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in precarity**

Journal:	<i>The British Journal of Social Work</i>
Manuscript ID	BJSW-21-196.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
ETHICS, VALUES AND CULTURE:	Critical Social Work, Social justice
FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE:	Family support
HEALTH AND ILLNESS:	
INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND GLOBAL ISSUES:	Europe
POLICY, POLITICS AND LEGISLATION:	Inequality, Poverty/, Welfare benefits
PRACTICE INTERVENTIONS:	
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION:	Qualitative methods
SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL CARE WITH ADULTS:	
SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION:	Social work practitioners, Service users, Social work theory and methods

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Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity

Abstract

In contemporary European welfare states, poverty reduction strategies can currently be characterized as individualistic rather than solidaristic, focusing on welfare recipients' merit rather than securing their rights. Based on the findings of a recent research project in Belgium, we explore how social workers develop strategies to combat child poverty in local municipalities. Inspired by the work of the critical French scholars Robert Castel and Serge Paugam, our qualitative analysis reveals how social workers construct stereotypes, conditions and binaries between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in their everyday practice. Our results elucidate how social workers strengthen processes of social disqualification when they support children and sanction parents living in poverty. Interestingly, our analysis also shows how social work takes a critical stance in relation to the recent shifts in the normative value orientation of social policy and social work.

Key words

Poverty, precarity, social disqualification, welfare conditionality

Teaser text

- Child poverty is a persistent, complex and multi-dimensional problem in most Western societies
- Social policy rhetoric increasingly favours individualist explanations for child poverty, which portrays parents as 'bad' and 'underserving' parents
- This rationality affects social work interventions and influences their social justice aspirations
- Our study is informed by the theoretical set of ideas on 'precarity' and 'social disqualification' of the critical French scholars Robert Castel and Serge Paugam
- Our qualitative study offers an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the positions and perspectives of social workers in their interaction with families in precarious situations
- Our findings reveal how social workers construct stereotypes, conditions and binaries in their everyday practice, and contribute to processes of social disqualification
- Our analysis also shows how social workers scrutinize, renegotiate, and reframe stereotypes, conditions, and binaries and remain loyal to their social justice aspirations

Introduction

Child poverty historically features as a persistent, complex and multi-dimensional problem in most Western societies (Platt, 2005). Child poverty thus has to be considered a ‘wicked issue’ that cuts across a diversity of policy domains and is extremely complex to be dealt with by social policy and social work actors (Main & Bradshaw, 2015; Jacquet, 2020). During the last few decades, European welfare states have developed child poverty reduction strategies that coincide with a social investment rhetoric, which is often reflected in national social inclusion policies (see the recent Lisbon strategy, 2000-2010, and the EU 2020 strategy, 2010-2020; Bradshaw & Chzhen, 2009). In the brave new world of social investment, the child is positioned as the central object of intervention which “divorces children’s welfare from that of their parents” (Lister, 2006, p. 315-316). Social policy rhetoric increasingly favours individualist explanations for child poverty, which portrays poor parents for example “as making bad spending decisions, and transmitting their attitudes and behaviours on to their children” (Main & Bradshaw, 2015, p. 38). It has therefore been argued that the social investment endeavour involves a paradigmatic shift in government commitments from securing the welfare of citizens through “a depoliticizing discourse of deficits, competitiveness, and balanced budgets” (Garrett, 2019, p. 190). This shift demonstrates a complex historical reconfiguration of the institutional framework of European welfare states, in particular in relation to the principles of collective responsibility and solidarity (Villadsen, 2007; Lorenz, 2016), yet however reveals subtle elements of continuity and discontinuity in policy landscapes (Garrett, 2019).

As Lorenz (2016, p. 6) argues, social work across Europe is currently increasingly caught in these changing historical and social welfare arrangements that reflect the shift of “attention in public policy away from the enhancement of social solidarity”. The neoliberal social investment rationality nonetheless intrinsically incorporates social work actors and ingrains their social justice aspirations and practices (Kessl, 2009). Our research interest involves social work actors, who might weaken and dismantle solidarity mechanisms towards families living in poverty in controlling and intrusive ways; treating parents as ‘incapable’ and ‘underserving’ because they are deemed responsible for dealing with the structural circumstances in which their children live and treating children as victims of their parents (Goldson, 2002; Lister, 2006). The International Federation of Social Work however continues to proclaim that the social work profession recognizes that human rights need to coexist alongside collective responsibility. Therefore, a major focus of social work is “to advocate for the rights of people at all levels, and to facilitate outcomes where people take responsibility for each other’s well-being and realize and respect the inter-dependence among people” (IFSW, 2014).

