



FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND  
EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

# **TRAJECTORIES OF POOR FAMILIES IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK**

Tineke Schiettecat

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck  
Co-Promotor: Prof. Dr. Griet Roets

Proefschrift ingediend tot het behalen van de academische graad van  
Doctor in het Sociaal Werk

2016

**Nederlandstalige titel:**

Trajecten van gezinnen in armoede in relatie tot sociaal werkpraktijken

**Begeleidingscommissie**

Prof. Dr. Danielle Dierckx

Dr. Francine Mestrum

Prof. Dr. Griet Roets

Prof. Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck

**Examencommissie**

Prof. Dr. Geert De Soete (voorzitter), Decaan Faculteit Psychologie en  
Pedagogische wetenschappen, Universiteit Gent

Prof. Dr. Danielle Dierckx

Dr. Cath Larkins

Prof. Dr. Rudi Roose

Prof. Dr. Geert Van Hove

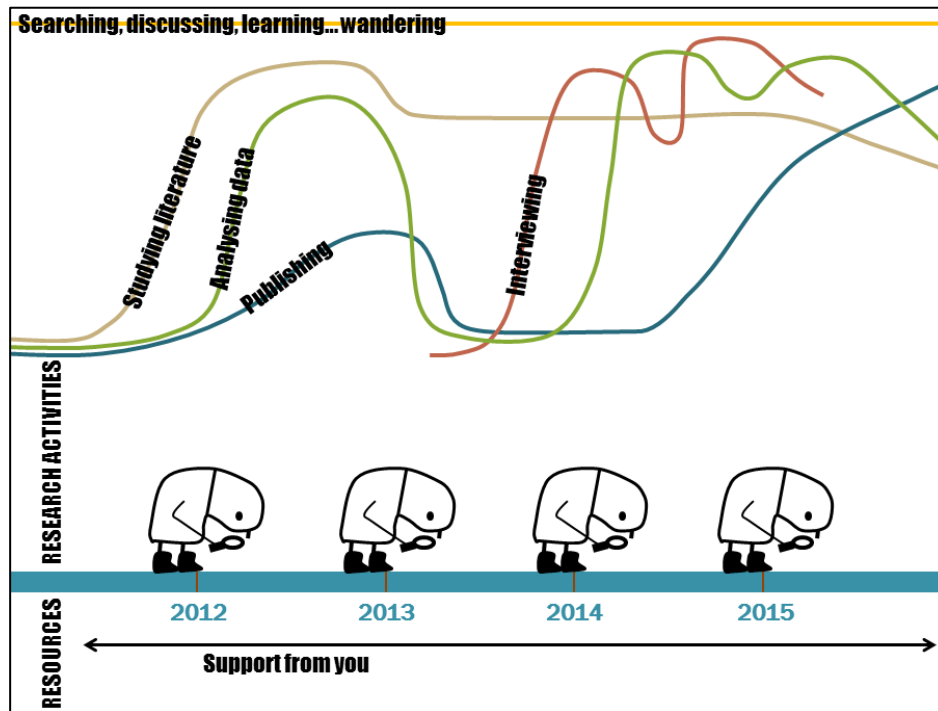
Prof. Dr. Maria Bouverne-De Bie

Dedicated to  
Maria Van de Velde  
Hugo Van Malderen

since it are not only your names  
I carry and cherish forever



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Because you were there, all long...

...Michel en Griet, thank you for being two super-supervisors. You were the ones who inspired me, guided me and accompanied me along the road. Michel, you sharpened my mind, structured my thoughts and mastered the balance of providing the space necessary to develop my own ideas while thoroughly supporting my work during every major step. Thank you for watching over me and sending the daily team home at a decent hour. Griet, for even longer than these four years, you were as steady as a rock – *mijn Roets in de branding*. Thank you for always believing in me, sometimes even more than I did myself. I treasure every minute (and there were many) of searching and writing together, the funny moments we shared, the countless encouraging words and 'paws'.

...The other members of the guidance committee, Francine and Danielle, thank you for the many valuable suggestions as well as for the sometimes rather challenging questions that made the research trajectory even more interesting. Without your support, this dissertation wouldn't be what it is today.

...The colleagues from the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Poverty and Social Exclusion (VLAS), thank you for the opportunity to intermediately share and discuss my lines of thought and research findings. Without a doubt, your reflections strengthened this work and stretched my horizon.

...All my past and present colleagues from the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy, from the people who cleaned my desk to the ones who filled my head (and heart). Thank you for the fist bumps, the encouraging e-mails, the practical assistance, the challenges and debates; for every small and big gesture of support.

...My dear colleagues and friends with whom I shared the office over the years: Dries, Sabine, Katrien, Sammy, Elias, Ine, Eline, Katrien, Jochen and Bert. I especially wish to thank you for (not only literally) being near at each stage of the research process. I can't imagine a more welcome, stimulating, joyful, engaged and inspiring working space than one I found with you.

...My beloved friends from outside the office, my friends from vzw AJOK, thank you all for cheering at the sideline and for helping me carry some weight when the burden became too heavy.

...Nele, Marijke, Fleur, Gaëlle, Femke and Caroline, thank you for lending me an (excellent) extra pair of hands and eyes when time was running out.

...My family, my family in law and especially Hugo en Livia, my dear parents, thank you for being there for me at all times and in so many ways. Either when I was nearby or further away, your warm support has always been present.

...Jonas, even when the road went bumpy, you stood by my side, which made the trail adventurous instead of scary. Thank you for (so very patiently) encouraging me to hang on, for helping me to let go, and for finding the extra special in the ordinary.

I'm also deeply obliged to the parents, practitioners and organizations who were engaged in my research. You made this work possible by welcoming me in your houses and offices, by sharing your life stories and meaning-making and by expanding my knowledge. Even though your real names are left concealed, you definitely leave your marks.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
-------------------------------	----------

<b>CHAPTER 1      INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
--	----------

1.1.   POINTS OF DEPARTURE.....	7
1.1.1.   THE POLICY RESEARCH CENTRE ON POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION (VLAS).....	7
1.1.2.   CHILD POVERTY .....	9
1.1.3.   EPISTIMOLOGICAL CHOICES.....	11
1.1.4.   A LIFE WORLD ORIENTATION .....	14
1.1.5.   RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	14
1.2.   DIFFERENT STEPS .....	16
1.2.1.   RESEARCH PROCESS.....	16
1.2.2.   CONTENT .....	18
1.3.   REFERENCES .....	21

<b>CHAPTER 2      DO FAMILIES IN POVERTY NEED CHILD AND                         FAMILY SOCIAL WORK?.....</b>	<b>25</b>
--	-----------

2.1.   INTRODUCTION .....	28
2.2.   HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGIES.....	30
2.2.1.   TRACING HISTORICAL ROOTS.....	30
2.2.2.   THE SOCIAL INVESTMENT PARADIGM .....	32
2.3.   KEY CHALLENGES IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE .....	35
2.3.1.   EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE 'MAGIC BULLET' AGAINST (CHILD) POVERTY?.....	35

2.3.2.	PARENTAL EDUCATION AND PARENTAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES: REINFORCING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY?.	37
2.3.3.	ACTIVATING PARENTS: RECONCILING EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE?	39
2.4.	CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: DO POOR FAMILIES NEED CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK?	40
2.5.	REFERENCES	43
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	<b>CAPTURING LIFE HISTORIES ABOUT MOVEMENTS INTO AND OUT OF POVERTY: A ROAD WITH PITS AND BUMPS</b>	<b>51</b>
3.1.	INTRODUCTION	54
3.2.	A DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF MOBILITY INTO AND OUT OF POVERTY: A COMPLEX ISSUE	55
3.2.1.	THE CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH	57
3.2.2.	BALANCING BETWEEN AGENCY AND STRUCTURE	59
3.3.	METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	61
3.4.	UNFORESEEN COMPLEXITIES IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS	62
3.4.1.	ANNA (AND HER BOYS)	64
3.4.2.	WENDY AND TOM	69
3.4.3.	EMILY	72
3.5.	CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS	75
3.6.	REFERENCES	77

**CHAPTER 4** WHAT FAMILIES IN POVERTY CONSIDER  
SUPPORTIVE: WELFARE STRATEGIES OF PARENTS  
WITH YOUNG CHILDREN IN RELATION TO (CHILD  
AND FAMILY) SOCIAL WORK .....**81**

4.1.	INTRODUCTION .....	84
4.2.	TAXONOMY OF LISTER .....	85
4.2.1.	GETTING BY .....	86
4.2.2.	GETTING (BACK) AT .....	87
4.2.3.	GETTING OUT.....	87
4.2.4.	GETTING ORGANIZED .....	88
4.3.	METHODOLOGY .....	88
4.4.	RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	91
4.4.1.	GETTING BY .....	91
4.4.2.	GETTING (BACK) AT .....	94
4.4.3.	GETTING OUT.....	98
4.4.4.	GETTING ORGANIZED .....	101
4.5.	CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS .....	101
4.6.	REFERENCES.....	105

**CHAPTER 5** HIDE AND SEEK: POLITICAL AGENCY OF SOCIAL  
WORKERS IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES LIVING IN  
POVERTY ..... **109**

5.1.	INTRODUCTION .....	112
5.2.	SOCIAL WORK AS A POLITICAL ACTOR.....	114
5.3.	METHODOLOGY .....	117
5.4.	RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	118
5.4.1.	GETTING BY .....	118
5.4.2.	GETTING (BACK) AT .....	121

5.4.3. GETTING OUT.....	124
5.4.4. GETTING ORGANIZED .....	127
5.5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: HIDE AND SEEK.....	130
5.6. REFERENCES.....	133

**CHAPTER 6      CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: REVISITING THE  
ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES  
IN POVERTY ..... 137**

6.1. A WAY OF SEEING.....	140
6.2. A WAY OF NOT SEEING .....	142
6.3. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK.....	144
6.3.1. SOCIAL JUSTICE.....	144
6.3.2. HUMAN RIGHTS .....	148
6.3.3. COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY.....	151
6.3.4. RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY.....	153
6.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE .....	154
6.5. REFERENCES.....	156

**NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING:  
TRAJECTEN VAN GEZINNEN IN ARMOEDE IN  
RELATIE TOT SOCIAAL WERKINTERVENTIES .. 165**

**DATA STORAGE FACT SHEETS..... 185**

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION





Caminante, son tus huellas el camino, y nada más;  
caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.

*Antonio Machado*

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more;  
wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking.

*[own translation]*

## **1.1. POINTS OF DEPARTURE**

### **1.1.1. THE POLICY RESEARCH CENTRE ON POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION (VLAS)**

This dissertation, developed at the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy of Ghent University, is part of a series of studies commissioned by the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Poverty and Social Exclusion (VLAS). The aim of the Policy Research Centre is to gain an in-depth understanding of processes of poverty and social exclusion – particularly in Flanders (the Flemish speaking part of Belgium) – in order to inspire and support the development of anti-poverty policy and practice. It builds this knowledge across a range of different work packages, based on a multidimensional perspective on poverty and social exclusion (VLAS, 2011).

Our research project is situated in the work package concerned with the issue of child poverty. One branch of research questions addressed by other scholars in this setting examines the impact of poverty and early childhood investments on children's skill development and educational attainment (VLAS, 2011). This focus aligns with popular research interests to gather evidence on 'what works' as a means to pursue effective and efficient public investments. As we will explain later, studies on 'what works' shape a partial and particular form of knowledge, based on implicit assumptions about the preferred outcomes of interventions (Biesta, 2007; Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). Since every act of research is inherently politically charged and

value-laden (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Vandebroek, Roets & Roose, 2012), Trinder (2000, p. 237) has prompted scholars "to think about what assumptions about the world are taken for granted and what questions and answers are not addressed or precluded by particular pieces of research or particular research designs." This implies that reflection is required about the underlying problem definitions that produce and are (re)produced in research ventures as well as about the actors who were (not) involved in the process of problem construction. Therefore, in addition to the quest for 'what works', we introduced another research approach, with dissimilar research questions that will generate another (yet equally partial) kind of knowledge.

Two exploratory reports, also commissioned by the Policy Support Centre, preceded our core study. The first report (Schiettecat, 2013) provided an extensive overview of the social services that are the most apparent in the political discourse on child poverty in Flanders – *kinderopvang, preventieve gezinsondersteuning, INLOOP-teams, opvoedingswinkels, centra voor kinderzorg en gezinsondersteuning en gezinsondersteunende pleegzorg* (child care, family support, group meetings for parents in poverty, centres for child and family support, and foster care). We explored the scope of these services as well as the existing insights in user perspectives. A document analysis of policy and research files revealed that the knowledge about the meaning-making of welfare recipients with regard to the quality of service provision is scarce. Strikingly, this appeared to be even more the case for services specifically targeted at families in poverty. We therefore concluded that it is not possible to tell whether the implicit assumptions on which these programmes are based – the idea that families in poverty are a separate target group with specific, and often specified, needs – are accurate. These practices consequently risk becoming self-evident. Our analysis underpinned the suggestion that the quality of services should be built on continuous processes of negotiation between help seekers and help providers, between individuals and society.



A second study investigated the relationship between research approaches and the historically dominant discourses about the welfare state, anti-poverty policy and social work. In this context, we particularly examined the present attention paid to child poverty and early childhood interventions in interaction with the prevailing welfare paradigm and discerned which problem constructions and research perspectives are currently lacking. Based on our findings, we suggested to broaden the focus in anti-poverty research from the predefined, child-focused and future-oriented outcomes of early childhood interventions to various kinds of services, while considering the life worlds of the actors involved (children, parents and professionals) in dynamic interaction with social structures and resources (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Life history research was thereby presented and discussed as a potentially useful methodological approach.

Both reports gave rise to critical reflections about the background of and possible lacunas in contemporary (anti-poverty) research and provided a legitimization and starting point for our own research project.

In what follows, we will provide a closer look into the context of our study wherein our research questions emerge.

### **1.1.2. CHILD POVERTY**

In the aftermath of the Lisbon Summit in 2000, the issue of child poverty has been highlighted as a political priority across the European Union. It subsequently featured as an important theme within the Open Method of Coordination. Likewise, the European Council of March 2006 vigorously designated children as a target group for anti-poverty policy making and urged the Member States to take action in the fight against child poverty: “The European Council asks the Member States to take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background” (Council of the European Union, 2006, p. 24). Child poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty consequently appeared as a central focus in many National Reports on

Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion (2006-2008). Also in response to the Europe 2020-strategy, the issue has remained prominent in various National Reform Plans. Moreover, the European Parliament recently adopted a new resolution on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty (European Parliament, 2015).

Although the fight against child poverty has noticeably (re)emerged as a major priority in European policy today (Platt, 2005), the concrete attention for child poverty and the ways the issue is addressed seem to differ between countries (Bradshaw & Chzhen, 2009). Notwithstanding this variety, a recent synthesis report of the Member States' national policies revealed that the focus on tackling child poverty is in most cases associated with a rather narrow poverty approach, blurring issues of income inequality and the unequal access to services:

Even when some attention is devoted to these issues in some NRPs, the approach is often too narrow, focusing mainly on educational disadvantage and policies to support parents' participation in the labour market. A key to the successful implementation of the Recommendation will be encouraging Member States to take a much more comprehensive approach which also gives attention to income support issues and access to services. (Frazer & Marlier, 2014, p. 20)

Although the current concern with child poverty inspires a valuable attention with regard to the importance of high quality early childhood education and care, criticism has been voiced against a too stringent focus on the early years that risk to induce a paradigmatic shift in anti-poverty policy from equalizing outcomes to equalizing opportunities. Different scholars in this context make a strong plea for caution about the assumption that equality of opportunity in early life also ensures future equality of outcomes (Morabito, Vandenbroeck & Roose, 2013). Moreover, they argue that opportunities and outcomes cannot easily be separated, since the (unequal) outcomes of one generation also shape the (unequal) opportunities of the next (Morabito, Vandenbroeck & Roose, 2013; Vandenbroeck & Van Lancker, 2014). In other words, poor children are always the children of poor parents (Kornrich &

Furstenberg, 2013; Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012; Mestrum, 2011; Rahn & Chassé, 2012). Following the critiques of a whole range of authors (i.a. Fox Harding, 1996; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2010; Roets, De Cock, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2011; Mestrum, 2011; Wiegers, 2007), we consequently consider the attention for the welfare rights of children living in poverty as inseparable from the attention for the welfare rights of the adults who live in the same poverty situation and household. Therefore, in this dissertation, we will foremost refer to child poverty as a problem of poverty, conceptualized as a combination of (1) a lack of material resources (financial resources, housing,...), (2) dynamics of social exclusion resulting in a lack of immaterial resources (education, health care,...) and (3) the accumulation of a lack of material as well as immaterial resources, resulting in deprivation (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Poverty consequently appears as a complex social problem, with the lack of income not as a sufficient, but as an essential characteristic (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003; Mestrum, 2011).

### **1.1.3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHOICES**

It is possible to discern an interconnectedness of shifting welfare paradigms, changed priorities in anti-poverty policy-making and developments in poverty research (Biesta, 2007; Platt, 2005). In this vein, the contemporary attention for the problem of child poverty has been associated with an increasing research interest in the impact of poverty on child development. In this context, leading scientific journals have stressed the importance of preventative interventions in the early years and analyzed the effectiveness and efficiency of early childhood education and care with regard to their return on investments (Duncan, Ludwig & Magnuson, 2007; Engle et al., 2011; Heckman, 2006; Swick, 2009). Interestingly, a recent systematic review of 24961 English and 1551 non-English publications from 28 European Member states persuasively observed that these effect-studies or impact-evaluations appear to be especially dominant in those European regions where a prevalence of the social investment paradigm is recognized, where services for families with young children are consequently considered as an investment rather than as a welfare

right, and where, consequently, ECEC provision is not a universal entitlement. As Peeters et al. (2014) state:

Impact evaluations (...) are more commonly found in those countries where ECEC is conceptualized as an 'investment' rather than in those countries where ECEC is considered a public good, and has been since its conception, and in which structural quality conditions might be more tightly regulated. (p. 6)

It demonstrates that what counts as scientific 'evidence' and informs practice accordingly, is clearly context- and politically bound (Platt, 2005).

Therefore, critics warn against the dominance of one type of knowledge as 'valid' and recommend that the scope of the existing body of research should be broadened while reflecting on both the taken-for-granted problem constructions and on the questions and answers that risk to be overlooked (Biesta, 2007; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Trinder, 2000; Vandebroek, Roets & Roose, 2012). In this vein, it has been argued that a single focus on the quest for 'what works' may be tricky, since it entails specific ideas about the preferred outcomes, while the underlying problem constructions remain implicit (Vandebroek, Roets & Roose, 2012). In other words, in order to study 'what works', a certain interpretation of 'working' must already have been established. With regard to the prevailing child-centred paradigm of social investment, it has been criticized that early childhood interventions are assessed according to their capacity to prepare young children for their role as self-sufficient citizen-workers of the future (Lister, 2003). As such, it can be argued that outcome-oriented effect-studies underpin the construction of the child as future economic capital, but at the same time risk to eclipse other possible problem constructions, meaning-making and welfare concerns of children as being interrelated with the welfare concerns of adults in these poverty situations in the here-and-now. Biesta (2007, p. 6) accordingly states that "the focus on 'what works' makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter".

He designates this as a democratic deficit, that is reinforced in research since:

The quest for 'what works' might lead to downsizing research questions to those that can be answered in a clear-cut way, hence leaving many relevant questions aside (...). Such research might lead to undemocratic knowing, ignoring the voice and perspectives, which are 'out of order' while it is the disagreement on contradicting perspectives and choices that form the essence of democracy. (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012, p. 549)

In order to grasp the more complex reality and enhance democratic knowing, an exclusive emphasis on a causal or one-dimensional search for 'what works' is consequently considered insufficient (Biesta, 2007). It rather requires that the floor can be open for various research approaches in which different questions and problem definitions can be equally addressed and contextualized, so that – instead of the single quest for one simple truth – multiperspectivism can be valued. According to the educational philosophy of Ghent University, multiperspectivism aims to stimulate learning as a reflexive process, understood as a critical revision of theoretical frameworks that starts from a reflection about these frameworks. It can invoke creative knowledge development, spurs critical attitudes towards knowledge and requires the ability to deal with the ambiguity that emerges from the confrontation of different perspectives on knowledge and practice ("Onderwijsvisie- en Strategie UGent", 2016). As D'Cruz & Jones (2004, p. 9) argue: "An appreciation of diverse paradigms (ways of knowing) and methodologies (ways of building knowledge) can assist the contribution of research to the kinds of critically aware professionalism required to meet the array of contemporary challenges for social work."

In the present research project, our aim is therefore to depart from the currently established definitions of support and mobility out of poverty. Rather than exploring 'what works', we wish to enhance the debate about 'what working could possibly mean for the families (consisting of children and parents) involved. Rather than being fixed on certain outcomes, our research tries to grasp complex and

unpredictable processes of support while exploring the life worlds and meaning-making of the actors involved, in dynamic interaction with social structures and resources (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Instead of letting people in poverty respond to an agenda set by others, the agenda is opened up and also shaped by their experiences, perspectives and knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2009).

#### **1.1.4. A LIFE WORLD ORIENTATION**

As a methodological framework, we adopted the interpretative paradigm of life world orientation, which has been developed as a reaction against the taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions and objectives that yield processes of alienation (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Since it is postulated that a detached external view does not suffice to understand peoples' experiences, the life world orientation approach endeavours an investigation of the everyday while embracing "the complex hermeneutic processes which characterize the everyday life (...) of people who are struggling to cope with and make sense of poverty, conflicts and injustice" (Lorenz, 2008, p. 639). Thereby, it concentrates on an "understanding of the everyday with reference to its obstinacy, its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations" (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009, p. 132). This leads to an exploration of how agents and structures (re)construct one another and, within this interplay, might constitute experiences and practices of (un)welfare. Since the everyday is contingent on social and systemic forces, the reconstruction of peoples' life worlds explicitly takes into account this dynamic interaction between the individual and society (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). In the analysis, we consider how this interplay may contribute to the realization of welfare rights and social justice.

#### **1.1.5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As social work researchers, we explored the possible role of social work in poverty situations as a pivotal issue in our research project. The first chapter accordingly addresses the question whether, and on

which conditions, families in poverty need child and family social work. We further explore this in the following chapters, not by adopting a dominant construction of child and family social work in poverty situations, but by taking a more open stance regarding the definitions of support. In this context, our aim is not to respond to the question of how social work can solve the problem of poverty. Lorenz (2014) already argued that many of the issues social workers are faced with, like poverty and migration, are far too big for social work, but that, nevertheless, its commitment to engage with this impossibility is crucial. Hence, we wish to acquire knowledge about the interpretation and role of social work in situations of (child-) poverty, while exploring the perspectives, strategies and meaning-making of the families and practitioners involved. Our core research endeavour is therefore concerned with the question *under which conditions (child and family) social work-interventions are experienced as supportive and how this relates to the families' mobility out of poverty*.

The objective of the research project is more specifically to uncover and understand how families – consisting of parents and children – and social workers give meaning to welfare, which strategies they accordingly develop and how the perspectives and welfare strategies of the families interact with social work interventions, including early childhood interventions. This might help us to acquire insights in how interventions are constructed, interpreted and being used as supportive levers in realizing the well-being of parents and children in poverty situations and to explore how they may influence families' routes out of poverty. Furthermore, from a social work perspective, we wanted to identify the systemic conditions necessary to develop practices of support.

As we consider living in poverty a violation of human rights, we adopted the idea of a right to human flourishing (Dean, 2010) as a key premise and theoretical frame of reference to analyze, interpret and confront the narratives of the parents and the practitioners involved in our project.

In the next section, we give a brief overview of our research process and of how it is moulded into the following chapters.

## **1.2. DIFFERENT STEPS**

### **1.2.1. RESEARCH PROCESS**

After finishing the preparatory reports commissioned by the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Poverty and Social Exclusion, we commenced our three core studies.

The **first study** (see chapter 2) existed of an extensive review of literature concerning the historical discussion about the role of social work in situations of poverty, as entangled with social, economic and political concerns (Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt, 2012; Lorenz, 2007). We particularly examined the developments leading to the emerging paradigm of social investment as a framework for social policy and social work and critically considered which implications this entails for contemporary social work practice with families living in poverty.

In the **second study** (see chapter 3 and 4), we adopted a life history research approach to retrospectively explore the life trajectories, welfare strategies, struggles, hopes and aspirations of parents with young children as well as their experiences with social work interventions.

The parents invited to participate in this study were recruited with the help of social work organizations who intervened in their families. This choice to access families through professionals was prompted by ethical as well as practical considerations. We presumed that the practitioners, because of their close involvement with the families, were well placed to estimate the possible impact of the research intervention on the parents and children involved. Furthermore, we relied on them to select those families that could meet our inclusion criteria, as described below. In order to diminish the bias regarding the range of social work practices eventually covered in our study through



peoples' retrospective life and support trajectories, we chose different services – whether or not explicitly targeted at families in poverty – as starting points. This way, two times two families were recruited with the help of Child Care and Family Support Centres. The same amount of families was invited to participate after our contact with Public Centres for Social Welfare, and again one family was selected with aid of a Poverty Advocacy Group. Consequently, 14 parents from nine different families could be contacted and interviewed, including parents who intermittently joined the conversations. nine parents (seven mothers and two fathers from seven families) were interviewed more extensively, which made it possible to reconstruct and discuss their retrospective biographies.

The recruitment of the parents was, as we mentioned, based on different inclusion criteria. Since our core research interest is concerned with the relationship between support and mobility out of poverty, most decisive was the practitioners' estimation that the family's conditions have been situated around the poverty line, so that movements into and out of poverty could be recognized over time. In this vein, financial deprivation as well as the presence of (child and family) social work interventions constituted the primary entrances to contact the parents. It needs to be noticed that this choice implies that we involved a very specific group of families living in poverty. Therefore, we do not aspire to draw conclusions that also concern, for instance, individuals and families who face poverty over a longer period in time or who face intergenerational poverty. In addition, the selected families preferably consisted of different children, with the youngest child between zero and three years old. Finally, we also aspired a maximal diversity in family composition and ethnic background, however, it needs to be noticed that we did not manage to obtain the desired ethnic diversity.

A more detailed overview of the results of the selection process, as well as the methodology and the unforeseen complexities involved in our research venture are more extensively described in the third chapter.

During our **third study** (see chapter 5) we conducted open in-depth interviews with practitioners who were experienced as supportive by the parents engaged in the second study. The aim was to identify, from the viewpoints of these frontline workers, the conditions necessary to develop practices of support in the very complicated situations of poverty.

In total, 13 practitioners who made a significant difference in families' lives, according to the parents involved in the second study, participated in our research project. In the rare cases where parents pointed out numerous social work practices as supportive, we limited the range to the three interventions that were most explicitly mentioned in order to retain a more balanced selection across the families. Also the comparability of social work practices between families was an additional, decisive factor in this process.

## **1.2.2. CONTENT**

In this section, we provide a short overview of the following chapters in which our research findings are presented and discussed.

### **Chapter 2**

In the second chapter, *"Do families in poverty need child and family social work?"*, the contemporary role of child and family social work in situations of child poverty is considered while engaging in a debate concerning the question whether people in poverty actually need social work. In this context, the underlying rationales of social work interventions in poverty situations are the main subject of investigation. We observe that poverty is a very normative and ideological construct, intertwined with shifts and changes in welfare paradigms along social, political and cultural developments, which inform these interventions accordingly. In this vein, we particularly trace the roots of the emerging paradigm of social investment, which has been associated with the focus on child poverty and early child development. It is argued that the paradigm of social investment has found practical expression in preventive interventions, constructing

the problem of poverty in terms of education and activation of both children and their parents (as expressed by the 'parenting turn'), hence risking to obscure the attention for the structural conditions families are faced with. In this respect, we discerned discontinuity as well as continuity with regard to the role of social work. Furthermore, we also observe that adherents as well as critics on the 'parenting turn' in social work paradoxically tend to neglect the position, perspectives and meaning making of parents and children themselves. Therefore, we argue that a more in-depth understanding of the complexities of families life worlds in interaction with policy and practice is required if we wish to thoroughly challenge (child)poverty and reflect on the role of social work.

### **Chapter 3**

In the third chapter, *"Capturing life histories about movements into and out of poverty: A road with pits and bumps"*, the potential and relevance of biographical approaches for social work research purposes is discussed. We situate and position our life history research project alongside prevailing developments in poverty research wherein the biographical turn as well as the dynamic understanding of mobility into and out of poverty has gained increasing attention. At the same time, we discern and consider methodological and ethical complexities and ambiguities – pits and bumps – at stake in our life history research project, which are discussed by the representation of exemplary vignettes of the reconstructed and visualized life trajectories of three families involved in our study. The research participants taught us that issues of power are not only inevitable during the process of capturing their experiences, but also generate struggles and ambiguities while interpreting them.

### **Chapter 4**

In the fourth chapter, *"What families in poverty consider supportive: Welfare strategies of parents with young children in relation to (child and family) social work"*, the main findings of the life history research we conducted with parents of young children faced with poverty are

reported. While drawing on an analytical framework developed by Ruth Lister (2004), this chapter provides insights in how parents give meaning to welfare, which strategies they accordingly develop and how these perspectives and welfare strategies interact with (child and family) social work interventions. Our findings enrich prevailing understandings of 'getting by', 'getting (back) at', 'getting out' and 'getting organized' and nuance the primary suggested route out of (child) poverty that is currently paved by education and labour market activation and directed towards the development of self-sufficient, responsible and independent individuals.

## **Chapter 5**

In the fifth chapter, *"Hide and seek: Political agency of social workers in supporting families living in poverty"*, the conditions are explored under which frontline practitioners – who are pointed out as supportive by the families – manage to develop responsive practices that meet the welfare-concerns of low-income families within a shifting socio-political landscape. We again deploy the taxonomy developed by Ruth Lister (2004) in order to study the dynamic interplay between frontline decision-making and the systemic conditions in which supportive practices unfold. Our study affirmed the daily engagement of social workers to construct meaningful interventions in very complex situations. At the same time, however, the findings also reveal that, when the space for open discussion is lacking at particular levels of the system, practitioners' strategies to seek meaningful interventions often remain hidden or risk reinforcing processes of depolitization. We therefore suggest the development of 'communicative spaces' – at an organizational, inter-organizational and government level – which aspire a particular interpretation of transparency and accountability in accordance with social work's commitment to the realization of welfare rights.

## **Chapter 6**

The sixth chapter, *"Revisiting the role of social work in poverty situations"*, includes our general discussion and conclusion. While

pondering about our 'way of seeing and not seeing' (see Burke, 1965), we first reflect on our research stance and consider the main limitations of our study. Next, we readdress the question about the role of social work with regard to the problem of poverty, while discussing the key principles central to the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), based on our research findings. We conclude this final chapter with implications for policy and practice.

### 1.3. REFERENCES

- Biesta, G. (2007). Why "what works" won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1-22.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2003). Een rechtenbenadering als referentiekader. In M. Bouverne-De Bie, A. Claeys, A. De Cock & J. Vanhee (Eds.), *Armoede & Participatie* (pp. 1-20). Gent: Academia Press.
- Bradshaw, J., & Chzhen, Y. (2009). Child poverty policies across Europe. *Journal of family research*, 21(2), 128-149.
- Burke, K. (1965). *Permanence and Change*. University of California Press: Los Angeles.
- Council of the European Union. (2006). *Presidency conclusions of the Brussels European Council (23/24 march 2006)*. Brussels: Council of the European Union.
- D'Cruz, H., & Jones, M. (2004). *Social work research: Ethical and political contexts*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dean, H. (2010). *Understanding human need*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Duncan, G. J., Ludwig, J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2007). Reducing poverty through preschool in-terventions. *The future of children*, 17(2), 143-160.
- Engle, P., Fernald, L. C. H., Alderman, H., Behrman, J., O'Gara, C., Yousafzai, A.,..., & Iltus, S. (2011). Child development 2: Strategies for reducing inequalities and improving developmental outcomes for young children in low-income and middle-income countries. *The lancet*, 378(9799), 1339-1353.

- European Parliament. (2015). *Resolution of 24 November 2015 on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty*. Strasbourg: European Parliament.
- Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K., & Holt, K. (2012). Thinking systematically-thinking politically: Building strong partnerships with children and families in the context of rising inequality. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42, 618–633.
- Fox Harding, L. (1996). *Family, state and social policy*. Basingstoke: Mcmillan.
- Frazer, H., & Marlier, E. (2014). *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A study of national policies. Assessment of what Member States would need to do to implement the European Commission Recommendation. Synthesis Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 131-146.
- Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900-1902.
- IFSW. (2014). *Global definition of social work*. [Approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014]. Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Kornrich, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2013). Investing in children: Changes in spending on children, 1972 to 2007. *Demography*, 50(1), 1-23.
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2009). From voice to knowledge: Participatory action research, inclusive debate and feminism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(3), 279-295.
- Lindquist, M. J., & Lindquist, G. S. (2012). The dynamics of child poverty in Sweden. *Journal of Population Economics*, 25(4), 1423-1450.
- Lister, R. (2003). Investing in citizen-workers of the future: Transformations in citizenship and the state under New Labour. *Social Policy & Administration*, 37(5), 427-443.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press.

