belong to these fields. While immigrant organisations see themselves as agents of change and as key actors when it comes to issues related to emancipation, government agencies often treat them as mere executors and translators of government policy. In doing so, they expect immigrant organisations to reproduce hegemonic discourses that are at odds with the emancipatory changes they work to promote in their communities. These discourses construct immigrants as a problematic category: a group characterized by socioeconomic arrears that should be better incorporated into the professional system rather than being allowed to cultivate difference through collective processes.

The frame divergence regarding parenting support for immigrant families is embedded in a complex discursive field that sustains inequality, reproduces underlying tensions, and prevents recognition of the frame of shared spaces as a source for innovation. Moreover, the frame divergence fuels mutual distrust and conflict, making the necessary conditions for frame reflection and innovative reframing difficult to attain. Indeed, the controversy over parenting support for immigrant communities is not simply a conflict of values rooted in different types of intellectual and experiential knowledge but a conflict concerning loyalty, respective competencies and responsibilities, and legitimacy. It is a conflict between parties with highly unequal power relations that does not easily allow for mutual understanding. In such a setting, processes of reframing are difficult to imagine, as are the conditions of openness, empathy, rationality, and trust that Schön and Rein prescribe as necessary for frame reflection.
This drawback does not mean that reaching solutions through frame reflection and reframing is impossible, that these two processes cannot function as a strong basis of cooperation in specific cases. However, this study suggests that, in order to be successful, these processes may have to involve reflection on the societal positions of the actors involved, with specific attention to power differences. Chapter 4 describes one attempt to work in this direction.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 describes methodologically one participatory sub-part of Disclosing Cooperation, which played a crucial role in the whole project. It concerns a participatory investigation of the cooperation between two immigrant organisations and one Youth and Family Centre (YFC), called ‘YFC on the spot’. The project sought to combine the developmental aims of participatory action research (PAR), which are its strength, with contributions to the growth of supra-local knowledge, as is pursued in interactive research, which is normally less concerned with local change and employs the active involvement of participants in the design and performance of innovative research.

The challenge of combining a local (developmental) and a supra-local (research) focus was met by embedding the PAR in the mainstream (partly non-participatory) research project Disclosing Cooperation, for which it functioned as a ‘window of understanding’. I use this expression to convey that the PAR opened up the space to deepen the understanding of the research subject, by letting participants’ knowledge and perspective play a part in the analysis of the broader research. This methodological strategy involved a continuous interaction between the local analysis, performed together with participants, regarding their own situations, and the broader analysis of extended empirical data from a study for which the PAR functioned as an exemplifying case.

The PAR involved a collective investigation into the participants’ own conceptualization of cooperation in relation to that of other participants. This collective investigation offered the opportunity to develop a shared understanding of cooperation and its goals, and, at the same time, produced useful data for the larger project Disclosing Cooperation. The study developed through three phases: explorative, critical-reflective and constructive. While the first two phases involved a study of the views and experiences of participants, the third phase concerned the interpretation of results of the first phases, through producing a shared understanding of these results.

Making space for the input of immigrant organisations turned out to be more difficult than the collaborative initially thought it would be. Since the YFC framework was dominant in the discussions (at least in the first two meetings), the immigrant participants’ descriptions appeared often unconnected to the discussion and functioned as disruptions of the discursive order. By focussing on this phenomenon and taking it seriously, we realized that there was an asymmetry in the possibility of participants to contribute to the discussion, as immigrant participants seemed to lack a standard discourse that could position their experiences in a shared and recognisable system of meaning.

We tackled this issue with the methodological strategy I called ‘cycles of interpretation’, which was based on researcher and participants alternatingly providing reinterpretations of each other’s descriptions until an agreed upon understanding was reached. Through the cycles of interpretation,
the contributions of immigrant participants that initially appeared less articulate were disclosed. A new discourse became ‘hearable’, in which the role of immigrant organisations in parenting support was framed differently. This was crucial for articulating the distinction between two main frames described in chapter 3, the frame of access and the frame of shared spaces, which eventually shaped the analysis of the whole research. Only after recognizing the unequal positioning of participants in the discursive field did it become possible to understand the frame divergence between participants and eventually to weave different perspectives into a shared story.

The passage from not being able to place immigrant participant’s stories, to connecting to them was paired, for me as researcher, to a critical reflection on the starting frame of reference I adopted, which partly reproduced the frame of access. Taking time appeared crucial to learn to understand contributions in the form of anecdotes and images which first appeared out of context. For instance, playing back interviews at home, connections started to appear between observations and experiences of immigrant participants and the views of pedagogic theories that shape new policy approaches to pedagogic support to families. These theories emphasize the importance of normative discussions between citizens about parenting and the role of community development to help parents articulate their own orientation, difficulties and need for change (De Winter, 2012). By further connecting participant’s stories with this literature, in dialogue with the team, new interpretations of the role of immigrant organisations in parenting support were possible.

These interpretations contrasted with the view of this role that is dominant in the field of professional parenting support and policy discourse, which was adopted automatically as a standard frame of reference by both YFC participants and myself. I shared these reflections and the distinctions I perceived progressively with participants. The distinction between the different frames became clear gradually for participants, as it helped to clarify interventions and solve misunderstandings. This indicates that engaging in knowledge production ‘in dialogue’ with practice does not automatically lead to contributing to equality and inclusion, and that cooperative ventures like the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus must develop strategies to counter the risk of inadvertently reproducing discourses that keep distance and inequality in place.

Chapter 5

The position of the researcher who engages in co-creation of knowledge is the subject of chapter 5. This chapter investigates the specific role of social sciences in the context of the current discussion on ‘post-academic science’ that points out the changing relationship between science and society, which are increasingly interpenetrated and mutually dependent. Support-oriented science, as it is named in the chapter, is science that, far from being just ‘in service of practice’, develops through hybrid fields of knowledge production in which scientific and practical knowledge enrich each other. The concepts of ‘strong contextualization’ and ‘socially robust science’ (Nowotny et al., 2011) are employed to conceptualize not only the possibility of improving the practical employability of knowledge, but also that of opening the way for practice-rooted perspectives in the formulation of scientific problems, methods and conclusions. Relating to this discussion, which is currently focused on the natural sciences, life sciences and technology, the chapter identifies the specific contribution of the social sciences in their ability to clarify values, interests and power relations. Social sciences are characterized by value rationality and practical reasoning and by their ability to produce ‘enabling knowledge’ (Stehr 2010): knowledge that
considers the existing social conditions and shows the possibility of new courses of action. In this way, social sciences can act as ‘mind makers’, by producing new ways of conceptualizing and acting upon social realities that enable social development, in dialogue with social actors themselves.

Moreover the chapter offers a reflection of dilemma’s and practical struggles that the social science researcher encounters when engaging in support-oriented science, on the basis of two cases: 1. the participatory aspects of Disclosing Cooperation and the Kenniswerkplaats-Tienplus, also beyond the PAR described in chapter 4. 2. The research program ‘Security and citizenship’ at the Department of Political Sciences and Public Administration at the VU University Amsterdam. Both cases concern efforts to carry out engaged social science in cooperation with practice. On the basis of the experience of the authors with these projects, some conditions for success are identified. These are: mutual respect for the different positions of the researchers and of participants from the field of practice; shared ownership of the research project; and avoiding the expectation that the researcher can act as a ‘solutionist’ or take over the role of politics, that is: making decisions in an insecure and unpredictable context.
References