The article explores the findings of a recent qualitative research project in Belgium, that was commissioned by the Federal Science Policy to examine the meaning of social work being involved in local networks to combat child poverty (see Roets, 2018, 2020, 2021). Federal Social Policy has coined the ‘Children First’ policy program (see Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration, 2021), which entails the development of local, inter-organisational networks of social work and welfare services in order to combat child poverty (Jacquet, 2020). Whereas our study concerns social work practitioners involved in these local networks in which the Public Centres for Social Welfare are key coordinators, social work has diverse responsibilities, ranging from the allocation of welfare benefits when parents are unemployed to supporting the parents in their parenting, finding affordable housing, .. In the following sections, we explain our theoretical set of ideas.

Eroding the value of collective responsibility and solidarity: a recent shift to social insecurity

European welfare states originally pursued a constitutive rights-based notion of collective responsibility and mutual solidarity, resulting in redistribution and social protection rationales (Dean, 2015). Due recognition was given to human interdependency, being considered a universal feature of the human condition (Lister, 1997). Therefore, social security requires that welfare states critically pursue mutual social protection. In that vein, Dean (2015) refers to the idea that welfare states realize rights when governments enable their citizens to protect not just their family and neighbours but also distant strangers, mediated by welfare state arrangements and institutions. Thus, the pursuit of collective responsibility and solidarity is premised on a socially just judgment in the public sphere rather than on a sort of moral duty embedded in the private sphere (Lorenz, 2016; Zamora, 2017).

Be that as it may, central to the most radical expression of the recently emerging social investment paradigm is the finding that the dependency of citizens on the social welfare system, or welfare dependency, is regarded as a vital social risk (Dean, 2015; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). The debate on social protection and social security has been reframed as an issue of preventing the risk of welfare dependency on the social welfare system (Dean, 2015). As Garrett (2018, p. 49) asserts: “those mired in welfare dependency are framed as a burdensome weight serving to impede, with their ‘negative’ and ‘workshy’ attitudes and lifestyles, the journey to economic ‘recovery’”. This results in a focal concern in the behaviour and attitudes of the poor and the competence which should be expected of them (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Tyler, 2020). Also Tyler (2020) formulates a sharp critique on welfare reforms that are supposed to end so-called shameful ‘dependency cultures’, arguing that these policy reforms are causing pressure to get vulnerable citizens off benefits by imposing conditions and sanctions.

In the European context, we see an alarming emergence of critical scholarly interest in how the welfare system has shifted the emphasis from social security and reconfigured into a system of social insecurity (Villadsen, 2007; Garrett, 2018, 2019; Fletcher & Flint, 2018; Kessler, 2009; Kessler, Oechler & Schröder, 2019). The reconfiguration of the institutional framework of welfare states is based on a twisted reasoning, “people fall to the bottom *because* they are undeserving” (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013, p. 285). This is also the case in Belgium where social security and protection principles have been institutionalized in welfare state structures (Zamora, 2017), yet currently the dependency of citizens on the social welfare and social security system is increasingly framed as a ‘dangerous development’ by various policy makers (Van Haute, 2020). This is especially the case in Flanders on account of the center-right political climate (Roets, 2020), which shows the political and ideological path dependency of the different regions in Belgium including Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia.

As such, new forms of social insecurity have been injected by neo-liberal welfare systems in people’s lives (Garrett, 2019), which construe “our collective social obligation very narrowly” and lead to deepening poverty and widening income and wealth inequalities (Good Gingrich, 2010, p. 108). While poverty is scrutinized under the social and political microscope as a problem of people living at the bottom of the social and economic scale and burdening societies, dynamics of inequality are largely being ignored (Ridge & Wright, 2008). Due to the dominance of the market in the neoliberal phase of modern capitalism, Turner (2016) argues that citizens come increasingly to resemble marginalized denizens, or a precariat regarded as the bottom-rung of the ladder of citizenship. In that vein, we explore the work of the French

sociologists Robert Castel and Serge Paugam, which offers pertinent ideas for social work's social justice aspirations.

Reclaiming collective responsibility and solidarity: struggling against processes of social disqualification

The French sociologist Robert Castel dedicated his late career to a critical analysis of the evolution of the welfare state in France, underpinned by social class struggles. In his seminal book *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale, une chronique du salariat* (1995), he refers to welfare states in which capitalist dynamics rule and create 'wage societies', which signify differentiated and hierarchical societies and result in gross social inequalities that cut across the lives of citizens. Castel follows in the footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu, and tackles the emergence of a 'new' social class, the so-called precariat, situated "below the middle class or wage society, concerning individuals in the status of unemployment or underemployment" (Castel, 2011, p. 422), who are thus experiencing precariousness. He established this concept based on the observation that there are striking and alarming similarities between the living conditions of the blue-collar working class described as the *proletariat* in the early 1900s, and the living conditions of the *precariat* in contemporary welfare state arrangements. As Gill and Pratt (2008, p. 27) explain: the 'precariat' designates "a neologism that brings together the meanings of precariousness and proletariat to signify an experience of exploitation".