- Lorenz, W. (2007). Practising history: Memory and contemporary professional practice. *International Social Work*, 50, 597–612.
- Lorenz, W. (2008). Paradigms and politics: Understanding methods paradigms in an historical context: The case of social pedagogy. *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(4), 625-644.
- Lorenz, W. (2014). *The need for a new social question*. Public lecture given at Ghent University at 20th march 2014.
- Mestrum, F. (2011). Child poverty. A critical perspective. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 161-168.
- Morabito, C., Vandenbroeck, M., & Roose, R. (2013). 'The greatest of equalisers': A critical review of international organisations' views on Early Childhood Care and Education. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(3), 451-467.
- Onderwijsvisie- en Strategie UGent. (2016). Retrieved on 10 january 2016 from [users.ugent.be/.../Multiperspectivisme/Vorming\\_en\\_leren\\_aan\\_de\\_UGent.docx](https://users.ugent.be/.../Multiperspectivisme/Vorming_en_leren_aan_de_UGent.docx)
- Peeters, J. Cameron, C. Lazzari, A. Peleman, B. Budginaite, I. Hauari, H. Siarova, A. (2014). *Impact of CPD and working conditions of ECEC practitioners on quality, staff-interactions and children's outcomes: a systematic review of research evidence*. Gent: VBJK. Dublin: Eurofound
- Platt, L. (2005). *Discovering child poverty*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Raeymaeckers, P., & Dierckx, D. (2010). *Kinderen in armoede in Europees perspectief: Beleidsgerichte probleemanalyse*. Antwerpen: OASeS.
- Rahn, P., & Chassé, K. A. (2009). Children in poverty in Germany: Reflections on recent social work research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 243-252.
- Roets, G., De Cock, R., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2011). Rechten van kinderen in armoede: Hefboom tot armoedebestrijding of armoedebestrijding? In D. Reynaert, R. Roose, W. Vandenhoele & K. Vlieghe (Eds.), *Kinderrechten: springplank of struikelblok? Naar een kritische benadering van kinderrechten* (pp. 25-41). Antwerpen: Intersentia.

- Roets, G., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2013). Researching child poverty: Towards a lifeworld orientation. *Childhood*, 20(4), 535-549.
- Schiettecat, T. (2013). *Een inventaris van voorschoolse voorzieningen voor gezinnen met kinderen tussen 0 en 3 jaar (VLAS-studies 2)*. Antwerpen: Vlaams Armoedesteunpunt.
- Swick, K. J. (2009). Strengthening homeless parents with young children through meaningful parent education and support. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36, 327-332.
- Trinder, L. (2000). A critical appraisal of evidence-based practice. In L. Trinder & S. Reynolds (Eds.), *Evidence-based practice: A critical appraisal* (pp. 212-241). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vandenbroeck, M., & Van Lancker, W. (2014). *Een tweesporenbeleid inzake kinderarmoede*. VLAS-studies 14. Antwerpen: Vlaams Armoedesteunpunt.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Roose, R. (2012). Why the evidence-based paradigm in early childhood education and care is anything but evident. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(4), 537-552.
- Vlaams Armoedesteunpunt (2011). *Meerjarenplan Steunpunt VLAS*. Retrieved from [http://www2.vlaanderen.be/weten/steunpunten/steunpuntenG3/beheersovereenkomsten/steunpuntarmoede\\_meerjarenplan.pdf](http://www2.vlaanderen.be/weten/steunpunten/steunpuntenG3/beheersovereenkomsten/steunpuntarmoede_meerjarenplan.pdf)
- Wiegers, W. (2007). *Child-centred advocacy and the invisibility of women in poverty discourse and social policy*. Geraadpleegd via <http://faculty.law.ubc.ca/myoung/poverty/Wanda%20Wiegers.pdf>



## **CHAPTER 2**

# **DO FAMILIES IN POVERTY NEED CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK?<sup>1</sup>**



---

<sup>1</sup> Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2015). Do families in poverty need child and family social work?. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(5), 647-660.

[UK English]



**ABSTRACT**

This article attempts to contribute to the historically relevant debate about the role of social work in poverty situations, focusing on the emblematic and radical question whether the poor actually need social work. In the context of the currently dominant policy framework in European welfare states, that is underpinned by the emerging paradigm of social investment, we argue that it is extremely relevant to readdress this question. Within this development, the eradication of child poverty has been considered a key target of poverty reduction strategies and child and family social work has consequently been assigned a pivotal role in the fight against the intergenerational transmission of poverty. We demonstrate that the rhetoric of social investment has found a practical implementation in social work constructing the problem of poverty in terms of education and activation of both the child and the individual parent. Based on an extensive review of literature, we discuss underlying assumptions, consequences and pitfalls of the paradigm of social investment for social work and tease out whether, and on which conditions, poor families need child and family social work.

## 2.1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the industrial revolution and changing political regimes in Western European welfare states, public concern about societal problems has resulted in interventions within the social sphere and has led to the establishment of social work (Lorenz, 2006). Hence, since its inception and throughout the development of the welfare states, social work has always shown a commitment towards people living in poverty (Payne, 2005). The International Federation of Social Workers formally expresses this by stating that:

Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. (IFSW, 2000)

A large body of literature, however, also reveals a tendency to criticise the profession's involvement in poverty issues, to such an extent that even the significance of social work interventions in issues and situations of poverty is questioned (Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, & Monnickendam, 2009). At the end of the twentieth century, Dowling (1999, p. 246) explored idealist as well as pragmatic arguments and accordingly argued that the discussion remains 'whether or not the poor need social work'. Whereas an idealist view implies that poor people do not need social work, since solving wider political and structural problems may be more effective than social work, a pragmatic point of view refers to the argument that 'despite the temporary nature of the help, putting yourself in the place of the user asking for that help provides convincing evidence that something is better than nothing' (Dowling, 1999, p. 252). Ten years after Dowling (1999), conceptualisations of poverty and anti-poverty policy-making have shifted and social policy-makers across Europe have adopted an explicit focus on combating child poverty (European Commission, 2008). Whereas child poverty has, for centuries, been a stubborn problem in most European societies (Cantillon, 2011; Platt, 2005; Rahn & Chassé, 2009), it has only recently become one of the highest

priorities of anti-poverty strategies. In the aftermath of the Lisbon strategy (2000–2010) and the EU 2020 strategy (2010–2020) European Welfare States have correspondingly shown a particular concern to generate tangible results from the efforts made to combat child poverty in Europe, including poverty within families and its intergenerational transmission (Council of the European Union, 2006). In framing child poverty as a problem that needs urgent action, it has been made fit for interventions by practitioners in social work (Platt, 2005). The child along with the parents, who are perceived as being responsible for realising the well-being of children, have become the central objects of intervention (Attree, 2005; Clarke, 2006; Gillies, 2005, 2008; Platt, 2005). Anti-poverty strategies have, for instance, been increasingly directed towards prevention as embodied by early childhood education and care (ECEC; Doyle, Harmon, Heckman, & Tremblay, 2009), as high-quality ECEC is considered:

the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability [...] [It] is also particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged, including those from migrant and low-income backgrounds. It can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction, and so contribute to achieving the goals of the Europe 2020 flagship initiative European Platform against Poverty. (European Commission, 2011, p. 3)

Since ECEC tends to be dominantly perceived as a key instrument to promote social inclusion, enhance well-being and address social issues, it appears to fit well with the core mission of social work (Gray, 2014). Currently, social policy-makers stress that ECEC, in line with the mandate of social work, should be seen as a valuable anti-poverty strategy.

In that vein, we argue that concerns about the involvement of social work in poverty issues, again, become very topical and extremely relevant. Consistent with current conceptions of interventions within the social sphere and the increasing focus on young children and their parents, we therefore inquire whether poor families need—what we

will consequently call—child and family social work. In this article, we dwell on the question how child and family social work has been assigned a pivotal role in the fight against child poverty (Jones, 2002; Mestrum, 2011; Platt, 2005), and try to uncover the underlying assumptions, consequences and pitfalls of this development. In what follows, we will first discuss historical developments, while turning a critical eye on the ways in which the issue of child poverty has become politically salient and made fit for interventions within the social sphere. Underpinning these developments, we identify the paradigm of social investment as an emerging frame of reference in social policy and social work. Second, we discuss three key challenges in current social work practices that are underpinned by this paradigm. In our concluding reflections, we address both continuities and discontinuities throughout historical developments, and tease out whether, and on which conditions, social work can be supportive for families in poverty.

## **2.2. HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGIES**

Our critical and analytical observations on the historical dimensions of anti-poverty strategies are inspired by an argument made by Lorenz (2007, p. 599), who posits that the history of social work, interrelated with social, political and cultural processes and social policies in welfare state contexts, is complex and non-linear as there is no such thing as historical ‘continuity without breaks and contradictions’. Above that, the concept of poverty is not a neutral, but rather a normative and ideological construct (Mestrum, 2011). Hence, in line with social, economic and political concerns prevailing at different times in history (Featherstone, Broadhurst, & Holt, 2012), the face of poverty has changed, as have the measures to fight it.

### **2.2.1. TRACING HISTORICAL ROOTS**

The emergence of social work is associated with radical social, political and economic transformations since the nineteenth century (Rosanvallon, 2000). From the beginning of the twentieth century, the practice of social workers was seen as a solution to a number of

interrelated social questions and changes associated with processes of industrialisation, pauperisation and urbanisation (Donzelot, 1984). At that time, modern constitutional nation states were based on the rule of law and liberal democracy, rooted in Western enlightenment ideals (Dean, 2013). Citizens were expected to rely on their labour power to maintain their welfare, left without any social security in assumed social, political and economic individual freedom, as states were not supposed to intervene in the private sphere. In different European welfare states, the origins of social work are therefore rooted within the domain of civil society, resting on intermediate charitable and philanthropic organisations and concentrated in upper- and middle-class concerns towards poor and marginalised people (Craig, 2002; Lorenz, 2006). Covered in bourgeoisie philanthropy and charity, the model of middle-class family life soon started to represent the answer to social problems such as poverty and criminality. In this context, the nuclear family was framed as the principal institution that influences and informs the morality of children (Jones, 2002). Social work occupied the space between the respectable and the 'dangerous' classes, and exerted civilisation strategies for the sake of solving problems posed by the poor; defined as problems of character and morality rather than as a lack of resources and power (Powell, 2007). In doing so, in many countries it reconciled the liberal principle of the small state that does not intervene with the necessity to alleviate the hardest aspects of poverty that risked to lead to social upheaval. In that sense, social work had a buffering function between the private and the public domains. Since the support provided to poor families was temporal, conditional and selective, social work was perceived as a charity rather than as a welfare right (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010).

After the Second World War and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, Western welfare states evolved into social welfare states, particularly in continental Europe (Esping-Andersen, 2004). Welfare states increasingly focused on redistributing resources and power, and on realising the equality of all citizens, including people in poverty (Lister, 2004). Social work acquired a relatively autonomous position, playing

an essential role in enabling citizens to realise their welfare rights in democratic ways in order to lead a life in human dignity (Lorenz, 2006). Social workers increasingly embraced concepts like 'participation', 'emancipation', 'social justice' and 'empowerment' (of institutions, rather than of persons), based on critical analysis inspired by social pedagogy (e.g. Freire, Giesecke, Negt). Contingent with this critical stance of social work, states in continental Europe increasingly invested in civil society organisations that focused on adult education and cultural emancipation, rather than on interventions in the family (Van Damme, 1996; Vandenbroeck, Peeters, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). Service delivery, including social work, was conceived as a welfare right rather than as a charity (Esping-Andersen, 2004). The right of the citizen was complemented by the notion of commitment of the public domain.

### **2.2.2. THE SOCIAL INVESTMENT PARADIGM**

After the prosperous post-war period, new economic and socio-demographic questions emerged, caused by increasing diversity, economic downturn and associated risks. Following these developments, prevailing social welfare paradigms were gradually revised (Rosanvallon, 2000; Van Lancker, 2013), and neoliberal regimes appeared in the late twentieth century. European welfare states shifted their focus from income protection, redistribution of resources and power and cash-related benefits to human capital investment strategies (Cantillon, 2011). This transition has been referred to as a transition into a 'social investment' state (Giddens, 1998). In what follows, we discuss two interrelated yet rather paradoxical consequences of this social investment paradigm in relation to changing family structures within the last decades.

#### **2.2.2.1. The family is dead...**

Since the 1960s, ideological and socio-demographic developments have challenged the normative template of middle-class family life in which biological, legal and social parenthood coincide (Martin, 2013;



Neyrand, 2012; Schwenzer, 2007). Notwithstanding the persistent regulatory nature of this constellation (Skevik, 2003), whether implicit or explicit, a wide variation of alternative family configurations emerged (Wiegers, 2002). Within this development, the 'nuclear family' as a trinity of coinciding biological, legal and social parenthood fell apart. It is argued that this collapse of traditional male breadwinner family structures and, accordingly, of family-based society, has stimulated a climate of disorder and insecurity (Bonoli, 2007; Gillies, 2012; Martin, 2013). Within this framework, the rhetoric of risk prevails (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). In times of budgetary constraints, dependence of citizens on the social welfare system (e.g. in case of unemployment) has been considered a vital social risk (Moss, 2013). Hence, the paradigm of social investment entails that governments 'prepare' people to confront life's risks rather than 'repairing' their consequences (Mestrum, 2013). In order to avoid becoming dependent on benefits, citizens are expected to grasp the given opportunities in current welfare state arrangements, to adjust to changing socio-economic circumstances and to integrate in post-industrial labour markets.

Within this policy framework, different types of family structures have been adjudged different risk profiles and the individual responsibility of parents has increasingly been emphasised. A sign of this can be found in the concept of 'parenting' (Gillies, 2008), which emerged in European public and family policy discourse by the end of the 1990s (Martin, 2013). Within this so-called 'parenting turn' (Bermaoui, Keppens, & Stolberg, 2012, p. 1), Western welfare states seem to recall a climate that is characterised by explicit and implicit attempts to control and regulate the conduct of parents, and particularly the conduct of poor parents (Gillies, 2005; Lister, 2006). Gillies (2012, p. 13) infers that 'governments have increasingly come to see families more in terms of their practices than structures and have targeted policy interventions accordingly'. Whereas the traditional configuration of the family as the central building block of society is crumbling away, 'doing family' now tends to be acknowledged as the main foundation of our future societies. Accordingly, Hall, Parton, Peckover, and White

(2010) argue that while 'partnering' is considered as a private matter, subject to individual freedom of action and choice, 'parenting' has become a public concern and therefore a legitimate site for state intervention in the 'private' sphere of the family.

#### **2.2.2.2. ...long live the child!**

In the context of the emerging social investment paradigm, children and childhood are considered to be key to any successful social investment strategy, because 'inequalities in childhood pose a real threat to the accumulation of human capital and are root cause of unequal opportunities in the labour market and later life' (Van Lancker, 2013, p. 4). The importance of this child-centeredness has been widely endorsed by research, establishing a historical conception of the child as valuable, yet vulnerable capital of future societies. On an individual level, a large body of literature demonstrates the long-lasting damaging impact of poverty on children's development (Lister, 2006). It is argued that living in poverty not only threatens the quality of childhood experiences, but also impinges upon their welfare as prospective adult workers (Gornick & Jäntti, 2012; Lister, 2003; Ridge, 2007). Accordingly, on a societal level, it is argued that child poverty entails the risk of long-term losses in terms of human and economic capital (De Boyser, 2010; Hübenthal & Ifland, 2011). From this economic point of view (Spratt, 2009), public expenditures preventing or alleviating the impact of poverty in early childhood are increasingly framed as profitable investments in both future life and nation (Doyle et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2012), because they 'are repaid over an extended time in economic productivity and reduction in cost to society through decreased demands on services, including health, social security and criminal justice' (Spratt, 2009, p. 439). In that sense it is argued that, for individuals as well as for societies at large, 'investments at relatively low financial costs during childhood can yield a lifetime of gains' (UNICEF, 2012, p. 1). As an antipoverty policy commitment to the early years has been established as most effective and cost-efficient (Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007; Heckman, 2006; Swick, 2009), social work is increasingly turning into child and family social work as an

instrument of social policy. In what follows, we discuss key challenges from the perspective of research in social work practice that is underpinned by a social investment paradigm.

## **2.3. KEY CHALLENGES IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

It is argued that the paradigm of social investment has found practical expression in preventative interventions, constructing the problem of poverty in terms of education and activation of both children and their parents (Clarke, 2006). In the case that early childhood intervention is the central task of social work, the child, as the citizen-worker of the future, is considered the central object of intervention. In social work strategies of parent education and parental support and in practices where parents are activated to participate in the labour market, the focus is on the parent as the central object of intervention.

### **2.3.1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE 'MAGIC BULLET' AGAINST (CHILD) POVERTY?**

Recently, a growing body of policy documents emphasises the potential of high-quality ECEC, including parent support programmes, in order to equalise opportunities, prevent future problems in children and consequently break the cycle of poverty (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2012b). The proclaimed success of ECEC programmes, in which social work professionals are employed, has been particularly sustained by international studies in the fields of developmental neuroscience and economy. Research findings suggest that the earlier the young brain is exposed to a wide variety of stimuli, the more promising the child's outcomes will be in terms of cognitive development, socio-emotional functioning and educational performances (Heckman, 2006). Although ECEC is generally considered beneficial for all young children, the highest 'return on investment' (Heckman, 2006) is expected with children from low socio-economic backgrounds (Barnett, 2005; Doyle et al., 2009; EU, 2013). For those children identified as (at risk of) being socially and emotionally

disadvantaged, high-quality early childhood provisions are even believed to outweigh the unequal distribution of opportunities (Burger, 2010; Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003). The European Commission (2011, p. 4), for example, champions ECEC as a prominent and cost-efficient actor in breaking 'the cycle of low achievement and disengagement that often leads to school drop-out and so to the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next'. High-quality ECEC is thus represented as an important lever in order to achieve two of the core aims of the Europe 2020 strategy: reducing early school leaving (to below 10%) and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion (European Council, 2010). Within this framework, national government action plans are increasingly concerned with the accessibility of high-quality early childhood provisions, especially targeted at children from ethnic minority and low-income families. High-quality ECEC is considered as a promising means to compensate, at least partially, for a disadvantaged home life (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003) and produce economically profitable adults in the future.

Nevertheless, researchers also make a strong plea for caution about policies that consider ECEC to be the 'magic bullet' in the fight against poverty (Burger, 2010). A primary reason for this reluctance is the absence of convincing evidence that ECEC is indeed capable of levelling the playing field (Staab, 2010). More importantly, several researchers voice their concerns regarding the overall and historical tendency of framing poverty as a mere educational problem. The assumption that equality of early childhood provisions would diminish social inequalities is thereby not only empirically challenged, but it has also been contested because of the underlying rationale that future outcomes in education and later life are moulded primarily by personal efforts and talents (Morabito, Vandenbroeck, & Roose, 2013). According to this dominant logic, educational failure, poor employment prospects and adult poverty eventually tend to be considered the result of individuals' own (or their parents') merits (Ivan & Cristei, 2011), rather than by unequal opportunities or structural inequalities.

### **2.3.2. PARENTAL EDUCATION AND PARENTAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES: REINFORCING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY?**

Correspondingly, the turn to parenting has indicated a shift in the discourse on poverty from income protection to the development of parent support strategies. As the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report describes, 'parental engagement especially in ensuring high-quality children's learning at home and in communicating with ECEC staff—is strongly associated with children's later academic success, high school completion, socio- emotional development and adaptation in society' (OECD, 2012a, p. 12). The reasoning is that high-quality ECEC provisions could help those parents in socially disadvantaged situations to better understand child development and 'inform [them] about what the ECEC centres do and what they as parents can do at home' (OECD, 2012a, p. 10). Consequently, policies advocating the equalisation of educational opportunities strongly encourage parental participation and involvement, yet define unilaterally what participation means.

While analysing this dominant discourse, critics state that its underlying logic tends to slip from an engagement with structural inequalities to a reinforcement of individual as well as parental responsibilities (Clarke, 2006; Popkewitz, 2003). As Popkewitz (2003, p. 53) argues, adherents of this approach in child and family social work tend to 'pedagogicalize the parent' since parents are considered as key in order to, for example, produce social progress through creating better readers, more positive attitudes about school, improved attendance and better homework habits. At the same time, however, the preventative promotion of parenting skills has been contested and criticised for different reasons. Several authors contest the conceptualisation of 'good parenting' as merely a job or technique, which—with professional instruction and behavioural modification—can produce the desirable outcomes in child development and future adulthood (Clarke, 2006; Gillies, 2008). Hence, largely through their association with poor outcomes for children, in particular, parenting (and mothering) practices in poor families have been deemed the

opposite of good parenting (Gillies, 2008). Accordingly, parenting has also been considered the prime vehicle of a child's social mobility. In order to avoid and surmount a downward spiral, policy and practice have been advocating therapeutic 'guidance' around parenting styles, driven by a scientific regime of truth about risk factors (Clarke, 2006). Literature, however, demonstrates that this development has 'led to measurements of family life being scored around various categories, including frequency of swearing or smacking' (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 140), 'chat time during meals' (Swick, 2009, p. 329), 'reading books, structured play, breast feeding, cleaner homes, better safety, attendance at nursery and maternal employment' (Clarke, 2006, p. 718); yet, broader material components and processes in society that produce poverty and social inequalities are often overlooked (Axford, 2010).

In this respect, it has been argued that poverty runs the risk of being framed as a mere cultural phenomenon being addressed by changing the norms of parenting in poor families rather than combating poverty itself (Clarke, 2006). An interesting example is the Positive Parenting Program (Triple P), classified in international rankings such as the European Platform for Investing in Children ([europa.eu/epic](http://europa.eu/epic)) as 'best practice' in tackling child poverty. It has, however, been analysed as primarily 'based on the assumptions that parents should be "taught" what positive parenting is; that parents do not know how to perform positive parenting, while the expert does; and that parents can "progress" when looking critically at themselves and confessing to the professional' (Vandenbroeck, Roose, & De Bie, 2011, p. 77). While the programme does recognise that 'the broader ecological context within which a family lives cannot be ignored' (Sanders, Cann, & Markie-Dadds, 2003, p. 159), at the same time it tends to eclipse poor living conditions and inequalities, since:

It is hypothesized that the more self-sufficient parents become, the more likely they are to seek appropriate support when they need it, to advocate for their children, become involved in their child's schooling, and to protect children from harm (e.g. by managing conflicts between partners). (Sanders et al., 2003, p. 159)

Hence, while the governance focus on early childhood investment enhances the visibility of the child within the family, at the same time it risks to depoliticise anti-poverty strategies in policy and practice. In this way, the conceptualisation of poverty and its consequences as a problem of parenting tends to treat parents and children as largely abstracted from the web of relationships they experience and from the circumstances in which they live (Clarke, 2006).

### **2.3.3. ACTIVATING PARENTS: RECONCILING EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE?**

The well-being of children in Western societies is predominantly affected by the socio-economic background of the households in which children are born, since they are economically completely dependent upon the economic unit of the household in which they live (Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012; Lister, 2006). Accordingly, the participation of parents in the regular labour market has been applied as a key building block of the social investment state (Ridge, 2007), especially as statistics demonstrate that child poverty and social assistance rates are significantly higher among jobless households (European Communities, 2008). As paid employment of parents is a main route out of poverty for children and their families, Western governments focus on work incentives and activation strategies, oriented especially towards parents who are on social security payments (McArthur, Thomson, & Winkworth, 2013).

Different authors, however, critically analysed this policy framework and identified a shift in policy from welfare to 'workfare' (McDonald & Marston, 2005). It is argued that Western European welfare states have transformed into workfare states over recent decades: they invest in 'good' citizens who engage actively with the regular labour market, and 'the investment in the welfare of citizens is translated into moving inactive individuals into employment as a social obligation' (Roets, Roose, De Bie, Claes, & Van Hove, 2012, p. 95). This development has given cause to social work activation strategies oriented towards parents in poor households, primarily in order to stimulate their labour market participation and consequently heighten the single-parent

family income (Good Gingrich, 2008). In that sense, these parents are simultaneously activated into employment and to take on their responsibility for childcare (Lister, 2002).

This difficult reconciliation of work and family life in both single parent and modern dual earner households has however been challenged. Ridge (2007), for instance, demonstrates that many lone mothers enter insecure labour markets, which may rather negatively affect family life, instead of enhancing the well-being of its members. Moreover, it is argued that employment alone cannot guarantee a route out of poverty as 'further action is required to combat in-work poverty' (Committee of the Regions, 2012, p. 5). Above that, researchers assert that the emphasis on paid work ignores the need for, and social value of, unpaid domestic or care labour and ignores other constraints on participation in the labour market that make it difficult, if not impossible, for substantial numbers of women to participate in the labour market (Wiegers, 2007). Levitas (1996, cited in Garrett 2014, p. 449) further argues that 'to see integration as solely effected by paid work is to ignore the fact that society is—and certainly should be—more than a market'.

## **2.4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: DO POOR FAMILIES NEED CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK?**

It is now 15 years ago that Dowling (1999) formulated the emblematic question 'do the poor need social work?' The question currently remains at the forefront of social work discussions. As old as the mandate and engagement of social work is with the lives of people in poverty, so is the discussion about social work as a valuable actor in combating the social problem of poverty (Lorenz, 2007). While analysing the role of social work in changing welfare state regimes as related to families living in poverty throughout historical developments, this article discerns both continuity and discontinuity (Lorenz, 2007).



In the historical review, it is demonstrated that social service delivery, including social work, was conceptualised first as a charity and then as a welfare right. Since the latest turn of the century, we witness yet another shift in prevailing welfare state regimes, labelled as the shift from welfare to workfare, or as neoliberalism (Crawford, 2003; Rose, 2000). The term 'neoliberalism' refers to similarities between the present and the past, but important differences can be noted as well. In this context, the paradigm of social investment emerged. This increasing conditionality of welfare rights implies that citizens have no rights without responsibilities, and rights accordingly shift into obligations (Lorenz, 2006; Maesele, 2012).

In the context of this changing construction of interventions within the social sphere, as a continuity, it can be argued that the present intention to invest in future human capital, rooted in the rhetoric of social investment, re-endorses the historical idea of parents as 'conduits for ensuring the welfare of their children through the taking on of parental responsibility' (Featherstone et al., 2012, p. 5). As a discontinuity, however, while the nuclear bourgeois family disappears as the cornerstone of society, the individual parent appears. Now individual parental responsibility is reinforced as an obligation (Neyrand, 2012). The focus of social work has shifted to the well-being of the child whereas interventions are also increasingly targeted at individual parents who are held responsible in realising preventive goals for their children. The focus, in other words, is not on preventing parents from being poor and on supporting the well-being of both parents and children, but rather on stressing the individual responsibility of parents in poverty situations to enable their children to take their future place in a meritocratic society. Poverty, in this sense, is less prioritised by social policy and social work as a matter of redistributing material resources and power, but as a lack of individual educational competencies of parents and children. Social work, then, is increasingly and rather exclusively narrowed down into child and family social work, intervening in the private sphere of both individual parents and children.

In these current developments, the question of whether the poor need child and family social work remains significant. While presuming that poor people do not need social work, it can be argued that poor children cannot be dissociated from poor parents. Therefore, solving wider political and structural problems may be more effective—for both parents and children in poverty situations—than focusing on parent support, homework classes or other forms of child and family social work. However it can also be argued that child and family social work is better than nothing.

Historicising this dilemma leads to two additional difficulties. The first observation is that social work is not only shaped by how we construct a problem but also shapes the problem (Vandenbroeck et al., 2010). As Lorenz (2007) argued, notwithstanding the fact that social work is inextricably linked with contemporary social and political developments, it cannot be merely understood as a product of the state project and as an instrument for the implementation of a social investment rationale. In that vein, we argue that social work should be perceived as a political actor that questions, carries and creates the structures and practices in which social work strategically unfolds (Roose, Roets, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). Indeed, if we conceive of poverty as a problem of lacking educational capacities in parents and children, then the solution is to offer child and family social work. Yet, social work also contributes to this problem construction. For example, every time a parent support programme for poor parents is set up, it can be argued that the idea is reinforced that poor parents do have special educational needs that differ from mainstream parents; or that poor parents equal poor parenting. Moreover, this implies that parenting is perceived as a matter of skills that can be taught by experts, while overlooking possible constraints due to a lack of material resources and power (Lister, 2004). Thus, it might lead to the displacement of a politics of redistribution, which is grounded in attentiveness to economic inequality and social justice (Axford, 2010).

The second observation is that child and family social work, as well as the critics on the parenting turn in social work, paradoxically tends to

neglect the position of parents. Scholars have concluded that child and family social work interventions are often the result of problem constructions that deny the point of view of parents, reducing them to be spectators of their own problems (Lister, 2006). Critical analyses based on empirical research with parents about what they consider as supportive are still quite rare. The question of whether families in poverty need child and family social work requires a social work practice in which a myriad of ways and strategies to define, construct and support social problems such as (child) poverty are explored while embracing the life world of parents and children in poverty situations. Therefore, only an in-depth understanding of and sensitivity to the complexities of family life and the ways in which policies and practices influence children's and parent's lives can serve the ways in which (child) poverty is challenged.

## 2.5. REFERENCES

- Attree, P. (2005). Parenting support in the context of poverty: A meta-synthesis of the qualitative evidence. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 13(4), 330–337.
- Axford, N. (2010). Is social exclusion a useful concept in children's services? *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(3), 737–754.
- Barnett, W. S. (2005). *Maximizing returns from prekindergarten education*. Retrieved from <http://www.clevelandfed.org/research/conferences/2004/november/pdf/barnett.pdf>
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Bermaoui, J., Keppens, D., & Stolberg, C. (2012). *The 'turn to parenting' in England, France, Germany and the Netherlands*. Paper presented at the 'Think Parents!' Conference, The Hague, 10–12 October.
- Bonoli, G. (2007). Time matters: Postindustrialization, new social risks, and welfare state adaptation in advanced industrial democracies. *Comparative Political Studies*, 40(5), 495–520.
- Burger, K. (2010). How does early childhood care and education affect cognitive development? An international review of the effects of early interventions for children from different social

- backgrounds. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(2), 140–165.
- Cantillon, B. (2011). The paradox of the social investment state: Growth, employment and poverty in the Lisbon era. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 21(5), 432–449.
- Clarke, K. (2006). Childhood, parenting and early intervention: A critical examination of the Sure Start national programme. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(4), 699–721.
- Cleveland, G., & Krashinsky, M. (2003). *Financing ECEC services in OECD countries*. Scarborough, ON: University of Toronto.
- Committee of the Regions. (2012). *Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'child poverty'*. Retrieved from <http://eurlex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:113:0034:0039:en:PDF>
- Council of the European Union. (2006). *Presidency conclusions of the Brussels European Council (23/24 March 2006)*. Brussels: Council of the European Union.
- Craig, G. (2002). Poverty, social work and social justice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32(6), 669–682.
- Crawford, A. (2003). Contractual governance of deviant behaviour. *Journal of Law and Society*, 30(4), 479–505.
- De Boyser, K. (2010). Early childhood poverty in the EU: Making a case for action. In W. Vandenhoe, J. Vranken, & K. De Boyser (Eds.), *Why care? Children's rights and child poverty* (pp. 153–167). Antwerp: Intersentia.
- Dean, H. (2013). The translation of needs into rights: Reconceptualising social citizenship as a global phenomenon. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22(1), 32–49.
- Donzelot, J. (1984). *L'invention du social (The invention of the social)*. Paris: Vrin.
- Dowling, M. (1999). Social exclusion, inequality and social work. *Social Policy & Administration*, 33(3), 245–261.
- Doyle, O., Harmon, C. P., Heckman, J. J., & Tremblay, R. E. (2009). Investing in early human development: Timing and economic efficiency. *Economics and Human Biology*, 7(1), 1–6.