The concept might offer an inspiring and critical lens to tackle contemporary social inequalities and insecurities (Gill & Pratt, 2008). In the vein of Castel's frame of class struggle, Paugam (1988, 2002) refers to the precariat as a new social class emerging all over Europe. Furthermore, in Guy Standing's book (2011), *The Precariat: the new dangerous class*, reference is made to a new class-in-the-making in continental Europe, which suffers from increasing social inequalities and social insecurities. In more recent studies of new forms of precariousness, there is a remarkable and growing research interest in this topic (see Good Gingrich, 2010; Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson and Waite, 2014). In the realm of employment, for example, the precariat is associated with forms of insecure, low-wage, contingent, often part-time, flexible work that is made available to 'working poor' as part of economic dynamics that structurally disadvantage and exploit people who already live at the bottom of the social fabric (Good Gingrich, 2010). Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) refer to the dynamic nature of recurrent poverty as the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle: workers become entrapped in a long-term cycling between insecure, low-quality and low-paid jobs, and unemployment.

Key to the work of Castel and Paugam however is the fact that they situate individuals on a dynamic and multi-dimensional continuum that ranges from integration into society to a state of cumulative social ruptures (Silver, 2007), framed as a process of 'social disaffiliation' (Castel, 1995) or 'social disqualification' (Paugam, 1988; 1996; 2009). In *La disqualification sociale: essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté* (2009), Paugam introduces an analysis of how poverty, social inequality, and forms of precariousness are produced and reproduced – resulting in the concept he calls social disqualification (see also "*Le salarié de la précarité*", Paugam, 2002). He argues that individuals who face precariousness in their attempts to integrate into society experience processes of social disqualification, "especially when the possibility to collectively defend rights stays low" (Paugam, 2002, preface). Paugam (1996) draws attention to how complex dynamics and dimensions of poverty and social inequality, situated on different life domains, interfere with each other as a cumulation of a lack of material as well as immaterial resources. For example, precariousness on the labour market or what Castel (2011) calls "under-employment", defined as job insecurity or short/long-term unemployment, can resemble with

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3 low education, low income, poor housing conditions, marital breakdown/divorce and/or
4 impoverished social relationships, (mental) health problems, and so on (see also Good Gingrich,
5 2010).
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8 In his books “*La disqualification sociale: essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*” (1988) and
9 “*L’intégration inégale: force, fragilité et rupture des liens sociaux*” (2014), Paugam is
10 interested in how individuals who are caught in this spiral of social disqualification perceive
11 their use of social work services yet also develop strategies of coping and survival (Roets, 2017,
12 2018). Although they are aware of the inferiority of their status and of being stigmatised by a
13 wider society, including social workers, as “the poor”, “charity cases” or as being “inadequate
14 to civilisation”, they also develop strategies to resist these forms of moral degradation and find
15 ways to renegotiate, shift, and challenge processes of social disqualification (Paugam, 1988,
16 2014). In the course of the social disqualification process, nonetheless, people gradually lose
17 social relations and elementary forms of solidarity: “without social relations of any kind, they
18 lack the resources to find a way back into society” (Silver, 1994: 559). Processes of social
19 disqualification accordingly entail moral degradation with respect to their existential human
20 dignity (Paugam, 1988, 2014).
21
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23 24 **Research methodology**

25 26 *Data collection strategies*

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28 Our research project objective was to explore how social work develops strategies to combat
29 child poverty in four different local authorities in Belgium. Children living in poverty have
30 recently become central targets of local policy and social work intervention in Belgium (Federal
31 Public Planning Service for Social Integration, 2021). Ethical approval of the research study
32 was granted by the Ethical Committee of Author’s own before the research started, as the funder
33 (Federal Science Policy) demands.
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36
37 4 networks to combat child poverty were selected for the empirical fieldwork. All of the
38 networks operate in areas with a higher than average number of families living in poverty.
39 Whereas networks A and B are located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium,
40 networks C and D are located in Wallonia, the French-speaking region in Belgium. Each
41 network had its own unique constellation:
42

- 43 • Network A is situated in a suburban municipality close to Brussels. This network
44 consists of 5 partners and combines the provision of material and immaterial support
45 (e.g. welfare allowances, employment, parent support). It is targeted towards vulnerable
46 families, and aims at developing individualized support interventions.
- 47 • Network B is located in a small municipality in Flanders and involves over 60 individual
48 members. This network aims to provide parent support for all families with children in
49 the community.
- 50 • Network C develops services in rural areas to provide childcare and parenting support
51 for all families with children under 3 years of age, with special attention to the creation
52 of affordable and accessible services for families who have a lack of income and
53 mobility.
- 54 • Network D targets vulnerable children around a small city in Wallonia. The coordinator
55 and the partners aim to prevent dropping out of school early and bullying. The network
56 uses a street-level approach to reduce the distance between service providers and users,
57 and the school is seen as a very important actor in the network.
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3 We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews to gain an in-depth and dynamic understanding
4 of the interactions of social workers with families living in poverty, and of their mutual
5 experiences and perspectives of these interactions. In Network A, 8 local network actors were
6 interviewed, in Network B 8, in Network C 10, and in Network D 15 (n = 41). The interviews
7 were conducted in the research participants' workplace and took between 1 and 2 hours. The
8 perspectives of parents were examined to explore how they experience the interventions of, and
9 interactions with, the social workers.. In Network A, 11 parents were interviewed, in Network
10 B 12, in Network C 6, and in Network D 17 (n = 46). This research venture took place in formal
11 as well as informal settings (including in their homes and other locations). The interviews took
12 from 1 - 2 hours.
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15 ***Strategies of data analysis***

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18 We analysed the data, consisting of verbatim transcriptions of the qualitative interviews with
19 social workers and parents living in poverty, through a directed approach to qualitative content
20 analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). A directed approach – referred to as “deductive category
21 application” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1281) – serves primarily to refine, extend, and enrich
22 existing research insights. We were elaborating on Paugam's theory on processes of social
23 disqualification in which he identifies 3 successive stages: people being at risk (“*les fragiles*”),
24 people being dependent on social work (“*les assistés*”), and people living on the margins of
25 society (“*les marginaux*”) (see Paugam, 1988, 2014; Silver, 1994). Whereas he focuses mainly
26 on the experiences of people living in precarity with social welfare interventions, our coding
27 process also focused on the underlying assumptions and strategies of social work practitioners
28 who might (re-)produce or challenge processes of social disqualification towards families. The
29 three main thematic codes (informed by the 3 successive stages identified by Paugam) inspired
30 the development of new codes and sub-codes, that emerged inductively in the interview data
31 and analytically captured the mutual experiences and perspectives of social workers and parents
32 in their social interactions. This process of data analysis allowed us to identify 3 different ways
33 in which processes of social disqualification emerge: (1) stereotyping, (2) employing welfare
34 conditionality, and (3) constructing binaries of un/deserving poor. The 3 strategies in which
35 processes of social disqualification are shaped in interactions of social workers with families
36 living in poverty are analytically interrelated and intensify each other in accumulative ways. In
37 our qualitative analysis, we explain each of these mechanisms while actively fusing theoretical
38 and empirical sources.
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43 **Research findings**

44 ***Stereotypes***

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47 According to Paugam (1988), people who find themselves in precarious circumstances
48 experience feelings of social inferiority. Research shows that social workers often implicitly
49 perceive people living in poverty through stereotypes and prejudices, which might create
50 feelings of social inferiority, shame, stigma, and humiliation (Lister, 2004; Krumer-Nevo,
51 2016). Tyler (2020) refers to the ‘welfare stigma machine of austerity’, which incorporates a
52 relentless process of stigmatisation as a constant cycle of judgement that gets under the skin
53 and erodes people's self-esteem. Families reflected on feelings of stigmatisation and othering,
54 and perceptions that they were inferior, which were reinforced and legitimised through their
55 engagement with social work. The interview with one of the mothers shows that she is well-
56 aware of the negative and stereotypical framing of her strategy to search for employment.
57 Although her situation reflects the imprecise requirements of workfare (see Good Gingrich,
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2010) and the complex dimensions being at stake in precariousness (Paugam, 2014), the social workers do not take into account the fact that she does not have a computer. She tries to overcome this issue, and yet she is treated in ways that increase her feeling of social inferiority:

They expect you to find employment as the solution of your poverty situation, but I'm not able to use a computer, either at home or in public places. I just lack the resources. My strategy is to work on the computer here in the industry park, yet it is also not feasible to do this three times a week. They are looking at me as a total failure, saying "there she is again" (Mother, network A)