- Duncan, G. J., Ludwig, J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2007). Reducing poverty through preschool interventions. *The Future of Children*, 17(2), 143–160.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (2004). *Welfare states in transition: National adaptations in global economies*. London: Sage.
- EU. (2013). *Practices that work*. Retrieved from [http://europa.eu/epic/practices-that-work/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/epic/practices-that-work/index_en.htm)
- European Commission. (2008). *Child poverty and well-being in the EU: Current status and way forward*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- European Commission. (2011). *Early childhood education and care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*. Brussels: European Commission.
- European Communities. (2008). *The EU social protection and social inclusion process: Thematic study on policy measures concerning child poverty*. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/spsi/child\\_poverty\\_en.htm#childpoverty](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/child_poverty_en.htm#childpoverty)
- European Council. (2010). *Conclusions* (17 June 2010). Brussels: European Council.
- Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K., & Holt, K. (2012). Thinking systematically-thinking politically: Building strong partnerships with children and families in the context of rising inequality. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(4), 618–633.
- Garrett, P. M. (2014). Confronting the ‘work society’: New conceptual tools for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1682–1699.
- Giddens, A. (1998). *The third way: The renewal of social democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillies, V. (2005). Meeting parent’s needs? Discourses of ‘support’ and ‘inclusion’ in family policy. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(1), 70–90.
- Gillies, V. (2008). Perspectives on parenting responsibility: Contextualizing values and practices. *Journal of Law and Society*, 35(1), 95–112.
- Gillies, V. (2012). Family policy and the politics of parenting: From function to competence. In M. Richter & S. Andresen (Eds.), *The politicization of parenthood: Shifting private and public*

- responsibilities in education and child rearing* (pp. 13–26). London: Springer.
- Good Gingrich, L. (2008). Social exclusion and double jeopardy: The management of lone mothers in the market–state social field. *Social Policy & Administration*, 42(4), 379–395.
- Gornick, J. C., & Jäntti, M. (2012). Child poverty in cross-national perspective: Lessons from the Luxembourg income study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(3), 558–568.
- Gray, M. (2014). The swing to early intervention and prevention and its implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1750–1769.
- Hall, C., Parton, N., Peckover, S., & White, S. (2010). Child-centric information and communication technology (ICT) and the fragmentation of child welfare practice in England. *International Journal of Social Policy*, 39(3), 393–413.
- Heckman, J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900–1902.
- Hübenthal, M., & Ifland, A. M. (2011). Risks for children? Recent developments in early childcare policy in Germany. *Childhood*, 18(1), 114–127.
- IFSW. (2000, July). *Definition of social work*. (Adopted by the IFSW General Meeting Montreal, Canada). Retrieved from [www.ifsw.org/p38000208.html](http://www.ifsw.org/p38000208.html)
- Ivan, C., & Cristei, A. (2011). Parental involvement as a key-determinant for equal educational chances: Evidence from seven South Eastern European countries. *Review of Research and Social Intervention*, 34, 73–114.
- Jones, C. (2002). Social work and society. In R. Adams, L. Dominelli, & M. Payne (Eds.), *Social work: Themes, issues and critical debates* (pp. 41–49). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krumer-Nevo, M., Weiss-Gal, I., & Monnickendam, M. (2009). Poverty-aware social work practice: A conceptual framework for social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(2), 225–243.
- Lindquist, M. J., & Lindquist, G. S. (2012). The dynamics of child poverty in Sweden. *Journal of Population Economics*, 25(4), 1423–1450.

- Lister, R. (2002). The dilemmas of pendulum politics: Balancing paid work, care and citizenship. *Economy and Society*, 31(4), 520–532.
- Lister, R. (2003). Investing in citizen-workers of the future: Transformations in citizenship and the state under New Labour. *Social Policy & Administration*, 37(5), 427–443.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Lister, R. (2006). Children (but not women) first: New labour, child welfare and gender. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2), 315–335.
- Lorenz, W. (2006). *Perspectives on European social work: From the birth of the nation state to the impact of globalization*. Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich.
- Lorenz, W. (2007). Practising history: Memory and contemporary professional practice. *International Social Work*, 50(5), 597–612. doi:10.1177/0020872807079918
- Maesele, T. (2012). *From charity to welfare rights? A study of social care practices* (PhD thesis). Ghent University, Ghent.
- Martin, C. (2013). The invention of parenting policy in the French context: Elements for a policy tracing. In J. G. Ferrer & I. Monsonis Payá (Eds.), *Sustainability and transformation in European Social Policy* (pp. 179–197). Bern: Peter Lang.
- McArthur, M., Thomson, L., & Winkworth, G. (2013). Jumping through hoops: The cost of compliance on sole parents. *Child and Family Social Work*, 18(2), 159–167.
- McDonald, C., & Marston, G. (2005). Workfare as welfare: Governing unemployment in the advanced liberal state. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3), 374–401.
- McLaughlin, K. (2008). *Social work, politics and society: From radicalism to orthodoxy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Mestrum, F. (2011). Child poverty: A critical perspective. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 161–168.
- Mestrum, F. (2013). *An emerging new social paradigm for Europe*. Retrieved from [http://www.globalsocialjustice.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=397:an-emerging-newsocial-paradigm-for-europe&catid=10:research&Itemid=13](http://www.globalsocialjustice.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=397:an-emerging-newsocial-paradigm-for-europe&catid=10:research&Itemid=13)

- Morabito, C., Vandenbroeck, M., & Roose, R. (2013). The greatest of equalisers: A critical review of international organisations views on early childhood care and education. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(3), 451–467. doi:10.1017/S0047279413000214
- Moss, P. (2013). *Early childhood and compulsory education: Reconceptualising the relationship*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Neyrand, G. (2012). *Soutenir et contrôler les parents: Le dispositif de parentalité* [To support and to control parents: Parenting policies]. Toulouse: Éditions Érès.
- OECD. (2012a). *Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/startingstrongiiiqualitytoolboxforearlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>
- OECD. (2012b). *Education today 2013: The OECD perspective*. Retrieved from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edu\\_today-2013-en](http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edu_today-2013-en)
- Payne, M. (2005). *The origins of social work: Continuity and change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Platt, L. (2005). *Discovering child poverty: The creation of a policy agenda from 1800 to the present*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (2003). Governing the child and pedagogicalization of the parent: A historical excursus into the present. In M. N. Bloch, K. Holmlund, I. Moqvist, & T. S. Popkewitz (Eds.), *Governing children, families and education* (pp. 35–61). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Powell, F. W. (2007). *The politics of civil society: Neoliberalism or social left?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Rahn, P., & Chassé, K. A. (2009). Children in poverty in Germany: Reflections on recent social work research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 243–252.
- Ridge, T. (2007). It's a family affair: Low-income children's perspectives on maternal work. *Journal of Social Policy*, 36(3), 399–416.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., De Bie, M., Claes, L., & Van Hove, G. (2012). Pawns or pioneers? The logic of user participation in anti-poverty policy-making in public policy units in Belgium. *Social Policy and Administration*, 46(7), 807–822.



- Roose, R., Roets, G., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2012). Irony and social work: In search of the happy Sisyphus. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(8), 1592–1607.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2000). *The new social question, rethinking the welfare state*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rose, N. (2000). Community, citizenship and the third way. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(9), 1395–1411.
- Sanders, M. R., Cann, W., & Markie-Dadds, C. (2003). The triple p-positive parenting programme: A universal population-level approach to the prevention of child abuse. *Child Abuse Review*, 12(3), 155–171.
- Schwenzer, I. (2007). *Tensions between legal, biological and social conceptions of parentage*. Antwerp/Oxford: Intersentia. Retrieved from <http://www.ejcl.org/113/article113-6.pdf>
- Skevik, A. (2003). Children of the welfare state: Individuals with entitlements, or hidden in the family? *Journal of Social Policy*, 32(3), 423–440.
- Spratt, T. (2009). Identifying families with multiple problems: Possible responses from child and family social work to current policy developments. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(3), 435–450.
- Staab, S. (2010). Social investment policies in Chile and Latin America: Towards equal opportunities for women and children? *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(4), 607–626.
- Swick, K. J. (2009). Strengthening homeless parents with young children through meaningful parent education and support. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 36(4), 327–332.
- UNICEF. (2012). *A brief review of the social and economic returns to investing in children*. Retrieved from [http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Investing\\_in\\_Children\\_19June2012\\_e-version\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Investing_in_Children_19June2012_e-version_FINAL.pdf)
- Van Damme, D. (1996). *Volwasseneducatie in Europees perspectief: Onderwijs in de Europese Unie: Eenheid in verscheidenheid* (Adult education from a European perspective. Education in the European Union: Unity in diversity). Leuven: Garant.

- Van Lancker, W. (2013). Putting the child-centered investment strategy to the test: Evidence for EU27. *European Journal of Social Security*, 15(1), 4–27.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Coussée, F., & Bradt, L. (2010). The social and political construction of early childhood education. *British Journal of Social Work*, 58(2), 139–153.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Peeters, J., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2013). Lifelong learning and the counter/ professionalisation of child care: A case study of local hybridizations of global European discourses. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(1), 109–124.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Roose, R., & De Bie, M. (2011). Governing families in the social investment state. *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies*, 4(1), 69–85.
- Wiegers, W. (2002). *The framing of poverty as 'child poverty' and its implications for women*. Retrieved from [http://www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca/cms/documents/78/Wiegers\\_1-128.pdf](http://www.rwmc.uoguelph.ca/cms/documents/78/Wiegers_1-128.pdf)
- Wiegers, W. (2007). *Child-centred advocacy and the invisibility of women in poverty discourse and social policy*. Retrieved from <http://faculty.law.ubc.ca/myoung/poverty/Wanda%20Wiegers.pdf>

# **CHAPTER 3**

## **CAPTURING LIFE HISTORIES ABOUT MOVEMENTS INTO AND OUT OF POVERTY: A ROAD WITH PITS AND BUMPS<sup>2</sup>**



---

<sup>2</sup> Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (submitted). Capturing life histories about movements into and out of poverty: A road with pits and bumps. *Qualitative Social Work*.



**ABSTRACT**

In order to take into account the power imbalances typically implicated in knowledge production about the complex social problem of poverty, social work researchers have increasingly acknowledged the importance of grasping the viewpoints and perspectives of people in poverty situations. In this contribution, we accordingly reflect on a current life history research project that retrospectively explores the life stories of parents with young children with regard to their mobility into and out of poverty that is examined in dynamic interaction with social work interventions. In this article, we discuss methodological and ethical challenges and complexities that we unexpectedly encountered in our research venture, as illustrated by three exemplary vignettes. These examples demonstrate issues of power between the researcher and the research participants that are not only inevitable, but also generate dilemmas, struggles and ambiguities that often remain underexposed in the ways scientific insights are reported. Rather than disguising these pits and bumps, we argue for a reflexive research stance which makes these issues of power in knowledge production susceptible to contemplation and scrutiny.

### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, biographical research has become a significant approach as part of the broader practice of qualitative research, and can be attributed to an increased concern with the life experiences of those who were usually not heard (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Booth & Booth, 1996; Miller, 2000). As Roberts (2002) asserts aptly, biographical research evolves as an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field in which the interrelation between biography and society is interrogated. In that sense, it is claimed that this attempt to understand and situate individual life experiences within their historical, social, cultural and political context is part of a broader biographical or narrative turn in the social sciences (see Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000; Riessman & Quinney, 2005), which denotes approaches such as 'biography' and 'autobiography' (see Roberts, 2002), 'life story research' (Booth & Booth, 1996; Miller, 2000; Roets & Goedgeluck, 2007), 'family history research' or 'life history research' (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Miller, 2000) and 'oral history research' (Czarniawska, 2004; Thompson, 2000).

Only quite recently, the potential and relevance of biographical and narrative research approaches has been emphasized for social work research purposes (see Broadhurst, 2015). In a previous issue of *Qualitative Social Work*, Riessman and Quinney (2005, p. 405) stress that social work has embraced these approaches "only to a very limited degree in research" although there is a "storehouse of narrative approaches available in qualitative research literature". Moreover, they assert that social work researchers who actually engage with narrative research approaches adopt "reductionistic techniques, similar in effect to what quantitative researchers do with numbers". Therefore, they come to the conclusion that the challenge for social work researchers is to give narrative approaches a valuable place in social work. In the meantime, it can be argued that the social work academia is indebted to their call, which has received considerable attention (see Broadhurst, 2015).

As social work researchers we reflect on a current life history research project in which the life histories and welfare strategies of families in poverty situations were retrospectively explored and captured in dynamic interaction with the strategies and interventions of social workers (see Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2016, in press). Remarkably, however, our project produced particular methodological and ethical challenges and complexities that were emerging before and during the research process. Since biographical research “is a practice that is not merely enacting a prescribed research role according to steps in a manual” yet requires a recognition of the reflexive role of the researcher (Roberts, 2002, p. 173), we therefore aim to articulate how we embraced reflexivity in life history research as social work researchers (see D’Cruz & Jones, 2004; Shaw, 2008; Roose et al., 2015).

In what follows, we first address how we situated and positioned our life history approach alongside the current interest of researchers in dynamic analyses of poverty. Secondly, we address methodological and ethical considerations and concerns that were essential in constructing our research process. Thirdly, we discuss how our approach provoked tangible and unforeseen complexities in the research process. We conclude this article by issuing some concluding reflections and recommendations for future research in social work.

### **3.2. A DYNAMIC UNDERSTANDING OF MOBILITY INTO AND OUT OF POVERTY: A COMPLEX ISSUE**

The central aim of our life history research project was to identify which social work practices and interventions were experienced as supportive by parents with young children who were moving into and out of poverty over time. We used a life history research approach (see Bertaux & Thompson, 1997; Miller, 2000; Roberts, 2002) to uncover the range of strategies that were established by the parents “to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives” (Ridge, 2011, p. 81), and to capture the complex ways in which the parents practiced their agency in relation to material and immaterial (or social) resources and structural constraints (Lister, 2004).

Our life history approach aligns with a recent interest of poverty researchers in unravelling the dynamics of poverty based on longitudinal qualitative research (see Alcock, 2004; Dewilde, 2003; Kothari & Hulme, 2004; Millar, 2007; Ridge & Millar, 2011). These researchers commit to provide insights in “how people perceive their situations over time, how they engage with other people, deal with institutions and actively shape their circumstances and opportunities” (Ridge & Millar, 2011, p. 88). Their plea for longitudinal qualitative research originates from an emphasis on an understanding of the problem of poverty as a dynamic process (Millar, 2007), which implies that:

poverty should not be seen as a more or less permanent product of structural social relations and location within these, but rather is likely to be a temporary phenomenon (short-term, long-term or recurrent) encountered by different individuals in different circumstances or at different times in their life course. (Alcock, 2004, p. 398)

Back in 1986, for example, Bane and Ellwood (1986, p. 1) discussed the ground-breaking finding that “much of the research on the dynamics of poverty during the 1970’s (...) seemed to show that the bulk of the poor were poor for only a few years”. While revealing that people were slipping into and out of poverty, “research also showed that the poor were a very heterogeneous group, including a small minority of persistently poor” (Bane & Ellwood, 1986, p. 1). This finding was highly relevant in shedding light on the question of the allocation of resources and the development of anti-poverty policies, since this differentiation between what they call permanent and transitory poverty destabilized the idea of an underclass that rests on assumptions about the long-term nature of poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1986). Also Alcock (2004, p. 405) follows this reasoning, arguing that there is no empirical evidence to support the claims of anti-welfare critics such as Murray (1996) that welfare support creates an underclass of people drifted down the social hierarchy who have opted for a life of welfare dependency. In that sense, Bane and Ellwood (1986, p. 2) refer to the importance of



generating knowledge about the experiences of people who ever slip into and out of poverty, and more in particular about “the events leading to the beginnings and endings of spells of poverty”. These insights recently received renewed attention under the influence of the work of, for example, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1998), who have argued that modern societies are characterised by

much greater levels of social mobility and fluidity than was the case in earlier periods of industrialization (...) Individuals can expect to move up or down the social hierarchy to a much greater extent than might have been the case in the early part of the last century. (Alcock, 2004, p. 398)

Nevertheless, Alcock (2004) reveals that researching movements into and out of poverty is a very complex affair, referring to at least two central concerns in dynamic analyses of poverty: a first concern refers to the contribution of *qualitative* longitudinal research, and a second point of interest implies the necessary balance between agency and structure.

### **3.2.1. THE CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH**

Until recently, the study of poverty dynamics has been dominated by quantitative approaches to longitudinal research (Alcock, 2004; Kothari & Hulme, 2004; Millar, 2007). Dynamic analyses of poverty have traditionally been conducted on the basis of static and descriptive quantitative data (Dewilde, 2003), that are mainly collected by large-scale questionnaire surveys across a population of respondents at a particular point in time (see McKay & Lawson, 2002). In an attempt to objectively describe causal patterns and correlates of social and economic mobility, these studies do provide a snapshot of the structural features of social relations (Kothari & Hulme, 2004; Taylor, 2008). Nevertheless, it is argued that this mainstream snapshot view cannot explain why these movements occur and should be enriched by taking into account dynamic research that shows “poverty like a film, as opposed to a static image” (Taylor, 2008, p. 47). As Alcock (2004) asserts aptly, quantitative studies “are likely to be at the level of

structure and they will not shed much light on how the changes have come about. To observe change, and in particular to seek to explain it, we need to examine not snapshots but moving pictures" (p. 401). In that vein, we follow Taylor (2008) who argues for enriching these quantitative research studies by combining them with qualitative research approaches in order to enhance our current knowledge about the dynamics of poverty. Millar (2007, p. 534) in this context suggests that we need qualitative longitudinal research to address questions of experience and motivation which cannot be captured by quantitative surveys, and therefore focus attention "on the active ways in which people are (or are not) able to respond to their situations and in particular their responses to risk events, and the resources that they are able to call upon to deal with these".

In our approach to life history research, however, we follow the claim of Riessman and Quinney (2005, p. 398) for the field of social work research that "the challenge for narrative research is not to mimic positivist science in modes of data reduction". We wanted to give depth to rich and "extended accounts of lives in context" instead of fragmenting experiences into snippets of talk to illustrate pre-structured categories and issues (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 394). Rather than "applying and adapting traditional methodological principles, criteria and procedures" according to a (neo-)positivistic and quantitative research approach (Roberts, 2002, p. 37-40), we assumed that the construction of life histories should be grounded in a collaboration between the interviewer and the research subject(s). The narrative life history research approach as proposed by Miller (2000, p. 130) endorses this viewpoint, "taking the standpoint that 'reality' is malleable and multiple and a focus upon social aspects of the interaction between the interviewee and interviewer" should be highlighted. As such, biographical research evolves in a triangular process between the researcher and the research subject, whereas they can both contribute to the ways in which new knowledge is generated with reference to the central research aims and questions (Miller, 2000). In that sense, biographical research ventures allow research subjects to tell their life history "not on the basis of predetermined

responses to predefined objects, but rather as interpreters, definers, signalers, and symbol and signal readers whose behaviour can only be understood by having the researcher enter into the defining process” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25). Therefore, we approached *mobility into and out of poverty* in the life histories of the research subjects as a sensitizing concept, which gave us “a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. (...) Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). This involvement of both the researcher and the research subject(s), however, reminds us to a central concern for the potential power gap between researcher and researched when studying the life worlds of people who belong to marginalized groups in terms of their material, social, and symbolic resources (Krumer-Nevo, 2002, 2009). We will further discuss this issue in our methodological and ethical considerations.

### **3.2.2. BALANCING BETWEEN AGENCY AND STRUCTURE**

Biographical methodologies are mainly devoted to providing “access to the perspectives and experience of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional modes of academic discourse” (Booth & Booth, 1996, p. 55). The challenge for life history researchers therefore implies that the subjective experiences of individuals are captured while the researcher attempts to see the world from the point of view of the research subjects, who are invited to participate in the construction of the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Miller, 2000). As Krumer-Nevo (2009) indicates, ‘giving voice’ has quite recently entered the realm of poverty research. Documenting the life knowledge of people living in poverty has gained prominence since the 1990s, based on the idea that

opening our ears to the voices of the poor (...) is vital to the humanizing of citizens and institutions, including research (...) and offers a unique potential contribution to the overall corpus of knowledge because it reflects the point of view of people on the

fringes of society concerning their own lives, as well as society and its primary institutions. (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, p. 99–100)

While taking this into account, we adopted a life history approach with a pronounced focus on capturing the interrelation between individual biography and social structures, forces and resources available in societies, placing individual biographies in the broader public sphere (Clapham, 2003). As Bogdan and Biklen (1998, p. 25) assert, this research approach adopts the idea that “human beings are actively engaged in creating their world; understanding the intersection between biography and society is essential”. With regard to the balance between agency and structure, the focus on agency and the actions and decisions of people in poverty may all too easily lead to thrusting “all of the responsibility for avoiding or escaping poverty onto those individuals experiencing it” (Alcock, 2004, p. 398); and therefore structural resources and redistributive forces remain crucially important key elements in these dynamic analyses of poverty (Lister, 2004; Millar, 2007). Here, “subjectivity, the manner in which the respondent perceives his/her situation and activities in social structures and networks, is the very stuff of analysis” (Miller, 2000, p. 129).

However, our research endeavours were based on the assumption that human *experience* is intrinsically mediated by *interpretation* (Blumer, 1954; Schuyt, 1972). Life history research allows for an interpretation of the complex and dynamic ways in which material, social and cultural resources are viewed as opportunities and constraints for people to practice their agency, starting from the assumption that the individual “contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he [*sic*] is made by society and by its historical push and shove” (Roberts, 2002, p. 36). In that sense, we were inspired by the interpretive paradigm of lifeworld orientation (Otto and Thiersch, 2001; Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013). This approach was originally developed as a radical social criticism, challenging taken-for-granted institutional problem constructions that are wielding an alienating and colonizing influence on people’s

everyday experiences. As such, “this understanding of the everyday with reference to its obstinacy, its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations” is linked to a social justice project (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009, p. 132). This approach allowed us to take into account the contexts in which people’s biographies are produced and the injustice of poverty situations that shape them (see Roets et al., 2013).

In the next sections, we discuss more concretely how we were implementing these research approaches and rationales, and how we attempted to deal with the challenges, complexities and dilemmas we encountered during our research process.

### **3.3. METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We adopted a life history approach in which the welfare strategies, struggles, hopes and aspirations of parents with young children who were moving into and out of poverty and their experiences with social work were explored in retrospective ways. Retrospective approaches to qualitative longitudinal poverty research involve the collection of data “usually at one point in time, from respondents about their past experiences and life changes” (Alcock, 2004, p. 403), and can provide considerable detail about circumstances and structural resources and constraints. The research participants were recruited with the help of social work organizations that were invited to ask families in which they intervened and who experienced financial difficulties over time whether they would participate. After (re-)negotiating and obtaining informed consent (Roose et al., 2015), open qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with parents of young children who had experiences with a diversity of social work interventions. The families had several children with preferably one of their children being aged between zero and three years old. In the course of the research process, we interviewed 14 parents (ten mothers and four fathers) from nine different families, including parents who intermittently joined the conversation, yet nine parents (seven mothers and two fathers from seven families) were interviewed more extensively. All the interviews took place at a location chosen by the parents, ranging from their

homes, cafés, to separate meeting rooms in the context of the referring social work organization. Within a series of two to four conversations, which lasted one to five hours, parents storied their lives and their experiences of social work interventions. All the 27 interviews were fully audiotaped and transcribed.

Although the impetus of the biographical turn in social work research has been to reconfigure the power relations implicated in knowledge production while emphasizing the participation of the research subjects in co-constructing knowledge, determining how to interpret and write about the research insights “is in the hands of the researcher and not in the hands of the researched, the interviewed” (Krumer-Nevo, 2002, p. 305). Nevertheless, we follow Krumer-Nevo (2009, p. 282) who asserts that many scholars initiate and engage with participatory approaches in research, “but do not specify the process through which they had produced it (...) the role that people in poverty took in them is not clear”. For us, the life history research approach involved methodological and ethical complexities and ambiguities, which refer to the central importance of reflexivity for social work researchers (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004; Shaw, 2008). In that vein, these dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities require that researchers develop the reflexive potential and the necessary openness to discuss their doubts and considerations emerging during the research process (Roose et al., 2015). In what follows, we reveal how power relations in the life history research project evolved in surprising ways, at different stages of the encounters with the parents.

### **3.4. UNFORESEEN COMPLEXITIES IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

The process of working together to (re)construct the parents’ life histories steered us, by mutual agreement, to an attempt to visualize their life histories. This allowed us to deepen our understanding of the poverty situations in which our research participants were living, while documenting actual resources, events, key incidents and things that happened at turning points (Millar, 2007). In the situations under study, it was found that poverty consists of a multi-dimensional and

complex problem, that can be characterized as a lack of material as well as immaterial (or social) resources (Lister, 2004), created by cumulative processes of social exclusion that result, in different periods of the lives of the research participants, in deprivation (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Here, social exclusion refers to processes through which people in poverty are disconnected from the rest of society, which creates social lines of fracture and social inequalities between the poor and the non-poor (Roets et al., 2012). As such, our life history approach resulted in a complex mosaic of life experiences, which were pieced together and contextualized through the construction of an individual life line in close collaboration with the parents. These life lines ran through each research process as a common thread and were gradually corrected, elaborated and refined. This allowed us to gain a profound understanding of the ways in which transitions, and events and resources (including social work interventions) leading to these transitions, were experienced by these families.

In what follows, we represent exemplary vignettes of the reconstructed and visualized life histories of three families, and discuss the complexities involved in the construction process. All illustrations are drawn from the research journal that was systematically kept by the first author – the “I” in the following sections – who conducted the interviews.

The diagram illustrates the life path of a young adult, starting from birth in 1998 and continuing through various stages until 2013. The timeline is marked by years: 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013.

- 1998:** Birth, Family, Financial, Social.
- 1999:** Hospitalization, Child protection services.
- 2000:** Adult education, ECEC (mentorship), CFYW (mentorship).
- 2004:** Quit job, Neuroscience.
- 2006:** Quit job, Neuroscience.
- 2007:** Last job.
- 2009:** Preschool.
- 2011:** Trade Union.
- 2013:** Master research, Fine artist.

A large black scribble obscures the period between 1999 and 2000. Other labels include "Public Centre for Social Welfare 1", "ECEC (disruptant)", "Family Rehabilitation center", "Multi-disciplinary center 1", "Hospital", "Child protection services", "Hospital Discharge", "Hospital: Pediatrician", "Foster parents or partner", "Accommodation center and supported housing for young adults", "Multidisciplinary center 2", and "Diet medication (Lampr)".



Anna, 38 years old, was the first mother I contacted. At the time of the interviews, she lived together with her three children – two boys (13 and 15 years old) from a former relationship and a new-born girl with her current partner – at the basic floor of an apartment building. I recruited Anna with the help of a child and family social work organization, which intervened in her family more than ten years ago. The support trajectory was described by the practitioners as very successful because of the tremendous improvement in the family situation on a financial as well as on a relational level.

In our first conversation, I invited Anna to talk about her family. Her story provided starting points to reflect on factual elements such as her current and former housing situation, education, employment and the family income. As we did with the Disney puzzle that rested between us on the table during the interview, back home I tried to put together the many life fragments shared by Anna. Because she had told me she was very creative, I adopted the idea to draw a life line, based the events she recounted during our initial meeting. This enabled me to organize and visualize Anna's life trajectory since her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday – a starting point she had chosen herself – and to detect possible blank spots: elements that confused me or I had to ask more about during our next conversation. At the second interview, I requested Anna to complete or correct the life line where she thought it would be necessary. She told me, for instance, that the *"big black cloud"* – symbolizing a very dark period in her life – needed to have a larger size and should be preceded by a grey period. Also some dates and events had to be corrected and replaced.

This process of working together to reconstruct and visualize Anna and her family's life trajectory, in the course of four interviews, not only made it possible to gain a more detailed picture of certain events. It also offered a means to deepen Anna's life story, explore her meaning making and to indicate and talk about material as well as immaterial transitions she and her family experienced. Besides profound financial dynamics, Anna also designated familial and social changes. Interestingly, at a social level she further distinguished different types

of friendship, depending on the broader circumstances she found herself in at a certain period in life. While comparing current friendships with former ones, for instance at the time of the black cloud, she reflected:

*Well, you know? Now I have friends who understand me, but who are real friends. Back then, my friends were all in the same boat. I could find support with them, but the bonds of friendship I have now are totally different. They aren't built on this kind of support or on those problems anymore.*

This demonstrated that the experienced transitions in life are often complex, multi-layered and interrelated with other dynamics and life events. As we further discussed the diverse meanings and experiences behind the visualized life trajectory, as a social work researcher I also explicitly paid attention to Anna's account on formal resources, such as social work, and their perceived influence on processes of change.

Throughout this process of data collection, I had the feeling that Anna and I were riding a tandem. During each move, we were working together to follow and explore a route – a life trajectory – that only Anna could know and that she reconstructed during the narration. In this sense, she was in the driver's seat, choosing the paths forward and backward in time, making (sometimes unpredictable) connections between different roads, and using the brakes if the trip was taking too long. However, assuming that the 'authority' is therefore passed over to the informant would blur issues of power and bias entangled in each research process. Whereas the person in the backseat might not be able to see the road in front of her or to hold the steering wheel, she does impact the ride from the very start. As a researcher I noticed for example, that an informal conversation about the puzzle, lying on the table between us, helped to enhance a smooth departure. Also during the interview, I certainly had an influence on the speed as well as on the content of the conversation. Based on my own preoccupations and research interests, I could slow down the narration by highlighting topics that drew my attention or by asking Anna to go back in her story. Since research is always politically and theoretically charged, also the

questions I asked or didn't ask were certainly not neutral and influenced the construction and generation of knowledge. I did not know the road, but I held a compass. Moreover, as is the case when riding a real tandem, during the research process an empathic and sensing interaction between the two bikers, or between the researcher and the respondent, was crucial in order to take the (sometimes difficult) turns smoothly, not to fall, and to stop the conversation when this seemed appropriate.

As the graphics demonstrated, Anna's life story – in relation to material and immaterial conditions – was complex and dynamic, and went over pits and bumps. The same could be said about the process of data collection, about our ride, which was confronted with some complexities and challenges. While life histories are most appealing when presented as a story with a beginning, middle and an end, the narration was not always expressed in a logical or coherent manner. I noticed that my research questions did not always result in the expected answers. Sometimes there were memory issues, holes in the road. Sometimes, Anna consciously avoided going into detail about certain pits in her life trajectory – for instance she told me she preferred not to talk about a difficult history with her parents, because the relationship with her mother is now restored. Although some elements could consequently not be included, based on ethical considerations I left room for detours.

Also the research environment brought some challenges. Most conversations took place at Anna's house. During many of our meetings, she simultaneously had to watch over her children. Since the house was rather small, there was no place we could talk in private. Consequently, Anna's story was often interrupted by her crying baby or by playing youngsters. I also noticed that the boys were listening very attentively to every word we were saying and sometimes even joined the conversation. For example, on the third visit, Anna suggested to let the conversation take place outside of the house, at the terrace. Apart from her baby girl, Sophie, who was giggling on her playmat, it was the first time I also met her two older sons, Luke and Thomas. During the

interview, the boys now and then came to show their toys, captured insects or interfered in the conversation. On one occasion, Anna told me:

*Anna: If we would have made use of debt mediation sooner, I doubt if we would have ended up all that well. We might have lost our boosting moments, the tiny things – like going shopping or going on a trip – that could make you think: We had a nice day. The money has run out, but we had a nice day. We can cope again.*

*Luke, who was obviously eavesdropping: Mom, I'm glad that you are talking from the heart.*

*Anna: (laughs) I know, it's scary if you hear all of this. Yes, I know.*

*Luke: Mom, we were almost hobos, then.*

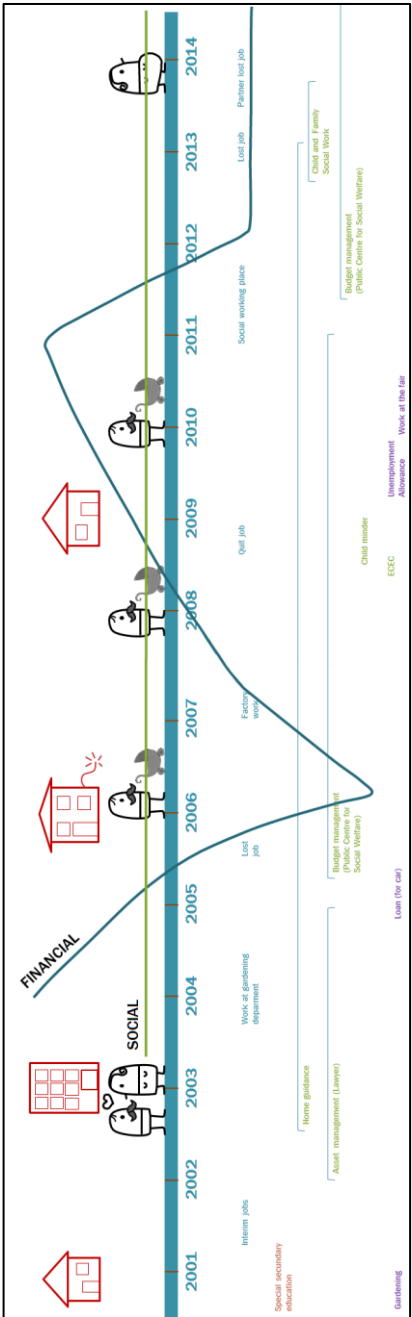
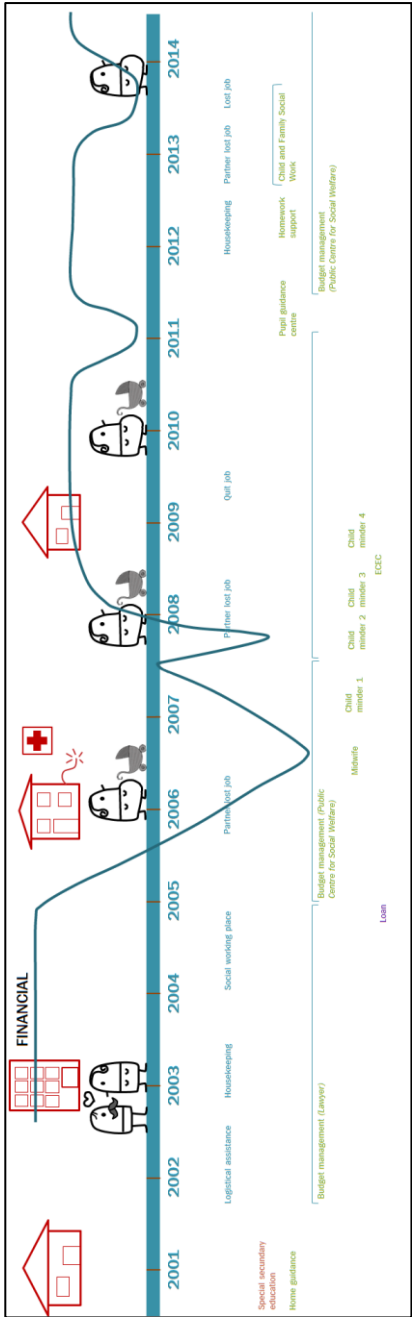
*Anna: Yes! (laughs)*

*Luke: You did say that we could only buy some bread. So...?*

*Anna: But you have had everything.*

I became aware of the fact that the narration and visualization of the family's life trajectory, that went over pits and bumps, might be confronting as well as familiar to each family member. Moreover, they clearly all have their say on life events, from their own perspective.

3.4.2. WENDY AND TOM



I was brought into contact with Wendy and Tom, both 33 years old, with the help of a child and family social work organization that almost completed a support trajectory in their family. At the time of the interviews, the couple had three children: a boy, seven years of age, and two daughters of respectively three and five years old. Since both parents confirmed that they wanted to be engaged in the research project, I suggested that maybe we could arrange separate encounters. I reasoned that, this way, their own meaning-making about transitions and support could be maximally valued. Eventually I had three conversations with each of both parents.

I first met Wendy. When I entered the living room, she was busy ironing. Although the place didn't seem messy to me, she apologized for the fact that she hadn't cleaned yet. She also introduced me to Bob, the canary-bird, who was released from his cage – despite the mild protest of her partner – and within a second cheerfully flew around the room. As soon as her partner went out to take his mother to the grandparent festival at their childrens' school, Wendy spontaneously showed me some of their kids' toys, which she extensively demonstrated. A little later, I got a tour around the bedrooms of the children. We took the time to admire some more toys and she drew my attention to a water stain above the window. Back downstairs she taught me how to fabricate short summer pants out of worn-out winter trousers and how to creatively fix the holes with patches from a low budget store. I could not get rid of the impression that Wendy wanted to prove to me that she's a good mother. Maybe she was first of all proud of what she is able to give to her children despite difficult living conditions. Maybe she was nervous about the interview and didn't really know how to react. Or, maybe, her spontaneous, rather defensive attitude told something about how she was used to be approached by social services. An hour passed before I could find an occasion to explain why I actually came to visit her. Until then, I kept the recording device switched off. This unexpected start of the interview exemplified how the mother and I were entangled in subjective processes of interpretation, based on the perceptions of the other, our own positioning, and the focus of our meeting. While clarifying our main topics of interest, during the

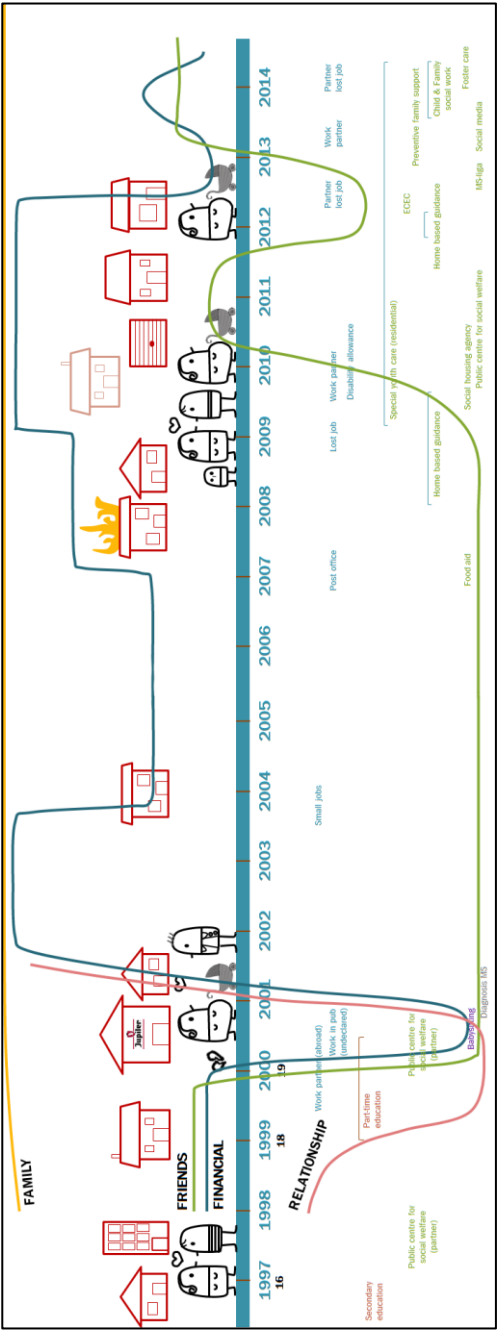
following conversations Wendy and I together (re)constructed and visualized her life trajectory. Again, this process provided useful tools to deepen the talk about experiences of life events, transitions and support.

The research process I followed with Wendy's partner, Tom, was much alike. Also the facts and figures both parents mentioned showed many resemblances. For instance, they both mentioned living on a "*ticking time bomb*", while referring to formerly bad and very unsafe housing conditions. Tom and Wendy did however not always focus as much on the same happenings or interventions. Moreover, also their corresponding experiences and interpretations of life events sometimes profoundly differed. The latter was clearly illustrated at the occasion when Tom told me without euphoria that Wendy was pregnant again.

*I still have to overcome this. But it's easier said than done, overcoming this. (silence) I do admit it, it's hard for me. (...) There are going to be four of them... Three was already a lot, but four! For me, that's something... For me, that's too much.*

A couple of moments later, after Tom had shared his view on the new family situation, Wendy entered the room. She was shining. Because, at that moment, I was there to listen to the meaning-making of Tom, I decided to primarily focus on his perspective and to greet Wendy the way I normally did, without referring to her pregnancy. During the further course of the conversation, Wendy stayed around. She repeatedly passed by the table, gave me something to drink and finally enthusiastically asked me if Tom has already shared the big news. I wanted to equally respect both perspectives, but because they seemed to directly opposing each other, I found this quite difficult. Eventually, I decided to honestly answer her question – while trying not to choose sides – and then to turned again to Tom.

3.4.3. EMILY





Emily (35 years old) is the mother of one teenage daughter from a former relationship and two younger daughters with her current partner, Steve (30 years old). At the moment of the interviews, the children were respectively 13 years, four years and two years of age. I was brought into contact with the family by the same child and family social work organization that also recruited Wendy and Tom. The practitioner told me that the support trajectory in Emily's family had been difficult, and would probably be interrupted or concluded.

On the telephone, Emily indicated that she wanted to participate in the research (*"I have much to tell!"*), but at the same time also made sure she would immediately withdraw if she wouldn't like it. This condition was totally in line with what I wanted to suggest her in the informed consent. At my first visit, after explaining the research content, I asked Emily and Steve if it would be possible to make audio-recordings of our conversation. Steve shrugged his shoulders, but Emily didn't respond to my question and immediately started to voice her story. Because the answer to my earlier request had remained blank, I tried to repeat the question:

*I: Emily, may I interrupt you for a second? What you are telling me is quite interesting, but I'm afraid that I will forget some of it if I can't record it or write it down, so I would like to ask you...*

*Emily: Ah, you think that it is interesting, peoples' misery? Do you make a lot of money out of it?*

I consequently decided not to turn on the recording device, but to listen very carefully. During the conversation, that eventually took almost four hours, Emily was very open and lively expressed her perspectives on social interventions. *"It seems like you're a friend who comes to visit us"*, she laughed towards the end of the interview, *"I can immediately feel it, when there's a connection"*. When saying goodbye and considering the next visit, I asked Emily to think again about my request concerning the audio recordings, which had still been left unanswered. An affirmative nod. *"You're still willing to come back?"*, she grinned. At the second meeting, a week later, the audio recording of the conversation no longer appeared to be an issue.

This illustration reflects struggles over power issues inherent to every research, but “intensified in research settings where gaps in the social ladder between researcher and researched are evident” (Wolf, 1996 in Krumer-Nevo, 2002). It demonstrates processes of negotiation, which may even start before the first encounter, wherein people actively attempt to (re)define themselves, their position and their relationship with the other (Krumer-Nevo, 2002). Also the focus of the research was object of shared discussion and (re-)interpretation. For instance, in one of our meetings, Emily explained how she understood the meaning and contribution of the research project:

*I’m going to give you an example. You like to eat chocolate paste. Nutella, for instance. (I’m choosing Nutella, just because it is a popular brand.) But – probably by conducting some studies – they consider that the brand doesn’t sell enough and they consequently withdraw it from the market. Likewise, there are things, let’s say in the Aldi (it doesn’t necessarily have to apply to expensive products) that you really, really like, but that they suddenly decide to stop selling. They don’t bother to ask us if we want it to disappear from the market. They conduct some kind of study and then they say that the return on investments isn’t big enough. But in the meantime, we lost our products! So, actually more people should be involved. Well, in fact, that is what you are doing: you are ensuring that we can keep the chocolate.*

While (re)constructing her trajectory and discussing the “chocolate” (in this case, supportive interventions) that have played a significant role in her life, Emily also identified and visualized experienced transitions, materially as well as immaterially. Surprisingly, with regard to the fact that she had been homeless and lived with her partner in a garage for a period in time, Emily did not indicate a deterioration in her financial situation. When I wondered about her underlying interpretations and meaning-making, she clarified that, while being homeless and living without water and electricity:

*We still had an income and less expenses since we didn’t have to pay a high rent, water nor electricity bills. However, because we also*

*weren't able to cook dinner, we always had to buy fast food. At that point, our expenses were a bit higher, but overall I guess that the financial balance must have stayed the same.*

### **3.5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Until recently, poor people's personal stories and experiences were often perceived among researchers mainly as anecdotal, as stories to be used in tokenistic ways rather than as a source of knowledge (Beresford, 2000; Roose et al., 2015). While reflecting on our research process, we were able to notice a shift from 'giving voice' to a more collaborative attempt to generate and co-construct 'knowledge' with the parents and families involved. It might be argued that our research process entails a transition from talking *at* to talking *with* people in poverty (ATD Fourth world, 1996 in Krumer-Nevo, 2009). Krumer-Nevo (2009, p. 290) describes this shift as "the treating of the voices of the inside-researchers as knowledge [which] requires that researchers think anew not only about the content of their research but also about its form". She asserts that treating people in poverty as having knowledge is the acknowledgement that they do not have only personal experiences "but they do also have thoughts, sometimes critical ones, ideas and recommendations, and they are capable of analyzing and theorizing their situations, even if they do it in nonacademic language" (Krumer-Nevo, 2009, p. 291).

However, our research process also reflects how this attempt in our life history research project implies that the empirical fieldwork evolved in very complex and even chaotic ways. The research participants were, for instance, challenging the original research intentions of the researchers and presented a more complicated and multifaceted picture of transitions into and out of poverty. They showed that "transitions are not necessarily temporally fixed, discrete and clearly definable events" (Millar, 2007, p. 6). Whereas a lack of material resources appeared as a constant element in each parent's life trajectory and hence seemed to constitute the roots of the problem of poverty (see Mestrum, 2011), the research participants' accounts also

revealed how social, cultural, relational, symbolic and material dimensions and resources are always intrinsically interrelated.

Furthermore, the parents taught us that the power disparity and asymmetry between the researcher and the research subjects is not only inevitable during the process of capturing the experiences of people in poverty, but also generates struggles and ambiguities in the interpretation of these experiences. The latter became very palpable in the case of Emily, who – unexpectedly for the researchers – did not seem to associate a period of homelessness with a downward movement, financially nor socially. From a plain conception of capturing peoples' voice and knowledge about poverty as neutral facts, we could accordingly draw the conclusion that, in this situation, no problems were at stake; The families' available income didn't drop and creative strategies for survival were deployed. Yet, an examination of Emily's meaning making in relation to social resources revealed issues – such as the lack of a decent housing, water and electricity – that ought to be problematized from a perspective of human rights and social justice (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

In interpreting our research findings, we accordingly struggled with the complexity of doing justice to peoples' accounts about transitions into and out of poverty, while it became apparent that, as social work researchers, we inevitably had to make choices that will never be totally neutral nor value free (Roose et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the open-ended and dialogic construction of the research process, researchers eventually consider “which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling” (Ellis, 2007, p. 26). Therefore, rather than pretending that power imbalances and the challenges they generate can simply be disguised, different authors make a plea for a reflexive stance in poverty research, so that choices inherent to each research project can be made explicit, legitimized and openly discussed. As Spyrou (2011) concludes aptly:

No single method can guarantee successful representation in itself. Reflexive research however accepts the messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality and multi-layered nature of meaning in

'stories' that research produce. The quick and easy way is not necessary the most ethical way; the ethical way necessitates time for reflection. (p. 162)

### 3.6. REFERENCES

- Alcock, P. (2004). The influence of dynamic perspectives on poverty analysis and anti-poverty policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 395-316.
- Bane, M. J., & Ellwood, D. T. (1986). Slipping into and out of poverty: The dynamics of spells. *The journal of Human Resources*, 12, 1-23.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beresford, P. (2000). Service users' knowledge and social work theory: Conflict or collaboration. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(4), 489-503.
- Bertaux, D., & Thompson, P. (1997). *Pathways to social class: A qualitative approach to social mobility*. New Brunswick/London: Transaction Publishers.
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory?. *American Sociological Review*, 19(1), 3-10.
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Booth, T., & Booth, W. (1996). Sounds of silence: Narrative research with inarticulate subjects. *Disability & Society*, 11(1), 55-70.
- Broadhurst, K. (2015). QSW 2015: welcome, special issues and special thanks to Catherine Riessman. *Qualitative Social Work*, 14(1): 3-9.
- Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J., & Wengraf, T. (2000). *The turn to biographical methods in social science: comparative issues and examples*. London: Routledge.
- Clapham, D. (2003). Pathways approaches to homelessness research. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(2), 119-127.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in social science research*. London: Sage Publications.

- D'Cruz, H., & Jones, M. (2004). *Social work research: Ethical and political contexts*. London: Sage.
- Dewilde, C. (2003). A life-course perspective on social exclusion and poverty. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(1), 109–28.
- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3-29.
- Giddens, A. (1998). *The third way: The renewal of social democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 131-146.
- Kothari, U., & Hulme, D. (2004). Narratives, stories and tales: Understanding poverty dynamics through life stories. Retrieved from [http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0002370/Understanding\\_poverty\\_GPRG\\_May2004.pdf](http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0002370/Understanding_poverty_GPRG_May2004.pdf)
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2002). The Arena of Othering: A life-story study with women living in poverty and social marginality. *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3): 303-318.
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2005). Listening to 'life knowledge': A new research direction in poverty studies. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 14, 99-106.
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2009). From voice to knowledge: Participatory action research, inclusive debate, and feminism. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(3): 279-295.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity press.
- McKay, A. and Lawson, D. (2002) Chronic poverty: A review of current quantitative evidence. *Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper 15*.
- Mestrum, F. (2011). Child poverty: A critical perspective. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 161-168.
- Millar, J. (2007). The dynamics of poverty and employment: The contribution of qualitative longitudinal research to understanding transitions, adaptations and trajectories. *Social Policy and Society*, 6(4), 533-544.

- Miller, R. L. (2000). *Researching life stories and family histories*. London: Sage Publications.
- Murray, C. (1996). *Charles Murray and the Underclass: The Developing Debate*. London: Institute of Economic Affairs.
- Otto, H. U., & Thiersch, H. (2001). *Handbuch der socialarbeit/sozialpädagogik*. Niewied/Kriftel: Luchterhand.
- Ridge, T., & Millar, J. (2011). Following families: Working lone-mother families and their children. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45(1), 85-97.
- Riessman, C. K., & Quinney, L. (2005). Narrative in social work: A critical review. *Qualitative Social Work*, 4(4), 383-404.
- Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Roets, G., & Goedgeluck, M. (2007). Daisies on the road: Tracing the political potential of our postmodernist feminist approach to life story research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 58-84.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2013). Researching child poverty: Towards a lifeworld orientation. *Childhood*, 20(4), 535-549.
- Roose, R., Roets, G., Schiettecat, T., Pannecoucke, B., Piessens, A., Van Gils, J.,..., & Vandekinderen, C. (2015). Social work research as a practice of transparency. *European Journal of Social Work*. DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2015.105195
- Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck (2016, in press). What families in poverty consider supportive: Welfare strategies of parents with young children in relation to (child and family) social work. *Child & Family Social Work*.
- Schuyt, K. (1972). *Recht, orde en burgerlijke ongehoorzaamheid*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Shaw, I. (2008). Ethics and the practice of qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 7(4), 400-414.
- Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive, representation. *Childhood*, 18(2), 151-165.

- Taylor, S. (2008). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods in researching the dynamics of childhood poverty. *Enquire*, 1(1), 1-13.
- Thompson, P. (2000). *The voice of the past: Oral history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, D. L. (1996). *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork*. Boulder: Westview Press.



# **CHAPTER 4**

## **WHAT FAMILIES IN POVERTY CONSIDER SUPPORTIVE: WELFARE STRATEGIES OF PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN IN RELATION TO (CHILD AND FAMILY) SOCIAL WORK<sup>3</sup>**



---

<sup>3</sup> Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (submitted). What families in poverty consider supportive: Welfare strategies of parents with young children in relation to (child and family) social work. *Child & Family Social Work*.



**ABSTRACT**

In current European Welfare states, Child and Family Social Work (CFSW) has been assigned a pivotal role in constructing a route out of (child) poverty. The direction, processes and outcomes of these interventions are, however, rarely negotiated with the families involved. Based on a retrospective biographical research with parents of young children who experienced financial difficulties over time, this article therefore seeks to uncover and understand how parents give meaning to welfare, which strategies they accordingly develop and how these perspectives and welfare strategies interact with CFSW interventions. We aim to acquire knowledge about how interventions are constructed, interpreted and being used as potentially supportive levers in realizing the well-being of parents and children in poverty situations and explore how they may influence families' routes out of poverty. Drawing on Lister's analytical framework of agency within the bounds of structural constraints, our research provides insights in the essentially complex, multi-layered and paradoxical nature of support, and suggests that support cannot simply be perceived as synonymous to mobility out of poverty.

## 4.1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, anti-poverty policies in European welfare states have endorsed the idea that the main route out of (child) poverty is paved by the equalization of developmental opportunities of future adults, parental support and integration into the labour market (Frazer & Marlier, 2014). A prominent mandate to support families and – by extension – to realize their mobility out of poverty has consequently been attributed to child and family social work (CFSW), thus capturing the problem of poverty in terms of education and activation of both children and their parents (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). In this respect, it is argued that support tends to be directed towards predetermined objectives grounded in the ideal of transforming citizens depending on state assistance into active, self-sufficient individuals (Lister, 2003; Clarke, 2005), which has immediately been linked to their mobility out of poverty (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2012). Different scholars however argued that the cloak of evidence surrounding these measures risks to obscure the perspectives and aspirations of the actors involved (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). As a consequence, people in poverty risk being reduced to spectators of their own problems and targets of predefined actions of support. Many researchers have contested this approach of ‘the poor’ as passive objects (Lister, 2004), and demonstrated that parents as well as children actively adopt a range of “strategies to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives” (Ridge, 2011, p. 81). In this context, Lister (2004) developed a widely cited taxonomy (see Clark-Kazak, 2014; Redmond, 2009; Sumner, 2010; Williams & Churchill, 2006), which illuminates the complex ways in which people try to negotiate their lives in contexts of adversity. She identified four ‘forms of agency’, represented as ‘getting by’, ‘getting (back) at’, ‘getting out’ and ‘getting organized’, that might be deployed by people in poverty while being entangled in structural opportunities and constraints. Nevertheless, little is known about how poor peoples’ welfare strategies more specifically interact with the strategies of CFSW.

In this article, we therefore present insights emerging from a research project in which the welfare strategies of parents are explored in relation to the strategies of CFSW professionals. The analysis draws on the taxonomy of Lister; not with the intention to capture and further categorize the possible welfare strategies or perceptions of support of parents in poverty situations, but to deepen our knowledge about processes of interaction between their broadly defined welfare strategies and societal strategies in the provision of social resources. In doing so, we aim to acquire knowledge about how CFSW interventions are constructed, interpreted and being used as potentially supportive levers in the realization of the well-being of parents and children in poverty situations, and tease out how these interventions influence families' mobility out of poverty.

## **4.2. TAXONOMY OF LISTER**

The categories of welfare strategies (or 'forms of agency') identified by Lister (2004) are outlined by means of a taxonomy based on two continua (Fig. 1). The vertical axis is formed by a continuum from the 'everyday' to the 'strategic', reflecting the consequential strategic significance that peoples' choices might have on their lives. The horizontal axis moves from the personal to the political, representing a shift in focus from the individual's livelihood towards acts of defiance or attempts to affect wider change. It is emphasized that the four forms of agency categorize actions, not actors, which implies that one individual may be exercising the four of them.



Fig. 1: Taxonomy of agency within poverty situations (Lister, 2004)

#### 4.2.1. GETTING BY

‘Getting by’ represents everyday, personal responses to poverty; the daily struggle of people to keep going in adverse circumstances. According to Lister (2004, p. 133), these processes “of juggling, piecing together and going without” are all too easily overlooked by policy-makers, practitioners and scholars. Often they are taken-for-granted or not recognized as expressions of agency. Lister (2004, p. 130) states that “the cloak of invisibility surrounding getting by tends to be lifted only when it breaks down and the situation becomes classified as a ‘problem’”. Yet, with reference to the resilience and resourcefulness of people in poverty, research increasingly illuminates how they are actively coping with their situation. At the same time, however, Lister asserts that it is often denied that the struggle to get by consumes much (of the often depleted) time and energy when people in poverty are “overwhelmed by the feelings of demoralization, hopelessness, powerlessness and lack of control that poverty can engender” (Lister, 2004, p. 136). Moreover, she addresses that the focus on ‘resilience’, ‘coping’ or ‘getting by’ must also “not obscure the ways in which, over the life-course, the more privileged are able to draw on their

considerably greater resources to perpetuate their privilege” (Lister, 2004, p. 132).

#### **4.2.2. GETTING (BACK) AT**

The everyday-political quadrant of the taxonomy represents what Lister has termed ‘getting (back) at’. It refers to ‘everyday resistance’, which is – unlike more institutionalized forms of resistance – described as “informal, often covert and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains”, with “survival and persistence” (Scott, 1985 cited in Lister, 2004, p. 141) as the primary motives. It might involve the violation of regulations, lying and concealment, an exaggerated playing by the rules, or interpreting the rules “in such a way as to give themselves room for manoeuvre in managing their resources” (Jordan, 1993 cited in Lister, 2004, p. 142 ). Although the actions involved are not inspired by political goals, “they represent a means whereby people in poverty can assert their rejection of the constraints imposed by the socio-economic order and get (back) at those with power over them, even if they do not directly challenge that order or power” (Lister, 2004, p. 144).

#### **4.2.3. GETTING OUT**

‘Getting out’ of poverty is associated with the personal-strategic quadrant. In this context, Lister elucidates that individuals might exercise their strategic agency in negotiating routes for getting out of poverty, which have been widely associated with employment and education. Nonetheless, she points out that “these routes themselves are forged by structural and cultural factors, which can assist or obstruct the exercise of that agency” (Lister, 2004, p. 145). Therefore, she argues that the extent to which people deploy their strategic agency in order to escape poverty should be considered in relation to the available resources and to their perceptions of structural opportunities and constraints. In this context, it has been argued that the struggle to ‘get by’ might hamper ‘getting out’, since “coping can sap the energy needed to seek ways out of poverty” (Lister, 2004, p. 147). Also

structural barriers, including the lack of suitable employment opportunities, transport and child-care facilities might affect the engagement in paid employment. At the same time, however, whereas participation at the labour market tends to be dominantly associated with movements out of poverty, Lister draws our attention to the fact that paid work is no panacea. The move from benefits into often low-paid or insecure work, for example, could also exacerbate poverty and debt. These insights imply that ‘getting out’ might rather enforce “a complex balancing act, which carries its own strains on ‘getting by’” (Lister, 2004, p. 148).

#### **4.2.4. GETTING ORGANIZED**

In the political-strategic quadrant of the taxonomy, Lister situates more collective expressions of agency, labelled as ‘getting organized’. They range from collective self-help to political action in order to affect change. As in other forms of agency, the structural and cultural context has an influence on the exercise of collective strategic agency. Furthermore, Lister (2004) addresses some fundamental constraints to getting organized. A major constraint constitutes the reluctance to identify with the label of ‘poverty’. This refers to the fact that being poor may not be part of a person’s *individual* identity. Moreover, the ascription of a category such as ‘poor’ does not necessarily translate into a sense of *collective* categorical identity, since “‘proud to be poor’ is not a banner under which many are likely to march” (Lister, 2004, p. 152). Also practical issues, such as the lack of resources and the struggle to ‘get by’, might raise barriers. At the same time, however, Lister describes how some people in poverty do overcome these constraints and ‘get organized’ in order to effect change, whether or not under the banner of poverty.

#### **4.3. METHODOLOGY**

In an effort to ‘provide evidence on how people perceive their situations over time, how they engage with other people, deal with institutions and actively shape their circumstances and opportunities’



(Ridge & Millar, 2011, p. 88), we adopted a retrospective biographical research design. Adding a time dimension to peoples' lived experiences seems particularly valuable since longitudinal datasets have demonstrated that "poverty is not necessarily a long-term sentence, but may be short term or, all too frequently, recurrent" (Lister, 2015, p. 11).

In the context of this study, open and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with parents of young children who have experienced financial difficulties at several moments in their lives and came into contact with social welfare interventions, including CFSW. Research participants were recruited with the help of social work organizations that have intervened in their families. In order to widen the range of social work practices eventually covered in our study through peoples' retrospective life and support trajectories, we chose three different services – whether or not explicitly targeted at families in poverty – as starting points: two Child Care and Family Support Centres (CKG), two Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW) and one Poverty Advocacy Group. Following the pre-arranged inclusion criteria, every family was deemed as at-risk of poverty by the referring practitioners and had several children with preferably one aged between zero and three years old. After negotiating and re-negotiating informed consent, we talked with 14 parents (ten mothers<sup>4</sup> and four fathers, all aged between 25 and 50 years old) from nine different families, including parents who intermittently joined the conversation, yet nine parents (seven mothers and two fathers from seven families) were interviewed more extensively, which made it possible to reconstruct and discuss their retrospective biographies. A low level of education and income insecurity appeared as a recurrent issue in all trajectories. The parents' life dynamics further revealed variations in family composition over time. Also at the moment of the interviews, differences between the structures of the participating families (dual parent households, single-parent families, step-families) could be discerned.

---

<sup>4</sup> One of the mothers is also the daughter of two other parents I initially contacted.

All meetings took place at a location chosen by the respondents, ranging from their homes, cafés, to separate meeting rooms in the context of the referring social work organization. Within a series of two to four conversations, which lasted one to five hours, parents storied their lives and their use of social work interventions, including CFSW. This retrospective biographical research venture resulted in a complex mosaic of life experiences, which were cumulatively pieced together and contextualized through the construction of an individual life line. These life lines ran through each research process as a common thread and were gradually corrected, elaborated and refined, which strengthened the validity of the research data. This process of working together to (re)construct and visualize the parents' life trajectory, provided a means to picture and deepen the talk about material as well as immaterial transitions, key incidents, things that happened at turning points in their lives, and parents' own strategies in fighting poverty. This way, we also discussed how they could make use of social work interventions as a lever. Key notions such as 'support' and 'mobility out of poverty' were not used as definitive concepts that are determined beforehand, but as sensitizing ones, outlined within the research interaction.

The research data, in the shape of 27 fully transcribed interviews and nine visualized life trajectories, were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis, which is generally described as a "qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2015, p. 541). We applied a directed approach to content analysis since this analytical approach allows us "to further refine, extend and enrich the theory" (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1283), combining principles of a theory-guided investigation with openness to gain new knowledge and insights (Kohlbacher, 2006). This combination enables researchers to find inspiration in an explicit theoretical frame of reference while taking a holistic and comprehensive approach towards complex social phenomena. In our approach to data analysis, we were guided by Listers' taxonomy of

agency in contexts of adversity in the analysis of the interplay between parents' welfare strategies and the use of social services.

## **4.4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

In what follows, while elaborating on Listers' taxonomy, we seek to uncover and understand how parents give meaning to welfare, which strategies they accordingly develop and how these perspectives and welfare strategies interact with strategies of CFSW in the provision of social resources.

### **4.4.1. GETTING BY**

Several social work interventions were mentioned as facilitating parents' daily struggles and strategies to get by. Research participants stated that these practices gave their families more room to breathe, for example by prolonging a payoff period, by offering child care, by providing information about possible discounts and opportunities or by assisting parents to fill in paperwork and claim their rights. Mary for instance highlighted the vital importance of one practitioner, since it was someone she could count on whenever she needed support, even though this implied that the boundaries of the practitioners' formal mandate – in this case to provide financial support by mediating debts – needed to be stretched.

*There have been days that I could only cry; that I couldn't bear it any longer; that I saw nothing but darkness. At times I called her, weeping, and she dropped everything to come by to talk. By the time she had left, I started to see everything a bit brighter again. (...) I don't really think she had to do it, but she also gave me social support. She could sit here for a whole hour, listening.*

Mary experienced "that you are not simply a number, or a file on the table". This remark was also echoed by other parents and most extensively described by Catherine. Although this mother refuted the idea that, in order to give support, practitioners should know everything about her life, she considered it essential that they show

interest and try to comprehend her life trajectory, which cannot simply be compiled by ticking boxes.

*There is no need to make it all public. (...) But, when they show no concern about whom you are... Then, they can only tell – for example – that this is Mario, 34 years old, who has one little kid, three older children, a girlfriend, a car and a job. Done. But in fact, that doesn't mean that you know his life. However, when you would take your time, you might. (...) And then you could better respond to it, and truly support him.*

Our research findings show that practices that can underpin the present welfare strategies of parents, while grounding the intervention in the lifeworld of the family and its everyday structures, were generally considered as supportive. Moreover, in several cases, interventions that sustained parents' strategies to get by, that brought more dignity to their daily struggles, or that helped families to feel more at ease, were also associated with transition processes. This issue will be further elaborated when we discuss their strategies to get out.

Examples of social work interventions that collided with the strategies of families in poverty to get by, and that were consequently experienced as unsupportive, have strengthened the former observations.