One of the social workers seems to confirm that this kind of stereotypical thinking, stigmatisation, 'Othering' and ignorance of the knowledge of poor people (Lister, 2004; Krumer-Nevo, 2016) is, however often unintentionally, an intrinsic part of her professional attitude. The emphasis in how she supports families also reflects a moral judgment towards supposedly 'bad parents' about what kinds of cultural values and norms are appropriate for raising children living in poverty:

Good support means that you make parents realize that they need to spend their money to provide their children with social and cultural leisure time activities. That's the surplus value of my work: I teach mothers that they shouldn't yell at the children, and how to punish their children. Another issue is that we teach them that they shouldn't buy expensive mobile phones, but need to spend their money to buy healthy food rather than fries and hamburgers at the end of the month. (...) the point is that those mothers need to wake up to the idea that the only solution is that they develop the proper attitude to work (Social worker, network B)

In many occasions, this results in experiences of shame and humiliation of parents living in poverty, with reference to what Krumer-Nevo (2016, p. 1797) calls 'micro aggressions' defined as "subtle, apparently innocuous behaviours engaged in by (...) professionals in their interactions with poor people". Also Walker (2014) confirms that people living in poverty are repeatedly exposed to shaming by the corrosive attitudes of people they meet, including social work, and feel ashamed for being 'unable' to meet societal expectations and fulfil their own aspirations.

Our findings however indicate that other social workers tackle and work through these poverty-related micro aggressions. They do so by framing the structural problems that are at stake in complex interplays in the precarious lives of both parents and their children as an existential condition (see Paugam, 2014; Good Gingrich, 2010), taking this into account when they support the families:

There was a mother who struggled with the problem that she couldn't get her four children enrolled in the same school, they were all attending different schools. That makes it almost impossible for the mother to cope. In practical terms, she didn't have the money for a car, had to get the children to four different schools on time in the morning, and had to be on time at her work. Therefore, we forcefully lobbied to make sure that the children could attend the same school and that a bus came round for the children. It's our duty to relate the concerns on different life domains and make life a bit more bearable for the parents and the children (Social worker, network A)

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3 Our research reveals the importance of social workers being capable of creating space to capture
4 what is actually going on in the lifeworld of parents rather than (re-)producing stereotypes about
5 the families. An understanding of how material, social and systemic resources constitute
6 parents' and children's experiences requires that social workers frame "the everyday with
7 reference to its obstinacy, its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations" according to their
8 quest for social justice (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009, p. 132). This requires an open-mindedness
9 to actually ask the parents how they perceive their situation, in which ways structural and
10 systemic aspects interrelate with their lifeworld, and negotiating with them what is feasible and
11 desirable in how they get support to fulfil life aspirations (Walker, 2014). In this example, the
12 mother first figures as someone who refuses to work and was blamed by social workers for
13 being 'irrational' and 'dishonest'.
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17 *This mom told me that she would enjoy being employed, yet she said to another social*
18 *worker of our network of social work services that she didn't want to work, and she told*
19 *people who can provide employment that it was too soon to work. Those social workers*
20 *were very demanding, and blamed her for not being honest (Social worker, network D)*
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23 However, the negotiation with other social workers shows that she had reasonable arguments
24 and aspirations in combining care for her child with employment.
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27 *Yet, these kinds of contradictions require us to be honest and discuss this with them and*
28 *to bring together all the takes on the situation. When I talked to the mother, she told me*
29 *that she is struggling with what is the best thing to do for her child. She would actually*
30 *love to be employed and didn't want to miss the opportunity to have support in finding*
31 *employment, but she prefers to stay at home a little bit longer for her baby. After a while,*
32 *she contacted me, saying that she now wanted to find a job! (Social worker, network D)*
33

34
35 The stereotypes being (re-)produced by social workers lead to moral judgements and micro-
36 aggressions towards families, resulting in experiences of shame, stigma and humiliation.
37

38 **Conditions**

39
40 Paugam (1988) asserts that people who endure cycles of living in socially insecure and
41 precarious circumstances gradually learn to identify themselves with the status of welfare
42 dependents, and they eventually might get into conflict with social workers. The welfare
43 apparatus, being informed by particular understandings of "the causes of poverty and
44 unemployment and the orientations and conduct of marginalised groups" (Fletcher and Flint,
45 2018, p. 772), seems to lead to welfare conditionality. Our findings show that the families'
46 access to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change
47 people's behaviour. As one of the mothers explains, she is judged by the social worker in
48 conditional ways before she is granted a welfare benefit while remaining unemployed:
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52 *At the end of the month, I have to ask my social worker for money, whether she can*
53 *grant me some. And then I first have to prove that I have used it in well-considered and*
54 *responsible ways, showing her the bills for the groceries, child care service, and so on.*
55 *And then the social worker often argues that it is high time that I find employment,*
56 *preferably on a full-time basis. I then have to prove that I have indeed made efforts,*
57 *showing her that I applied for jobs many times but that it didn't work out (Mother,*
58 *network C)*
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3 Our analysis of interactions with social workers shows that they link the realisation of rights to
4 the condition that parents behave in responsible ways. This welfare conditionality often
5 emerges when families are on welfare benefits, which requires social workers to judge whether
6 or not it is reasonable to grant these benefits. The example concerns a mother, who is in search
7 of employment that allows her to reasonably combine this with the care for her 3 children, yet
8 she is treated in controlling and disciplinary ways before she receives a welfare benefit (see
9 also Good Gingrich, 2010).

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11
12 *They don't want to employ me because I have three children. I'm not eligible for a full-*
13 *time job, I need a flexible job, because my husband works until six or six-thirty, and I*
14 *need to pick up the children at five-thirty. I would love to start in a half-time job and,*
15 *when my son starts to attend pre-school in September, work full-time. But my social*
16 *worker thinks that is not enough for now (Mother, network C)*

17
18
19 Recent research reveals that welfare benefits are increasingly conditional; access to publicly
20 provided welfare benefits and services is dependent on individual citizens first agreeing to meet
21 particular obligations or patterns of behaviour (Dwyer, 2004; Fletcher & Flint, 2018). In that
22 sense, people do not have rights without fulfilling their duties. Our research shows that social
23 workers believe that undeserving beneficiaries must be prodded to combat their own laziness.
24 In this example, the social worker justifies the conditionalisation of the welfare benefit as the
25 only leverage he has to motivate individuals, especially those who believe – he claims – the
26 provision to be unlimited in time.

27
28
29 *Normally, if the beneficiary does not meet the conditions, we have the option to suspend*
30 *his minimum welfare benefit. We don't often do that, but it's the only way to motivate*
31 *someone, to boost him, tell him to get himself in motion. Otherwise, it's too easy –*
32 *beneficiaries believe that the income we provide is for life. We can no longer accept*
33 *this, because there are too many abuses, people who lean on the system. We can no*
34 *longer afford that now. It's the only leverage we still have to activate those who are lazy*
35 *(Social worker, network D)*

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37
38 The assumptions are premised on professional orientations which view poverty as “the sum
39 product of the psychological, moral, behavioural and cultural pathologies and deficits of poor
40 people” (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1795), resulting in assumed welfare dependency that is framed
41 as a burden for an economically prosperous society (Garrett, 2018). The neo-liberal paradigm
42 also leads to the use of sanctions, being justified by “notions of the duties and obligations of
43 welfare recipients and a paternalistic belief that marginalised groups need to be facilitated to
44 behave appropriately and incentivised to take up support”, as objects of suspicion (Fletcher and
45 Flint, 2018, p. 772).

46
47
48 This welfare conditionality and sanctioning is also tangible in the case of a family in which
49 twins were born prematurely. The father is involved in full-time employment, but he works
50 extremely long days and has to accept any kind of precarious working conditions, including
51 night shifts. The mother has to explain their situation time after time to social work services
52 that monitor whether she has been in search of – preferably full-time – employment to keep her
53 allowance. The family struggles in chronic ways with a lack of material as well as immaterial
54 resources on multiple life domains, such as lack of income and resources to pay for the twins'
55 healthcare, and so on. For the mother, this is very demanding:

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3 *It's exhausting, we can't handle it any more. We could end up in a divorce. (...) I could*
4 *not sleep for two years, always worrying about their health. In the meantime, I had to*
5 *deal with welfare-to-work programme inspectors. I got into big trouble with them*
6 *because I did not get a job, I couldn't give them enough proof of my job seeking. I've*
7 *tried to explain to them that most employers always got scared when I explained my*
8 *family situation, that I have to take care of young twins, without any possibility of child*
9 *care. Due to my husband's new position in the company, we live far from our hometown,*
10 *far from family support, without any support from our parents or sisters or brothers.*
11 *(...) It's not that I don't want to get a job – to be honest, I really need a job, my husband*
12 *and I are sick of being unable to buy a loaf of bread at the end of the month due to lack*
13 *of money (Mother, network C)*
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17 This conditionality is also constructed, for example, in relation to employment as a condition
18 for being eligible to use childcare services, which are originally meant to support parents in
19 finding and keeping their employment. These conditions are based on an economic logic, that
20 operates irrespective of the viewpoints, experiences and life worlds of parents (see Grunwald
21 & Thiersch, 2009).
22

23
24 *My social worker, who is responsible for supporting me as a family support worker, told*
25 *me that accessibility to childcare was dependent on whether or not I was already*
26 *employed. However, my social worker also told me that I had to accept any kind of*
27 *employment that is offered, since I can't be too demanding (Mother, network A)*
28
29

30 However, social workers also challenge these ideas, arguing that the structural circumstances
31 in which families live should be seen as conditions for social workers to be able to “take a
32 stance and behave as partners” to support families in the struggle against poverty (see Krumer-
33 Nevo, 2016, p. 1802). One of the social workers relies on an example of a situation that evolved
34 well, arguing that structural conditions matter, such as being educated and having a diploma to
35 find proper employment:
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38 *Recently, I accidentally ran into this mother in the IKEA. It was such a wonderful*
39 *surprise to hear that she is now fully involved in a Bachelor's education track. We*
40 *supported her for three years. She received support from all kinds of social work and*
41 *welfare services, she got a welfare benefit and financial support, and so on. And I*
42 *thought, Oh my God, the support we offered on all these life domains matters! (Social*
43 *worker, network B)*
44
45

46 Welfare conditionality, tangible in families' obligations and expected patterns of behaviour
47 towards social work, increases social insecurity for those who are already living in poverty. It
48 illustrates a shift from a social work rights-based orientation and social protection to increased
49 conditionality and social insecurity.
50

51 **Binaries**

52
53 Paugam (1988) argues that people who experience an accumulation of disadvantages tend to be
54 no longer protected by structural and rights-oriented social work and welfare interventions, but
55 rely predominantly on charity-based social relations (Paugam, 1988; Silver, 1994). Social work
56 research currently shows that people who are dependent on the social welfare system might be
57 easily subjected to surveillance and strategies “to change the morally impaired poor's perceived
58 passivity, dependency and laziness into self-reliance, independence, competitiveness, and
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3 industriousness” (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1801). The underlying reasoning is that, unlike
4 others, the poor, as a so-called underclass, fail to function in productive ways, echoing a binary
5 and pre-welfare state distinction between ‘good’ and deserving versus ‘bad’ and undeserving
6 citizens (Villadsen, 2007). In one example, a social worker explains that some parents hardly
7 struggle to offer a better life to their children, and frames parents who neglect their children’s
8 well-being – for example, by buying an expensive cell phone instead of lunch for their children
9 – as undeserving ones. The blaming clearly overrules the alertness for the shame of the parents,
10 for being treated as a “charity case” (Paugam, 2014).
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14 *I was very shocked once. In a school, they had sold lasagne or something else, because*
15 *the school found out that one girl in the kindergarten did not show up at the school*
16 *during the afternoon because her parents could not afford to give her a lunch box. The*
17 *parents were ashamed – so they picked the girl up every day at noon. But somehow the*
18 *parents had the latest iPhone, a better phone than mine. So I thought, you don’t have*
19 *any money to give your daughter a lunch, but you have enough to buy a very expensive*
20 *cell phone – that doesn’t make sense. They don’t need a cell phone like that, it’s not*
21 *necessary (Social worker, network B)*
22

23
24 Furthermore, social workers often insist on the limits of welfare benefits and services, and argue
25 for selectivity, conditionality and sanction (Fletcher and Flint, 2018; Jacquet, 2020). According
26 to this particular social worker, deserving parents are the ones who accept the conditions,
27 obligations and norms issued by social workers, and demonstrate a willingness to deprive
28 themselves for the sake of their children:
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30
31 *It’s great to help people, but we should not assist them too much. It would be awesome*
32 *to support everyone, but we can only support those who follow up on their*
33 *responsibilities and who deprive themselves for their children (Social worker, network*
34 *A)*
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36
37 After the conditions, disciplinary sanctions are imposed on people living at the edge of society
38 (Fletcher and Flint, 2018), when social workers grant parents an inferior second-class
39 citizenship status. One of the parents was, for example, actually sanctioned because she was
40 not able to attend an appointment with a social worker. As a consequence, she lost her welfare
41 benefit for 6 months. The underlying reason for missing the appointment was the fact that the
42 family was not able to pay for the train ticket to get there, but the social worker didn’t show
43 any understanding.
44

45
46 *We need to pay the full price for train tickets. At that point, they suspended me for 6*
47 *months. I just didn’t have any money left to buy the ticket and get to the appointment.*
48 *The social worker said that the ticket cost only €4, but I just didn’t have any money left*
49 *(Mother, network B)*
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51
52 Other social workers, however, stress the importance of negotiating with families and other
53 social work and welfare services to be able to challenge simplistic dichotomies between ‘good’
54 and ‘bad’ parents. These efforts square with the attempt of social workers to tackle forms of
55 alienation (see Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009), which may be experienced as “societal isolation
56 and personal dislocation resulting from powerlessness” (Fletcher and Flint, 2018, p. 773). They
57 stress the importance of getting to know the complex life conditions in which the families live,
58 in order to be able to understand how they give meaning to the situations in which they survive,
59 in order to provide resources.
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Welfare services that are stimulating the parents to find employment often raise quite simplistic judgments about the parents, because they don't understand what is going on in the lives of the families. So we often have to join the parents in those appointments – otherwise, they are easily sanctioned. These experiences mean that they often no longer seek support in the long run (Social worker, network A)

11 Irrespective of the circumstances in which parents are expected to raise their children, social
12 workers often make a clear distinction between beneficiaries who deserve support and the ones
13 who do not, and even make a distinction between children as deserving and parents as
14 undeserving welfare recipients.
15

16 17 **Concluding reflections** 18

19 Our research study is based on the theoretical set of ideas of the French scholars Castel and
20 Paugam who critically tackle the reproduction of social inequalities, insecurities, and poverty
21 in our societies. Their novel work on the issue of precariousness concerns a comprehensive
22 conceptualisation of how the lack of material and immaterial resources, starting from a
23 structural lack of income due to un/employment, leads to a new group of '(working) poor'
24 citizens. They situate individuals in a dynamic and multi-dimensional process of cumulative
25 social ruptures that are resembled on different life domains, framed as a process of 'social
26 disaffiliation' (Castel, 1995) or 'social disqualification' (Paugam, 1988; 1996; 2009). Whereas
27 Paugam addresses this spiral of social disqualification from the viewpoint of so-called welfare
28 recipients and their experiences of social work, our study attempts to gain an in-depth and
29 dynamic understanding of the mutual experiences and perspectives of the social interactions
30 between social workers and families living in precarity.
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34 As a major limitation of our study, we want to stress the lack of systematic attention for the
35 intersection of social inequalities of gender, disability, and ethnicity/race in our empirical
36 fieldwork. These aspects have been stressed as being of vital importance for an in-depth
37 understanding of how 'the precariat' is produced as an emerging new social class (see Good
38 Gingrich, 2010; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Lewis et al., 2014).
39
40

41 Our study however confirms Paugam's ideas on how families both renegotiate and resist forms
42 of moral degradation in which social workers are complicit, yet also lack the proper resources
43 to reveal their right to human flourishing in our societies (see Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013).
44 Also Schoneville (2020) addresses how stigmatising social work attitudes powerfully affect
45 individuals and families, and attack their subjectivity from within, making social work
46 counterproductive for both social work and vulnerable citizens. In order to avoid further
47 humiliation, families might be reluctant to make use of social services. Social work is frequently
48 conditional on the parents' willingness to integrate the social workers' normative and
49 disciplinary framework (see also Good Gingrich, 2010; Fletcher and Flint, 2018; Garrett, 2019).
50 These dynamics operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy: parents are deemed responsible for
51 dealing with the structural conditions in which their children live, which results in a schism of
52 the 'deserving' troubled child and the 'undeserving' troublesome, incapable parent (Goldson,
53 2002; Lister, 2006).
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57 Since children are always (economically) dependent on their parents and adults in the household
58 in which they live (Lister, 2006), these social work strategies are paradoxical and
59 counterproductive in the long run since the social justice "aims, aspirations, and affiliations" of
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3 social work (Garrett, 2019, p. 190) shift into monitoring, controlling, judging and sanctioning
4 beneficiaries as undeserving ‘charity cases’ (Paugam, 2014; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Many social
5 workers thus produce expressions of neo-philanthropy (Villadson, 2007; Kessl et al., 2019;
6 Jacquet, 2020), which drastically move away from the post-world war rights-oriented welfare
7 state framework. Professional social workers do have a public mandate to provide welfare
8 resources and services without questioning whether individuals had been living up to all their
9 responsibilities as a condition for granting rights (Dwyer, 2004; Dean, 2015).

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12 Interestingly, however, our analysis also reveals how social workers take a critical stance and
13 refuse, renegotiate, and resist the recent shifts in the normative value orientation of social policy
14 and social work (Kessl, 2009; Garrett, 2019). It is of crucial importance for social work to
15 scrutinize and reframe the public discourses regarding welfare dependency, in which social
16 workers and welfare recipients are increasingly enmeshed (Kessl, 2009; Garrett, 2018, 2019;
17 Fletcher & Flint, 2018). The vital issue at stake for social work and welfare actors remains how
18 to stay loyal to the public mandate of social work in promoting principles of social justice and
19 human rights and in taking a stance when they apply and realise these principles in practice
20 (Lorenz, 2016).

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