However, these findings do not entail that support is always experienced when social work practitioners follow the welfare strategies of the families to get by. It needs to be noticed that some parents also criticize presence without change. About her encounters with a practitioner involved with family support in the context of special youth care, Emily for instance pondered:

*I have to pay her to chat, while she actually does something similar to what you do: listening. And every now and then, she also writes things down with her pen. That ink must be expensive! When she comes by two times a month, I have to pay 10 to 12 Euro. (...) If necessary, I can put some pens ready the next time. (...) It doesn't help me with my problem, it only helps me losing money!*

Mary further exemplified this issue by referring to her experiences with a debt mediator who seemed to promote the families' strategies to get by – *“for example, when we asked some more money to buy something, it was always possible”* – while, at the same time, hampering their possibilities to get out, without being transparent about it: *“at the moment his colleague took over, she found out that we still had for over 700 or 800 Euro of unpaid bills we weren't aware off.”* This discovery was followed by heavy discussions with the new practitioner who explained that in the short-term payment was required in order to prevent further problems. Although the transition was initially experienced as hard, Mary described that the introduced possibility to openly negotiate welfare strategies, aspirations and expectations with the latter practitioner, eventually made her value this intervention as more supportive:

*It was a difficult switch, but by the time I realized that Natasha was really engaged, and I could understand why she sometimes had to say 'no' or 'wait to buy this or that', I thought: 'It's okay, I can see why she says so'. (...) If we remained burdened with the other one, we maybe would have been held in debt mediation for years.*

Our research findings suggest that, depending on the perception of particular circumstances, expectations, previous experiences, and key priorities set in the struggle to survive, the need for formal support is assessed differently at different points in time. While looking back at the darkest period in her life – when a troubled pregnancy and the premature birth of her youngest son had caused an accumulation of financial and emotional problems – Anna addressed this by stating that everyday survival strategies made her and her partner somewhat blind to the fact that financial support such as debt mediation could have been helpful to overcome their monetary problems. Nevertheless, she also expressed her fear that such interventions might have diminished their possibilities to get by and would consequently not have been considered as supportive.

*You are so busy surviving, helping your child and paying the bills – well, the most important bills – you can't see you might need some financial support. In fact, we did know that, but we assumed that we could manage without it. It has to do with pride, but also with the fear of losing your autonomy and losing the extras that are essential to keep you going. If we would have made use of debt mediation sooner, I doubt if we would have ended up all that well. We might have lost our boosting moments, the tiny things – like going shopping or going on a trip – that could make you think: We had a nice day. The money has run out, but we had a nice day. We can cope again.*

In the same period, however, other practices *did* align with the families' strategies to get by, first of all by creating room for manoeuvre within difficult circumstances. For Anna, it was only years later that the added value of debt mediation came to the fore.

These illustrations suggest that the meaning of support is not straightforward, but needs to be considered in interaction with the welfare strategies that parents deploy at a given time and under certain conditions.

#### **4.4.2. GETTING (BACK) AT**

Different parents referred to the unexpected accumulation of unfortunate events, causing strains on their everyday living: *"It's so odd. It can all go very well for a long time, and then, all of a sudden, everything converges. One setback and they keep on coming."* (Catherine). In these and other moments, while deliberating the possibilities for daily survival, families also strategically employed CFSW and other social work interventions to prevent their situation from getting worse. This included escaping bailiffs or preventing their children from being placed in out-of-home-care. In these contexts, dependence on social work interventions was deemed supportive, since it made it possible for parents to retain their dignity or to guard some control over their situation. However, parents also pointed to the fact that these strategies to keep their autonomy through dependency of social work interventions may not have been that imperative if they could have

counted on a higher income and better structural conditions, such as decent housing, as a buffer to preserve a worthy everyday life.

As Catherine mentioned:

*I want to get out of (debt mediation), as soon as possible. I can already manage my money carefully. It's just because of bad luck that I've gotten into this. If the oil tank wouldn't have failed, I wouldn't have got into trouble. I've always had bad housing and therefore, bad luck.*

This suggests – as more extensively demonstrated by other scholars (e.g. Lister, 2004; Ridge & Millar, 2011) – that, according to contextual variables, the living situation of some families is more vulnerable to misfortune or so-called ‘bad’ decisions than others, which also has its implications for the use of social work services.

In cases where social work interventions have been employed, parents often actively tried to navigate their support trajectory. One mother made this explicit: “*As a service-user, you have to be creative.*” She accordingly shared some lies, which she applied to extend her possibilities to get by and to retain more room for her families’ daily aspirations. While referring to a period in her life when she made use of debt mediation, the mother described how she concealed the use of extra and alternative financial resources – such as a second, but undeclared work – since this not only increased the available family budget but also generated more space for autonomous decision making in realizing the well-being of herself and her children.

*By writing advertisements and cleaning an apartment, each week I gathered 100 euro the OCMW wasn't aware about. (...) In the meantime, I also worked on interim agreements, so it's not that I wasn't doing anything. The people from the OCMW must have thought: 'Wow, she's able to get by on that small living wage.' (she laughs) That was quite bold of me. So, in that period, it went slightly better.*

Other parents mentioned that they temporarily hide the fact that they are living together with a partner, since declaring it would imply that they wouldn't have enough money left to get by. According to Emily's calculations, the consequent reduction of the amount of child allowances and other benefits – while the rent and other monthly invoices stay stable and job opportunities insecure – would entail that her family would be confronted with a shortage of at least 250 Euro, each month.

Parents' strategies to get (back) at also included the interpretation and use of the social work intervention itself in such a way that room for manoeuvre in managing their resources could be broadened. This might involve creative ways of juggling different financial resources, so that the explicit as well as implicit opportunities to enhance everyday living in difficult circumstances are maximally exploited. In the case of Tom, a father of three young children, the family's income and expenses were managed by a social work agency through budget guidance. Every week they received 150 euro from their total budget to live on, with one exception: three times a year, some child expenditures could get a repayment from the social work organization if parents turned in their gathered receipts: *"Food or diapers don't count. What counts are clothing, toys, school materials, trips,..."* Tom illustrated how this welfare strategy, formally installed to the benefit of children in poverty, was informally valued by him and his partner in the interest of both their children and their broader family life. By handing in the receipts of gifts from relatives too, they could get an extra refund – *"we can use the money twice"* – and slightly extend the family budget. This way, the initiative from the welfare agency was turned into something that was considered even more supportive.

Other examples demonstrated that strategies to increase the benefits and support from social work interventions are sometimes shared with other service users. This implies that getting (back) at may carry collective elements. Moreover, our findings suggest that also practitioners might back or stimulate parents' strategies to reconfigure, transform or expand the regulations so that a greater experience of



support can be enabled. In this context, Catherine referred to the advice given by a practitioner of a supported housing agency since, after finishing the support trajectory, she had to go to the OCMW for a short period in time:

*There is a rule that you have to tell the OCMW about all existing saving accounts, because they use that money first. But Nicky told me – normally she's not allowed to do that – that I should hide my savings, so I would still have them after leaving the OCMW. I've been there for only four months.*

Findings however indicate that strategies to get (back) at – such as bending the rules, lying, noncompliance or resistance – could also result in an enforcement of coercive measures or exclusion from the offered support. Nancy for instance expressed how her attempts to make comments at the youth court to address her opinions concerning the out-of-home placement of two of her children, was negatively valued by the judge: *“I gave her an answer. She stood up and left. It doesn't bring you anything good, it only costs you.”* Yet, she described why she refused to remain silent.

*A judge once said to me: ‘You're not too shy, are you’. And I replied: ‘So? You're safe behind your desk, making decisions about everything. You should try to stand in my shoes and let's see how you would react. Over there, you can have a big mouth’.*

Although compliance is often perceived as an indicator of the engagement of parents, resistance and non-compliance might rather indicate relevant and significant understandings of the problems at stake. Resistance may then reflect an attempt to retain some power over the situation when interventions, rather than being supportive, are experienced as merely disciplining and controlling (Roose, Roets, Van Houte, Vandenhoele & Reynaert, 2013).

### 4.4.3. GETTING OUT

Experiences of mobility in and out of poverty seemed to be stimulated by a complex interplay between different factors and conditions. The question about transitions in the lives of parents appeared to be a challenging one, as the answers were often multi-layered.

*In that period, I had my kids and my partner. That's why I can call it a climb. Financially, it was worse, but emotionally I could cope with it more easily, because my family stood there.*

We identified the complexity of poverty dynamics, while exploring the main drivers behind key incidences and discussing turning points in relation to the use of formal interventions. In this vein, parents repeatedly referred to the importance of tackling structural constraints, such as low income or bad housing conditions. However, our findings add some nuance to widely established answers to get families out of poverty, since these might also interfere with the welfare strategies employed by parents and with their understandings of support.

Parents mostly focused on material transitions. Interpretations of improvement in this context were often associated with an increase in the budgets directly available to them and with corresponding feelings of autonomy. Accordingly, parents addressed that, even though in the longer term debt mediation could enhance mobility out of poverty, the intervention period itself was seldom associated with an upward drive. As it brought a greater strain on parents' everyday strategies to get by, most parents even linked a period of debt mediation to a downward movement. Nevertheless, this did not always prevent the intervention itself to be experienced as supportive. Some of these interventions were, however, deemed more supportive than others, although the formal objectives of the mediation practices were the same. Debt mediation processes that did not only premise rapid payoffs, but also recognized and facilitated families' everyday welfare strategies, were generally experienced as more supportive. For Mary a key concept in this context was the experience of "liveability".

*The difference is huge. (...) The first debt mediation was offered by a lawyer who totally stripped you. Until I met Natasha, from the OCMW, I never knew about the discounts to go on holiday, to pay for train tickets, to go to the movies,... That's why the second collective debt mediation was much easier to bear. Simply because I could give something to my children. (...) For that lawyer, your payment and the creditors were the only things that mattered. For the OCMW, the family came first.*

One couple stressed that their dependency on budget management by a public welfare agency, even after debts were paid, was not only considered as supportive, but also directly associated with their mobility out of poverty, since it created certainty, autonomy and produced more options to enhance their everyday living. The father described that a former attempt to quit budget management, because of the small living wage, eventually felt like a disaster since after leaving the service, *"from an upward move, it all went back downhill"*. In this context, a reference was made to the abrupt loss of support, benefits and discounts – for instance to go to a theme park – that could previously make family life easier: *"If you decide to quit, all support stops. As they see it: if you want to leave the service, you're on your own"*. Reflecting on a recent unjustified visit of a bailiff, Tom added that, since his family used budget guidance again, they immediately got back-up from the social work agency, which could bring the situation at ease:

*At that moment, I realized that without this support we could be even more in trouble. Yesterday, I was so glad we had it. And I will never... For now, I will never quit again.*

Furthermore, many families described that employment was incontestably set as a key priority of social work interventions. This objective did however not automatically commensurate with the welfare strategies of the families or provoked an experience of either mobility or support. In the case of Anna, for example, with reference to the period of personal health issues and a troubled pregnancy, the mother mentioned that she and her partner, Simon, did a short attempt to seek financial help from the OCMW. However, the intervention was

not experienced as supportive since the welfare priorities and objectives of the practitioner came into conflict with the families' own concerns, which ended in a rejection to provide further assistance.

*At that time, I was struggling with my pregnancy, but she expected Simon to go and find a job, while he was determined to stay by my side. I could understand him too, because every moment Jesse could be born. (...) Eventually, we were removed from the OCMW, because Simon refused to go working.*

While many parents did value higher wages and better working conditions, most of them were low-skilled and had little opportunities to increase their income, to gain income security or to combine their work with family life. Some parents therefore attempted to broaden their options for further education as a means to get out, but were not always backed by the social workers.

*I asked her if I could go back to high school. No one would have guessed that I was 20 years old. They always bet that I'm still 17. But she said: 'No, you should find yourself a job, it will bring you further in life. I disagreed and argued that it's the diploma that brings you further. But she refused. If you're living on income support and the OCMW doesn't have your back, you can forget it. So I told her: 'It's my future you're ruining'.*

In contrast, when practitioners gradually negotiated the support trajectory and its objectives together with the family, interventions were more commonly described as supportive and as a lever out of poverty. This was clearly demonstrated in the case of Anna. The CFSW practice (CKG) she used was considered supportive because it relieved pressure when the family went through a dark period due to the illness of the child, financial problems related to high hospital expenses and Anna's depression. It also meant a lever because in due course the childcare worker encouraged and helped Anna with adult education in order to become a childcare worker herself. Eventually, the diploma she received gave her access to better-paid jobs that she could more easily combine with family life. It appears that this practice did not only

bear in mind the (future) wellbeing of the child, but broadened its traditional child-centred mandate and considered the well-being and meaning-making of all family members.

#### **4.4.4. GETTING ORGANIZED**

The life trajectories of all parents reflected fluctuating periods of poverty. At the time of the interviews, some of them found themselves no longer in a poverty situation, others were mostly struggling to get by. Although some parents did not align themselves with the label of 'poverty', while framing their financial conditions as far below average, all the parents participated in the research to voice what support have meant for them, in order to contribute to the future development of meaningful social work practices for other families in similar situations.

Some parents also engaged in collective action through so-called 'organizations where the poor take a stance', while others participated in trainings to become an 'expert by experience in poverty and social exclusion'. These parents considered this engagement not only as a means to gain wider public support for the problem of poverty and enhance social change, but also to sustain the welfare of their own families by gaining information, claiming rights or improving their income situation. Moreover, whereas participation in these collective political activities entails that people identify with the label of poverty, Jimmy paradoxically valued the 'organization where the poor take a stance' as a space where he can get rid of this label and be treated as a human being.

*Over there, they don't look at you as someone who is poor. It means a lot, to be accepted as a person.*

#### **4.5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Together with other scholars, we value and applied the taxonomy developed by Lister (2004) as a useful conceptual framework to explore how people in poverty actively negotiate their lives in adverse circumstances. The theory has previously been used to examine the

agency of specific groups living in deprivation, such as children (Redmond, 2009; Sumner, 2010) and refugees (Clark-Kazak, 2014), and offered a means to illuminate their welfare strategies or active responses to structural opportunities and constraints. In this context, Sumner (2010) as well as Clark-Kazak (2014) took explicit account of material, relational as well as subjective aspects of well-being. The use of social work services as a lever and resource in the development of well-being, however, is only marginally explored or directly linked to specific interventions and predefined outcomes of support, such as the attribution of Sure Start to the empowerment of people living in poverty (Williams & Churchill, 2006).

Our particular interest in this article was to broadly study the interactions between welfare strategies of parents of young children living in poverty and CFSW strategies in the provision of social resources. The study engenders both limitations and strengths.

With regard to the research respondents we did not manage to obtain a desired ethnic diversity, since unfortunately no parents from ethnic minority groups were represented in our study. Moreover, it needs to be noticed that – because of our research interest in studying families' mobility into and out of poverty – we involved a very specific group of families living in poverty. We did not, for instance, explicitly enclose individuals and families who face poverty over a life time or the group of so-called 'newly-poor', who suddenly ended up into poverty after an economic downturn. This does however not minimize either the complex and deprived living conditions of our research participants nor the processes of social exclusion (from a decent income, housing, employment, leisure,...) many of them have been confronted with.

Also our chosen research methods generate some limitations. Although our longitudinal retrospective research approach enabled us to collect data about peoples' past experiences and life changes – in contrast with prospective studies, which can only uncover respondents' experiences within the limited time frame of the survey – peoples' current accounts about the past inevitably generates some bias (Alcock, 2004). However,

by revisiting the parents several times, their life trajectories, resources and experiences could be (re)discussed, which may have reduced this expected bias to a minimum. Nevertheless, the life history as narrated, discussed and visualized during the interactions remains a construction that acquired its more consistent and chronological form precisely because of the research intervention (Roberts, 2002; Rosenthal, 1993).

Despite the limitations, our findings enrich prevailing understandings of getting out, getting (back) at and getting organized.

First of all, they suggest that supportive interventions and mobility out of poverty cannot be perceived as synonymous or mutually in line. Our research shows that parents experience some interventions as supportive, while their poverty situation does not critically alter. Conversely, they are also the object of measures that potentially improve their financial position, but that have not been valued as supportive. This finding adds a level of complexity to the dominant assumption that economic mobility and self-sufficiency of families in poverty are the paramount goals to be realized by social work. All parents in our study associate economic mobility with a decent income *and* a good life, as also reflected in the entanglement of getting by and getting out. Moreover, their notions of support are not definitive or universal, but rather complex and shifting in relation to structural conditions, life dynamics and their accordingly developed welfare strategies.

This issue is aptly exemplified in the case of Emily who lives together with her partner and three children in a rented house on which they monthly have to spend almost the entire family budget. Since the mother considers a proper and affordable housing as a key strategy to trigger her families' mobility out of poverty, she contacted a social housing agency. However, already two of the agency's housing proposals were rejected. From the perspective of the agency, it could consequently be argued that efforts to support the family and enhance their mobility out of poverty have been made, but that the mother is

too picky. Yet Emily rejects the proposals on relevant grounds, since she worries that living in an even smaller house would deteriorate the families' capacities to get by – because of a decrease in space for her children – and might therefore not support a successful everyday living. However, a third rejection would entail that Emily's family again appear at the end of the waiting list.

The research findings indicate that, as a condition for social work interventions to be experienced as supportive, the construction of support demands a deliberative process in which both material and immaterial conditions need to be perceived as inextricably intertwined. It requires from social work services what Grunwald and Thiersch (2009) describe as 'social work and social care with a lifeworld orientation':

Social work and social care with a lifeworld orientation is caught in the conflict between respecting existing everyday structures, destroying the everyday and working towards a successful everyday. (...) Negotiation as it is practiced between the conflicting demands of respect, destruction and work on new options is the central reference point. (p.138)

These practices might nuance the primary suggested route out of (child) poverty that is currently paved by education and labour market activation and directed towards the development of self-sufficient, responsible and independent individuals. Our findings might challenge "injunctions about reasonable choices and responsible behaviour" (Clarke, 2005, p. 451), and enable CFSW to embrace the welfare strategies as developed by parents to enhance their families' well-being as well as critically deal with the social and structural conditions from which these strategies derive.

Regarding getting (back) at, our research accordingly suggests that acts of everyday resistance cannot be one-sidedly depicted as 'bad' choices, resulting from the wilfulness of irresponsible individuals that pose a threat to the welfare system and need to be sanctioned and controlled (Clarke, 2005). Considering the scarcity of available options due to



structural constraints, they may rather be comprehended as strategies for survival by which parents in poverty try to enhance their families' well-being, when the social welfare system does not sufficiently resonate with their lifeworld, meaning-making and welfare strategies.

In relation to getting organized, parent's accounts were relatively scarce (see Lister, 2004). Yet, we found no indication that an engagement with poor peoples' concerns should solely be addressed through political and collective action by people who therefore have to align themselves with the label of poverty. Although this interpretation of getting organized is more commonly perceived as a driver for social change, it contains certain risks as collective self-help might operate, for people in poverty, in the name of making the social change on their own (Baistow, 2000). As Phillips (2004, p. 36-37) argues, these notions of getting organized might "threaten to reinforce the very patterns of domination they otherwise claim to challenge (...) They leave the agenda to be set by people whose power has been (...) taken for granted". Accordingly, it is asserted that getting organised, in its current form, might work as a camouflage technique, masking the oppressive power relations in society and the lack of collective accountability for dealing with the poverty problem (Roets, Roose, De Bie, Claes & Van Hove, 2012). We therefore suggest a different interpretation of getting organized that reflects a joint and undetermined exploration of possible meanings of mobility and support for society, practitioners as well as for adults and children in poverty situations. Together with other social work practices, CFSW might have a crucial role to play, which inevitably requires that practitioners are enabled to work in and with essentially complex, multi-layered and paradoxical situations.

## 4.6. REFERENCES

- Alcock, P. (2004). The influence of dynamic perspectives on poverty analysis and anti-poverty policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 395-416.

- Baistow, K. (2000). Problems of powerlessness: Psychological explanations of social inequality and civil unrest in post-war America. *History of the Human Sciences*, 13(3), 95-116.
- Clarke, J. (2005). New Labour's citizens: Activated, empowered, responsabilized, abandoned?. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4), 447-463.
- Clark-Kazak, C. (2014). "A refugee is someone who refused to be oppressed": Self-survival strategies of Congolese young people in Uganda. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 3(1), 1-11.
- European Commission. (2011). *Early childhood education and care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Frazer, H., & Marlier, E. (2014). *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 131-146.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lister, R. (2015). *To count for nothing': Poverty beyond the statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/>
- OECD. (2012). *Education today 2013: The OECD perspective*. Retrieved from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edu\\_today-2013-en](http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/edu_today-2013-en)
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Phillips, A. (2004). Identity politics: have we now had enough? In J. Andersen & B. Sim (Eds), *The Politics of Inclusion and Empowerment: Gender, Class and Citizenship* (pp. 36-48). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Redmond, G. (2009). Children as actors: How does the child perspectives literature treat agency in the context of poverty?. *Social Policy and Society*, 8(4), 541-550.

- Ridge, T. (2011). The everyday costs of poverty in childhood: A review of qualitative research exploring the lives and experiences of low-income children in the UK. *Children & Society*, 25, 73-84.
- Ridge, T., & Millar, J. (2011). Following families: Working lone-mother families and their children. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45(1), 85-97.
- Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., De Bie, M., Claes, L., & Van Hove, G. (2012). Pawns or pioneers? The logic of user participation in anti-poverty policy-making in public policy units in Belgium. *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(7), 807-822.
- Roose, R., Roets, G., Van Houte, S., Vandenhoe, W., & Reynaert, D. (2013). From parental engagement to the engagement of social work services: discussing reductionist and democratic forms of partnership with families. *Child & Family Social Work*, 18(4), 449-457.
- Rosenthal, G. (1993). Reconstructing life stories: Principles of selection in generating stories for narrative biographical interviews. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives* (pp. 59-91). London: Sage.
- Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). Do families in poverty need child and family social work?. *European Journal of Social Work*, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2014.953916
- Sumner, A. (2010). Child poverty, well-being and agency: What does a '3-D well-being' approach contribute?. *Journal of International Development*, 22, 1064-1075.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Roose, R. (2012). Why the evidence-based paradigm in early childhood education and care is everything but evident. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(4), 537-552.
- Williams, F., & Churchill, H. (2006). *Empowering parents in Sure Start local programmes*. Research report for the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS). London: Birckbeck, Institute for the study of children, families and social issues.



# CHAPTER 5

## HIDE AND SEEK: POLITICAL AGENCY OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY<sup>5</sup>



---

<sup>5</sup> Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (submitted). Hide and seek: Political agency of social workers in supporting families living in poverty. *British Journal of Social Work*.



**ABSTRACT**

It is argued that recent shifts and changes in welfare paradigms have induced a depolitization of the problem of poverty, within both society and organizational settings. In this contribution, we adopt the idea that social workers are political actors who co-construct policy in practice rather than passive objects of these developments. While researching their agency, our attempt is to engage in the underexposed question how frontline workers, who are identified as supportive by families in poverty, actively use and shape this discretion in order to develop practices of support that embrace the concerns and life worlds of welfare recipients. From a systemic understanding of social workers' political agency, we explore their strategies and decision making processes in dynamic interaction with conditions and strategies at organizational, inter-organizational and governmental levels. The taxonomy of Lister, which takes into account this interplay between agency and structure, is applied as an analytical framework. Our findings address how practitioners' commitments to seek meaningful interventions often remain hidden or risk to reinforce the same processes of depolitization that are initially contested. We therefore suggest the development of communicative spaces, which reflect a different understanding of accountability and transparency that enables the promotion of welfare rights.

## 5.1. INTRODUCTION

Global economic and demographic transitions, rising inequalities and the growing number of people who live in situations of poverty and welfare dependency have nurtured a shift in the understanding of, and responses to, welfare needs (Taylor-Gooby, Dean, Munro & Parker, 1999). In different European welfare states, this has been associated with a general tendency in policy making towards early childhood intervention, prevention and investment in human capital (Gray, 2014). ‘Preparing rather than repairing’ and ‘no rights without responsibilities’ appear to have become the central tenets (Dwyer, 2004). Critics point out that social work, which is argued to be susceptible to social policy influences (Lorenz, 2004), increasingly tends to be reshaped as an instrument of control and risk management within the contemporary welfare state arrangements (Gray, 2014; Pollack, 2010). In this context, warnings have been raised against a mere disciplinary and constricted focus on the individual behaviour of help seekers that overlooks “the connections between structural change and the manifestation of individual problems” (Marston & McDonald, 2012, p. 1023). At the same time, also increasing managerial demands, stemming from the optimistic belief that “better management will resolve a wide range of economic and social problems” (Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 437), have been the subject of heated debates in social work literature and practice. As Jones (2014, p. 489) claims, under the impulse of managerialism, professionals will be further “constrained and straight-jacketed by regulation, recording and intrusive information technology as a means of shaping their deployment of time and task”.

A growing amount of researchers, however, contend that social work is not solely a passive and powerless victim of these contexts and developments (Roose, Roets & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). They argue that it occupies a complex position between, on the one hand, a necessary engagement with the changing historical, social and political realities and, on the other hand, a role in considering the welfare rights, meaning-making and concerns of every citizen in society (Lorenz,



2004). When practitioners are dealing with social problems, which are complex and multidimensional by nature, they use and produce shifting problem definitions while balancing the tension between the state and the individual, between control and emancipation. In the present contribution, we consider this ambiguity as an enduring and essential feature of social work (Jordan & Parton, 2004) and consequently argue that social work too is a political actor that – from its position as an intermediate between the public and the private – can question, carry and create the structures in which it strategically develops (Roose et al., 2012).

Whereas this enactment and re-enactment of policy by social work has been widely studied (i.a. Dubois, 2010; Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980), less is known about the dynamic interplay between frontline discretion and supportive processes at an organizational, inter-organizational and government-level. Based on in-depth interviews with frontline professionals from a variety of social work settings, this article therefore aims to explore the conditions that underpin practitioners' political agency and their strategies to contribute to the realization of social justice and human dignity while embracing the welfare concerns families in poverty within a shifting socio-political landscape. Lister (2004) offers an inspiring theoretical framework that locates peoples' agency in dynamic interaction with structural opportunities and constraints. It enables us to explore how agents and structures (re)construct one another and, within this interplay, might constitute experiences and practices of (un)welfare. In an earlier part of our study (see Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, in press), we elaborated on Lister's taxonomy to consider the welfare strategies of parents with young children living in poverty, in relation to social work interventions. Hence, we were able to identify their interpretations of well-being and support. The purpose of the current article mirrors the former one, while drawing on the perspectives of frontline social work practitioners who are – according to the parents involved in our study – establishing practices that are experienced as supportive. We thus wish to identify systemic conditions that might enable them to do so.

Yet before discussing our research methods and results, we will first dig deeper into the understandings of social work as a political actor and reflect on the importance of regarding this agency in relation to systemic conditions.

## **5.2. SOCIAL WORK AS A POLITICAL ACTOR**

Notwithstanding the fact that social work is inextricably linked with social and political developments, it is argued that it cannot be merely understood as a product of the state project or as an instrument for the implementation of a social investment rationale (Lorenz, 2004). As Marston & McDonald (2012, p. 6) assert, “social workers are always engaged in policy work, whether as end users, as producers or somewhere in between”.

A particularly influential approach in challenging the traditional top-down view on policy processes is Lipsky’s (1980) account of frontline practitioners as ‘street-level bureaucrats’. Inspiring in this context is the notion of discretion, which refers to professionals’ relative agency and freedom to make decisions in social work practice, while being confronted with the complexity of concrete processes of intervention (Ellis, 2011; Lipsky, 1980). In this vein, social work plays a vital role in shaping the relationship between the public sphere – with its socio-political objectives – and the diversity of concrete life world processes, while considering the issues and concerns that are at stake in both domains from the perspective of social justice and human dignity (Lorenz, 2004). In the context of our study, this requires that social work practices explore and negotiate a plurality of perspectives and welfare strategies of all actors involved, including people who are living in poverty (Roose et al., 2012). As such, social work can be seen as a co-constructor of the social problem definitions that underpin its interventions.

At the same time, the acknowledgement of social workers as policy actors has raised the question which strategies and mechanisms are developed by practitioners to shape and use their professional

discretion (Roose & De Bie, 2003). Lipsky (1980) already observed that discretion might be used in various ways, not all of them in favour of service users' interests (Evans & Harris, 2004). However, in the context of recent socio-political developments, discussions concerning the discretion of frontline workers have mainly paid attention to the interaction and possible gap between formal policy statements and the ways they are implemented (Carson, Chung & Evans, 2015). These debates often address an existing tension between increasing policy demands in terms of regulation and registration and the need for practitioners' initiative and creativity in processes of policy implementation (Evans, 2010). As Ellis (2011) argues, the focus in this context has been on macro-concerns – such as the (de)generalization of effective and efficient intervention methods – rather than on what happens in the personal encounters between professionals and service users, and to whose concerns. A pending question is therefore how concrete practices of support are shaped in the interaction with individuals and families in poverty, while considering the life worlds, meaning-making and welfare strategies of the actors involved (Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014).

Spratt (2001, p. 952) acknowledges that there is an urgent need “to move from surface to depth in how we understand what social workers do, why they do it” and adds to this the importance of exploring “what organizational conditions are required” if the interests of welfare recipients are a central concern. His comment raises the issue whether the political agency of social workers should be confined to a matter of frontline discretion. Other scholars have recently endorsed this critical question. They point out that, when social workers are recognized as political actors, there has often been given insufficient attention to the dynamic interactions between their individual decision making processes at the frontline level and the organizational, inter-organizational and governmental contexts in which they operate (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2010; Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012). Rather than simply considering the decision making processes of particular frontline practitioners as ‘heroic agents’ (Fine & Teram, 2013), it is consequently argued that we have to acquire a more

systemic understanding of social workers' competence and political agency, as it

develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context. A key feature [of this competent system] is its support for individuals to realize their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that meet the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts. (Urban et al., 2012, p. 516)

In order to acquire knowledge about how these practices can be constructed in the dynamic interplay between frontline decision making processes and systemic conditions, we will rely on a taxonomy as developed by Ruth Lister (2004). In this taxonomy (Fig.1), Lister identifies four categories of welfare strategies (or 'forms of agency') – *getting by*, *getting (back) at*, *getting out*, *getting organized* – that people develop in relation to structural opportunities and constraints. These categories are outlined based on two continua. The vertical axis moves from the 'everyday' to the 'strategic', reflecting the consequential strategic significance of peoples' choices. The horizontal axis is formed by a continuum from the 'personal' to the 'political', representing a shift in focus from the individual's livelihood towards acts of defiance or attempts to affect wider change.



Fig. 1: Taxonomy of agency within poverty situations (Lister, 2004)

Whereas the taxonomy has mostly been used to discuss welfare strategies of people in poverty, in his article it will be deployed to study the strategies of frontline social workers to increase families' welfare in relation to the systemic conditions in which their practices unfold. In analogy with the original taxonomy, 'getting by' thus refers to practitioners' survival strategies in order to cope with the complexity and ambiguity of the poverty situations in which they intervene. If these survival strategies fail, they can result in burn-outs or in the decision to quit practice (Roose et al., 2012). In order to increase daily survival, practitioners can also decide to develop hidden strategies of resistance or to 'go underground' (Aronson & Smith, 2010), which align with Listers' interpretation of 'getting (back) at'. 'Getting out' and 'getting organized' might both refer to overt actions (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Fine & Teram, 2013). 'Getting out' could mean that practitioners and their organization openly interpret and expand the scope of their work. 'Getting organized' rather corresponds to collective actions of resistance at an inter-organizational and a policy level (Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2014).

In what follows, we will describe our methodological considerations.

### **5.3. METHODOLOGY**

The research data were retrieved from qualitative in-depth interviews with practitioners who have been operating at a frontline level of a diversity of social work practices. All respondents were selected based on the former part of the study that included a retrospective biographical research with 14 parents with young children who experienced financial difficulties over time (see Schiettecat et al., in press). Two to four open in depth-interviews were conducted with the parents, which enabled us to (re)construe their life trajectories and document their interpretations of welfare and support. In this context, we discussed transitions and key incidences in their lives and explored their strategies to make use of social work interventions as a lever. Hence, together with the parents, we selected social work practices that – in one way or the other – have made a significant difference for the

families and were considered as supportive. Out of each retrospective life trajectory, we selected one up to three social workers to talk with in the context of the second and present part of the research project. After discussing if informed consent could be obtained, we were able to recruit 13 significant practitioners in total. Their professional contexts at the moment of the intervention in the family ranged from ECEC and child welfare and protection to income and housing support. By the time the interviews took place, some practitioners were still active in the same social work setting, others had changed their occupation or even decided to quit the field of social work. With each research participant we conducted an open in-depth interview that lasted one to three hours. It was our purpose to discover, from the perspective of social work practitioners, the rationale and conditions that enable supportive interventions in poverty situations.

The research data were analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis. We applied a directed approach, which entails that “analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). As such, the taxonomy developed by Lister (2004), was used as a theoretical framework to guide our analysis. This enabled us to analyze the accounts of social workers who were involved in our study and to identify a range of strategies occurring in the dynamic interaction with conditions at an institutional, inter-institutional and social policy level (Urban et al., 2012). It needs to be noticed that the four identified quadrants are meant to capture and analyse actions and strategies, not the features of actors.

## **5.4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **5.4.1. GETTING BY**

Notwithstanding their sharp critiques on the social inequalities and injustices that many service users are faced with, in concrete encounters with people living in deprivation, practitioners might deploy strategies to cope with these social injustices rather than

contest them. One frontline social worker, who is active in a shelter for homeless people and families, pictured this as an alteration in professionals' attitudes from 'getting out' to 'getting by', under the influence of recent political developments and reforms. In this context, she witnessed how the requested room for negotiation about what's in the clients' best interest tends to be reduced by a more stringent administrative culture in social service delivery. With reference to her current contacts with social housing agencies, she commented:

*You have to deal with lots of administrative procedures until you can offer people the support that they need. Those procedures used to be rather flexible, but nowadays you're more often confronted with technical professionals whose only concern is whether their paperwork is filled in correctly. They don't mind the situations behind it or the urgency of our request. They aren't even social workers anymore! That was totally different at the time I worked with Jimmy and Suzan [respondents of the first part of our study]. Back then, a good motivation could open doors, but now... (...) We noticed that a lot has changed under the influence of movements to the political right: less possibilities in service provision, but plenty of obligations. (...) We are losing our welfare, but clients are also losing their rights and benefits! (...) My reaction might be sobering, but nowadays our interventions are largely concerned with disillusionment. (Lisa, Homeless shelter)*

This statement adds to the concern widely expressed in literature that "both service user and social worker expectations and behaviours are now understood within performance management discourse, frameworks and a wider neo-liberal context that has to be navigated, despite criticism of this context" (Lambley, 2010, p. 10). Other practitioners endorsed the conclusion that everyday practices are not only shaped by the mindset of individual social workers and their teams, but largely depend on the broader political setting and organizational culture. In this respect, a social worker at a public welfare service demonstrated how a different board of directors might profoundly influence the room for manoeuvre, with implications for the offered support.

She argued:

*The team might stay the same, the practitioners' willingness might stay the same, but when the board is not very empathic and refuses every request for support, being socially minded yourself won't help. You're stuck! (...) It must be frustrating. I can imagine that I would even decide to quit my job. (...) I saw it happen at another service, where the board changed in that direction. However, most practitioners kind of accepted it. It's a pity, because if they would have kept standing firm, the board would have had to give in. But eventually, when their own income is on the scale, people often choose the most secure way. (Sarah, Debt mediation)*

At first sight, these reactions seem to be consistent with literature that highlights the curtailment of professional discretion by the proliferation of rules and the supervisory control over frontline practice (Jones, 2014). Some authors in this context conclude that the pressures of managerialism have “produced a culture of following approved or typical processes resulting in defensive forms of social work wholly uncongenial to the development of human qualities likely to promote social workers’ engagement in critique and revision of what counts as best practice” (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1016). At the same time, however, practices of support are also shown as delineated by certain combinations between both structural processes and the responses of professionals, which might challenge as well as reproduce the changing discourses (Thomas & Davies, 2005).

The complexity of these dynamics, which are consequently considered to be multidirectional in nature (Thomas & Davies, 2005), was further illuminated by examples that vividly expressed the struggles of social workers in dealing with the tensions they experience. Our findings for instance recognize that practitioners’ coping-strategies are not to be fatalistically regarded in terms of the passive compliance of professionals and organizations in their own self-interest. They might as well be the result of active decision-making processes on behalf of the service users. Some social workers accordingly expressed how they fold to the stifling political procedures they internally contest, in order



to maintain their everyday role in the provision of support. Peter, who complained about the overly complex and bureaucratic application processes to get allowances, clarified how he and his colleagues try to put their frustrations aside so that their clients won't have to bear the brunt.

*In the case of sickness, unemployment,... people have the right to allowances. That's great! But it's ridiculously hard to figure out how they can actually benefit from it. The antiquated language of paperwork, the exceptions, the huge differences between cities... It's outrageous! Why can't it be simplified? It really makes me angry! (...) But we adapt ourselves. What else can we do? The regulators won't mind if we would refuse to investigate their procedures. It's the help seeker in front of you, who would lose what he actually deserves (...) Sometimes, we also meet clients who could really benefit from a right that they are, strictly speaking, not entitled to. Yet, as frustrating as it is, we decide to stick to the rules, because we don't want to cause these people even more troubles." (Peter, Debt mediation)*

Further examples demonstrated how individual practitioners as well as their teams and organizations develop methods and strategies to make the best out of the restrictive logics in which they operate. These included the so-called 'guided transfers' to other services when the predefined intervention period comes to an end. The framework itself, which sets out these boundaries in the first place, however, is publicly left unchallenged.

#### **5.4.2. GETTING (BACK) AT**

In the search to construct meaningful interventions with regard to poverty and social injustices, social workers might also engage in silent, everyday acts of non-compliance that are often framed in literature as 'micro-politics of resistance'. Aronson & Smith (2010, p. 531) found that these covert strategies of disruption are deployed by professionals when confronted with practices and perspectives that are judged as "at odds with the interests of clients and communities and with their own commitments to public service and social justice". Also in the context of

our research, various frontline workers illustrated how they secretly intruded on the imperatives of organizations and policy makers, while centering on what matters to families.

A subtle form of these 'underground' practices (Aronson & Smith, 2010) contains the attempt to 'dress up' application forms in order to increase the possibility to acquire resources (White, 2009). Sarah, who is active as a social worker in public welfare services of several municipalities, formulated this as "*a game you have to play*". The profound variations she experiences between the perspectives of the politically tinted advisory boards of the different localities in which she works, induces her write and re-write the motivation letters accordingly. This reflects both critical and practical aspects of disparate accounts (Aronson & Smith, 2010).

*Ultimately, you have to blend in. If you know or have learnt by experience that, in a particular context, an extensive motivation with certain bullet points is required to get things done, you will do so, in order to achieve your goal. (Sarah, Debt mediation)*

The fact that the apparent cooperation with imposed obligations might conceal acts of resistance (White, 2009) becomes even clearer when the directives are directly, but secretly, contradicted. As such, social workers might deploy alternative strategies that escape systemic boundaries, which may hamper the provision of support. Some practitioners in our research accordingly demonstrated how they actively shape and reshape the problem definitions that impinge their interventions, while covertly contesting the regulations. This was again vividly illustrated by Sarah, who provides collective debt mediation. The social worker referred to a case where the advisory council had stressed the service users' attendance as a measure of engagement, with severe consequences for the provision of financial support. She recalled how the chairman told her: "*If that client misses the appointment, we will cut off the living wage*". While recalling her role as a social worker in realizing the welfare rights of every citizen in society, the practitioner however decided to transform the emphasis on

behavioural compliance into a focus on individual peoples' meaning making. She consequently made no notice of the clients' absence.

*Indeed, that lady missed her appointment three times, but for me, she was three times present. (...) Did I overstep my boundaries? (...) I think it's important to do what you stand for. (...) Plus, there might be a reason why people don't show up. That could also offer a starting point to provide support. The fact that they don't get here, often reflects something else. (Sarah, Debt mediation)*

In their attempt to construct meaningful practices of support for individuals and families living in poverty, some frontline workers witnessed the growing structural difficulties their clients are faced with. They also testified the limited impact of mere individually focused responses. Lynn, who provides family guidance in contexts of special youth care, illustrated how she subsequently took the initiative to broaden her task and deliver small-scale financial and material support, while at the same time remaining sceptical about the possible impact of charitable actions for families in the long run.

*I went with a mother to the consultant at juvenile court and noticed that she hadn't been eating in two days because of a lack of money. So I said to her: 'Let's first buy us a sandwich'. It's at my own expense, but it simply gives her food in her stomach, which may again enable her to achieve something. (...) Sometimes, I'm also looking for extra funding in charity organizations whose principles I don't always agree on. But if it allows me to get 300 euro that can support a family to buy something, this 300 euro is all I'm thinking about. (...) However, we do recognize that these ad hoc interventions won't suffice to enhance long-term social changes. (Lynn, Context support)*

Whereas these examples indicate efforts of practitioners to creatively address issues of injustice and inequality in concrete contacts with welfare recipients, they also illustrate the limited capacity of these hidden – and thus non-negotiable – approaches to advance structural change.

### 5.4.3. GETTING OUT

At the same time, several frontline workers accentuated the necessity to openly rethink and re-negotiate current welfare discourses and provision in a shared forum of discussion. In this context, they stressed the importance of an organizational climate – at different levels of the service – that creates the conditions to do so, whether this climate was presently lacking or not. Interestingly, almost half of the professionals involved in our research mentioned that they work in an organization that was explicitly profiled by the government to be innovative, to rethink themselves or to introduce new ideas. It was most often, though not exclusively, in these organizations that strategies to get out explicitly came to the forefront.

At a minimum but not least important level, some practitioners described how the reinterpretation of general frameworks and quality guidelines are borne or facilitated by their organizations or teams. Lynn for instance illustrated how her own rationales in the provision of family support could be freely discussed with her director, even if these suggest a depart from the rationales initially set out by the governmental agency. With regard to the recent imposed standards in frequenting families, she argued:

*The fixed minimum norm of paying a home visit once a week doesn't work for me. Some families indeed demand my weekly support, but in other situations I can notice that people don't require that many meetings. Sometimes people don't even ask for home visits. Their concern might be 'please, take care of my child during the week, because I can't handle the situation anymore', rather than 'come and chat with me twice a week'. (...) I'm fortunate to have always been allowed to choose for myself how to use my time, so that I could be present when and where my support was needed the most. (...) I'd really like to keep this freedom to set my agenda together with the families involved. (Lynn, Context support)*

Other practitioners described how they explicitly embrace and discuss the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity of daily practice together with

their teams. This continuous organizational support in their quest for responsive interventions in complex situations was strongly defended by several social workers. In this context, they mentioned the importance of the uninhibited exchange of insights, the opportunity to develop themselves and the openness to try, to fail and try again.

*Everything was negotiable in our team. Also the course of an intervention could be openly discussed. (...) If you wanted to choose a certain direction in the support trajectory, you were allowed to do so. Sometimes, your colleagues figured that you might walk against a wall, but even if they thought so, they often allowed you to try and perhaps walk against that wall. That was the strength of our team. (Tom, Accommodation centre and supported housing for young adults)*

It is stressed that these environments emerge out of the interplay between both structural aspects and personal attitudes. Neither one of these elements in itself appear to be sufficient.

*It's so important to get enough space to develop differentiated approaches. And to take that space. But you also need the support of your employer to follow courses that might strengthen you to do so, to consult with each other, to make mistakes, to discover new options, to search. (Peter, Debt mediation)*

Professionals' efforts to reinterpret and expand the scope of their interventions might also be more systematically integrated in their organizational culture and policy.

*That's what makes it so nice to work here: the continuous and joint quest for 'who we are' and 'who we are meant to be according to the context'. (Lynn, Context support)*

This might happen in an explicit as well as in a rather implicit manner. Nick, who is active in a service that provides child and family social work, referred to an established strategy in his organization to prolong intervention periods when considered appropriate, although this cannot be registered in official reports for the funding government.

*The support trajectory has an ending, that's clear. But parents are still welcome for a sociable chat as well as with the message 'I'm totally in the shit again'. It occurs that we then restart a short trajectory or that we make some calls to make sure that the right service can provide further support. Toward the funding agency, we can't register it as work, though. But we still do it, simply because we consider it important. (Nick, Child and family social work)*

In this line, different social workers expressed a tension between, on the one hand, the recognized importance of making their work accountable as a means to enhance their organizations' employability, credibility and to politically defend its interests and, on the other hand, their frustrations about the experienced gap between what is 'counted' as evidence of professional quality and what actually counts for families in practice (Aronson & Smith, 2010). Organizations might consequently attempt to enlarge the room for manoeuvre to give priority to those activities *'that matter'*. Hence, a practitioner who provided housing support, described how her organization stimulated her and her colleagues to detach themselves from a fixed conception of regulatory frameworks and to pragmatically explore what's in the margins.

*At the moment, you have to write everything down in a client file. But it's not that evident. It can make people even more anxious (...). When I was first confronted with the new registration forms, I really struggled with how to deal with those. Fortunately, my organization considered that you might be obligated to fill it in, but you might as well be able to motivate why you decide to do otherwise or leave some topics blank. I think that these contemplations are important for an organization. Interpreting things (...) might prevent a framework from being too narrow." (Ruth, Housing support)*

Other services tried to expand or retain the scope of their work by explicitly profiling their activities within the landscape of social welfare provision and by bringing into vision what risks to be downsized. Jessica explained how her organization always had the vision to include

the most difficult to reach and to spend time for presence at different domains rather than to focus on fixed short-term outcomes.

*I don't mean to say that every support trajectory has to take long, but it is a service that should definitely exist. Even if you're working with people for six months without doing something big or visible, you might still be doing something valuable. But it's not easy to measure. (...) So, you can decide to specialize: 'we want to concentrate our service on attachment and on issues that require more time to deal with, while other services focus more on short-term interventions'. We hope that, sooner or later, such a collaboration with other instances might clarify things for the government. (Jessica, Housing support for youngsters)*

This example also contains clear elements of a fourth strategy, which will be further illuminated in the next section.

#### **5.4.4. GETTING ORGANIZED**

Besides practitioners' and organizations' strategies to broaden the scope of their interventions by deconstructing and reconstructing the outlines of support, some social workers also exemplified how support might as well be mediated and negotiated in contact with other services. As such, several practitioners pointed out how their organization explicitly advocated peoples' welfare entitlements and concerns when these appeared at risk to be overshadowed. Nick illustrated:

*We try to make sure that people can build up their rights. For example, if we know that they are entitled to some kind of benefit but aren't able to get somewhere, or if a service causes obstructions, we will act as an intermediary. We then stress the fact that they are already involved in our organization and come over three times a week to get support and that sanctioning them for being unemployed, might therefore not be the best option. People might rather need some more time, so we can really invest in their family. Probably later on, activation may again come to the forefront. (Nick, Child and family social work)*

When faced with procedures that were commonly framed as absurd and at odds with individual peoples' welfare needs, practitioners and organizations might also construct informal cooperatives. In this respect, one of the practitioners, engaged with housing support for youngsters, referred to an inter-organizational relationship that was considered supportive, since it made it possible to translate a formal logic into a responsive practice.

*We scrutinize the regulations and have a good contact with the local public welfare organization to do so, with people who are really... If we ask them about the regulations, they can inform us about how to follow them, interpret them and deviate from them. That way, the cooperation works very supportive for us. (Jessica, Housing support for youngsters)*

After some doubt, she denoted how this public welfare organization tacitly expanded the official procedure to apply for a living wage. Whereas the application form can't strictly be submitted before the exact age of 18, the social worker in chief – in contrast to public welfare organizations in other regions – does organizations and help seekers the favour of preparing the request slightly sooner, which makes the process go much smoother and allows it to be experienced as more supportive.

Findings further suggest that often strategic partnerships are developed with organizations that share a similar vision or that are expected to fit best the welfare interests of particular help seekers in concrete situations. In this sense, different practitioners pointed to the possibility to walk informal pathways in the provision of support. Lisa demonstrated that because her own organization tends to tighten the criteria to access housing support, she and her team increasingly decided to immediately contact another service with a similar service provision for the more complex cases. It is argued that in this respect, they could give them a better chance to get the requested supply.

When they come across structural difficulties and inequalities, different social workers also referred to efforts that overtly advance social



change. Signalization is often a common denominator of these actions, although its content and scope might differ. Some practitioners see it as their mission to continuously address the injustices they encounter in practice as an attempt to inspire wider evolutions. Peter argued:

*When I notice something senseless or absurd, I report it to the service involved. Preferably the same is done by as many services from as many channels as possible, so that the signal returns, over and over again, and the service eventually gets tired from it and does something about it. (Peter, Debt mediation)*

In other settings, working groups have been set up to gather the issues, build ideas and construct a strong vision that can lead up to political discussion and change. This could involve meso-politics of resistance, directed to practitioners' own organizations, as well as macro-politics, where problems are addressed to the level of government.

*The whole team will be gathered to reflect on how to change our current system of providing shelter, on the one hand (...) and, on the other, what we can do to creatively cope with the system, so that we can still enhance peoples' well-being. It's all about group discussions, creativity and taking the leap. (Lisa, Homeless shelter)*

*We attempt to tell the government: 'be aware that these problems exist' and 'from the point of view of our organization, this is what we think of it'. But before you can do so, we first need to contemplate what our vision might be. (Lynn, Context support)*

Again other professionals additionally refer to the value of official fusion operations in order to commonly raise and, as such, strengthen their voice. Also the establishment of separate, so-called 'signalization teams' is a recurrent strategy in the attempt to politically address injustices. However, despite the efforts, a significant amount of frontline workers tended to downsize their actual own political potential, while expressing their frustrations about their limited impact.

*"A living wage is not the minimum necessary for subsistence. It's a direct ticket to poverty. Then add the possible erosion of the child allowances... It's astonishingly cold. (...) As a frontline worker you have little impact on these policies, otherwise we should have had a job as a policy maker. But we do have signalization teams, who try to move something at the level of government." (Lisa, Homeless shelter)*

*"We had a signalling function. (...) There's always something that is done with our signals, in the sense that, they are passed on. Whether they effectively inspire changes, that's a different question." (Karen, Homeless shelter)*

## **5.5. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: HIDE AND SEEK**

The four categories, set out by the taxonomy, allowed us to consider and analyze various forms of welfare strategies deployed by frontline social workers in response to the complicated problem of poverty. A closer examination of practitioners' efforts to 'get by', 'get (back) at', 'get out' or 'get organized' revealed that each strategy involves an engagement of social workers to construct, deconstruct or reconstruct practices of support. The rationale behind these dynamics of frontline discretion in the "inherent messiness and ambiguity of everyday practice" (Roets et al., 2014, p. 14) implies a concern for the well-being of individuals and families. In this respect, our study affirms the daily commitment of social workers to construct meaningful interventions in very complex circumstances.

While practitioners overall seek to provide appropriate practices of support, we also found that their actions sometimes remain hidden. These 'underground strategies' (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Roets et al., 2014) tend to be associated with the experienced lack of a safe atmosphere, in contacts with co-workers, organizations or policy makers, to overtly address and discuss perceived injustices. As Fine & Teram (2013, p. 1313) posit "many social workers choose not to address injustices in their place of work" since this can be complicated and risky. Our findings however challenge the assertion that practitioners simply wish to avoid repercussions on their own status

and livelihood. Also the fear to act at the expense of individual welfare recipients is shown as a motivation to comply with the dominant discourse and regulations, despite implicit or even nostalgic critical comments on underlying tendencies. The same critical stance may as well induce hidden practices of resistance in order to secretly “right perceived organizational wrongs” (Fine & Teram, 2013, p. 1322). However, a common consequence of such practices of compliance or resistance is that not only these strategies stay under the radar. Also the underlying motivations, contested injustices and advanced welfare interests are – once more – left concealed from public debate. Considering the mandate of social work in shaping the relationship between the private and the public sphere, we therefore argue that small-scale charitable actions and ad hoc solutions, although they may benefit individual welfare recipients, do not suffice to politically redress social disadvantages and defend the welfare rights of families in poverty situations.

Despite the perceived restrictions of spaces for open discussion, all practitioners without exception mention that they experience enough freedom to make decisions in their work. Although this freedom, which they mostly associate with micro-politics (Aronson & Smith, 2010), is expressed as a necessity to fulfil their task in a supportive manner, we should be careful to assume that it automatically implies a contribution to the well-being of welfare recipients and to the quality of social work. In that sense, our findings interrupt the romantic ideal of frontline discretion as being synonymous with meaningful practice. A simplified glorification of bottom-up actions also risks to overrun the acknowledgement of significant conditions and actors with discretion at other levels of the system (Evans, 2015) who may be crucial to enable this decision making in the first place. Likewise, it can be argued that a polarized understanding of the relationship between discretion and political structures could eventually reinforce the same processes of depolitization that were formerly contested.

However, our study also suggests that frontline workers find different ways to overtly disrupt dominant rationales in social work that are

perceived to be incompatible with its role in realizing welfare rights. These strategies are often associated with gathering and transferring signals to social policy makers, ranging from tokenistic to more transformative advocacy work. Nevertheless, such notions of 'getting organized' risk to undermine public struggles over power and politics that are essential in constructing rights-based welfare organizations as a process that requires a socially and politically constructed underpinning of rights (see Dean, 2010). As such, "the necessary public debate surrounding the social and political features of social work, relating to the part played by social structures and political forces in producing, amongst others, situations of poverty and social inequality, easily disappears" (Roets et al., 2014, p. 14). Such a notion of 'getting organized' might consequently leave frontline workers disillusioned and frustrated about their capacity to make a positive and progressive difference (Marston & McDonald, 2012) or lead them towards charity work. A more productive way to advance a social justice agenda, as recognized in 'getting out' and in a different understanding of 'getting organized', seems to emerge in a climate that induces reflection and public debate on the role of social work. Our research findings revealed communicative spaces – mostly in or between organizations – where transparency and quality appears to be more than about meeting criteria according to notions of pre-structured effectiveness and accountability, which risk to keep the ways in which social problem definitions are constructed into obscurity. These communicative spaces rather reflect an understanding of transparency, which is rooted in dialogic processes of negotiation about the efforts and scope of social work in complex situations in accordance with its commitments to the realization of welfare rights.

Together, the four quadrants illuminated that the development of social workers' political agency to deal with the complicated problem of poverty and to develop practices of support, is not purely a matter of commitment or discretion of frontline workers. Following Urban et al. (2012), we discerned that the organizational environment is equally important to open up the space to overtly engage with the inherent complexity and ambiguity of social problems, induce "critical reflection

and offer scope for change". Yet, especially at an inter-organizational and governmental level, these conditions currently appear as either limited or hidden. We therefore argue that social work needs to both have and create a forum across all levels of the system in which the discussion can be kept going about a plurality of perspectives and welfare concerns of all actors involved, including people who are living in poverty (Roose, Roets & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012), and where social works' own role as a co-constructor of problem definitions can be brought into debate.

All in, all in,  
everybody out there  
all in free!<sup>6</sup>

## 5.6. REFERENCES

- Aronson, J., & Smith, K. (2010). Managing restructured social services: Expanding the social?. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(2), 530-547.
- Carson, E., Chung, D., & Evans, T. (2015). Complexities of discretion in social services in the third sector. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(2), 167-184.
- Dean, H. (2010). *Understanding Human Need*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Dubois, V. (2010). *The bureaucrat and the poor: Encounters in French welfare offices*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Dwyer, P. (2004). Creeping conditionality in the UK: From welfare rights to conditional entitlements?. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 29(2), 265-287.
- Ellis, K. (2011). 'Street level bureaucracy' revisited: The changing face of frontline discretion in adult social care in England. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45(3), 221-244.

---

<sup>6</sup> Children's rhyme commonly chanted at the end of a game of hide and seek, to signal the hiders to return to the base.

- Evans, T. (2010). *Professional discretion in welfare services: Beyond street-level bureaucracy*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- Evans, T. (2015). Street-level bureaucracy, management and the corrupted world of service. *European Journal of Social Work*, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2015.1084274
- Evans, T., & Harris, J. (2004). Street-level bureaucracy, social work and the (exaggerated) death of discretion. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(6), 871-895.
- Ferguson, I., & Lavalette, M. (2004). Beyond power discourse: Alienation and social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(3), 297-312.
- Fine, M., & Teram, E. (2013). Overt and covert ways of responding to moral injustices in social work practice: Heroes and mild-mannered social work bipeds. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(7), 1312-1329.
- Gray, M. (2014). The swing to early intervention and prevention and its implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1750-1769.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Jones, R. (2014). The best of times, the worst of times: Social work and its moment. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(3), 485-502.
- Jordan, B., & Parton, N. (2004). Social work, the public sphere and civil society. In R. Lovelock, K. Lyons, & J. Powell (Eds.), *Reflecting on social work – Discipline and profession* (pp. 20-36). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lambley, S. (2010). Managers: Are they really to blame for what's happening to social work?. *Social work & social sciences review*, 14(2), pp. 6-17.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lorenz, W. (2004). *Towards a European paradigm of social work – Studies in the history of modes of social work and social policy in*

- Europe*. Dresden: PHD Fakultät Erziehungswissenschaften der Technischen Universität Dresden.
- Marston, G., & McDonald, C. (2012). Getting beyond 'heroic agency' in conceptualizing social workers as policy actors in the twenty-first century. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(6), 1022-1038.
- McBeath, G., & Webb, S. (2002). Virtue, ethics and social work: Being lucky, realistic and doing one's duty. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32(8), 1015-1036.
- Pollack, S. (2010). Labelling clients 'risky': Social work and the neo-liberal welfare state. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1263-1278.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., Schiettecat, T., Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). Reconstructing the foundations of joined-up working: From organisational reform towards a joint engagement of child and family services. *British Journal of Social Work*, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu121
- Roose, R., & De Bie, M. (2003). From participative research to participative practice: A study in youth care. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(6), 475-485.
- Roose, R., Roets, G., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2012). Irony and social work: In search of the happy sisyphus. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(8), 1592-1607.
- Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). Do families in poverty need child and family social work?. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(5), 647-660.
- Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016, in press). What families in poverty consider supportive: Welfare strategies of parents with young children in relation to (child and family) social work. *Child & Family Social Work*.
- Spratt, T. (2001). The influence of child protection orientation on child welfare practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 31(6), 933-954.
- Taylor-Gooby, P., Dean, H., Munro, M., & Parker, G. (1999). Risk and the welfare state. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50(2), 177-194.

- Thomas, R., & Davies, A. (2005). Theorizing the micro-politics of resistance: New public management and managerial identities in the UK Public Services. *Organization Studies*, 26(5), 683-706.
- Tsui, M., & Cheung, F. C. H. (2004). Gone with the wind: The impacts of managerialism on human services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(3), 437-442.
- Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., & Peeters, J. (2012). Towards competent systems in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 508-526.
- White, V. (2009). Quiet challenges? Professional practice in modernised social work. In J. Harris, & V. White (Eds.). *Modernising social work: Critical considerations* (pp. 129-144). Bristol: Policy Press.



## **CHAPTER 6 CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: REVISITING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN POVERTY**





Zal ik weggaan?  
Zal ik verdrietig worden en weggaan?  
Zal ik het leven eindelijk eens onbelangrijk vinden,  
mijn schouders ophalen  
en weggaan?  
Zal ik de wereld neerzetten (of aan iemand anders geven), denken:  
zo is het genoeg,  
en weggaan?  
Zal ik een deur zoeken,  
en als er geen deur is: zal ik een deur maken,  
hem voorzichtig opendoen  
en weggaan- met kleine zachtmoedige passen?  
Of zal ik blijven?

Zal ik blijven?

*Toon Tellegen  
In: Alleen liefde,  
Querido Amsterdam 2002*

Shall I leave?  
Shall I become sad and leave?  
Shall I finally decide to turn my back on life,  
shrug my shoulders  
and leave?  
Shall I put the world down (or give her to someone else), thinking:  
'now that's it',  
and leave?  
Shall I look for a gate,  
and if there is no gate: shall I make one,  
carefully open it  
and leave – with small, gentle steps?  
Or shall I stay?

Shall I stay?

*[Own translation]*

## 6.1. A WAY OF SEEING

Evolutions in the ways poverty and the measures to fight it are perceived seem to happen in line with social, economic and political concerns prevailing at different times in history and with the related dominance of certain welfare paradigms (Platt, 2005). The concept of poverty – the way we talk and think about it – and the focus of anti-poverty policies are never neutral, but rather normative and ideological constructs (Mestrum, 2011). Nevertheless, as Lister (2004, p. 12) indicates, every definition of poverty is “bound up with explanations and has implications for solutions”. How we define poverty and pursue anti-poverty strategies in social work is therefore critical to political and academic debates.

In this research project, we analyzed the recent emergence of a social investment paradigm in several European welfare states, which has induced, amongst others, an articulation of poverty in terms of child poverty. Its premise that investments at relatively low financial costs in early childhood yield long-term individual as well as social gains (Barnett, 2011; UNICEF, 2012) has taken root in a context of profound social, economic and demographic changes that pressure(d) traditional welfare state settlements (Taylor-Gooby, Dean, Munro & Parker, 1999; Van Lancker, 2013). The social investment perspective has consequently inspired policy and practice to capture a more linear approach to complex social problems, such as poverty, as comprised by the assumption that equality of ‘input’ (as in opportunity) will generate a more equal and profitable ‘output’ (as in self-sufficiency and socio-economic progress). According to this point of view, failures or interruptions in this single circuit ought to be attributed to the individual who is assumed to have forsaken his responsibility of grasping the given opportunities.

Although these ideas (more extensively addressed in the first chapter) are widespread in contemporary anti-poverty policy and practice, it can be argued that social investment and its expected payoffs are no self-evident facts. There exists, for example, no convincing evidence to

defend investments in early childhood as the ultimate solution for poverty and inequality (Morabito, Vandebroek & Roose, 2013; Staab, 2010). The social investment paradigm consequently renders a partial and temporary *representation* of reality rather than that it objectively grasps the complicated reality in itself. However, this does not prevent the rhetoric of social investment to engender further lines of thought and shape provision, presumed expectations and evidences that, in their turn, are everything but evident (Gray & McDonald, 2006). Presenting social investment as the one decisive and consensual answer to the problem of poverty therefore risks to mask the inherent complexity of social problems, and might, as a self-evident and self-explaining discourse, establish what Moss (2013) labels the dictatorship of no alternative.

Hence, while social investment currently operates as a powerful discursive construct for shaping anti-poverty knowledge and practice, this dissertation reports on a research project that introduces another possible way of seeing. The aim was to radically look through the eyes of parents of young children living in poverty and significant professionals intervening in their families in order to gain insights in their views on mobility out of poverty and support. Key to this research were more open questions, such as 'under which conditions are social work interventions considered as supportive by parents with young children living in poverty', 'how does the experience of support relates to families' mobility out of poverty', and 'which conditions at different levels of the system are decisive for social workers themselves to be able to develop practices of support'. As such, our research intended to supplement dominant problem definitions and contribute to a more democratic debate in academia and society.

Since poverty research is never neutral (D'Cruz & Jones, 2005; Lister, 2004), but embedded in the prevailing discourse that nurtures and continues to be nurtured by the research itself, introducing another way of seeing in our dissertation might bring an added value to contemporary academic, social and political discussions and challenge the superiority of one single kind of evidence. At an academic level, the

contribution of this research project is signified by the open formulation of our research questions as well as by the methodology used to explore subjective accounts of actors involved in poverty situations. Nonetheless, neither our poverty research pretends to be neutral. We explicitly adopt the paradigm of welfare rights as a frame of reference (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003; Dean, 2004; Lister, 2004) and therefore argue that focusing on the welfare rights of children in deprived circumstances may not disregard the welfare rights of the adults who live in the same poverty situation. The societal relevance of this dissertation is its particular contribution to debates about anti-poverty strategies and, more specifically, to reflections on the role of social work as a potentially supportive lever in realizing the human dignity and the well-being of parents and children in poverty situations.

## **6.2. A WAY OF NOT SEEING**

Since “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (Burke, 1965, p. 49), we also wish to reflect on some important elements and issues that have been inadequately addressed or underdeveloped within the scope of this research.

With regard to our research subjects, we were first of all interested in capturing the perspectives and experiences of parents with young children who moved into and out of poverty over time, since longitudinal research found that the population of people in poverty largely consists of people who experienced short-term income problems, although these might be recurrent (Lister, 2015; Van Haarlem, Coene & Thévenot, 2013). Nevertheless, this implies a limited variety in the socio-economic backgrounds of our research participants. For example, we did not explicitly enclose those families who suffer from a deep-rooted transmission of poverty between generations or the group of so-called ‘newly poor’, who suddenly ended up into poverty after an economic downturn. This does however not minimize either the complex and deprived living conditions of our research participants nor the processes of social exclusion (from a decent income, housing, employment, leisure,...) many of them have

been confronted with and which have impacted their possibilities to live a life in human dignity.

Another important lacuna refers to the fact that, whereas the poverty rates are higher for families from ethnic minorities, they were unfortunately not represented in our study. Our findings might consequently engender cultural bias. At this point too, further research is strongly recommended.

Also the selection of the practitioners entails certain limitations. For instance, we only studied the perspectives, decision-making processes and strategies of social workers who were considered and experienced as supportive by the parents involved in our research. This means that we cannot make any comparative comments concerning the strategies of those practitioners who were pointed out as less or not supportive. Moreover, since all interviewed professionals were situated at the frontline level of social work practice, a majority of our research findings subsequently identified frontline decision making in the construction of meaningful interventions. At the same time, we found clear indications of similar strategies at other levels of the system, which underpins Evans' (2015, p. 10) statement that "discretion permeates organizations, including at senior manager level. It is not simply located at the end of the chain of implementation but at points all along it." Our research focus on the frontline level, however, limited our possibilities to gain deeper and more direct insights in this use of discretion throughout the whole system. Nevertheless, it might be crucial to also study the interplay between systemic conditions and decision making processes at various levels, so that the – as we figured – overly simplistic dichotomy between bottom-up and top-down-practice can be more profoundly explored and transcended.

Finally, we wish to recognize that also the chosen research methods are not impeccable. Whereas prospective studies can only uncover respondents' experiences within the limited time frame of the survey, retrospective longitudinal research approaches also manage to collect data about their past experiences and life changes. However, since

retrospective longitudinal research approaches consider peoples' current accounts about the past, they inevitably generate some bias too, "flowing in particular from their reliance upon the memory recall and honesty of respondents, and the scale and scope of the research questions" (Alcock, 2004, p. 403). By revisiting the parents several times, their life trajectories, resources and experiences could be revised and (re)discussed, which may have reduced this expected bias to a minimum. However, the life history as narrated, discussed and visualized during the interactions remains a construction that did not exist before the interaction between the research participants and the researcher. The life histories acquired a more consistent and chronological form precisely because of the interactional research intervention (Miller, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Rosenthal, 1993).

Despite these limitations, during our research project we were able to gain deeper knowledge about the role of social work in poverty situations, as will be presented and discussed in the next sections.

### **6.3. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK**

The international definition of social work prioritizes four key principles that underpin social work practice, as it postulates that the "principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work" (IFSW, 2014). In what follows, the meaning of each of these principles will be discussed, based on our research findings.

#### **6.3.1. SOCIAL JUSTICE**

While incomes have grown more unequal and poverty has risen (Taylor-Gooby, 2013), during recent years we have witnessed a paradigm shift from a concern for poverty and social inequality to a focus on equality of opportunity (Dwyer, 2004; Giddens, 1998; Lister, 1998; Morabito et al., 2013). Especially since the latest turn of the century, 'preparing rather than repairing' has become the key mantra in social policy making and in anti-poverty policy in particular



(Mestrum, 2013). Wainwright (1999) – in a review of Lister (1998) – highlights:

Redistribution of wealth through the tax and benefits system has been replaced by a commitment to equality of opportunity through education training and paid employment, thus rejecting the notion of equality of outcome which it perceives as both undesirable and unrealistic. (p. 478)

It can be argued that in such a configuration, self-sufficiency, more than solidarity or equality, becomes the greater good. In the first chapter of this dissertation, we accordingly witnessed how the individual responsibility of parents has increasingly been emphasized, as expressed by the so-called ‘parenting turn’. This recalls a climate characterized by explicit and implicit attempts to control and regulate the conduct of parents (Gillies, 2005; Lister, 2006), for instance through the development of parental support programs. What is at stake, is the cognitive, socio-emotional and educational development of their children (Heckman, 2006) – especially when from a lower socio-economic background (Barnett, 2005) – so that their future self-sufficiency and integration into the labour market is safeguarded (Gray, 2014). As such, parenting becomes a prime vehicle of social mobility (Gillies, 2008). The focus, in other words, is not on preventing parents from being poor by pursuing structural and systemic anti-poverty strategies and on supporting the well-being of both parents and children, but rather on stressing the quality of the home-learning environment. Different authors argue how poverty, in this sense, is less prioritized by social policy and social work as a matter of redistributing material resources and power, but as a lack of individual educational competencies of parents (Frazer & Marlier, 2014). Moreover, support programmes targeted at parents living in poverty reinforce the idea that poor parents have special educational needs that differ from ‘mainstream parents’; or that poor parents equal poor parenting. At the same time, however, the ‘parenting turn’ paradoxically tends to neglect the positions and perspectives of parents and their children so that the

construction of support and its underlying problem definitions are rather unilaterally defined.

In the first empirical part of our research project, we were able to gain more knowledge about the construction, interpretation and use of child and family social work interventions, including ECEC and parenting support, as potentially supportive resources. Interestingly, the parents involved in our study mentioned a broad diversity of social work practices that were experienced as supportive levers and/or that played a significant role in realizing families' mobility out of poverty. These practices ranged from child and family social work to budget guidance and housing support. Yet common to these interventions was their attention for the welfare concerns and human dignity of the parents, their children and the family as a whole, even when practitioners' formal mandates were initially more narrowly defined. In this respect, all parents involved in our study for instance referred to the importance of interventions that also took into account the structural circumstances in which parenting took place and which severely affected family life. These findings underpin the thesis that the important focus on the well-being of children in poverty should not obscure the well-being of the adults who live in the same poverty situation and from whom the children are economically dependent. Mestrum (2015) in this context endorses that child poverty should not be de-linked from other people's poverty and from society as a whole. She stresses that:

Even if, theoretically, child poverty can be dissociated from the poverty of their families and their communities, it goes without saying that for poverty reduction policies to be perceived as being fair, all poor people should benefit from them and be allowed social progress. (p. 368)

As such, poverty is again pictured as a social problem, connected to an unequal distribution of resources and power, and an unequal realization of human rights.

In accordance with the goal of welfare states to realize equality in the opportunities of citizens to live a life in human dignity, the empirical study we conducted with frontline social workers reflected their struggles to address social injustice. They explicitly recognized the structural processes underlying the problems faced by help seekers and often strongly criticized growing social inequalities. Nevertheless, practitioners also expressed their increasing inability and frustration to genuinely affect processes of poverty and social injustice. However, they still articulated attempts to redress perceived injustices related to the organizational, inter-organizational and government levels (Aronson & Smith, 2010). In this context, we for instance discerned overt actions taken by frontline workers (Fine & Teram, 2013), which were commonly associated with the transmission of signals to other levels of the system. In some occasions, practitioners additionally referred to the idea that official fusion operations between organizations might strengthen their voices and stimulate social change.

The expressed frustration that yet little is accomplished by these kinds of overt strategies was often combined by the commitment to develop corrective actions in the personal encounters with welfare recipients, in an effort to reduce the potential harm caused by the perceived societal and organizational injustices and to establish practices of support. However, when the systemic atmosphere for open discussion at meso- or macro-level appeared to be lacking and these actions, together with the underlying motivations and contested injustices, were consequently going underground, we argued that these efforts could, at their turn, miss their political potential. In this vein, we follow Marston & McDonald (2012) who stated that “an important point of political action is to make hegemonic truths appear as neither inevitable nor natural, so that other possibilities might emerge.” In our view, this requires the development of communicative spaces in and between different levels of the system wherein open, dialogic processes of negotiation can be stimulated, so that the ways in which practice deals with social problems and power issues can be continuously discussed. In order to sufficiently address social injustices and systemic

inequalities, we thereby argue for a shared frame of reference. According to the international definition of social work, that framework is human rights (IFSW, 2014).

### **6.3.2. HUMAN RIGHTS**

Discussions concerning human rights as the founding principle of social service delivery reflect a tension between different interpretations of the right to social welfare, which has certain consequences for the way in which social work, as a human rights profession, is conceptualized and practiced (Bouverne-De Bie, 2007; Hubeau, 1995; Ife, 2012). In a minimalist approach, the right to social welfare is rather symbolic. For social work, this implies a focus on “a pre-structured supply in which the central question is how demand and supply can be tuned in a just manner and where the quality of the services offered is guaranteed by the creation of consumer rights” (Maesele, 2012, p. 121). According to a maximalist conception, the right to social welfare embraces the universal right to an existence worthy of human dignity (which is manifested in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22 and was further incorporated in the Belgian Constitution in 1994) as the benchmark for every intervention (Maesele, 2012; Roose & De Bie, 2003). In this respect, quality of service delivery cannot be externally determined and predefined, but entails processes of negotiation and deliberation in which contradictory problem constructions might be at stake between help seekers and social workers.

Over the last decades, the maximalist interpretation of welfare rights has been under pressure (Hubeau, 1995). Different scholars expressed that, together with the shift from equality of outcomes to equality of opportunity, the rights-based approach to social welfare, which underpinned the development of the European welfare states after the second world war, tends to be replaced by an emphasis on social obligations (Lister, 1998; Lorenz, 2006; Maesele, 2012), or on “no rights without responsibilities” (Giddens, 1998). Rights are thus more selectively attributed along with the fulfillment of imposed individual responsibilities and the outcomes of support predetermined according

to the prevailing welfare state rationale. Several authors stated that this development towards a rather minimalistic conception of rights also reflects a residual positioning of social work. Welfare rights in this context become more and more conditional according to a normative assessment of the efforts of welfare recipients, grounded in the ideal of transforming citizens depending on state assistance into active, self-sufficient individuals (Clarke, 2005) so that public service provision could be made redundant. In this respect, support has been directed towards a predefined objective that has also been immediately linked with mobility out of poverty.

However, while exploring the welfare strategies and perspectives of parents living in poverty, our research findings added a level of complexity to dominant assumptions concerning support and mobility out of poverty. They suggested that both conceptions cannot simply be perceived as synonymous. This could mean that mobility and self-sufficiency cannot be the sole indicators of the effectiveness of processes of support. In some cases, the social work practices that were considered supportive or that could enhance mobility out of poverty were precisely those interventions that did not determine these outcomes beforehand, but gradually negotiated the support trajectory together with the family, while bearing in mind the family members' own welfare strategies as well as the structural circumstances and mechanisms from which their strategies derive (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

These insights have been strengthened by parents' accounts on 'dependency', 'engagement' and 'resistance' that profoundly challenged one-directional conceptions of reasonable choices and responsible behaviour. However, it does not entail that economic mobility or autonomy are no longer important. All families involved in our study definitely mentioned a decent available income as a basic requirement to improve their living conditions. Our research findings mainly indicated that economic mobility might be associated with a decent income *and* a good life, and that 'human flourishing' (see Dean, 2010) can only be supported through processes of deliberation. This implies

that the construction of supportive interventions cannot merely be based on a reductive analysis of needs, while disregarding the life worlds and meaning making of families in poverty and their own strategies in using social resources (Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt, 2012). These insights align with a maximalist approach to social welfare rights, which requires a social work practice in which a myriad of strategies to define, construct and give meaning to social problems and support are explored, while considering the life worlds of the actors involved as a crucial point of departure (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Schiettecat, Roets & Vandenbroeck, 2014). It consequently reflects a transition from a residual to a more structural positioning of social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2007) with the aim of striving for equality for each individual to realize a life in human dignity as the objective of every intervention.

Whereas many practitioners who participated in our research clearly demonstrated their daily commitment to navigate the support trajectory in very complicated situations together with the actors involved, we argued that the required processes of negotiation should not be confined to the micro-level of interactions between help-seekers and social workers. Adopting a rights discourse as the foundation for social work also demands continuous discussion about the problem definitions that underpin its interventions as well as about the societal mechanisms and political forces that produce processes of poverty and social exclusion, which might be reproduced in practice (Bouverne-De Bie, 2003). Therefore, it is argued that small-scale charitable actions and ad hoc solutions, although they could benefit individual welfare recipients, do not suffice to politically redress social disadvantages and realize the welfare rights of families in poverty situations. We thus suggest a maximalist interpretation of the rights discourse as a highly relevant framework for practice and public debate at, and between, all levels of the system.

### **6.3.3. COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

The global definition of social work stipulates: “the social work profession recognizes that human rights need to coexist alongside collective responsibility” (IFSW, 2014). In our research project, we found different spaces where this collective responsibility can take shape, despite historical tendencies to consider the family and, more recently, the individual parent as the prime cause and solution to social ills (Gillies, 2012; Marston & McDonald, 2012).

Whereas the parents involved in our study actively adopted a range of “strategies to mediate and negotiate the impact of disadvantage on their lives” (Ridge, 2011, p. 81), we found no evidence to suggest that people in poverty, individually or collectively, are the preferred and sole actors to produce welfare or advocate their welfare rights. Yet, it is argued that welfare states have been steadily transforming into steering states, “stressing individual initiative and responsibility, turning individuals into the base of an altered practice of steering the social: a ‘government from a distance, willing to be the coxswain, but letting others do the rowing’” (Oelkers, 2012, p. 101). Perceiving people in poverty as the main drivers for social change, however, risks to extract the complex problem of poverty and the measures to fight it from broader social structures and political forces. As such, this problem construction tends to depoliticize the poverty problem, while translating poverty issues at stake in families automatically into problems of parenting or a lack of empowerment (Roets & Roose, 2014).

Instead, the research findings defended practices that rather challenge these processes, while engaging in a joint quest between help seekers and social workers concerning the often multidimensional and paradoxical issues at stake, in a certain situation and at a particular moment in time. Our research insights confirm that plain solutions do not exist (Roose et al., 2012) and that a continuous reflexivity about the taken-for-granted as well as about its underlying problem constructions is elementary (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004). In this context, we

identified different strategies that are deployed by frontline workers in an attempt to “expand the reach of their programmes to excluded communities and clients, as well as the depth and complexity of their services and programmes” (Aronson & Smith, 2010, p. 15).

We however argue that the required reflexivity cannot be confined to the individual relation between help seeker and help provider. The idea that the multifaceted and stubborn problem of poverty could be resolved within social work practice would reduce poverty to a problem of social services, rather than acknowledging its broader structural core (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2013; Lister, 2004). Moreover, a blind glorification of political action at a micro level – again – risks to stimulate processes of depolitization, since it may enforce a dichotomic relationship between bottom-up and top-down actions. Therefore, we reason that reflexive processes should go beyond the micro-level to seek the democratic experiment. This needs to be understood in terms of a transformation (Biesta, 2014) and an orientation towards collective interests and the common good; towards the issues of the public – the *res publica*. What is always at stake in the democratic experiment is consequently the question to what extent and in what form private ‘wants’ – that what is desired by individuals or groups – can be supported as collective concerns (Wright Mills, 1959); that is, can be considered desirable at the level of the collective, given the plurality of individual wants and always limited resources.

This entails that our results do not defend a perception of social workers as superhero’s. To aspire human rights and social justice requires a life world orientation as well as policy making at the level of society, so that structural causes of social problems can be addressed and services of support developed. While consequently recognizing that social workers need to be ‘humble’ about what may be achieved in daily practice, we nevertheless argue that they have an important role to play (Marston & McDonald, 2012; Roose et al., 2012). In other words, while acknowledging that social workers are no superhero’s, our research suggests that they are not powerless either. Their agency refers to the role of social work as a mediator, making precisely the



suggested connection between the individual and the social level (Lorenz, 2007). This requires action as well as reflection about the structural and systemic conditions in which these actions take place. We found that this agency can be fuelled by systemic conditions – at an organizational, inter-organizational or government level – that inspire a more deliberative conception of transparency and a collective accountability for dealing with poverty, as a social problem.

#### **6.3.4. RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY**

Whereas the societal diversity has become more and more palpable, the longstanding ambition to set an (implicit or explicit) standard or to look for straight-forward solutions to social problems keeps on growing. However, our contention in this research was that support cannot simply be set along predefined criteria. While referring back to the former discussion about how social justice and human rights can be pursued and realized on the basis of a collective responsibility in welfare states, we draw on Lister's (2010) comment that:

(...) the best way of achieving a more equal set of outcomes is not necessarily by treating everyone the same. (...) Simply ensuring that people have equal resources does not guarantee equitable outcomes because of the variations in the opportunities and the ability to convert those in outcomes. (p. 241)

Correspondingly, the endeavour to realize human rights

is given meaning through the particular, and it is these local contexts that require us to pay attention to the complexity of social relations and social problems. For social workers as policy activists, this means abandoning the modernist search for one policy or variable as either the sole cause or the sole solution. (Marston & McDonald, 2012, p. 1035)

Therefore, we argue that support should rather be constructed during continuous processes of negotiation in which the inherent ambiguity of practice can be embraced (Roose et al., 2012). Considering social works' principle of collective responsibility, this also entails negotiating

and re-negotiating the connection between concrete life worlds and the system, while acting and reflecting on a plurality of possible meanings about the same situation, through interaction with the people involved and from a perspective of social justice and human dignity (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2014).

## **6.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

We started this dissertation with the question whether families in poverty need (child and family) social work, as a means to investigate the current rationales underlying social work interventions in poverty situations.

A first possible answer could be that addressing wider social and political forces is more effective than focusing on the quality of the home-learning environment, parenting skills and on child and family social work that may render the structural factors obsolete (Dowling, 1999). A radical understanding of this position casts some doubt on the potential of (child and family) social workers as political actors. It may leave practitioners disillusioned and frustrated about their capacity to achieve social change (Marston & McDonald, 2012) and make them decide to *become sad and leave* the field or to adopt a more activist stance, while *passing the world to someone else* (Roose et al., 2012).

Another, more pragmatic argument advances the idea that (child and family) social work in situations of poverty is better than nothing. This stance is for instance reflected in practices of compliance, which might be actively adopted by frontline workers in order to maintain their role in the provision of support so that help seekers won't have to bear the brunt. In this context, we also situate the engagement of social workers in small-scale charitable actions or the both critical and practical commitment to *create a gateway* and secretly redress social inequality and perceived injustices in the concrete encounters with service users. Although these strategies could temporarily benefit individual welfare recipients, we have argued that this approach – again – departs from

social work's political potential, as the actions, motivations and challenged processes of injustice stay under the radar.

Therefore, we further reflected on the conditions necessary for social workers *to stay* and recognize their structural (instead of residual) positioning as a political actor, mediating and shaping the relationship between the private and the public, while developing practices of support. In this respect, frontline workers' accounts revealed the importance of communicative spaces at and between different levels of the system. These spaces refer to the realization of public fora where the reflexive potential to openly consider and reconsider institutional problem definitions, while embracing the complexity of peoples' life worlds (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009), can be facilitated, encouraged and developed. In accordance with the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014), we suggested human rights, conceptualized as a right to human flourishing (Dean, 2010), as a frame of reference and the key objective of these shared processes of negotiation. At this point, Lister (2004, p. 163) states that:

while a human rights discourse performs an important symbolic and mobilizing function and throws new light on the meaning of poverty, the ultimate test of its effectiveness as a political tool will be the closing of that gap between promise and reality. (p. 163)

Hence, whereas the problem of poverty is far too big for social work (Lorenz, 2014), and may never be fully erased, we argue that social work does have an important role to play. It has to (and be allowed to) reflexively keep on (re-)addressing processes of poverty and social exclusion at, and between, the micro-, meso- and macro-level. We therefore suggest that the main contribution of social work in supporting families in poverty and addressing their welfare rights, is not simply represented by 'going with the flow'. It is neither exclusively found in the attempts of practitioners to radically row against the stream. Together with Biesta, we argue that it rather occurs at the very moment when the existing order is interrupted (Biesta, 2014) - while embracing the diversity in meanings, welfare concerns and aspirations of the actors involved - and different possibilities start to emerge. In

our research, we witnessed the importance of actors at other levels of the system in fostering this role, by constructing an openness for debate, so that the political potential of social work can be realized. For social work, this requires that it not only appears as a thorn in the side, but that it can also discuss examples of productive practice (without becoming self-referential), so that hope about the possibilities to realize social justice and human rights can bloom (Marston & McDonald, 2012).

## 6.5. REFERENCES

- Alcock, P. (2004). The influence of dynamic perspectives on poverty analysis and anti-poverty policy in the UK. *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(3), 395-416.
- Aronson, J., & Smith, K. (2010). Managing restructured social services: Expanding the social?. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(2), 530-547.
- Barnett, W. S. (2005). Maximizing returns from prekindergarten education. Retrieved from <http://www.clevelandfed.org/research/conferences/2004/november/pdf/barnett.pdf>
- Barnett, W.S. (2011). Effectiveness of Early Educational Intervention. *Science*, 333, 975-978.
- Biesta, G. (2014). Learning in public places: Civic learning for the twenty-first century. In G. Biesta, M. De Bie & D. Wildemeersch (Eds.), *Civic learning, democratic citizenship and the public sphere* (pp. 1-11). London: Springer.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2003). Een rechtenbenadering als referentiekader. In M. Bouverne-De Bie, A. Claeys, A. De Cock & J. Vanhee (Red.), *Armoede & Participatie* (pp. 1-20). Gent: Academia Press.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2007). Laat ons de geschiedenis meenemen: 30 jaar OCMW. *OCMW Visies*, 22, 8-13.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M., Roets, G., Roose, R., & Versailles, P. (2013). Armoedebestrijding als democratisch vraagstuk. In W. Lahaye, I.

- Pannecoucke, J. Vranken & R. Van Rossem (Eds.), *Armoede in België: Jaarboek 2013* (pp. 181-199). Leuven: Acco.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M., Roose, R., Coussée, F., & Bradt, L. (2014). Learning democracy in social work. In G. Biesta et al. (Eds.). *Civic learning, democratic citizenship and the public sphere* (pp. 43-54). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Burke, K. (1965). *Permanence and Change*. University of California Press: Los Angeles.
- Clarke, J. (2005). New Labour's citizens: Activated, empowered, responsabilized, abandoned?. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4), 447-463.
- D'Cruz, H., & Jones, M. (2004). *Social work research: Ethical and political contexts*. London: Sage Publications.
- Dean, H. (2004). *The ethics of welfare: Human rights, dependency and responsibility*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Dean, H. (2010). *Understanding Human Need*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Dowling, M. (1999). Social exclusion, inequality and social work. *Social Policy & Administration*, 33(3), 245-261.
- Dwyer, P. (2004). Agency, 'dependency' and welfare: Beyond issues of claim and contribution?. In H. Dean (Ed.), *The ethics of welfare: Human rights, dependency and responsibility* (pp. 135-154). Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Evans, T. (2015). Street-level bureaucracy, management and the corrupted world of service. *European Journal of Social Work*. DOI:10.1080/13691457.2015.1084274
- Featherstone, B., Broadhurst, K., & Holt, K. (2012). Thinking systematically-thinking politically: Building strong partnerships with children and families in the context of rising inequality. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42, 618-633.
- Fine, M., & Teram, E. (2013). Overt and covert ways of responding to moral injustices in social work practice: Heroes and mild-mannered social work bipeds. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(7), 1312-1329.
- Frazer, H., & Marlier, E. (2014). *Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A study of national policies. Assessment of what*

- Member States would need to do to implement the European Commission Recommendation. Synthesis Report.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Giddens, A. (1998). *The third way: The renewal of social democracy.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillies, V. (2005). Meeting parents' needs? Discourses of 'support' and 'inclusion' in family policy. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(1), 70-90.
- Gillies, V. (2008). Perspectives on parenting responsibility: Contextualizing values and practices. *Journal of Law and Society*, 35(1), 95-112.
- Gillies, V. (2012). Family policy and the politics of parenting: From function to competence. In M. Richter, & S. Adresen (Eds.), *The politicization of parenthood: Shifting private and public responsibilities in education and child rearing* (pp. 13-26). London: Springer.
- Gray, M. (2014). The swing to early intervention and prevention and its implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1750-1769.
- Gray, M., & McDonald, C. (2006). Pursuing good practice?: The limits of evidence-based practice. *Journal of Social Work*, 6(1), 7-20.
- Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 131-146.
- Heckman, J. J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900-1902.
- Hubeau, B. (1995). De doorwerking van de sociale grondrechten in de Belgische grondwet: Over de maximalisten en de minimalisten. In J. Vranken, D. Geldof, & G. Van Menxel (Eds.), *Armoede en Sociale uitsluiting: Jaarboek 1995* (pp. 157-166). Leuven/Amersfoort: Acco.
- Ife, J. (2012). *Human rights and social work: Towards rights-based practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- IFSW. (2014). *Global definition of social work.* [Approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014].

- Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work>
- Lister, R. (1998). From equality to social inclusion: New labour and the welfare state. *Critical Social Policy*, 18(55), 215-225.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Lister, R. (2006). Children (but not women) first: New Labour, child welfare and gender. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2), 315-335.
- Lister, R. (2010). *Understanding theories and concepts in social policy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Lister, R. (2015). 'To count for nothing': Poverty beyond the statistics. *Journal of the British Academy*, 3, 139-165.
- Lorenz, W. (2006). *Perspectives on European social work: From the birth of the nation state to the impact of globalization*. Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich.
- Lorenz, W. (2007). Practising history: Memory and contemporary professional practice. *International Social Work*, 50(5), 597-612.
- Lorenz, W. (2014). *The need for a new social question*. [Public lecture given at Ghent University at 20th march 2014].
- Maesele, T. (2012). *From charity to welfare rights? A study of social care practices*. Proefschrift. Gent: Universiteit Gent.
- Marston, G., & McDonald, C. (2012). Getting beyond 'heroic agency' in conceptualizing social workers as policy actors in the twenty-first century. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(6), 1022-1038.
- Mestrum, F. (2011). Child poverty: A critical perspective. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 161-168.
- Mestrum, F. (2013). *An emerging new social paradigm for Europe*. Retrieved from [http://www.globalsocialjustice.eu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=397:an-emerging-newsocial-paradigm-for-europe&catid=10:research&Itemid=13](http://www.globalsocialjustice.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=397:an-emerging-newsocial-paradigm-for-europe&catid=10:research&Itemid=13)
- Mestrum, F. (2015). Child poverty in the context of global social development. In W. Vandenhole, E. Desmet, D. Reynaert, & S. Lembrechts (Eds.), *Routledge international handbook of children's rights studies* (pp. 357-370), New York: Routledge.
- Miller, R. L. (2000). *Researching life stories and family histories*. London: Sage Publications.

- Morabito, C., Vandenberg, M., & Roose, R. (2013). 'The greatest of equalisers': A critical review of international organisations' views on early childhood care and education. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(3), 451-467.
- Moss, P. (2013). The relationship between early childhood and compulsory education: A properly political question. In P. Moss (Ed.), *Early childhood and compulsory education: Reconceptualising the relationship* (pp. 2-50). London: Routledge.
- Oelkers, N. (2012). The redistribution of responsibility between state and parents: Families in the context of post-welfare-state transformation. In M. Richter & S. Andresen (Eds.), *The politicization of parenthood: Shifting private and public responsibilities in education and child rearing* (pp. 101-110). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Platt, L. (2005). *Discovering child poverty: The creation of a policy agenda from 1800 to the present*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Ridge, T. (2011). The everyday costs of poverty in childhood: A review of qualitative research exploring the lives and experiences of low-income children in the UK. *Children & Society*, 25(1), 73-84.
- Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical research*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Roets, G., & Roose, R. (2014). Lost in Arcadia?. In P. M. Garrett (Ed.), *Critical and radical debates in social work: Children and families* (pp. 69-74). Bristol: Policy Press.
- Roose, R., & De Bie, M. (2003). From participative research to participative practice: A study in youth care. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(6), 475-485.
- Roose, R., Roets, G., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2012). Irony and social work: In search of the Happy Sisyphus. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(8), 1592-1607.
- Rosenthal, G. (1993). Reconstructing life stories: Principles of selection in generating stories for narrative biographical interviews. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives* (pp. 59-91). London: Sage.



- Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). Do families in poverty need child and family social work?. *European Journal of Social Work*, 18(5), 647-660.
- Staab, S. (2010). Social investment policies in Chile and Latin America: Towards equal opportunities for women and children? *Journal of Social Policy*, 39, 607-626.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (2013). Why do people stigmatise the poor at a time of rapidly increasing inequality, and what can be done about it?. *The Political Quarterly*, 84(1), 31-42.
- Taylor-Gooby, P., Dean, H., Munro, M., & Parker, G. (1999). Risk and the welfare state. *British Journal of Sociology*, 50(2), 177-194.
- UNICEF. (2012). A brief review of the social and economic returns to investing in children. Retrieved from [http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Investing\\_in\\_Children\\_19June2012\\_e-version\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/socialpolicy/files/Investing_in_Children_19June2012_e-version_FINAL.pdf)
- Van Haarlem, A., Coene, J., & Thévenot, C. (2013). Armoede vanuit een dynamisch perspectief. In D. Dierckx, J. Coene, A. Van Haarlem & P. Raeymaeckers (Eds.), *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting: Jaarboek 2013* (pp. 67-84). Leuven/Den Haag: Acco.
- Van Lancker, W. (2013). Putting the child-centred investment strategy to the test. *European Journal of Social Security*, 15(1), 4-27.
- Wainwright, S. (1999). Anti-poverty strategies: Work with children and families (Critical Commentary). *British Journal of Social Work*, 29(3), 477-483.
- Wright Mills, C. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.



Al andar se hace camino,  
y al volver la vista atrás  
se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar.  
Caminante, no hay camino,  
sino estelas en la mar.

*Antonio Machado*

By walking the road is made,  
and when you look back,  
you'll see a path never to be trodden again.  
Wanderer, there is no road,  
only trails across the sea.

*[own translation]*



**NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING:  
TRAJECTEN VAN GEZINNEN IN ARMOEDE IN RELATIE  
TOT SOCIAAL WERKINTERVENTIES**

---



## **1.1. CONTEXTSCHETS<sup>7</sup>**

Dit doctoraatsonderzoek werd ontwikkeld vanuit de Vakgroep Sociaal Werk en Sociale Pedagogiek (UGent) en uitgevoerd in het kader van het Vlaams Armoedesteunpunt (VLAS, dat gesubsidieerd werd van januari 2012 tot en met december 2015). Als wetenschappelijk consortium van verschillende onderzoeksinstituten stelt het VLAS zich tot doel inzichten te verzamelen over processen van armoede en sociale uitsluiting in Vlaanderen ter ondersteuning van beleid en praktijken inzake armoedebestrijding. Het bouwt deze kennis op overheen verschillende werkpakketten die samen het complexe en multidimensionale karakter van armoede benadrukken (VLAS, 2011).

Ons onderzoekproject kaderde in het werkpakket 'kinderarmoede'; een kwestie die in de context van armoedebestrijding steeds vaker op de nationale en internationale beleidsagenda's komt te staan (zie o.a. Council of the European Union, 2006; Vlaamse Regering, 2011; European Parliament, 2015). Veeleer dominant wordt de impact van armoede op de ontwikkeling van kinderen daarbij onder de aandacht gebracht en het belang van vroegtijdige interventies in de jongste levensjaren geaccentueerd. In de sfeer van het sociaal werk gaat deze tendens gepaard met een opvallende inzet op preventieve, voorschoolse interventies en opvoedingsondersteuning (Gray, 2014). In het VLAS-werkpakket werden deze ontwikkelingen vanuit twee verschillende disciplinaire invalshoeken benaderd: enerzijds vanuit de economische wetenschappen, anderzijds via sociaal werkonderzoek. Deze tekst rapporteert samenvattend over de bevindingen die voortkwamen uit de tweede onderzoekspiste.

### **1.1.1. HISTORISCHE CONTEXTUALISERING VAN HET ONDERZOEK**

Vanuit historisch perspectief stellen we vast dat de constructie van sociale problemen en interventies inherent verbonden is met het welzijnsparadigma dat in een bepaalde sociale, politieke en

---

<sup>7</sup> Zie hoofdstuk 1

economische context dominantie verwerft (Platt, 2005). Het gezin blijft daarbij doorheen de geschiedenis steevast focus van interventie, maar het onderliggende denkkader dat richting geeft aan praktijken van armoedebestrijding blijkt te verschuiven.

Aan het eind van de 19de eeuw werden tussenkomsten sterk geïnspireerd door een *liefdadigheidsparadigma* waarbij civilisatiestrategieën en beschavingsoffensieven ingezet werden als sociale beleidsinstrumenten. Het burgerlijk kerngezin – waarin de vader beschouwd werd als kostwinner, de moeder verantwoordelijk geacht werd voor de opvoeding van de kinderen, en het biologisch, sociaal en wettelijk ouderschap als inherent met elkaar verbonden waren – werd daarbij vooropgesteld als ideaal en als antwoord op sociale problemen.

Een toenemende welvaart, en het inzicht dat armoede niet alleen en niet altijd een individueel, maar ook een maatschappelijk karakter kent, stimuleerde na de tweede wereldoorlog een accentverschuiving. De nadruk kwam nu te liggen op de *herverdeling* van hulpbronnen en macht in de samenleving met de bedoeling iedereen – zowel volwassenen als kinderen – gelijke mogelijkheden te geven om een menswaardig bestaan te leiden en hun burgerschap te realiseren. Met de uitbouw van de sociale zekerheidsrechten en sociale voorzieningen werd hier praktisch vorm aan gegeven.

Vanaf het einde van de 20ste eeuw kennen de Westerse welvaartsstaten een nieuwe paradigmaverschuiving. Vanuit het *sociale investeringsdenken* komt de beleidsklemtoon steeds nadrukkelijker te liggen op investeringen in het jonge kind (en latere arbeidskracht) als kapitaal voor de toekomst en op de verantwoordelijkheid van ouders in functie daarvan. Ook de geschetste focusverschuiving van armoede naar kinderarmoede kan deels binnen deze ontwikkeling gekaderd worden.

### **1.1.2. (KINDER)ARMOEDEONDERZOEK**

Verschuivende opvattingen over de welvaartsstaat, sociale problemen en sociaal werk staan ook in wisselwerking met het soort sociaal



wetenschappelijk onderzoek dat in een heersende beleidscontext ontwikkeld wordt. Zo valt op dat bepaalde onderzoeksbenaderingen in sommige contexten net meer of minder aandacht en status genieten (Foucault, 1975). Ook het soort gestelde onderzoeksvragen varieert, afhankelijk van de manier waarop sociale problemen dominant gedefinieerd worden. Omgekeerd geeft onderzoek zelf mee vorm aan deze probleemdefinities door een bepaald perspectief naar voor te schuiven, door prioriteiten te stellen en door (impliciet) aan te geven waar het geen prioriteit in ziet (Bouverne-De Bie, 2005; Platt, 2005). Ook armoedeonderzoek is in dit opzicht nooit neutraal (Lister, 2004; D'Cruz & Jones, 2005), maar dient telkens gesitueerd te worden ten aanzien van heersende sociale probleemconstructies die mee de focus bepalen van het onderzoek.

In dit licht bemerkten we samen met andere auteurs een aantal belangrijke lacunes in de bestaande kennisconstructie over armoede en armoedebestrijding:

- In lijn met het sociaal investeringsparadigma – dat een nadruk legt op de toekomstige economische winst op basis van investeringen in jonge kinderen – stijgt de populariteit van impactstudies die de efficiëntie en effectiviteit van interventies willen nagaan door te peilen naar ‘wat werkt’. Eigen aan deze studies is dat ze aangestuurd worden door vooronderstellingen over gewenste uitkomsten, eerder dan de initiële probleemconstructies mee als onderwerp van onderzoek te kiezen (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). Om te kunnen nagaan ‘of iets werkt of niet’ moet namelijk vooraf een notie bestaan van wat als ‘werken’ wordt gedefinieerd. In het kader van een sociaal investeringsdenken beoordelen onderzoekers voorschoolse voorzieningen op die manier vooral op basis van hun vermogen om kinderen voor te bereiden op hun rol als autonome, zelfredzame burgers en op hun integratie in de arbeidsmarkt. Uitkomstgerichte effectstudies bekrachtigen zo de constructie van het kind als toekomstig economisch kapitaal voor de staat, eerder dan de huidige positie, het welzijn en de leefwereld van kinderen en hun gezinnen als

uitgangspunt te nemen (Lister, 2003). Sociaal werkpraktijken en voorzieningen (voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen in het bijzonder) krijgen dan vaak een verengde en vooraf gedefinieerde rol toebedeeld, die de brede variëteit aan mogelijke betekenissen van deze én andere mogelijke vormen van ondersteuning (ook op het vlak van inkomen, tewerkstelling,...) voor kinderen én volwassenen in het hier en nu dreigt te overschaduwen (Vandenbroeck, Roets & Roose, 2012). Hoe gezinnen in armoede problemen zelf definiëren, of wat zij onder 'werken', kwaliteit, of positieve uitkomsten verstaan, wordt met andere woorden zelden in rekening genomen. Van hieruit kan geargumenteed worden dat effectstudies, net als elke andere vorm van onderzoek, slechts een partiële constructie van de werkelijkheid in beeld brengen, en bijgevolg niet als de enige of meest valide vorm van kennisverwerving kunnen gelden.

- Verder waarschuwen critici voor een te eenzijdig kindgerichte focus die samengaat met een verschuiving van een herverdelend beleid naar een gelijke kansenbeleid (Dwyer, 2004; Taylor-Gooby, 2009). De zorg voor gelijke kansen van jonge kinderen garandeert immers niet noodzakelijk ook sociaal rechtvaardige uitkomsten. Bovendien kunnen kansen niet zomaar onderscheiden worden van uitkomsten aangezien de uitkomsten van de ene generatie bepalend zijn voor de kansen van de volgende (Morabito et al., 2013, Vandenbroeck & Van Lancker, 2014). Arme kinderen zijn met andere woorden ook altijd kinderen van arme ouders (Mestrum, 2011; Rahn & Chassé, 2012; Lindquist & Lindquist, 2012; Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013). In navolging van de kritieken van verschillende auteurs (o.a. Fox Harding, 1996; Wiegers, 2007; Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2010; Mestrum, 2011; Roets, De Cock, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2011) gaan we er bijgevolg vanuit dat de terechte aandacht voor de welzijnsrechten van kinderen niet losgekoppeld kan en mag worden van de aandacht voor ook de welzijnsrechten van volwassenen die zich in dezelfde armoedesituatie bevinden. Vandaar stellen we dat het nodig is om, zowel in beleid, praktijk als onderzoek, de

intergerelateerde bekommernissen van kinderen en ouders in rekening te nemen en het gezin te beschouwen als een geheel dat in wisselwerking staat met de ruimere samenleving en met de materiële en immateriële hulpbronnen die zich daar bevinden.

Met ons onderzoek wilden we graag een bijdrage leveren aan het invullen van deze leemtes.

## **1.2. ALGEMEEN ONDERZOEKSOPZET**

Terwijl het sociaal investeringsdenken actueel sterk bepalend is voor het denken en handelen in het kader van armoedebestrijding, introduceert ons onderzoekproject een andere mogelijke (maar even partiële) kijk op de werkelijkheid. In plaats van institutionele probleemconstructies als uitgangspunt te nemen, kiezen we er in dit onderzoek voor de subjectieve betekenisverlening van de mensen voor wie de interventies bedoeld zijn voorop te stellen. Naast, en als aanvulling bij, de bestaande onderzoeksinteresse voor 'wat werkt', wensen we de discussie te bevorderen over de betekenis van 'wat werkt' voor gezinnen met jonge kinderen in armoedesituaties en wat daarin de rol is van het sociaal werk. We trachten daarbij de bestaande vooronderstellingen over sociale problemen open te breken door ze te interpreteren vanuit de leef- en ervaringswereld van mensen in armoede en die te relateren aan de maatschappelijke structuren en hulpbronnen die ze ter beschikking hebben (Roets, Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012). Menselijke waardigheid en sociale rechtvaardigheid vormen de centrale toetsstenen in de analyse (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

De volgende onderzoeksvragen komen daarbij centraal te staan en worden telkens in een ander, maar gerelateerd, onderzoeksluik behandeld:

- In een eerste empirisch deel van ons onderzoek reconstrueren we de levenstrajecten van ouders met jonge kinderen in armoede in relatie tot sociaal werkinterventies, waaronder voorschoolse voorzieningen en opvoedingsondersteuning. We gaan na onder

welke condities tussenkomsten in de opvoedingspraktijk beschouwd worden als ondersteunend en hoe dit zich verhoudt tot de mobiliteit van hun gezinnen uit de armoede.

- › Het onderzoeksluik dat daarop volgt, bevraagt praktijkwerkers die intervenieerden in de betrokken gezinnen en door de ouders als ondersteunend werden bevonden. Via open diepte-interviews gaan we na hoe praktijken van ondersteuning ontwikkeld worden in de dynamische interactie tussen strategieën van frontliniewerkers en de manier waarop systemische condities op organisatorisch, inter-organisatorisch en overheidsniveau ter beschikking zijn of gesteld worden.

In wat volgt schetsen we per onderzoeksluik kort onze methodologische keuzes en belangrijkste bevindingen.

### **1.3. EERSTE ONDERZOEKSLUIK<sup>8</sup>**

Om een antwoord te vinden op de eerste onderzoeksvraag hanteren we een retrospectief biografische onderzoeksbenadering, wat ons niet alleen toelaat om de perspectieven en betekenisgeving van individuele ouders als aangrijpingspunt te kiezen, maar ook om hun leefsituaties overheen de tijd te bestuderen op een interactionele en dynamische manier. Deze laatste keuze wordt mee ingegeven door de vaststelling in longitudinaal onderzoek dat “de populatie van mensen in armoede voornamelijk is opgebouwd uit mensen die slechts korte tijd inkomensproblemen ervaren (al kunnen zij herhaaldelijk inkomensproblemen ervaren)” (Van Haarlem, Coene & Thévenot, 2013, p. 83). Gezien onze onderzoeksinteresse om van hieruit transitieprocessen in en uit de armoede te bestuderen in relatie tot sociaal werk, worden in ons onderzoek in de eerste plaats gezinnen betrokken die zich – volgens de praktijkwerkers die in er intervenieerden – financieel rond de armoedegrens situeren. 14 ouders uit 9 verschillende gezinnen hebben uiteindelijk deelgenomen aan onze studie.

---

<sup>8</sup> Zie hoofdstuk 2 en 3

In een reeks van twee tot vier open diepte-interviews hebben we samen met de ouders hun individuele levenstrajecten (ook visueel) ge(re)construeerd. Deze trajecten werden doorheen het onderzoeksproces stelselmatig verder vormgegeven, gecorrigeerd en verfijnd, wat de validiteit van het onderzoeksmateriaal versterkte. Ze boden een aangrijpingspunt om materiële en immateriële transities, sleutelmomenten en eigen welzijnsstrategieën van ouders in een armoedecontext op een diepgaande en interactionele manier bespreekbaar te stellen. Daarbij is uitdrukkelijk nagegaan op welke manier sociaal werkinterventies, waaronder voorschoolse voorzieningen en opvoedingsondersteuning, als mogelijke hefboom fungeerden. Sleutelbegrippen zoals ‘ondersteuning’ en ‘mobiliteit uit de armoede’ hebben we in het kader van deze studie niet vooraf ingevuld, maar benaderd als concepten die hun inhoud verwerven in het interactieproces (Blumer, 1954).

Voor de data-analyse hanteren we een schema (Fig. 1) dat in 2004 ontwikkeld werd door Ruth Lister en een schets maakt van verschillende welzijnsstrategieën (of vormen van agency die gerelateerd zijn aan systemische condities en hulpbronnen) die mensen in armoede tot uiting brengen wanneer ze geconfronteerd worden met structurele moeilijkheden en beperkingen. Het schema wordt gevormd door twee continua. De verticale as loopt van ‘het dagelijkse’ naar ‘het planmatige’, en reflecteert het strategische gehalte van menselijke keuzes. De horizontale as gaat van ‘het persoonlijke’ naar ‘het politieke’, en representeert aan de ene kant een focus op het individuele bestaan, en aan de andere kant een klemtoon op verzetsdaden of op ruimere pogingen om verandering te bewerkstelligen. ‘*Getting by*’ verwijst op die manier naar de persoonlijke, dagelijkse strijd van mensen om te overleven. Het zijn strategieën die vaak onderbelicht blijven of vanzelfsprekend worden geacht, en dikwijls pas zichtbaar worden wanneer ze verdwenen zijn en problemen bijgevolg duidelijker komen bovendrijven. ‘*Getting (back) at*’ wordt geassocieerd met informele en vaak verborgen verzetsstrategieën (zoals de overtreding van regels, liegen,...), met opnieuw overleving als belangrijkste motivatie. ‘*Getting out*’ wordt

begrepen als strategieën om uit de armoede te geraken. In het dominante discours worden ze vaak verbonden met opleiding en werk. In het vierde kwadrant – *'Getting organized'* – situeren zich meer collectieve uitdrukkingen van agency die variëren van collectieve zelfhulp tot politieke actie in het streven naar sociale verandering.



Fig. 1 Taxonomie van agency in armoedesituaties (Lister, 2004)

Lister benadrukt dat de welzijnsstrategieën alleen acties categoriseren, niet de mensen of actoren die deze strategieën of acties ontwikkelen. Dit betekent ook dat ze alle vier bij eenzelfde persoon tot uiting kunnen komen. In ons onderzoek wordt het schema van Lister gebruikt als een referentiekader om de strategieën van gezinnen met jonge kinderen in armoedesituaties te analyseren in relatie tot materiële en immateriële hulpbronnen. Het maakt het mogelijk om meer inzicht te verkrijgen in de constructie, de interpretatie en het gebruik van sociaal werkinterventies – waaronder voorschoolse voorzieningen en opvoedingsondersteuning – als ondersteunend.

De onderzoeksresultaten werpen een ander licht op dominante interpretaties van ondersteuning en mobiliteit, op verzetsstrategieën van mensen in armoede en op hun collectieve acties in het streven naar sociale verandering.

- Eerst en vooral tonen ze dat *ondersteuning* en *mobilititeit* uit de armoede (cfr. 'getting out') niet altijd synoniemen zijn of in elkaars verlengde liggen. Sommige interventies worden door ouders als ondersteunend ervaren, hoewel ze niet meteen gepaard gaan met een transitie uit de armoede. Omgekeerd bestaan er maatregelen die de financiële situatie wel verbeteren, maar niet ondersteunend worden geacht. Deze analyseresultaten voegen een laag van complexiteit toe aan de dominante assumpties over ondersteuning en mobilititeit uit de armoede. Zo blijken zelfredzaamheid en mobilititeit niet de enige mogelijke indicatoren voor de effectiviteit van ondersteunende interventies. Praktijken die door ouders aangeduid worden als ondersteunend zijn vaak net die interventies die de beoogde uitkomsten niet vooraf definiëren, maar het ondersteuningstraject samen met de gezinnen onderhandelen, en daarbij zowel de betekenisgeving en strategieën van kinderen en ouders, alsook de onderliggende structurele condities en mechanismen mee in rekening nemen. Dat betekent echter niet dat we economische mobilititeit en zelfredzaamheid als doelen van interventies achterwege moeten laten. Alle ouders in ons onderzoek beklemtonen namelijk het belang van een degelijk beschikbaar inkomen om hun levensomstandigheden te verbeteren. Het betekent wel dat de verwezenlijking van deze doelstellingen iets complexer is geworden. Ouders associëren mobilititeit uit de armoede met een waardig inkomen *én* met leefbaarheid. De materiële kern van armoede en de immateriële aspecten die ermee geassocieerd zijn, blijken met andere woorden niet van elkaar te onderscheiden, maar onlosmakelijk met elkaar vervlochten te zijn. Willen sociaal werkpraktijken ondersteunend zijn voor gezinnen in armoede, dan dienen ze deze verwevenheid ook uitdrukkelijk voor ogen te houden. Ondersteunen vergt dus onderhandelen: het vereist een zorgvuldig balanceren tussen materiële en immateriële condities, aansluitend bij de leefwereld van mensen, waarbij zowel persoonlijke als maatschappelijke verwachtingen in rekening worden genomen (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Dit betekent ook dat dominant gehanteerde

strategieën om mobiliteit uit (kinder)armoede te realiseren – die zich actueel oriënteren richting de ontwikkeling van zelfredzame, verantwoordelijke en onafhankelijke ouders, geïntegreerd in de arbeidsmarkt – genuanceerd en aangevuld moeten worden.

- Een ondersteuningspraktijk, geïnterpreteerd als onderhandelingspraktijk, creëert ook openheid om mensen die *weerstand* bieden of regels ombuigen (cfr. 'getting (back) at'), niet eenzijdig te beschouwen als onverantwoordelijke individuen die 'foute' keuzes maken en bijgevolg gesanctioneerd en strenger gecontroleerd moeten worden (Clarke, 2005). Rekening houdend met de moeilijke leefomstandigheden die vaak weinig keuze toelaten, kunnen hun acties ook gelezen worden als strategieën om het welzijn van hun gezin te verbeteren, wanneer sociale voorzieningen hier onvoldoende in slagen (Roets, Dean & Bouverne-De Bie, in press).
- De getuigenissen van de ouders geven verder geen indicatie dat ondersteuning als onderhandeling per se via *collectieve actie* (cfr. 'getting organized') moet gebeuren. Het lijkt ons niet aangewezen dat mensen in armoede exclusief verantwoordelijk worden geacht om zich te verenigen en dus individueel en collectief het label van armoede te dragen. Dat betekent niet dat collectieve verenigingen geen rol te vervullen hebben, maar wel dat ze niet als het enige of belangrijkste middel tot organisatie en sociale verandering kunnen gelden. Sociale verandering vraagt een breder draagvlak en een gedeeld engagement om voortdurend op zoek te blijven gaan naar mogelijke betekenissen van ondersteuning en mobiliteit voor zowel de samenleving, praktijkwerkers als voor volwassenen en kinderen in armoedesituaties (Roose, Roets, Van Houte, Vandehole & Reynaert, 2012).

Op de vraag 'wat ouders van jonge kinderen in armoedesituaties als ondersteunend ervaren' kan bijgevolg geen definitief, universeel antwoord volgen dat zich handig in methodes laat gieten. Meer essentieel is dat sociaal werkers (in de brede zin, als alle mensen die



professioneel omgaan met gezinnen in armoede) de *onderhandelingsvaardigheden* verwerven die het mogelijk maken meerdere perspectieven (waaronder zowel maatschappelijke perspectieven als de perspectieven van ouders in armoede) te verkennen en in rekening te nemen. Dit houdt onvermijdelijk in dat ze moeten kunnen werken in en met ambigue, complexe en vaak paradoxale situaties.

Deze laatste reflectie bracht ons tot een tweede onderzoeksvraag, die we opnamen in het volgend luik van het onderzoeksproject.

#### **1.4. TWEEDE ONDERZOEKSLUIK<sup>9</sup>**

Op basis van de gereconstrueerde levenstrajecten hebben we samen met de ouders één tot drie praktijkwerkers geïdentificeerd die door hen en hun gezin als ondersteunend werden ervaren. In totaal konden we op die manier 13 professionals selecteren die – op het moment van interventie in de gezinnen – werkzaam waren in uiteenlopende sociaal werkpraktijken, waaronder praktijken van gezinsondersteuning en bijzondere jeugdzorg, budgetbegeleiding en woonbegeleiding. Sociaal werkers worden in het kader van ons onderzoek beschouwd als politieke actoren die probleemdefinities en interventies mee construeren, deconstrueren en reconstrueren in het spanningsveld tussen de private en publieke sfeer. Tijdens een open diepte-interview met elk van de geselecteerde praktijkwerkers hebben we van hieruit gepeild naar de strategieën die sociaal werkers ontwikkelen in interactie met condities op organisatorisch, inter-organisatorisch en overheidsniveau om ondersteunend te kunnen zijn voor gezinnen in armoede (Urban et al., 2012).

Om dit actorschap te analyseren in relatie tot systemische condities, bouwen we opnieuw op het schema van Lister (2004). Naar analogie met de originele taxonomie, kan ‘getting by’ in deze context geassocieerd worden met de veelal onzichtbare overlevingsstrategieën van praktijkwerkers in het omgaan met het spanningsveld tussen enerzijds complexe ondersteuningsvragen en de betekenisverlening

---

<sup>9</sup> Zie hoofdstuk 4

van hulpvragers, en anderzijds politieke verwachtingen. Wanneer deze strategieën falen, kunnen ze leiden tot burn-out of tot de beslissing om ontslag te nemen. In deze dagelijkse overlevingsstrijd kunnen ook bewust verborgen of ondergrondse strategieën van praktijkwerkers worden gedetecteerd – zoals stiekem indruisen tegen de regels – (Aronson & Smith, 2010) die eerder aansluiten bij ‘Getting (back) at’. ‘Getting out’ en ‘getting organized’ verwijzen beide naar openlijke acties (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Fine & Teram, 2013). ‘Getting out’ omvat strategieën van professionals en organisaties om de grenzen van hun opdracht bespreekbaar te stellen en open te breken. ‘Getting organized’ sluit aan bij collectieve acties van verzet op interorganisatieel of overheidsniveau (Roets, Roose, Schiettecat & Vandenbroeck, 2014). Opnieuw kunnen meerdere strategieën bij eenzelfde persoon worden waargenomen.

Onze studie gaat na op welke manier de strategieën van praktijkwerkers – die in dynamische interactie bekeken worden met systemische condities – kunnen bijdragen tot een responsieve en ondersteunende hulpverlening. Hieronder volgen onze belangrijkste vaststellingen:

- Uit onze bevindingen blijkt een duidelijke inzet van sociaal werkers om in zeer complexe situaties betekenisvolle interventies te construeren. Wanneer in het contact met de eigen organisatie, andere organisaties en/of beleidsmakers echter geen openheid wordt gevonden voor discussie over schijnbare evidenties, rekening houdend met de leefwereld van gezinnen, blijken deze strategieën eerder onder de radar te verdwijnen. Een aantal praktijkwerkers geeft aan daarbij terug te moeten vallen op ‘ad hoc’ oplossingen of liefdadigheid. Niettegenstaande de potentiële (maar vaak tijdelijke) meerwaarde van deze acties voor individuele hulpvragers, worden deze processen echter geproblematiseerd vanuit de vaststelling dat, behalve de strategieën, ook de onderliggende bekommernissen, probleemdefinities en gecontesteerde onrechtvaardigheden onzichtbaar blijven en dus niet bespreekbaar kunnen worden

gesteld. We argumenteren daarom dat het politieke potentieel van het sociaal werk in het streven naar een bredere sociale rechtvaardigheid en menselijke waardigheid voor gezinnen in armoede in deze situaties niet ten volle benut kan worden. Wanneer praktijkwerkers in deze context meer openlijk politiek trachten bij te dragen tot de realisatie van welzijnsrechten van hulpvragers, wordt dit veelal geassocieerd met het collectief verzamelen en overdragen van signalen naar het beleidsniveau, wat vaak gepaard gaat met frustraties over de geringe impact van deze acties.

- › Beide strategieën – zowel de verborgen als de meer activistische praktijken van sociaal werk – produceren bovendien een dichotoom beeld van de relatie tussen praktijk en beleid, dat processen van depolitisering in de hand dreigt te werken en welzijnsstrategieën, betekenisvolle acties en condities op ook andere niveaus overschaduwet. Acties van frontliniewerkers als mede-beleidsmakers tonen zich in ons onderzoek nochtans niet als strikt verbonden met personen, maar ook als gerelateerd aan de omgeving waarin ze handelen. Ondersteunende praktijken krijgen bijgevolg niet vorm door *of* de aanwezigheid van voldoende handelingsruimte van praktijkwerkers *of* welbepaalde structurele condities, maar wel vanuit het complexe samenspel tussen beide (Urban et al., 2012).
- › In die lijn wordt een meer productieve manier om bij te dragen tot de uitbouw van een ondersteunende hulpverlening en de realisering van welzijnsrechten gevonden in omgevingen waar een mogelijkheid is tot openlijk debat over probleemdefinities en de rol van het sociaal werk als vormgever aan de relatie tussen het private en het publieke. We pleiten daarbij voor transparante, kwaliteitsvolle, effectieve en verantwoorde interventies; niet zozeer door het meten van voorgestructureerde criteria, maar wel door op en tussen verschillende niveaus bespreekbaarheid te creëren, vanuit de leefwereld van mensen en met het oog op de realisatie van sociale rechtvaardigheid en menselijke waardigheid.

Belangrijk is dat de aandacht voor de pluraliteit van individuele bekommernissen en aspiraties van mensen in armoede ook aanleiding geeft tot collectieve leerprocessen over de configuratie van de samenleving (Biesta, 2014). Armoede verschijnt daarbij als een maatschappelijk in plaats van een individueel probleem, waaraan alleen vanuit een gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid tegemoet kan worden gekomen.

## 1.5. LITERATUUR

- Aronson, J., & Smith, K. (2010). Managing restructured social services: Expanding the social?. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(2), 530-547.
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory?. *American Sociological Review*, 19(1), 3-10.
- Biesta, G. (2014). Learning in public places: Civic learning for the twenty-first century. In G. Biesta, M. De Bie, & D. Wildemeersch (Eds.), *Civic learning, democratic citizenship and the public sphere* (pp. 1-11). London: Springer.
- Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2005). Het OCMW en het recht op maatschappelijke dienstverlening. In J. Vranken, K. De Boyser & D. Dierckx (red.), *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting: Jaarboek 2005* (pp. 203-218). Leuven: Acco.
- Cantillon, B., & De Maesschalck, V. (2012). De sociale investeringsstaat: Enkele kritische overwegingen bij een nieuw beleidsparadigma. Geraadpleegd via [http://www.centrumvoorsociaalbeleid.be/sites/default/files/D%202012%206104%2003\\_oktober%202012.pdf](http://www.centrumvoorsociaalbeleid.be/sites/default/files/D%202012%206104%2003_oktober%202012.pdf)
- Clarke, J. (2005). New Labour's citizens: Activated, empowered, responsibilized, abandoned?. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(4), 447-463.
- Council of the European Union. (2006). Presidency conclusions of the Brussels European Council (23/24 march 2006). Brussel: Council of the European Union.

- D'Cruz, H., & Jones, M. (2004). *Social work research in practice: Ethical and political contexts*. London: Sage.
- Dwyer, P. (2004). Agency, 'dependency' and welfare: Beyond issues of claim and contribution?. In H. Dean (Ed.), *The ethics of welfare: Human rights, dependency and responsibility* (pp. 135-154). Bristol: The Policy Press.
- European Parliament. (2015). Resolution of 24 November 2015 on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty.
- Ferguson, I., & Lavalette, M. (2004). Beyond power discourse: Alienation and social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(3), 297-312.
- Fine, M., & Teram, E. (2013). Overt and covert ways of responding to moral injustices in social work practice: Heroes and mild-mannered social work bipeds. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(7), 1312-1329.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Surveiller et punir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Fox Harding, L. (1996). *Family, state and social policy*. Basingstoke: McMillan.
- Gray, M. (2014). The swing to early intervention and prevention and its implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1750-1769.
- Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 131-146.
- Kornrich, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2013). Investing in children: Changes in spending on children, 1972 to 2007. *Demography*, 50(1), 1-23.
- Lindquist, M. J., & Lindquist, G. S. (2012). The dynamics of child poverty in Sweden. *Journal of Population Economics*, 25(4), 1423-1450.
- Lister, R. (2003). Investing in citizen-workers of the future: Transformations in citizenship and the state under New Labour. *Social Policy & Administration*, 37(5), 417-443.
- Lister, R. (2004). *Poverty*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press.
- Mestrum, F. (2011). Child poverty: A critical perspective. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 161-168.

- Morabito, C., Vandenbroeck, M., & Roose, R. (2013). 'The greatest of equalisers': A critical review of international organisations' views on early childhood care and education. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(3), 451-467.
- Platt, L. (2005). *Discovering child poverty*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Rahn, P., & Chassé, K. A. (2012). Children in poverty in Germany: Reflections on recent social work research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 23(2), 243-252.
- Raeymaeckers, P., & Dierckx, D. (2010). *Kinderen in armoede in Europees perspectief: Beleidsgerichte probleemanalyse*. Antwerpen: OASes.
- Roets, G., De Cock, R., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2011). Rechten van kinderen in armoede: Hefboom tot armoedebestrijding? In D. Reynaert, R. Roose, W. Vandenhoe, & K. Vlieghe (Eds.), *Kinderrechten: springplank of struikelblok? Naar een kritische benadering van kinderrechten* (pp. 25-41). Antwerpen: Intersentia.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., & Bouverne-De Bie, M. (2013). Researching child poverty: Towards a lifeworld orientation. *Childhood*, 20(4), 535-549.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., Schiettecat, T., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2014). Reconstructing the foundations of joined-up working: From organisational reform towards a joint engagement of child and family services. *British Journal of Social Work*, DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcu121
- Roose, R., Roets, G., Van Houte, S., Vandenhoe, W., & Reynaert, D. (2013). From parental engagement to the engagement of social work services: Discussing reductionist and democratic forms of partnership with families. *Child & Family Social Work*, 18(4), 449-457.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (2011). Security, equality and opportunity: Attitudes and the sustainability of social protection. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 21(2), 150-163.
- Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., & Peeters, J. (2012). *Towards competent systems in Early Childhood*

- Education and Care: Implications for policy and practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 508-526.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Roose, R. (2012). Why the evidence-based paradigm in early childhood education and care is anything but evident. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(4), 537-552.
- Vandenbroeck, M., & Van Lancker, W. (2014). Een tweesporenbeleid inzake kinderarmoede. (VLAS-studies 14). Antwerpen: Vlaams Armoedesteunpunt.
- Van Haarlem, A., Coene, J., & Thévenot, C. (2013). Armoede vanuit een dynamisch perspectief. In D. Dierckx, J. Coene, A. Van Haarlem, & P. Raeymaeckers (Eds.), *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting: Jaarboek 2013* (pp. 67-84). Leuven/Den Haag: Acco.
- Vlaamse Regering. (2011). *Vlaams Actieprogramma Kinderarmoede*. Brussel: Vlaamse Regering.
- Wiegers, W. (2007). Child-centred advocacy and the invisibility of women in poverty discourse and social policy. Geraadpleegd via <http://faculty.law.ubc.ca/myoung/poverty/Wanda%20Wiegers.pdf>





# DATA STORAGE FACT SHEETS

---



## PARENTS

% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Trajectories of poor families in child and family social work

% Author: Tineke Schiettecat

% Date: 12/01/2016

### 1. Contact details

---

#### 1a. Main researcher

---

- name: Tineke Schiettecat
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy  
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Tineke.Schiettecat@Ugent.be or  
schiettecatineke@gmail.com

#### 1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

---

- name: Prof. Michel Vandenbroeck  
Prof. Griet Roets
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy  
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@Ugent.be  
Griet.Roets@Ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to [data.pp@ugent.be](mailto:data.pp@ugent.be) or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

### 2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

---

\* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2015). Routes uit de armoede: Wat ouders met jonge kinderen als ondersteunend ervaren. In D. Dierckx, J. Coene, P. Raeymaeckers & M. van der Burg (Eds.), *Armoede en sociale uitsluiting: Jaarboek 2015* (pp. 198-213). Leuven/Den Haag: Acco.

Schiettecat, T. (2016). Trajectories of poor families in child and family social work. (Doctoral dissertation)

Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandenbroeck, M. (2016, submitted). What families in poverty consider supportive: Welfare strategies of parents with young children in relation to (child and family) social work. *Child and Family Social Work*.

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Retrospective biographical research with parents

### 3. Information about the files that have been stored

---

#### 3a. Raw data

---

\* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? ☒ YES / ☐ NO

If NO, please justify:

\* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- ☒ researcher PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other (specify):

\* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☒ other (specify): Server administrator of the department

#### 3b. Other files

---

\* Which other files have been stored?

- ☐ file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results.

Specify: ...

- ☒ file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcriptions of interview recordings and visualized life trajectories
- ☒ file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Files reporting results
- ☒ files(s) containing information about informed consent
- ☐ a file specifying legal and ethical provisions

- ☐ file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
- ☒ other files. Specify: An overview specifying the nature, content and context of the raw data

\* On which platform are these other files stored?

- ☒ individual PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other:

\* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☒ other (specify): Server administrator of the department

#### 4. Reproduction

---

\* Have the results been reproduced independently?: ☐ YES / ☒ NO

\* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):

- name:
- address:
- affiliation:
- e-mail:

## PRACTITIONERS

% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study: Trajectories of poor families in child and family social work

% Author: Tineke Schiettecat

% Date: 12/01/2016

### 1. Contact details

---

#### 1a. Main researcher

---

- name: Tineke Schiettecat
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy  
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Tineke.Schiettecat@Ugent.be or  
schiettecat@tineke@gmail.com

#### 1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

---

- name: Prof. Michel Vandenbroeck  
Prof. Griet Roets
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy  
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Michel.Vandenbroeck@Ugent.be  
Griet.Roets@Ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to [data.pp@ugent.be](mailto:data.pp@ugent.be) or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

### 2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies

---

\* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:

Schiettecat, T. (2016). Trajectories of poor families in child and family social work. (Doctoral dissertation)

Schiettecat, T., Roets, G., & Vandebroek, M. (2016, submitted). Hide and seek: Political agency of social workers in supporting families faced with poverty. *British Journal of Social Work*.

\* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Open in-depth interviews with social work practitioners

### 3. Information about the files that have been stored

#### 3a. Raw data

\* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? ☒ YES / ☐ NO  
If NO, please justify:

\* On which platform are the raw data stored?

- ☒ researcher PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other (specify):

\* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☒ other (specify): Server administrator of the department

#### 3b. Other files

\* Which other files have been stored?

- ☐ file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results.

Specify: ...

- ☒ file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcriptions of interview recordings

- ☒ file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Files reporting results

- ☒ files(s) containing information about informed consent

- ☐ a file specifying legal and ethical provisions

- ☐ file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...

- ☒ other files. Specify: An overview specifying the nature, content and context of the raw data

\* On which platform are these other files stored?

- ☒ individual PC
- ☒ research group file server
- ☐ other:

\* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?

- ☒ main researcher
- ☒ responsible ZAP
- ☐ all members of the research group
- ☐ all members of UGent
- ☒ other (specify): Server administrator of the department

#### 4. Reproduction

---

\* Have the results been reproduced independently?: ☐ YES / ☒ NO

\* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):

- name:
- address:
- affiliation:
- e-mail: