

The erosion of social protection principles: qualitative research on the role of social work in the lives of citizens in precarious situations

Nicolas Jacquet

Supervisors

Prof. Dr. Griet Roets (UGhent)

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A dissertation submitted to Ghent University and Liège University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Social Work and Social Welfare Studies (UGhent) and for the degree of Docteur en Sciences Politiques et Sociales (ULiège)

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De erosie van de principes van sociale bescherming: kwalitatief onderzoek naar de rol van sociaal werk in het leven van burgers in preciaire situaties

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CHAPTER 1

General introduction

“ C’est ici que le laisser-faire agit d’une façon désastreuse, car il achète la richesse au prix de la misère.
(Eugène Buret, 1841)

Setting the scene

In this short introduction, we will situate the research problem in contemporary social policy and social work developments and address our knowledge ambition.

Over the last forty years, poverty reduction strategies have evolved in the Belgian political system, percolating through the heart of public action mechanisms (Palier & Surel, 2005). The poverty reduction narrative has gradually become a field on its own in the political spectrum, with countless political representatives at all levels of the Belgian federal state. From the Communities to the Federal State with the Regions in between, poverty reduction strategies are developed at all levels of the state. Among other political positions, it includes a Secretary of State, one minister in each region, one Public Center for Social Welfare (P.C.S.W.) in each municipality, whose areas of decision-making cover public measures to struggle poverty. In the same vein, countless private organizations continue to emerge and position themselves in the field of poverty reduction strategies, such as private foundations and Non-Profitable Organizations. We believe that the emergence of Poverty Reduction Strategies on the political agenda as a mode of public action (Palier & Surel, 2005) shows the gradual shift from one social model to another or in sociological terms, from one cognitive and normative matrix or paradigm (Palier & Surel, *infra*; Krumer-Nevo, 2016) to the other, with reference to a vital shift from welfare state principles to the workfare state. The gradual emergence of this latter paradigm has profoundly reshaped the Belgian social question and reshuffled the cognitive and normative frameworks inherited from the social pact of 1944 (Vrancken, 2012).

The knowledge ambition of our doctoral research project is to examine how contemporary social policies orientations and the focus on poverty and child poverty reduction strategies directly impact social work frameworks and interventions. Our exemplary focus will be on the most preeminent public institution that embodies poverty reduction strategies in Belgium, the Public Centre for Social Welfare in each municipality and its evolution over the last hundred years. Furthermore, we will demonstrate the erosion of social protection principles in the framework of poverty and child poverty reduction strategies, from the perspective of social work practices and families, considering that child poverty must always endorse a family-oriented approach.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

“Societies are not collections of individuals, but systems of signs, symbols and norms that frame the course of the game, which only the game in progress can bring into existence” (Orienne, 2019).

To understand contemporary issues at stake in the field of poverty reduction strategies, we will focus on the theoretical and conceptual framework of our dissertation. We will first develop a socio-historical perspective to address historical-genealogical dimensions of poverty reduction strategies in social policy and social work. We will also situate the Belgian developments with a particular interest in how the right to social welfare has been institutionalised in law and practice developments in Public Centres for Social Welfare. Then, we will focus on the contested nature of poverty and anti-poverty strategies which are adopted in this doctoral dissertation, and address how this relates to child poverty reduction strategies. The analytical framework being used in our doctoral research project is based on a synthesis of how historical normative value orientations culminate in the present.

1.1 Socio-historical perspective on anti-poverty strategies

We borrow from the French sociologist Robert Castel (1995) the definition of a holistic sociology, historically attached to Durkheimian thought, which considers that the social phenomena studied are traversed by two broader processes that must be considered when analysing them in depth. The first is historical and considers that all social phenomena are the result of a system of transformation from which they inherit. The second is to consider the synchronic point of view of a social phenomenon, to consider the system of constraints internal and external to the phenomenon studied.

The socio-historical approach of poverty we develop is in line with this definition, both theoretically and methodologically. We aim to demonstrate the system of transformation of the Belgian welfare state over the last hundred years with a specific focus on poverty and child poverty reduction strategies. Also, Roets and Kessl (2023) observe a complex historical remaking and transformation of the institutional framework of the welfare state in social policy and social work landscapes. Although historical developments in social policy and social work are complex and non-linear and should not be seen as “continuity without breaks and contradictions” (Lorenz, 2007, p 599), a discursive shift from charity-based to rights-oriented social work – and back? - was noticeable while European nation states evolved from pre-welfare into active welfare states (Villadsen, 2007; Kessl, 2009; Maesele, 2012; Lorenz, 2016; Garrett, 2019). We rely on that theoretical framework to broadly describe three periods, three cognitive and normative matrixes (Muller & Surell, 1995), in which shifting ideas are at play in poverty reduction strategies and social work practices development: the period of the pre-welfare and modern welfare state regimes and the rise of the welfare state, the social welfare state and the period of the active welfare (or workfare).

1.1.1 Prewelfare arrangements and the rise of the welfare state: charity-oriented strategies

Throughout the 19th century, pre-welfare constitutional states in Europe were rooted in Western enlightenment ideals and based on the rule of law and liberal democracy (Villadsen, 2007; Dean, 2015). As societies throughout Europe were under pressure to reinvent a new basis for society since traditional bonds could no longer be regarded as natural and given, radical social, political and economic transformations took place at the end of the 19th century (Rosanvallon, 2000),

identified by Donzelot (1994) as 'the social question'. During these processes of industrial revolution and urbanization, and further pauperization in different European welfare states took places, 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 (Villadsen, 2007). As such, the state distinguished between the so-called 'deserving' and 'un-deserving' poor; between those who deserve help since they have a good morality and those who do not (Winance, 2007). Paupers were conceived as a labour force to be festered and led to behave productively, with a focus on the visible behaviour of the paupers (Villadsen, 2007).

The origins of social work might be situated as a response to the emergence of 'the social question'; "through the fundamental changes in social relationships, caused by economic dislocation and revolutionary challenges to political power structures, ensuring the coherence of societies became a 'project' which had to be attended to, organized and shaped", according to the question how social solidarity can be secured under capitalist conditions (Lorenz, 2016, p. 5). The professionalization of social work has ever since been rooted in the ambiguity and an inherent field of tension between 'control' and 'care', in the attempt to keep asking the social question again and anew in changing circumstances rather than 'resolving' it (Lorenz, 2016).

At that time, social work operated in the shadow of criminal justice, as a burgeoning yet confederate social actor deployed to realise social order in European nation states, aiming at the prevention of deviance (De Bock, 1968). This led to oppressive regimes of workhouses and practices of forced labour, asylums, or prisons, and later by rather moral instructions offered by intermediate charitable and philanthropic organisations (Villadson, 2007; Maesele, 2012; Zamora Vargas, 2017).

Social work is historically rooted within the domain of civil society and concentrated in upper- and middle-class concerns towards people in poverty, mainly a blue-collar working class called "the proletariat" (Craig, 2002; Castel, 2011). Covered in bourgeoisie philanthropy and charity, these private and voluntary initiatives of social work soon started to represent the answer to social problems such as poverty and criminality, which were regarded as problems of a deficient morality of the poor being perceived as a dangerous class in society (Simpson, 2007), and accordingly as a lack of civilisation and social integration of the lower classes (Simon & Van Damme, 1989; Jones, 1998).

In diverse European countries, social work was mainly implementing controlling and disciplinary civilisation and education strategies to learn poor people to (re-)integrate socially in the existing social order (Michielse & Vankrieken, 1990; Lorenz, 2006; Villadsen, 2007).

Since the support provided to the poor was conditional, selective, and instrumental, social work can be mainly characterized as a charity (Maesele, 2012). In the long run, the poor were deemed responsible for their own welfare. Here, enlightenment ideals and the superior moral status of the philanthropists were leading principles, yet these strategies were not resolving the situation of the poor. After all, their problem was “how to render the poor useful to the state, not to secure their welfare” (Villadsen, 2007, p. 312).

However, in a similar time juncture, social work actors were intrinsically involved in social and political struggles, as part of civil society initiatives who criticised social institutions and public arrangements and rallied for systemic social change (Hermans & Roets, 2022). They pioneered in developing more emancipatory approaches. An example here is the work of Jane Addams as a driving force in the settlement movement, taking place in the slipstream of the women’s movement (Lorenz, 2016). As a form of emancipatory community work, the settlement movement’s argument was that services should be developed that are able to embrace the interests and needs of the people in their circumstances, as a partnership of sharing – especially women’s - knowledges (Spatcheck, 2019).

From the late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century onwards, European nation states gradually started to conceive a role for the welfare state in securing the welfare of citizens (Payne, 2005). Increasingly, social policy did not only invest in anti-poverty strategies for the deserving ones, but European states started to develop initiatives to secure people from social risks (Vrancken, 2012; De Bie, 2015). In the first decades of the 20th century, a public concern emerged, and early laws and structural provisions were sparsely conceived (Carey, 2003; Driessens & Geldof, 2009), particularly concerning the welfare of children such as child protection laws (Roose, 2006) and early childhood provisions (Vandenbroeck, 2006), including an early impetus to social welfare provisions (Maesele, 2012).

Social workers, who were often women representing ‘the common good’ under cover of bourgeois philanthropy, continued to exercise a subtle sort of paternalistic care, intrinsically related with social control (Jones, 1998). As an

inherent field of tension, care and control were viewed as necessary, and educational as well as disciplinary strategies were developed to govern those who were deemed employable and could contribute in keyways to the capital of the nation state, as well as “to control the unproductive and socially different” (Carey, 2003, p. 421). During the rise of the welfare state, however, western imperial powers became preoccupied with competitive national efficiency, and developed strategies and technologies to simultaneously civilise “the uneducated” in European countries as well as the so-called savage, uncivilised “Other” abroad in colonised lands (Simpson, 2007). These mechanisms of care and control included the family, education, work programs, social institutions, and informal relational practices in the community (Carey, 2003). Social work was involved in the enactment of control yet was also engaged with the tenets of the labour movement (de Swaan, 1988).

After the First World War, the economic crisis of the 30's destabilized many European states, leading to mass unemployment (Driessens & Geldof, 2009), yet the dominant discourse in liberal policy regimes like the UK highlighted the individual inadequacy of the poor (Harris, 2008), whereas Nazi and Fascist ideologies applied the divisive device of racism to distinguish collectively between racially defined groups that merited collective protection (e.g. through “generous” family policies, youth schemes, workers’ protection and recreation policies) and those deemed “unworthy”. These ideas across different political regimes were undergirded by scientific and socio-political thinking during the first half of the 20th century, expressed for instance in eugenics as a movement believing in economic savings to regenerate the nation, that highlighted the costs of “unemployable citizens” as a financial burden to society (Radford, 1994). The desire of European nation states for a pure human race and a ‘perfect’ and productive society led to repressive policies (Roets, Dean & Bouverne-De Bie, 2019). Social workers were often complicit in this project of strengthening ‘the deserving’, while eliminating ‘the undeserving’ members of society in the interest of rationality, efficiency and productivity under the cover of a scientific and even humanitarian project (Lorenz, 2016; Roets et al., 2022). On the other hand, there are also examples of social work that is keeping its commitment to the solidarity issue (Lorenz, 2007).

At the same period, public assistance implemented by PCSW in Belgium was following the same charity-oriented strategies. The history of PCSW legislation embodied the dichotomy from those who deserved charity policies to those who did not deserve it. In the late 19 century, the *Commission for the Reform of Public Assistance*, the former PCSW, sets out in its report a typology that operates the

same dichotomy. First, the *destitute* who live in misery and do not have the strength to work and therefore deserve charity-based strategies. Those were considered as the good poor. Second, the *indigents* who could not find the means to work. And finally, the *destitute* who were able but not willing to work and considered as a social danger that must be ruthlessly repressed. The distinction between the second and the third was defined in the report as: "*professional beggar, vagrant or inveterate beggars whose cunning and deceitful ways are revealed to us by investigations, vagrants without confession, the reserve of the army of crime.*" (Commission de réforme de l'Assistance Publique, 1925)

Later, the first version of the PCSW was designed in 1925 when authorities merged the former *charity offices* and *civil hospices* into one local institution called Commissions of Public Assistance. The commissions were implemented to *prevent and relieve misery, organize medical assistance and guardianship of found, abandoned and destitute children* (Organic Law, 1976). The core idea was to implement "first-aid for the poorest" policies by organizing medical care and social policies designed to struggle misery. Each commission was run by a committee who was led by local policy makers that chose who to support. However, the real nature of the Commissions did not break with arbitrary support principles and used to reproduce old traditions of charity.

1.1.2 Social welfare state: a rights-oriented institutional framework

After the Second World War, many European nation states evolved into social welfare states, particularly in continental Europe (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Originally, European welfare states critically pursued a constitutive rights-based notion of a mutual solidarity and collective responsibility – rooted in the idea of social protection – in securing the rights of citizens (Dean, 2015). Due recognition was given to human interdependency, which "is quintessential to human relationships", as the basis of social policymaking (Lister, 1997: 105). Human interdependency was regarded to be a universal feature of the human condition (Lister, 1997; Williams, 2001), entailing an over-arching recognition by the state that we *all* "are in need of different types of care and support at different stages in our lives" (Watson et al., 2004: 344). As Turner (1993: 507) has stressed, "it is from a collectively held recognition of *individual frailty* that rights as a system of mutual protection gain their emotive force". In that vein, Dean (2015) refers to the idea that welfare states realize rights when governments enable their citizens to care not just for their family and neighbours but also for

distant strangers, mediated by welfare state arrangements and institutions. Thus, the pursuit of collective responsibility and solidarity is premised on a rational, socially just judgment in the public sphere, rather than on a sort of moral duty embedded in the private sphere (Dean, 2015; Lorenz, 2016; Zamora, 2017).

In the same period, principles of citizenship and rights were increasingly recognized and institutionalised (Dean, 2015). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 showed the will to recognize the freedom and equality of, and solidarity between, all citizens. Here, the right to human flourishing for every citizen was acknowledged as the basis of conceiving social welfare states (Turner, 2008). In economically advanced states, it was widely accepted that the welfare state should play an essential role in the unconditional and universal provision of welfare (Lorenz, 2007, Payne, 2005). The main pillars (or also called 'giants') of the modern welfare state were constituted through provision of public services which every citizen might expect to need within a 'normal' life course, such as healthcare, education, social security/insurance, (full) employment, and housing, whereas provisions for especially vulnerable people - the people with whom social workers characteristically deal - were substantively different (Roets, Dean & Bouverne-De Bie, 2019).

Next to labour market qualification and securing the social order, creating equal opportunities to live a life of human flourishing became a new social-political goal (Lister, 2004; Dean, 2015). Welfare states increasingly focused on redistributing resources and power, and on realising the equality of all citizens, including people in poverty (Lister, 2004). The idea existed for a few decades that poverty as a social problem did not exist anymore, or would resolve itself by growth (Roets et al., 2012; Bouverne-De Bie, 2003; Vrancken, 2010). In the decades following on these developments, nevertheless, poverty was re-discovered as a stubborn social problem in many European welfare states (Reinecke, 2015). The conception of the welfare state suffered from several "construction errors" – the conceptual basis being framed as "altmodisch" (Abrahamson, 2005) since the point of reference was the melting away of class divisions in the golden years of post-war welfare state development.

One example concerns the idea that the nuclear family was framed as the cornerstone of our societies, leading to the neglect of gender and women's capacity to work on the regular labour market, considering it women's duty of doing care work as a kind of 'emotional labour' in the private sphere, in the shadows of the symbolic and public order sphere (Wolkowitz, 2006). The rights of people in poverty, along with the rights of other groups such as women, were

in many occasions not realised in practice: although they achieved a political status and formal entitlement as citizens, their lived citizenship - how they experience negotiate rights, responsibilities, identities and belonging in everyday social interactions — could be captured as a form of second-class citizenship (Lister 2007; Warming & Fahnoe, 2019).

The social work profession was drawn into this fundamental re-ordering and re-assembly of formal as well as informal solidarity structures as an intricate part of the various welfare state projects after the second World War and had to confront new challenges (Lorenz 2013). Rooted in administrative case-work methods, techniques of personal counselling, and disciplinary power, the social work profession was not well adapted to a rights-based approach (Roets, Dean & Bouverne-De Bie, 2019). During the 70's, however, social work further evolved as a profession with a public mandate being recognized by the welfare state and was ought to acquire a relatively autonomous position, playing an essential role in shaping the relationship between the *private sphere*, in which private troubles and concerns are at stake, and the *public sphere*, in which public issues and concerns are at stake (Roets & Kessl, 2023). As Lorenz (2016, p. 8) addresses, shaping 'the social' in the relationship between the individual's lifeworld and the system – with reference to the issue of solidarity in our societies – turns into a project to ensure the functioning of an ever more complex web of mutual interdependencies, "made all the more difficult in the face of the unleashing forces of which drive societies apart through dislocation, migration, poverty, economic exploitation, epidemics and criminality".

Also, more informal social workers in civil society organisations supported citizens to gain access to public services, to realise their social rights and to advocate for social change. Especially in the 1970s and 1980s new initiatives were taken by citizens, social workers, and social movements as a potential answer to newly evolving needs that were not addressed by public authorities, but these new initiatives also aimed to turn private troubles with which they were confronted, into public issues. As such, these practices combined direct help with a more critical, awareness-raising approach towards public authorities and society at large. Later, these new initiatives often became institutionalised, financed, and scaled up, as public authorities became convinced of the usefulness of these practices (Hermans & Roets, 2022).

1.1.2.1 The constitution of the Belgian conservative Welfare state

We have made the theoretical choice of starting from Gosta Esping-Andersen's typology of the three worlds of the welfare state, published in 1990, to grasp the particularities of the Belgian welfare state. This typology is an indispensable tool to understand the welfare theoretical framework. It should be noted at the outset that this typology does not stand up to epistemological criticism: the dangerously immobile nature of a typology, the failure to take account of the changing nature of social dynamics and the schematization exercise which proves to be highly simplifying and reductive of the disparities between types and within types themselves; and socio-historical criticism, the failure to take account of the field of Belgian public assistance in particular. However, we will use this to 'clear the way' for our discussion and to define a general framework for reflection, which we will attempt to move beyond.

According to this theoretical model, the Belgian welfare state belongs to the conservative and corporatist regime whose metaphysical principle (Palier & Surel, 2005) is to maintain the worker's income (male-bread winner), by developing welfare policies (Vrancken, 2012). The system lays on social contributions, from both workers and employers, and is organized by representatives from public institutions, employers, and unions. The level of replacement income is determined in proportion to salary and the various categories of compensation to which the worker belongs, such as unemployment, pension, or invalidity. The Belgian system is in fact largely built around the dimensions described by Esping Andersen. The social pact of 1944 gave birth to the National Social Security Office and to a proliferation of public policies aimed to protect work and to organize collective bargaining between the social partners (employers, workers and institutions). The pacification of social relations in the workplace and the organization of a social protection system undoubtedly represents the core of the Belgian welfare model, as Esping Andersen asserts in his typology.

As a matter of fact, the Belgian welfare state has been historically implemented by a multitude of intermediary players between the state, the workers, and the employers. Entire sections of Belgian society are organised around the three Belgian pillars (socialist, catholic, and liberal). These pillars, whether in the context of the pacification of social relations at work, via collective/trade union bargaining and the management of unemployment benefit funds, or in the organization of the healthcare system and mutual insurance companies, or again

in the implementation of compulsory schooling through education networks, each pillar provides its own welfare services through its own networks. It is, indeed, the Belgian pillars that organize and implement the 1944's Belgian social pact.

However, the conservative model described by Esping Andersen does not allow us to grasp the specificities of the Belgian model compared to other conservative welfare states such as France or Germany. We are aware of the Esping Andersen typology limits such as the absence of a model for the Mediterranean countries or the lack of consideration for gender issues, for which plenty of sociologists and political scientists have already addressed the main critics. Here we would like to build on his theoretical framework to add our contribution to his typology.

Notably the typology does not consider the Belgian public policies known as PCSW, which were also developed throughout the 20th century. In fact, one of the specific features of the Belgian welfare state is that it combines so-called social protection public policies inspired by the conservative/corporatist model and social assistance public policies borrowed from the liberal model. The Belgian welfare state is both inspired by the Bismarckian categorical social security system, and a residual social assistance system embodied by Public Centers for Social Welfare. Moreover, we believe that PCSW legislations such as the right to a residual minimum income or the right to social integration must be considered when analysing the Belgian welfare state.

1.1.2.2 Welfare policies in PCSW's legislations

In the post-war period, as a response to the horrors of the Second World War a collective social justice aspiration was considered essential for democracy (Dean, 2015) and materialized in the implementation of welfare states and social protection systems. This resulted in the desire to realize universal human rights through the recognition of social equality, manifested in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Maesele, 2012). Based on this declaration, the states ratified that they committed themselves to secure human rights for every citizen (Turner, 2008; Dean, 2015). With this declaration a new social political goal was introduced: to create equal opportunities for everyone to live a life in human dignity (Lister, 2007). Yet, the meaning of human rights in the Declaration was not clearly defined, which left the term open for various and diversified interpretations (Chan & Bowpitt, 2005). However, the implementation of the Belgian welfare state had impacted the charity-based policies and the

PCSW (formerly “Commissions of Public Assistance”). Public funds allocated to Commissions as well as public hospices and allowances were massively expanded following the growing interest for human rights and equality. Even though the number of individuals claiming assistance decreased drastically during the three following decades (Zamora Vargas, 2017), public funds were expanded to refer to welfare standards and further on to end misery (Commission d'étude des CAP, 1925). In Belgium, the commitment to human rights was never translated in PCSW legislation.

The introduction of the right to human dignity is often defined as a Copernican Revolution (Pieters 1980-1981), and as a transition in the thinking on welfare relying on a socio-political and rights-based normative value orientation (Bouverne-De Bie, 2007). The principle of social protection in the welfare state included the democratic realization of the right to human flourishing and the realization of social services to do so. In 1976, this principle and normative value orientation has been institutionalized, in the light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, as a policy rhetoric in the law on the Public Centers for Social Welfare. Their mission is to secure the right to human flourishing, by securing these services to which the community is bound, with the goal that everyone can lead a life in human dignity (Maesele, 2012). In other words, citizens' subjective questions, concerning what they considered necessary to realize their right to human flourishing, must be unconditionally accepted by PCSW's and must be the subject of democratic negotiation and deliberation. This could lead to a substantial realization of citizenship rights in practice (see De Corte, Vandebussche & Roose, 2019; Lister, 2007). Furthermore, it reflects a new codification of a societal project that understands social assistance in the frame of human dignity as well as a stepping stone to the labour market and its related social security system.

Residual Minimum Income: 1972's PCSW Organic Law

The 1974 PCSW's minimum income legislation, a.k.a. MINIMEX in french, consisted of providing a monthly income to individual that were not able to access the labour market and therefore had no resources to access goods and services. Considering that the welfare state designed two decades ago, was targeting *male-bread winner* workers, individuals who were not able to integrate the labour market were left aside of welfare benefit. To deal with this situation, the legislator designed a residual minimum income for each PCSW to provide to individual who could not access social protection benefits such as unemployment, illness or invalidity. After a century of institutional mutations and

legislative reforms, the idea of developing specific strategies for the poor rather than, for example, considering the extension of the welfare strategies to protect them or redesign the labour market, was still not discussed and charity was more than ever pushed forward. However, we should notice that this strategy was drastically distancing itself from the cultural perspective of poverty. For once in the history of social assistance, PCSW were not deciding beforehand what was good for the poor but rather let them choose whatever they wanted to buy.

Right to social integration: 1976' PCSW Organic Law

However, four years later, there has been a small introduction of political understanding of poverty in 1976's legislation reform of public poverty relief and the replacement of the Commissions of Public Assistance by Public Centers for Social Welfare (Organic Law 1976). Beside the existing social minimum income and the human dignity strategies, the legislator added the right to social integration. Aware that the labour market was not designed to integrate low-skilled workers such as MINIMEX recipients, the legislator created a new form of contract, article 60§7, for each PCSW to hire its recipients and reinstalled them into the social protection system (Organic Law PCSW art.60§7). The idea was to reintegrate MINIMEX recipients to the labour market by offering them a first job experience at the PCSW or at a local non-profit organization. In that matter, each local PCSW received federal public funds that cover wages, including employers-contribution exemptions, as well as administrative and coordination fees such as trainings sessions, monitoring, and coordination with NPO partners. At the end of the contract, never longer than the necessary timing to regain access to social security (Law 2 Augustus 2002, art.187, 2°), the recipient regains his right to unemployment allowances and is no longer support by the PCSW. We believe that this piece of legislation is following welfare principles considering that it's following right-oriented strategy as well as it's a way of "decommodifying" the labour market.

1.1.3 Workfare state: the erosion of social protection principles and rights orientations

After the rather prosperous post-war period, new economic and socio-demographic questions emerged, caused by an increasing economic downturn, social inequality, and associated social risks (Taylor-Gooby et al., 1999). More stringent and global neo-liberal regimes appeared in the late 20th century (Garrett, 2019). Prevailing social welfare paradigms have accordingly been gradually revised (Rosanvallon, 2000; Van Lancker, 2013). Dean (2015) addresses different dimensions at stake in these welfare state transformations, also referred to as “welfare pluralism” or a “mixed economy of welfare”, with an (emphasis on self-responsibility, informal care and new subsidiarity, the rescaling of welfare state responsibilities/decentralisation, marketization, and privatization of public service delivery.

European welfare states gradually shifted their focus from income protection, redistribution of resources and power, and cash-related benefits to human capital investment strategies (Cantillon, 2011). Central to the most radical expression of the recently emerging human capital 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 (Williams, 2001; Dean, 2015). As Garrett (2018, p. 49) aptly 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’”.

Originally, European welfare states critically pursued a constitutive rights-based notion of a mutual solidarity and collective responsibility – rooted in the idea of social security and protection – in securing the rights of citizens (Dean, 2015). Due recognition was given to human interdependency, which “is quintessential to human relationships”, as the basis of social policymaking (Lister, 1997: 105). Human interdependency was regarded to be a universal feature of the human condition (Lister, 1997; Williams, 2001), entailing an over-arching recognition by the state that we *all* are in need of different types of care and support at different stages in our lives. As Turner (1993: 507) has stressed, “it is from a collectively held recognition of *individual frailty* that rights as a system of mutual protection gain their emotive force”. Therefore, social security requires that welfare states critically pursue a constitutive rights-based notion of mutual social protection,

collective responsibility and solidarity. In that vein, Dean (2015) refers to the idea that welfare states realize rights when governments enable their citizens to care not just for their family and neighbours but also for distant strangers, mediated by welfare state arrangements and institutions. Thus, the pursuit of collective responsibility and solidarity is premised on a rational, socially just judgment in the public sphere, rather than on a sort of moral duty embedded in the private sphere (Dean, 2015; 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 welfare and social security has been reframed as an issue of preventing the risk of welfare dependency on the social welfare system (Williams, 2001; Dean, 2015). As Garrett (2018: p. 49) aptly 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). 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). New forms of social insecurity have been injected by neo-liberal welfare systems in people’s working 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: 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, class power has been restored by redistributing wealth and income from the poor to the rich and dynamics of inequality are largely being ignored (Ridge & Wright, 2008; Fraser et al., 2014). 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 this vein, Kessler (2009: 309) asserts that also “the legitimacy of social work as a public good is more sharply questioned today than ever before”. Social work thus often must find its scope despite its highly imbalanced and politically weakened position (Kessler, 2009; Jacquet, 2019). According to its social justice orientation, it is therefore of vital importance for social work to scrutinize and

reframe the public discourses regarding welfare dependency in which social workers and citizens are increasingly enmeshed (Garrett, 2018, 2019; Fletcher & Flint, 2018), and to recognize and challenge new forms and manifestations of social insecurity and marginalisation. In that vein, we explore the work of the French sociologists Robert Castel and Serge Paugam, which offers pertinent ideas for social work that enable us to reclaim the importance of the normative social justice aspirations and value orientation of solidarity.

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 tackles the emergence of a 'new' 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".

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; Kessl, 2009; Kessl, 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).

In the face of these historical, social, economic, political, and demographic challenges, many European welfare states have thus been confronted with barriers in realising the human and social rights of diverse citizens (Moyn, 2018). As Lorenz (2016) argues, social work across Europe is increasingly caught in these welfare state transformations as it has always been interrelated with changing socio-political circumstances, and therefore needs to take a stance towards these developments. Social work however has historically sought to acquire a relatively autonomous public and professional mandate in the welfare state to shape ‘the social’, with reference to the question how a social justice and human rights orientation is incorporated when shaping the relation between the individual and society (Lorenz, 2008, 2016; Kessler, 2009). Social work has indeed evolved as an academic discipline and welfare profession with changing welfare rationales throughout the last centuries (Lorenz, 2016; Boone, Roets & Roose, 2018). The most recent global definition of social work frames social work as a practice-based profession and academic discipline that should seek to pursue human rights, social justice, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities as principles central to social work (see IFSW, 2014; Ornellas et al., 2018). Social work actors might however also weaken and dismantle solidarity mechanisms, which is reflected in social work interventions towards citizens who are deemed responsible for their own welfare (Goldson, 2002; Krumer-Nevo, 2018).

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 (Jacquet, 2020). This is especially the case in Flanders on account of the center-right political climate (Jacquet, 2020), which shows the political and ideological path dependency of the different regions in Belgium including Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia.

The last version of PCSW was implemented in 2002, when the C.P.A.S. changed the meaning of the letter “A”, from “Assistance” to “Action” in the French acronym, along with the evolution of the MINIMEX into the Integration Income, a.k.a., Revenu d’Intégration in French (RI). The core missions of PCSW were extended to go beyond providing a minimum income and a first-job experience by imposing an individual social integration plan on its recipients, aka Plan Individuel d’Intégration Sociale (PIIS). The revised legislation claimed the necessity to guarantee to all recipients, beyond passive compensation, the right to an “accountable” existence. PCSW institutions were then expected to

encourage user's social participation (Law 2007 art.215). The gradual introduction of the P.I.I.S., which was first imposed on students in 2002 before being imposed on all recipients in 2017, reflects the tendency to advocate activation into employment of economically inactive citizens. Following the social activation principle, PCSW recipients were then expected to acquire marketable skills by successfully following a workfare programs.

The gradual process of further conditionalization leads to total or partial suspension of the income for individuals who turn-down any job offer without justifiable motives (Dumont, 2007). The activation principle that leads to the suspension of suppression of the minimum income, even for a month, runs counter the social assistance model and illustrates the second shift from social assistance and human dignity to activation, workfare and accountability. This new social arrangement is built on individuals' "self-responsibility" (Vrancken, 2010) and overshadows unconditional assistance for the poorest by self-responsibility's euphoria. The generalization of the principle of conditionality of access to the most fundamental rights acts as an ideological shift, which we have been witnessing for the past thirty years.

Although the policy rhetoric has been institutionalized, it can be argued that this paradigm has nonetheless gradually eroded by the development towards a workfare state, which carries the risk of a further intensification of the un/conditional coupling of assistance to the goals of labour market qualification and order (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2005). The tendency that consisted, in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, of applying the principle of rights orientated strategies and human dignity in the fight against misery, is tending to disappear, giving way to an increasing conditionalization in social assistance strategies.

1.1.4 Welfare and workfare matrixes

The social historical perspective on the evolution of poverty reduction strategies, and more broadly the Belgian social question we stress in the previous sections, shows the gradual transition from one paradigm/matrix to another, from welfare to workfare. From the point of view of Pierre Muller and Yves Surel's cognitive sociology (1998), cognitive and normative matrixes are built upon four dimensions: metaphysical principles (paradigms, deep core), specific principles (policy core), modes of action and instruments. These analytical dimensions are useful for us to first summarize each dimension we developed in the theoretical and conceptual framework, and then to compare each matrix system of

interpretation, or "vision of the world", with a specific focus on PCSW's poverty reduction policies and its ad hoc social work practices. The goal here is to understand the effect of each matrix on PCSW strategies and social work practices rather than going into details on each dimension.

As we stressed in the socio historical approach, the Welfare state is based on the metaphysical principle of "social peace" with the specific principle of "social protection". To implement those principles, welfare state develops modes of action such as redistribution of wealth and work or full employment policies through the instruments of welfare benefits and public services. On the other hand, we stressed that workfare state is built upon the metaphysical principle of individual risks and the specific principle of human capita investment. Those principles are translated into "modes of action" such as the ongoing further welfare conditionalization embodied in "instruments" such as workfare programs.

Poverty reduction strategy as a mode of action is a great example to illustrate the profound difference between matrixes. For instance, welfare envisages the PCSW poverty reduction strategies through the "social assistance" metaphysical principle which considers each citizen as equal rightful claimants to a set of rights (specific principle) including ensuring the right to human dignity and the right to social integration (modes of action). Those strategies are implemented through a different set of instruments such as social minimum income and art60§7. As expressed earlier in this dissertation (see right to social integration section) while relying on this Surel and Muller theoretical and conceptual framework, we consider the art60§7 as an instrument to ensure full-employment policies (modes of action) that follows welfare principles (metaphysical and specific principles). In this matrix, social work is perceived as a tool to ensure social justice (metaphysical principle) and to develop right-oriented strategies (specific principle) when interacting with citizens. They operate as guardians of citizens. In practice they develop universal, unconditional, and lifeworld-oriented practices (modes of action) through instruments such as article60§7. On the contrary, in the workfare matrix, poverty reduction strategies are built upon the metaphysical principle of "workfare assistance which is translated into a specific principle of "preventing welfare dependency". Those principles are embodied in social activation policies (modes of action) of PCSW that require an "Individual Social Integration Plan" (instrument) for all citizens.

Table 1: Welfare matrix

	METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES	SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES	MODES OF ACTION	INSTRUMENTS
WELFARE	Class struggle Social peace Mutual solidarity	Social protection Decommodification Right based	Redistribution of wealth and work Full employment	Public Services Welfare benefits
PCSW	Social assistance	Right to social integration Right to social assistance	Human dignity Social integration	Social minimum income
SOCIAL WORK STRATEGIES	Social justice	Rights-oriented Guardian of recipients 'rights	Lifeworld Unconditional Universal	art60§7

Table 2: workfare matrix

	METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES	SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES	MODES OF ACTION	INSTRUMENTS
WORKFARE	Individual risks	Human capital investment	Welfare conditionalization	Workfare programs
PCSW	Workfare assistance	Preventing welfare dependency	Social activation Further conditionalization	Partial or total suspension from minimum income benefit
SOCIAL WORK STRATEGIES	Accountability	Professional and social integration Moral entrepreneur	Instrumental Conditional Selective	PIIS

1.2 Poverty and anti-poverty strategies: contested concepts

1.2.1 (Child) poverty: a multidimensional social problem

“ “The concept of poverty is not a neutral, but rather a normative and ideological construct, differing according to the ways in which it is defined in different historical periods and constructed by different actors in different societies.” (Lister, 2004).

Poverty is often seen as a lack of cultural understanding of what an individual must achieve to avoid or extract himself from poverty. Public and private strategies implemented according to this cultural definition of poverty compensate for individuals lack of good cultural behaviour. Countless public and private strategies aim to educate the poor by providing good practices on a large spectrum. It leads to different sets of projects, from workshops to individualized support, that mainly target three specific areas of individuals' lives. First, projects that show what are the good ways of consumption in terms of diet, goods, cultural activities and so on. The second type of projects targets wrong ways of acting as a citizen. The most leading one is parenting. There is a growing interest in the field of social assistance to organize workshops for parents that are labelled as unfitted to educate a child. The last one is projects that aim to better the employability of individual. This one is an important key strategy in the workfare matrix.

Economic or monetary approach to poverty is undeniably the most stable and most shared dimension of poverty throughout history. This approach considers that poverty results from a lack of income to access goods and services. The public and private schemes and strategies implemented according to this economic definition of poverty compensate for individuals lack income by making all kinds of benefits available such as foodbanks, distribution of clothes and vouchers (energy, water, education), access to night shelters and public showers.

1.2.2 A political understanding of Poverty

The perception of poverty as a political issue is particularly recent in the history of social systems. In this framework, poverty is no longer perceived as a lack of cultural or economical resources, but rather as a form of social inequality and

the result of a lack of material as well as immaterial resources (Lister, 2004; Dean, 2015). Poverty is understood from a legal and political perspective, resulting in a lack of rights, resources, and political power. In this dissertation we understand poverty following social inequalities framework that considers poverty as a lack of material resources (income, housing, mobility, ...), a lack of immaterial resources (health care, education, employment, ...), and a lack of political power to define what poverty is and how it might be tackled (Lister, 2004). Additionally, we believe that poverty must be struggled following rights-oriented strategies that counter the reproduction of social inequality. This dimension of poverty is embodied in the welfare state that aims to develop strategies based on a rights-based approach that focuses on securing a set of rights and redistributing resources and power to struggle inequalities. History has shown that rights-oriented strategies, inherited from welfare principles, had the best impact on structural inequalities.

However, during the last decades, when new forms of social insecurity have been injected by neo-liberal welfare systems in people's lives 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. The development of poverty and anti-poverty strategies therefore often entails many different, and often contradictory, meanings and perspectives for different people, especially in the case of child poverty (Couture 2007). It is now obvious that a monetary or cultural understanding of poverty is highly acclaimed by private and/or public spheres. For instance, the re-emergence of the old principles of merit and social activation in Public Centers for Social Welfare practices appears to be ineffective to better the life of citizens. The paradoxical no-win situation we describe in chapter 4 shows counterproductive effects of poverty reduction strategies following the eco-cultural perception of poverty on citizens' trajectories.

1.2.3 A renewed focus on child poverty

Here, we are not reflecting on the long historical line of child policies such as charity-based policies targeting orphans or the more recent development in child protection policies in Belgium. There are plenty of scientific material that stresses those issues such as the great work of Lucinda Platt (2007), who analyses the evolution of child policies over the last two centuries, or the PhD dissertation of our colleagues at the University of Ghent, Michel Vandebroek (2009) and Rudi Roose (2006) and more recently Tineke Schiettecat (2016) and Dorien Van Haute (2018). Yet, we therefore work on the time juncture that seem to have rediscovered child poverty.

International social policy and social work research shows that child poverty remains a stubborn, complex, and multi-dimensional problem for social policy makers in most Western societies (Platt 2005; Lister 2006). Throughout history, Western welfare states have accordingly considered what causes harm to children in poverty situations, implying a priority given to social work to intervene in these situations (Parton 2011). As Schiettecat, Vandebroek and Roets (2014) address, social policymakers across Europe recently explicitly focus on combating child poverty (European Commission, 2008). During the last few decades, European welfare states have developed child poverty reduction strategies that coincide with a social investment rhetoric. The Lisbon strategy (2000–2010) as well as the EU 2020 strategy (2010–2020) has 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).

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) which easily “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).

Although addressing child poverty is perceived as intrinsically legitimate, Goldson (2002) argues that the structural conditions in which children live – expressions of poverty and inequality that are also experienced by parents - are substituted with a conceptual emphasis on individual responsibility. As such, a well-established conceptual schism has been resurrected in the form of the ‘deserving’ troubled child and the ‘undeserving’ troublesome’ parents, who do not behave according to the norm of ‘responsible’ parenting (Goldson 2002).

1.2.4 Local inter-organizational networks to combat child poverty

Governments have recently faced major challenges in resolving highly complex and hard to manage social problems such as unemployment, homelessness, social dislocation, and child abuse and child poverty (Keast, Mandell, Brown and Woolcock 2004; Devaney and Spratt 2009). Rittel and Webber (1973) identify these problems as so-called ‘wicked issues’ for social policy makers. This is because issues basically cut across a diversity of service areas and policy domains and are too complex to be dealt with by single welfare organizations. Furthermore, as these problems are characterized by a high degree of complexity and uncertainty about the means-end relations, different welfare actors will inevitably pursue differing goals, propose alternative strategies, and rely upon varying values to be achieved (Weber & Khademian, 2008; Ferlie, et.al., 2011; Alford & Head, 2017).

In that vein, the development of an inter-organizational or joined-up approach within the broad field of welfare services is a pertinent strategy to tackle wicked issues (Lister 2003; Frost 2005). This development is generally perceived as a sustainable solution to the persistence of the historical fragmentation of welfare services (Allen 2003; Provan & Sebastian 1998). As Frost (2005: 11) asserts aptly, a highly specialized division of labour allows professionals to become “more specialist and more expert in their narrow fields”. This has led to the creation of separate and categorical policy domains or areas (e.g. housing, welfare, employment, child services) in the provision of welfare services to citizens (Statham 2011) and to fragmented problem-solving mechanisms and procedures (Hood 2014). This fragmentation implies that citizens, and especially those citizens who experience problems that are very complex and multi-dimensional in nature, encounter substantial obstacles or thresholds at the supply side of welfare provision, which prevents them from making use of, and benefiting from, the social resources and support provided by high-quality welfare services (Roets, 2016). To avoid that citizens fall through the cracks of

welfare provision (Allen 2003) and to realize a collaborative advantage that could not have been achieved by individual welfare actors and services alone, inter-organizational networking is therefore expected to tackle gaps and overlaps in the provision of welfare services while taking into account the complex and wicked problems of citizens (Rose 2011; Allen 2003; Vangen and Huxham 2013).

1.2.5 Charity and rights-oriented strategies in social policy and social work

In the context of the changing relationship between children, parents, and the welfare state during the last century (Gillies 2008; Oelkers 2012), social work has evolved as a welfare practice with shifting normative value orientations. In that vein, Maesele (2012) argues that a complex historical transition can be observed in social work from charity- to rights-oriented ideas and practices, that also reveals elements of continuity and discontinuity. Whereas charity-oriented social work practices paid an overwhelming attention to disciplining family life in order to protect children in poverty from their so-called 'irresponsible' parents (Lister 2003; Vanobbergen *et al.* 2006), rights-oriented practices consider the realization of children's rights as always interrelated with a proactive realization of the welfare rights of their parents (see Lister 2006; Schiettecat *et al.* 2014).

Western welfare states have however recently developed a new concern about what causes harm to children, implying a renewed priority given to social work for intervention in supposedly alarming situations, such as children living in poverty (Parton 2011). In that sense, recent research shows that the rights-oriented value orientation in welfare states has been particularly changing and shifting into charity-based ideas and value orientations (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Lorenz 2016; Krumer-Nevo 2016; Kessl, Oecher & Schröder 2019).

In our doctoral research project (see chapters 3 and 5), we rely on the conceptual frame of reference of Maesele (2012) and Roets *et al.* (2022, 2023), which identifies three interrelated central fields of tension that indicate the features of, and distinction between, charity- and rights-based social work orientations in social policy and social work practice: whereas selectivity, conditionality and instrumental approaches refer to ideas being rooted in charity-oriented welfare discourse and social work practice, universality, unconditionality and lifeworld-oriented approaches refer to rights-oriented value orientations in welfare

discourse and social work practice (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Morvaridi 2016).

(1) Selective versus universal: Selectivity refers to the creation of criteria that determine whether citizens have the right to a certain welfare state intervention and entails a categorization (division) between those who deserve this and those who do not meet specific conditions that give access to social service provision as undeserving citizens (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). A universal approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). In that vein, selectivity refers to the construction of target groups, and aims to direct public resources towards the most disadvantaged to maximize equality on the condition that they are willing to accept the social norm (Martin 2010). However, in the implementation of these policy rationales, selective approaches often have stigmatizing effects (Maesele 2012).

(2) Conditional versus unconditional: Judging this willingness to behave according to the social norm is rooted in the idea of 'goodwill' (Maesele 2012). The component of goodwill refers to the dependence of the poor on those providing help and the goodwill of those providing help to assist those 'deserving' it (Payne 2005; Leighninger 2008). In social work, welfare conditionality refers to the fact that access to publicly provided welfare benefits and services is dependent on individual citizens first agreeing to meet particular obligations or patterns of behavior (see Dwyer 2004; Fletcher & Flint 2018). People's access to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change people's behavior. In that sense, the argument goes that people do not have rights without fulfilling their responsibilities. An unconditional approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided, without conditions or goodwill (Martin 2010; Brady and Burroway 2012).

(3) Instrumental versus life world-oriented: An instrumental social work practice means that the aim of what is to be done is defined from an external viewpoint and without considering what is considered as meaningful for welfare recipients (Maesele 2012). This means that the outcomes of the interventions are defined beforehand by the social workers, without consulting the citizens about their definition of problems and solutions (Roose *et al.* 2013). Life world-oriented principles and practices, on the other hand, consider the aspirations, life worlds, and concerns of people in poverty situations (Grunwald and Thiersch 2009). This implies that social workers focus on the complex and dynamic relationship

between the individual and society. According to a social justice orientation, the interplay between lifeworld and system becomes vital as they analyse how everyday life is contingent on social and systemic forces (Grunwald and Thiersch 2009; Roets, Roose & De Bie 2013).

Although the identified fields of tension are closely related and partly overlapping, there is, however, a subtle though important difference between them. For example, selective and universal approaches mainly deal with the question whether welfare actors construct target groups whereas conditional and unconditional approaches are basically about the actual and 'good' behaviour we expect. Moreover, it might be the case that social work and welfare actors rely on a selective and unconditional approach in practice, or on a universal and conditional approach when dealing with wicked issues such as child poverty. The differentiation allows us to make clear that it is possible, for example, to approach citizens in selective (e.g. focus on families in poverty), unconditional (e.g. no further expectations about 'good' behavior or restrictions with regard to access imposed to these people) and life world-oriented ways (e.g. their concerns are taken into account from a social justice orientation).

It is important to note that the framework should be perceived as a heuristic strategy to investigate the underlying and often shifting and changing normative assumptions in social work practice (see Schiettecat et al. 2018) rather than as an absolute typology that is often used in social policy scholarship (see Lister 2004; Dean 2015 for fruitful examples). As such, the heuristic framework also allows scholars to identify not only the normative principles and ambitions of (local) social policy but also how these principles are implemented and might shift and change while evolving in dynamic ways in social work practice (see Schiettecat et al. 2018). Social work practice is crisscrossed and divided by its principles which leads to contradictions in social workers' practices that, in a way or another, affect citizens' life such as families living in poverty.

1.3 Methodology (including research ethics and positionality of the researcher)

In our dissertation, we develop a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Myring 2000) to analyse the interviews we conducted with social workers, policy makers and citizens. This process of data analysis, in which we persistently triangulated different data sources (observations and qualitative interviews), allowed us to validate and cross-check our research findings. The validity and reliability of our research findings was also established through the prolonged engagement of the researchers, peer debriefing, and careful consideration in our research team (Morse *et al.* 2002).

We invite the reader to look at each methodology sections of chapters 2,3,4 and 5 to have a better grasp on the methodology we developed for each study we conducted.

1.3.1 Research activities

The empirical data of our dissertation comes from two clusters of research activities we have had since we started our PhD position. The first cluster is built upon a Brain-Belspo research project INCh 2014-2018. The research explores strategies of local social work and welfare actors in 5 municipalities targeting families living in poverty. We published two papers based on this research, one in BJSW and the other in SPA (see publications). The second cluster is built upon research we conducted for a major health guidance association in Wallonia and another one for a private Foundation, both from 2020 to 2023. The first research focuses on citizens' trajectories and social work practices in the field of workfare programs and mental health support. We submitted one paper based on this research outputs in European Journal of Social Work (see publications). The second research focus on neo-philanthropy philosophies and social work practices in the field of child poverty reduction strategies. We analyse new modes of collaboration between a private foundation and front-line social workers. We submitted one paper based on this research's results in Childhood (see publications).

1.3.2 Central research question, and research questions for each sub-study/chapter

Different and evolving layers can be further discovered in this dissertation, in which we first introduce the theoretical and conceptual framework (chapter 1) and then build on it to discuss current poverty and child poverty reduction strategies with the perception of social workers and citizens. We firstly do this in a broad sense by reflecting on the diverse strategies developed by front-line social workers when interacting with families living in poverty (chapter 2). We also analyse varying strategies that are deployed by inter-organizational networks in dealing with normative value orientations when collectively tackling child poverty (chapter 3). Furthermore, we built upon a more in-depth research phase to shed more light on social work poverty reduction strategies and practices and their effects on citizens' trajectories (chapter 4). In the same vein, we investigate a new child poverty reduction strategy/model between a private foundation and the corporate sphere. Finally, we offer concluding reflections to explain what our contribution to the new theoretical knowledges in this field of research is. We will stress policy and practices implications as well as we will discuss the strengths and the limitation, especially methodological, of our dissertation and open the discussion to envisage future scenarios for forthcoming research.

In what follows, we will summarize all the research steps of the respective chapters. However, it might be important for the readers to know that chapter 2 to 5 are presented in the form of articles. This implies that these chapters also include a methodological section in which the specific choices concerning data collection strategies or strategies of data analyses are explained. As such, there is a considerable overlap between these sections and the chronological and more detailed overview which will be presented below.

This dissertation has the general ambition to broaden the theoretical and empirical knowledge of social work strategies, mainly at PCSW and the impact of those strategies on families living in poverty. We hope to provide an in-depth insight into the strategies of social workers in dealing with the wicked issue of (child) poverty, and as such we aim to be inspirational for scholars, social work strategists and practitioners, and policy makers that want to engage in developing strategies to combat poverty.

Our research was conducted between 2014 and the beginning of 2023 and consisted of four separate but interconnected studies. After establishing an

extensive literature review on social work, (child) poverty reduction strategies and the current social question at PCSW, we opted for theoretical and conceptual framework for each study. The goal was to investigate the welfare state arrangements and the role of professional social work practices that might re-produce poverty and precarity, revealing a no-win situation. We delved deeper into the issue of the 'subtle' (re)configuration of the welfare state, poverty and precarity such as the idea that work is the best protection against poverty even if work happens to be precarious, or that work-care nexus is detrimental for (single) families with children, or again that Belgium historical and contemporary arrangements regarding conditionality that have always been rooted in PCSW legislations but are also subject to discontinuity.

We discuss those issues in the chapters we developed in our dissertation. We will however summarize the central research question of our dissertation as well as the research question for each sub-chapter.

The central research question of our dissertation is as follow: how does the erosion of welfare principles at the heart of PCSW poverty reduction strategies, embodied in the shift from welfare to workfare, interfere with social work practices and citizens trajectories? The erosion of social protection is at the core of every sub-chapter we developed whether as part of PCSW strategies and social work practices in local networks (chapters 2 and 3) or as part of the strategies implemented in a specific workfare program (chapter 4) or between social workers and a private Foundation (chapter 5). Throughout the studies we challenged PCSW and social work' strategies to understand the current social question and the implications for citizens, with a specific concern on families with children. Undeniably, the erosion of welfare principles in PCSW strategies is interfering with the life of citizens and challenging daily social workers practices.

Social workers, policy makers and citizens are using plenty of words to describe individuals who are supported by welfare policies (PCSW, workfare programs) such as users, beneficiaries, claimants, public, clients (mostly used in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium), and more recently we heard at a conference a social worker calling them partners. Following the conceptual and theoretical frameworks we developed above, we opted to focus on citizenship rather than on those designations. As we highlighted above, welfare states have been developed according to this general framework that consisted in securing rights to citizens. Citizens who are defined as individuals who bear the citizenship and therefore are eligible to a set of rights. We are not discussing here social policies targeting undocumented migrants. Despite the keen interest we have to develop

future scenarios of research (see 6.3.) on social policies targeting undocumented migrants and, on their trajectories, the choice to focus on welfare policies have, from the very beginning of the research process, excluded those population.

Chapter 2: Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity¹

In this chapter, we tackle conceptually the main problem statement of this dissertation: what the potential role can be of PCSW and social workers in the fight against child poverty? The study attempts to gain an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the mutual experiences and perspectives of the social interactions between social workers and families living in precarity. We developed a methodology based on semi-structured interviews with social workers to determine the strategies they are implementing, and participant observations of interactions between parents and social workers in day care centres and parenting workshops. While investing in this question, we introduce and elaborate broadly on the social disqualification theory of Serge Paugam, in which citizens experience morale degradation, and build on his ideas to develop our conceptual framework. Our qualitative analysis reveals that Public Centers for Social Welfare strategies as well as social work practices can currently be characterized as individualistic rather than solidaristic, focusing on citizens' merit rather than securing their rights. 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 in poverty situations.

The research question for this chapter was as follow: what poverty reduction strategies social workers develop when interacting with families in four integrated local networks in Belgium? Are those strategies tainted with stereotypes, binaries, and condition?

¹ This chapter was published in British Journal of Social Work. Jacquet, N., Van Haute, D., Schiettecat, T., & Roets, G. (2022). Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity. *British Journal of Social Work*, 52(6), 3425–3442.

Chapter 3: Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: Inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection²

In this chapter, we explore social workers strategies and local networking practice in 5 municipalities targeting families living in poverty. The focus of the project was to examine the role of social workers and PCSW in the development of local inter-organizational networks being supported by federal social policy measures. The methodology is constructed on semi-structured interviews with networks coordinators and social partners to understand their positions in the networks and what are the child poverty reduction strategies they want to implement. Beside we conducted participant observations in workshops targeting parents, and in day-care services to get a better grasp on the interactions between parents and social workers. Here we build on three fields of tension in the literature (selective/universal, conditional/unconditional and instrumental/lifeworld) to capture the rationales, strategies, and actions that are directed towards families and children, and to illustrate complex debates for local welfare actors. The results show great disparities in the normative value orientation within and between networks as well as the predominance of PCSW in coordinating networks and implementing selective, conditional and instrumental-oriented strategies.

The research question for this chapter was: what are child poverty reduction strategies developed by institutions (mainly PCSW) and social workers when networking?

Chapter 4: The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium³

In the chapter, we investigate citizens' trajectories involved in a workfare program. We focus on the analyses of social activation as a social work strategy and its impact on citizens' life trajectories. We opted for a methodology based on

² This chapter was published in *Social Policy & Administration*. Jacquet, N., Van Haute, D., De Corte, J., Nisen, L., Vandebroek, M., & Roets, G. (2020). Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection. *Social Policy & Administration*, 54(7), 1081–1095.

³ This chapter was submitted in *European Journal of Social Work*. Jacquet, N., Vrancken, D., Roose, R., Zamora Vargas, D., Roets, G. (2024). *The production of paradoxical no-win situation: a case study of social policy activation and practice*.

biographical trajectories of citizens involved in workfare programs and semi-structured interviews with front-line social workers, managers and directors from the institutions who run the workfare programs. We developed twelve biographical trajectories of citizens involved in workfare programs and eleven semi-structured interviews with front-line social workers, managers and directors from the institutions who run the workfare programs. Here, we build on the theoretical framework and the concluding reflections we developed in the chapter 3 to stress out the impact of social work following a rights-oriented, unconditional and lifeworld-oriented strategies on citizens. The results show that even though social workers implement welfare principles when providing support, recipients are still facing structural issues such as the labour market inability to offer long-term positions fitted to their needs and qualifications. This results in generating a no-win situation for citizens who are kept in a social zero-gravity situation.

The research question for this chapter was: Is developing unconditional and lifeworld-oriented strategies in a workfare program protecting citizens from falling into extreme poverty?

Chapter 5: Un/Deserving child⁴

This chapter explores child poverty reduction strategies and social work practices in the context of neo-philanthropy. The focus of the study is to analyze poverty reduction strategies developed by the Foundation and its social partners when providing support to children in poverty situations. We interviewed twenty social partners and seven Administrators of the Foundation. The research question for this chapter was: what are the poverty reduction strategies developed by a private Foundation and its social partners when intervening with families? What does it say about the evolution of the Belgian Welfare state?

Here, we rely on the same three fields of tension we developed in the chapter 3 (selective/universal, conditional/unconditional and instrumental/lifeworld) to capture the rationales, strategies, and actions that are directed towards families and children, and to illustrate complex debates between local welfare actors and a private Foundation. Our findings show how a discursive distinction between un/deserving children can be at stake in anti-poverty strategies. We also tease

⁴ This chapter was submitted to *Children & Society*. Jacquet, N., Vandekinderen, C., Generet, C., Zamora Vargas, D., Vranken, D., Roets, G., (2024), *The Un/Deserving Child*

out whether the Foundation might function as a little stone in the shoe of public actors in the welfare state system by dismissing PCSW and developing market-based strategies.

General conclusion

In the last section of this dissertation, we offer concluding reflections to explain what our contribution to the new theoretical knowledges in this field of research is. We will stress policy and practices implications as well as we will discuss the strengths and the limitation, especially methodological, of our dissertation. Furthermore, we will open the discussion to envisage future scenarios for forthcoming research.

1.4 Research ethics

We have opted for the "Ethical guidelines for good research practice" drawn up by the UK and Commonwealth Association of Social Anthropologists. These consist of four parts: relationships and responsibilities with research participants; with sponsors, commissioners, and employers; with colleagues and discipline; and with our government. In what follows, we set out the key ethical elements relating to relations with research participants, with the sponsors and with the scientific community.

The social science researcher's responsibility towards the participants consists of protecting participants and honouring the truth; negotiating informed consent with the participant; guaranteeing participants' right to confidentiality and anonymity; protect participants' intellectual property rights; and involve participants in the research process.

The social scientist's responsibility to the sponsors is to clarifying roles, rights and obligations; specify their obligations to the client; negotiate the research space.

The research project, including these procedures and considerations, was presented to the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. The Committee gave their full approval for the research project.

CHAPTER 2

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 citizens' 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

2.1 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 interdependence 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.

2.1.1 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; Kessl, 2009; Kessl, 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.

2.1.2 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, Hodgkinson 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 low education, low income, poor housing conditions, marital breakdown/divorce and/or impoverished social relationships, (mental) health problems, and so on (see also Good Gingrich, 2010).

In his books “*La disqualification sociale: essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*” (1988) and “*L’intégration inégale: force, fragilité et rupture des liens sociaux*” (2014), Paugam is interested in how individuals who are caught in this spiral of social disqualification perceive their use of social work services yet also develop strategies of coping and survival (Roets, 2017, 2018). Although they are aware of the inferiority of their status and of being stigmatised by a wider society, including social workers, as “the poor”, “charity cases” or as being “inadequate to civilisation”, they also develop strategies to resist these forms of moral degradation and find ways to renegotiate, shift, and challenge processes of social disqualification (Paugam, 1988, 2014). In the course of the social disqualification process, nonetheless, people gradually lose social relations and elementary forms of solidarity: “without social relations of any kind, they lack the resources to find a way back into society” (Silver, 1994: 559). Processes of social disqualification accordingly entail moral degradation with respect to their existential human dignity (Paugam, 1988, 2014).

2.2 Research methodology

2.2.1 Data collection strategies

Our research project objective was to explore how social work develops strategies to combat child poverty in four different local authorities in Belgium. Children living in poverty have recently become central targets of local policy and social work intervention in Belgium (Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration, 2021). Ethical approval of the research study was granted by the Ethical Committee of UGent before the research started, as the funder (Federal Science Policy) demands.

4 networks to combat child poverty were selected for the empirical fieldwork. All of the networks operate in areas with a higher than average number of families living in poverty. Whereas networks A and B are located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, networks C and D are located in Wallonia, the French-speaking region in Belgium. Each network had its own unique constellation:

- Network A is situated in a suburban municipality close to Brussels. This network consists of 5 partners and combines the provision of material and immaterial support (e.g. welfare allowances, employment, parent support). It is targeted towards vulnerable families, and aims at developing individualized support interventions.
- Network B is located in a small municipality in Flanders and involves over 60 individual members. This network aims to provide parent support for all families with children in the community.
- Network C develops services in rural areas to provide childcare and parenting support for all families with children under 3 years of age, with special attention to the creation of affordable and accessible services for families who have a lack of income and mobility.
- Network D targets vulnerable children around a small city in Wallonia. The coordinator and the partners aim to prevent dropping out of school early and bullying. The network uses a street-level approach to reduce the distance between service providers and users, and the school is seen as a very important actor in the network.

We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews to gain an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the interactions of social workers with families living in poverty, and of their mutual experiences and perspectives of these interactions. In Network A, 8 local network actors were interviewed, in Network B 8, in Network C 10, and in Network D 15 (n = 41). The interviews were conducted in the research participants' workplace and took between 1 and 2 hours. The perspectives of parents were examined to explore how they experience the interventions of, and interactions with, the social workers.. In Network A, 11 parents were interviewed, in Network B 12, in Network C 6, and in Network D 17 (n = 46). This research venture took place in formal as well as informal settings (including in their homes and other locations). The interviews took from 1 - 2 hours.

2.2.2 Strategies of data analysis

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

2.3 Research findings

2.3.1 Stereotypes

According to Paugam (1988), people who find themselves in precarious circumstances experience feelings of social inferiority. Research shows that social workers often implicitly perceive people living in poverty through stereotypes and prejudices, which might create feelings of social inferiority, shame, stigma, and humiliation (Lister, 2004; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Tyler (2020) refers to the 'welfare stigma machine of austerity', which incorporates a relentless process of stigmatisation as a constant cycle of judgement that gets under the skin and erodes people's self-esteem. Families reflected on feelings of stigmatisation and othering, and perceptions that they were inferior, which were reinforced and legitimised through their engagement with social work. The interview with one of the mothers shows that she is well-aware of the negative and stereotypical framing of her strategy to search for employment. Although her situation reflects the imprecise requirements of workfare (see Good Gingrich, 2010) and the complex dimensions being at stake in precariousness (Paugam, 2014), the social workers do not consider 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)

Our research reveals the importance of social workers being capable of creating space to capture what is actually going on in the lifeworld of parents rather than (re-)producing stereotypes about the families. An understanding of how material, social and systemic resources constitute parents’ and children’s experiences requires that social workers frame “the everyday with reference to its obstinacy,

its alienation, its self-assertion and its aspirations” according to their quest for social justice (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009, p. 132). This requires an open-mindedness to actually ask the parents how they perceive their situation, in which ways structural and systemic aspects interrelate with their lifeworld, and negotiating with them what is feasible and desirable in how they get support to fulfil life aspirations (Walker, 2014). In this example, the mother first figures as someone who refuses to work and was blamed by social workers for being ‘irrational’ and ‘dishonest’.

“ This mom told me that she would enjoy being employed, yet she said to another social worker of our network of social work services that she didn’t want to work, and she told people who can provide employment that it was too soon to work. Those social workers were very demanding, and blamed her for not being honest. (Social worker, network D)

However, the negotiation with other social workers shows that she had reasonable arguments and aspirations in combining care for her child with employment.

“ Yet, these kinds of contradictions require us to be honest and discuss this with them and to bring together all the takes on the situation. When I talked to the mother, she told me that she is struggling with what is the best thing to do for her child. She would actually love to be employed and didn’t want to miss the opportunity to have support in finding employment, but she prefers to stay at home a little bit longer for her baby. After a while, she contacted me, saying that she now wanted to find a job! (Social worker, network D)

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

2.3.2 Conditions

Paugam (1988) asserts that people who endure cycles of living in socially insecure and precarious circumstances gradually learn to identify themselves with the status of welfare dependents, and they eventually might get into conflict with social workers. The welfare apparatus, being informed by particular understandings of “the causes of poverty and unemployment and the orientations and conduct of marginalised groups” (Fletcher and Flint, 2018, p. 772), seems to lead to welfare conditionality. Our findings show that the families’

access to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change people's behaviour. As one of the mothers explains, she is judged by the social worker in conditional ways before she is granted a welfare benefit while remaining unemployed:

“ At the end of the month, I have to ask my social worker for money, whether she can grant me some. And then I first have to prove that I have used it in well-considered and responsible ways, showing her the bills for the groceries, childcare service, and so on. And then the social worker often argues that it is high time that I find employment, preferably on a full-time basis. I then have to prove that I have indeed made efforts, showing her that I applied for jobs many times but that it didn't work out. (Mother, network C)

Our analysis of interactions with social workers shows that they link the realisation of rights to the condition that parents behave in responsible ways. This welfare conditionality often emerges when families are on welfare benefits, which requires social workers to judge whether or not it is reasonable to grant these benefits. The example concerns a mother, who is in search of employment that allows her to reasonably combine this with the care for her 3 children, yet she is treated in controlling and disciplinary ways before she receives a welfare benefit (see also Good Gingrich, 2010).

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

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

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

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

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

“ It’s exhausting, we can’t handle it anymore. We could end up in a divorce. (...) I could not sleep for two years, always worrying about their health. In the meantime, I had to deal with welfare-to-work programme inspectors. I got into big trouble with them because I did not get a job, I couldn’t give them enough proof of my job seeking. I’ve tried to explain to them that most employers always got scared when I explained my family situation, that I have to take care of young twins, without any possibility of child care. Due to my husband’s new position in the company, we live far from our hometown, far from family support, without any support from our parents or sisters or brothers. (...) It’s not that I don’t want to get a job – to be honest, I really need a job, my husband and I are sick of being unable to buy a loaf of bread at the end of the month due to lack of money. (Mother, network C)

This conditionality is also constructed, for example, in relation to employment as a condition for being eligible to use childcare services, which are originally meant to support parents in finding and keeping their employment. These conditions are based on an economic logic, that operates irrespective of the viewpoints, experiences, and life worlds of parents (see Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

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

However, social workers also challenge these ideas, arguing that the structural circumstances in which families live should be seen as conditions for social workers to be able to “take a stance and behave as partners” to support families in the struggle against poverty (see Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1802). One of the social workers relies on an example of a situation that evolved well, arguing that structural conditions matter, such as being educated and having a diploma to find proper employment:

“ Recently, I accidentally ran into this mother in the IKEA. It was such a wonderful surprise to hear that she is now fully involved in a Bachelor’s education track. We supported her for three years. She received support from all kinds of social work and welfare services, she got a welfare benefit and financial support, and so on. And I thought, Oh my God, the support we offered on all these life domains matters! (Social worker, network B)

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

2.3.3 Binaries

Paugam (1988) argues that people who experience an accumulation of disadvantages tend to be no longer protected by structural and rights-oriented social work and welfare interventions but rely predominantly on charity-based social relations (Paugam, 1988; Silver, 1994). Social work research currently shows that people who are dependent on the social welfare system might be easily subjected to surveillance and strategies “to change the morally impaired poor's perceived passivity, dependency and laziness into self-reliance, independence, competitiveness, and industriousness” (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1801). The underlying reasoning is that, unlike others, the poor, as a so-called underclass, fail to function in productive ways, echoing a binary and pre-welfare state distinction between ‘good’ and deserving versus ‘bad’ and undeserving citizens (Villadsen, 2007). In one example, a social worker explains that some parents hardly struggle to offer a better life to their children, and frames parents who neglect their children's well-being – for example, by buying an expensive cell phone instead of lunch for their children – as undeserving ones. The blaming clearly overrules the alertness for the shame of the parents, for being treated as a “charity case” (Paugam, 2014).

“ I was very shocked once. In a school, they had sold lasagne or something else, because the school found out that one girl in the kindergarten did not show up at the school during the afternoon because her parents could not afford to give her a lunch box. The parents were ashamed – so they picked the girl up every day at noon. But somehow the parents had the latest iPhone, a better phone than mine. So I thought, you don't have any money to give your daughter a lunch, but you have enough to buy a very expensive cell phone – that doesn't make sense. They don't need a cell phone like that, it's not necessary. (Social worker, network B)

Furthermore, social workers often insist on the limits of welfare benefits and services, and argue for selectivity, conditionality and sanction (Fletcher and Flint, 2018; Jacquet, 2020). According to this particular social worker, deserving parents are the ones who accept the conditions, obligations and norms issued by social workers, and demonstrate a willingness to deprive themselves for the sake of their children:

“ It’s great to help people, but we should not assist them too much. It would be awesome to support everyone, but we can only support those who follow up on their responsibilities and who deprive themselves for their children. (Social worker, network A)

After the conditions, disciplinary sanctions are imposed on people living at the edge of society (Fletcher and Flint, 2018), when social workers grant parents an inferior second-class citizenship status. One of the parents was, for example, actually sanctioned because she was not able to attend an appointment with a social worker. As a consequence, she lost her welfare benefit for 6 months. The underlying reason for missing the appointment was the fact that the family was not able to pay for the train ticket to get there, but the social worker didn’t show any understanding.

“ We need to pay the full price for train tickets. At that point, they suspended me for 6 months. I just didn’t have any money left to buy the ticket and get to the appointment. The social worker said that the ticket cost only €4, but I just didn’t have any money left. (Mother, network B)

Other social workers, however, stress the importance of negotiating with families and other social work and welfare services to be able to challenge simplistic dichotomies between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parents. These efforts square with the attempt of social workers to tackle forms of alienation (see Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009), which may be experienced as “societal isolation and personal dislocation resulting from powerlessness” (Fletcher and Flint, 2018, p. 773). They stress the importance of getting to know the complex life conditions in which the families live, in order to be able to understand how they give meaning to the situations in which they survive, in order to provide resources.

“ 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)

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

2.4 Concluding reflections

Our research study is based on the theoretical set of ideas of the French scholars Castel and Paugam who critically tackle the reproduction of social inequalities, insecurities, and poverty in our societies. Their novel work on the issue of precariousness concerns a comprehensive conceptualisation of how the lack of material and immaterial resources, starting from a structural lack of income due to un/employment, leads to a new group of '(working) poor' citizens. They situate individuals in a dynamic and multi-dimensional process of cumulative social ruptures that are resembled on different life domains, framed as a process of 'social disaffiliation' (Castel, 1995) or 'social disqualification' (Paugam, 1988; 1996; 2009). Whereas Paugam addresses this spiral of social disqualification from the viewpoint of so-called citizens and their experiences of social work, our study attempts to gain an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the mutual experiences and perspectives of the social interactions between social workers and families living in precarity.

As a major limitation of our study, we want to stress the lack of systematic attention for the intersection of social inequalities of gender, disability, and ethnicity/race in our empirical fieldwork. These aspects have been stressed as being of vital importance for an in-depth understanding of how 'the precariat' is produced as an emerging new social class (see Good Gingrich, 2010; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013; Lewis et al., 2014).

Our study however confirms Paugam's ideas on how families both renegotiate and resist forms of moral degradation in which social workers are complicit, yet also lack the proper resources to reveal their right to human flourishing in our societies (see Shildrick & MacDonald, 2013). Also, Schoneville (2020) addresses how stigmatising social work attitudes powerfully affect individuals and families, and attack their subjectivity from within, making social work counterproductive for both social work and vulnerable citizens. In order to avoid further humiliation, families might be reluctant to make use of social services. Social work is frequently conditional on the parents' willingness to integrate the social workers' normative and disciplinary framework (see also Good Gingrich, 2010; Fletcher and Flint, 2018; Garrett, 2019). These dynamics operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy: parents are deemed responsible for dealing with the structural conditions in which their children live, which results in a schism of the 'deserving' troubled child and the 'undeserving' troublesome, incapable parent (Goldson, 2002; Lister, 2006).

Since children are always (economically) dependent on their parents and adults in the household in which they live (Lister, 2006), these social work strategies are paradoxical and counterproductive in the long run since the social justice “aims, aspirations, and affiliations” of social work (Garrett, 2019, p. 190) shift into monitoring, controlling, judging and sanctioning beneficiaries as undeserving ‘charity cases’ (Paugam, 2014; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Many social workers thus produce expressions of neo-philanthropy (Villadson, 2007; Kessler et al., 2019; Jacquet, 2020), which drastically move away from the post-world war rights-oriented welfare state framework. Professional social workers do have a public mandate to provide welfare resources and services without questioning whether individuals had been living up to all their responsibilities as a condition for granting rights (Dwyer, 2004; Dean, 2015).

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

CHAPTER 3

Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: Inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection

Abstract

In the international realm, inter-organizational networking is perceived as a highly relevant instrument in social policy that enables welfare organizations to deal with 'wicked issues'. In this article, we discuss the central empirical findings acquired from a recent qualitative research project that focuses on inter-organizational networks that were formed at the local level to deal with the wicked issue of child poverty as a complex and multidimensional social problem. We explore how the network discussions about normative value orientations in four inter-organizational networks evolve and identify three central fields of tension that illustrate the complexity for local welfare actors in and across networks to create network strategies in dealing with child poverty: (1) selective versus universal provision, (2) conditional versus unconditional strategies, and (3) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches. Our findings show that networks can function as valuable forums for collective debate and reflection, since different approaches and perspectives to tackle the problem of (child) poverty can be confronted with each other. Creating such a forum has the potential to challenge dominant conceptualizations and undesirable assumptions of complex social problems that are present in welfare practices and policies.

Keywords

Inter-organizational networks, (child) poverty, social policy, welfare provision

3.1 Introduction

Governments have recently faced major challenges in resolving highly complex and hard to manage social problems such as unemployment, homelessness, social dislocation, and child abuse and child poverty (Keast, Mandell, Brown and Woolcock 2004; Devaney and Spratt 2009). Rittel and Webber (1973) identify these problems as so-called 'wicked issues' for social policy makers. This is because issues basically cut across a diversity of service areas and policy domains and are too complex to be dealt with by single welfare organizations. Furthermore, as these problems are characterized by a high degree of complexity and uncertainty about the means-end relations, different welfare actors will inevitably pursue differing goals, propose alternative strategies, and rely upon varying values to be achieved (Weber & Khademian, 2008; Ferlie, et.al., 2011; Alford & Head, 2017).

In that vein, the development of an inter-organizational or joined-up approach within the broad field of welfare services is considered to be a pertinent strategy to tackle wicked issues (Lister 2003; Frost 2005). This development is generally perceived as a sustainable solution to the persistence of the historical fragmentation of welfare services (Allen 2003; Provan & Sebastian 1998). As Frost (2005: 11) asserts aptly, a highly specialized division of labor allows professionals to become "more specialist and more expert in their narrow fields". This has led to the creation of separate and categorical policy domains or areas (e.g. housing, welfare, employment, child services) in the provision of welfare services to citizens (Statham 2011) and to fragmented problem-solving mechanisms and procedures (Hood 2014). This fragmentation implies that citizens, and especially those citizens who experience problems that are very complex and multi-dimensional in nature, encounter substantial obstacles or thresholds at the supply side of welfare provision, which prevents them from making use of, and benefiting from, the social resources and support provided by high-quality welfare services (Schiettecat, 2016c). To avoid that citizens fall through the cracks of welfare provision (Allen 2003) and to realize a collaborative advantage that could not have been achieved by individual welfare actors and services alone, inter-organizational networking is therefore expected to tackle gaps and overlaps in the provision of welfare services while taking into account the complex and wicked problems of citizens (Rose 2011; Allen 2003; Vangen and Huxham 2013).

The central aim of this article is to explore the debates about normative value orientations within inter-organizational networks that aim to combat child poverty. In Belgium, policy makers adopted an inter-organizational networking approach as a relevant strategy to combat child poverty in social service delivery being organized at local governmental levels (Schiettecat 2016a, 2016c; Raeymaeckers and Dierckx 2012). Since current research on inter-organizational networking has often been conceived from a rather technical or managerial perspective (Provan and Milward 2001; Allen 2003; Frost 2005; Thompson and Perry 2006), our research question is formulated as follows: what are the varying strategies that are deployed by inter-organizational networks in dealing with normative value orientations when collectively tackling a wicked issue such as child poverty?

In the theoretical part, we first explore different fields of tension in the normative debates that might emerge when a wicked issue of child poverty is tackled. The concept of (child) poverty is not a neutral, but rather a normative and ideological construct, differing according to the ways in which it is defined and constructed by different actors in different societies (Lister 2004). The development of poverty and anti-poverty strategies therefore often entails many different, and often contradictory, meanings and perspectives for different people, especially in the case of child poverty (Couture 2007). After having outlined our research methodology, we present our empirical findings about the different strategies that are developed within these local inter-organizational networks to deal with the fields of tension in normative debates about tackling child poverty. Finally, we make some general reflections about the role of inter-organizational networks as a means to (re-)organize social service delivery and to challenge dominant conceptualizations, definitions and strategies with regard to child poverty. Hence, although research shows that these perspectives also emerge in traditional welfare organizations (see Maesele, 2012), our empirical contribution reveals how inter-organizational networking and collaboration between welfare services intensifies the tensions and the debates about these issues. In this vein, we conclude that networks can function as valuable forums for collective debate and reflection, since different approaches and perspectives to tackle the problem of (child) poverty can be confronted with each other. Rather than avoiding discussion and debate, we argue that such a forum has the potential to challenge dominant conceptualizations and undesirable assumptions of complex social problems that are present in welfare discourses, policies and practices.

3.1.1 Tackling child poverty: shifting normative value orientations in social work and welfare discourses and practices

An extensive body of international social policy and social work research shows that child poverty remains a stubborn, complex and multi-dimensional problem for social policy makers in most Western societies (Platt 2005; Lister 2006). Throughout history, Western welfare states have accordingly given great consideration to what causes harm to children in poverty situations, implying a priority given to social work to intervene in these situations (Parton 2011). In the context of the changing relationship between children, parents and the welfare state during the last century (Gillies 2008; Oelkers 2012), social work has evolved as a welfare practice with shifting normative value orientations. In that vein, Maesele (2012) argues that a complex historical transition can be observed in social work from charity- to rights-oriented ideas and practices, that also reveals elements of continuity and discontinuity. Whereas charity-oriented social work practices paid an overwhelming attention to disciplining family life in order to protect children in poverty from their so-called 'irresponsible' parents (Lister 2003; Vanobbergen *et al.* 2006), rights-oriented practices consider the realisation of children's rights as always interrelated with a proactive realisation of the welfare rights of their parents (see Lister 2006; Schiettecat *et al.* 2014). Western welfare states have however recently developed a new concern about what causes harm to children, implying a renewed priority given to child and family social work for intervention in supposedly alarming situations, such as children living in poverty (Parton 2011). In that sense, recent research shows that the rights-oriented value orientation in welfare states risks to be particularly changing and shifting into charity-based ideas and value orientations, leading to the emergence of neo-philanthropic ideas and practices (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Lorenz 2016; Krumer-Nevo 2016; Kessler, Oecher & Schröder 2019).

Throughout these historical developments, scholars have argued that a new emphasis on the distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' manifests itself during the last decades (Villadsen 2007; Krumer-Nevo 2016; Garrett 2018). Our societies have long distinguished between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' (Villadsen 2007), yet this currently results in a focal concern 'in the behaviour and attitudes of the poor and the 'competence' which should be expected of them' (Garrett 2018: 392). This is also at stake in the case of child poverty (Couture 2007). Although addressing child poverty is perceived as intrinsically legitimate, Goldson (2002) argues that the structural conditions in

which children live – expressions of poverty and inequality that are also experienced by parents - are substituted with a conceptual emphasis on individual responsibility. As such, a well-established conceptual schism has been resurrected in the form of the ‘deserving’ troubled child and the ‘undeserving’ troublesome’ parents, who do not behave according to the norm of ‘responsible’ parenting (Goldson 2002).

3.1.2 Features of charity- and rights-oriented approaches to social work

In that vein, we rely on a conceptual frame of reference that identifies three interrelated central fields of tension that indicate the features of, and distinction between, charity- and rights-based social work orientations: whereas selectivity, conditionality and instrumental approaches refer to ideas being rooted in charity-oriented welfare discourse and social work practice, universality, unconditionality and lifeworld-oriented approaches refer to rights-oriented value orientations in welfare discourse and social work practice (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Morvaridi 2016).

(1) Selective versus universal: Selectivity refers to the creation of criteria that determine whether citizens have the right to a certain welfare state intervention, and entails a categorization (division) between those who deserve this and those who do not meet specific conditions that give access to social service provision as undeserving citizens (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). A universal approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). In that vein, selectivity refers to the construction of target groups, and aims to direct public resources towards the most disadvantaged to maximize equality on the condition that they are willing to accept the social norm (Martin 2010). However in the implementation of these policy rationales, selective approaches often have stigmatizing effects (Maesele 2012).

(2) Conditional versus unconditional: Judging this willingness to behave according to the social norm is rooted in the idea of ‘goodwill’ (Maesele 2012). The component of goodwill refers to the dependence of the poor on those providing help and the goodwill of those providing help to assist those ‘deserving’ it (Payne 2005; Leighninger 2008). In social work, welfare conditionality refers to the fact that access to publicly provided welfare benefits and services is dependent on individual citizens first agreeing to meet particular obligations or patterns of behavior (see Dwyer 2004; Fletcher & Flint 2018). People’s access

to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change people's behavior. In that sense, the argument goes that people do not have rights without fulfilling their responsibilities. An unconditional approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided, without conditions or goodwill (Martin 2010; Brady and Burroway 2012).

(3) Instrumental versus life world-oriented: An instrumental social work practice means that the aim of what is to be done is defined from an external viewpoint and without taking into account what is considered as meaningful for welfare recipients (Maesele 2012). This entails that the outcomes of the interventions are defined beforehand by the social workers, without consulting the welfare recipients about their definition of problems and solutions (Roose *et al.* 2013). Life world oriented principles and practices, on the other hand, take into account the aspirations, life worlds, and concerns of people in poverty situations (Grunwald and Thiersch 2009). This implies that social workers focus on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society. According to a social justice orientation, the interplay between lifeworld and system becomes vital as they analyse how the everyday life is contingent on social and systemic forces (Grunwald and Thiersch 2009; Roets, Roose & De Bie 2013).

Although the identified fields of tension are closely related and partly overlapping, there is however a subtle though important difference between them. For example, selective and universal approaches mainly deal with the question whether welfare actors construct target groups whereas conditional and unconditional approaches are basically about the actual and 'good' behavior we expect. Moreover, it might be the case that social work and welfare actors rely on a selective and unconditional approach in practice, or on a universal and conditional approach when dealing with wicked issues. The differentiation allows us to make clear that it is possible, for example, to approach citizens in selective (e.g. focus on families in poverty), unconditional (e.g. no further expectations about 'good' behavior or restrictions with regard to access imposed to these people) and life world-oriented ways (e.g. their concerns are taken into account from a social justice orientation).

3.2 Research methodology

3.2.1 Research approach

In order to explore the varying strategies of inter-organizational networks in dealing with normative value orientations in how to tackle child poverty in different municipalities in Belgium, the multiple case study was qualitative and ethnographic rather than comparative in nature (Spradley 1980). We adopted a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the normative debates and the strategies being developed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). We therefore selected the cases in the different municipalities while embracing diversity in the cases.

Selection of the inter-organizational networks

The research project was funded by a federal research foundation in Belgium. Despite the relative differences in social policy in the regions and the communities, the main focus of the project was therefore to examine the role of social welfare actors in the development of local inter-organizational networks being supported by federal social policy measures. In Belgium, the common orientation on the federal social policy level entails a rights-oriented approach due a law of 1976 that is installed to guarantee the unconditional right to human dignity in universal ways. In the research project, we therefore developed the following inclusion criteria:

- The Public Centre of Social Welfare (PCSW), being constituted on the federal Belgian level for social work to pursue the unconditional right to human dignity in universal ways, had to be one of the partners in the network.
- The network and its organizations must have worked with families with children in poverty, but not exclusively.
- The network had to consist of autonomous organizations that were different but with complementary functions, rather than an integration of these different functions in one single organization.
- The child poverty rate per municipality or community had to be higher than the average rate.

In addition to the inclusion criteria, we wanted to create a diverse sample of networks. Therefore, the following diversity criteria were also determined:

network location (urban and rural), size, history of working together, sectoral diversity. Additionally, we took into account the willingness of local network actors to collaborate in this study (being open to participative observation and interviews) and considered interesting practices that were developed in the network.

We provide an overview of all the diverse characteristics of the selected networks in table 1.

Table 1: network characteristics

	Network A	Network B	Network C	Network D
Localisation	Flanders (Suburban)	Flanders (urban)	Wallonia (Rural)	Wallonia (Urban)
Represented sectors	Social welfare Early childhood Legislation	Social welfare Early childhood Education Health care	Early childcare Education Health care Social welfare	Youth Education Front-line NGO Social welfare
Active stakeholders	5	60	20	30
Public reached	50/year	30/year	100 children/year	Hundreds of school children/year
Governance	PCSW /OCMW	PCSW /OCMW	NGO	NGO
Resources	Municipalities and regional subsidies	Regional subsidies National lottery	Regional subsidies Communities subsidies	Federal subsidies Regional subsidies
Mandate	Public	Public	Public	Public
Target group	Children (0-3) Vulnerable families	Children Families	Children (0-3) Vulnerable families	Children Teenagers
Provided services	Individualized support trajectories	Parenting support	Childcare Parenting support	Educational activities School prevention

The four selected networks are funded either by the regional or by the national governmental department responsible for poverty reduction. Networks A and B

are located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Network A is situated in a suburban municipality. This network consists of five partners that together combine the provision of material and immaterial support (e.g. welfare allowances, employment, parent support). It is targeted towards vulnerable families with a child initially between 0 and 3 years old, and aimed at developing individualized support trajectories for a maximum of three years, coordinated by a case coordinator. The trajectories start by examining with the parents whether all the rights/benefits they are entitled to are realised on many different life domains (for example housing, employment, leisure time, education, income and mobility).

Network B is located in a small municipality in a rural region in Flanders, and involves in total over 60 individual members. This network aims to provide parent support for all families with children in the community. The network deals with complex social problems, including high numbers of ethnic minorities, high unemployment, low average income, high residential density, and so on. The network consists of many network partners (at the start 60 individual members) from sectors such as education, (preventive) parenting support, leisure time, health care and welfare. By creating a “House of the Child”, the network aims to provide a physical meeting place and contact point for families with children in the municipality. Network interventions such as play and meeting moments for parents and children, information moments, consultations, and trajectories for pregnant woman are offered to all families in the municipality.

Networks C and D are located in Wallonia, the French-speaking region in Belgium. Network C aims to provide childcare and parenting support for all families with children under three years old, with special attention being paid to the creation of affordable and accessible services for families in poverty in 15 rural communities. Network C develops and supports day-care for children, especially for children in poverty situations whose parents are involved in welfare-to-work programs. Besides, the network provides parenting support through educational and cultural activities and workshops.

Network D is located in Wallonia targets children and teenagers, and aims to prevent early school leaving and bullying. It starts from a street-level approach to reduce the distance between service providers and users where the school is seen as a very important actor in the network. Network D brings together 30 services from various domains, such as youth, education, welfare and poverty. The coordinator and the partners focus on problems such as bullying, harassment, early school leaving and early parenthood, and want to develop a

joined-up approach to decrease service fragmentation and offers comprehensive support for teenagers.

3.2.2 Data collection strategies

In order to investigate these networks, two qualitative research methods for data collection were combined: participant observation during the network meetings and activities; and qualitative interviews with actors of the network. Two researchers (first and second author) were involved in the relevant settings and activities of the networks (Nandhakumar and Jones 1997). Participant observation served as an appropriate research method to offer thick descriptions of field experiences (Patton 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2003). The observations took place during meetings of the network actors. Documenting the discussions in detailed and contextualized ways during these meetings provided an in-depth insight into the actual meaning, implementation, and value orientation of the networks. The participant observation was spread over a period of two years. The frequency of the observations was dependent on the frequency of the meetings of the networks.

Each of these meetings took between two and three hours. None of the meetings or informal discussions were audio-recorded, but field notes were taken. For participant observation, it is important to separate observation from interpretation when taking notes (Mack *et al.* 2005). In so doing, the participant observation provides a context that allows us to understand the data that are collected through other methods (Mack *et al.* 2005). In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with central local network actors, to take into account the actors' perspective (Patton 2002: 341). The selection of the network actors was based on the condition that they fulfill a significant role on the strategic level in shaping and steering the networks and their interventions. Topics concerning the role of local social policies and strategies on (child) poverty reduction and networking between organizations and sectors were discussed. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the university and informed consents were systematically obtained.

3.2.3 Strategies of data analysis

We analyzed the data (field notes and interviews) through a qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005: 1278) define this as 'a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systemic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns'. It is used as a sense-making effort that attempts to systematically analyze and identify core

consistencies and meanings in qualitative research material (Patton 2002; Kohlbacher 2006). In our analysis, we were relying on the three existing fields of tension in the literature that allowed us to capture the rationales, strategies and actions that are directed towards families and children, and to illustrate complex debates for local welfare actors. Since the creation of inter-organisational networks between a wide range of welfare services for children and families might produce similar challenges, our analysis focuses on these three fields of tensions. These fields of tension influence the rationales, strategies and actions that are directed towards families and children, but we revised them to do justice to the discussions and dynamics that evolved in and across networks to create shared strategies in dealing with child poverty: (1) selective versus universal provision; (2) child- versus family-oriented strategies, and (3) instrumental versus life-world oriented approaches. As such, a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Myring 2000) was applied. This process of data analysis, in which we persistently triangulated different data sources (observations and qualitative interviews), allowed us to validate and cross-check our research findings. The validity and reliability of our research findings was also established through the prolonged engagement of the researchers, peer debriefing, and careful consideration in our research team (Morse *et al.* 2002).

3.3 Research findings

3.3.1 Universal versus selective provision

This field of tension deals with the discussion about the target group and the question whether the network should serve citizens in universal or selective ways. In the different networks, we observed how the network actors try to connect both poles of selective or universal principles and practices. Our cases show that both approaches are used for different strategies and goals that evolve in dynamic ways over time.

For example, Network A starts from a selective approach by targeting families in poverty. Individual trajectories are constructed to support families in poverty in a multidimensional way and using a rights-based orientation. Nevertheless, this trajectory is only possible for a limited number of families (in this case 40), which raises questions about the accessibility of the network. Still, it is effective in reaching poor families and realizing their rights on many different life domains. The network tries to compensate its selective character by developing a strategy

to broaden this selective approach into a more universal approach. The signals and problems that were discovered by implementing the individual support trajectories, were also discussed and dealt with on a broader local policy level. In this way, other families of the local community (who are not directly included in the network's support and activities) may also benefit from the network. For example, the lack of affordable and qualitative housing was presented to a local council where local housing policies were developed to tackle this problem. The impact of the network, therefore, goes beyond the selective approach where every citizen can potentially benefit from the network activities.

Other examples could be observed in Networks B and C. These networks started from a universal approach, that was initially used as a strategy to include vulnerable parents in the network. Network C's objective was to promote accessibility and affordability for poor families in a newly created childcare facility. Even though this was formulated as an aim, the network members stated that they faced difficulties in reaching these poor families and this was perceived as deeply problematic. In this network, a partner suggested developing a new strategy to overcome this problem, namely using a selective approach instead of a universal approach to fulfill the objectives of the network. Another partner also reflected on this and mentioned that in some ways, inequalities in the child care system are reproduced, due to the fact that the network doesn't reach families in poverty as supposed to. This partner therefore seems to suggest that processes of social exclusion are reproduced by the network that aims to combat child poverty. To prevent the exclusion of vulnerable families, the network decided to create an income-related system in their childcare facility to increase the affordability of their services and decrease the threshold for poor families. As they argue, *"we have to make sure that stronger families don't oppress the vulnerable ones"* (own translation). The network still defends a universal approach as they aim to serve a socially diverse group and avoid stigmatization.

Network B started from a universalist approach, by creating a 'House of the Child' as a low-threshold provision and contact point for all families with children in the community. Still, the network struggled to reach vulnerable parents, and the network coordinator made this repeatedly explicit during the network meetings. During this meeting, it became clear that the inequality of use was not only seen as a problem of non-participation, but also as an issue of spending the financial means of the network. A partner of the network defended a more selective approach to tackle child poverty and challenged this universalist approach. This person contested: *"Are the funds that are acquired for combating poverty actually used for this group in particular? Or do all the resources and benefits go to*

families who do not live in poverty?" (own translation). This discussion was also raised in another network meeting, and the principle of proportionality was mentioned to defend the idea that the budget should benefit the well-being of families in poverty more than the wellbeing of more affluent families. In reaction, the coordinator of the network stated that: *"It should not become a House of the "problem" Child instead of a House of the Child"*, to underpin the argument that a selective and targeted approach would create a stigmatizing label. The selective approach might paradoxically produce an inaccessibility for all families, and more particularly might scare families in poverty.

3.3.2 Conditional versus unconditional strategies

Families in poverty situations are often confronted with a complex web of material and non-material problems which cut across a wide range of policy domains and service areas (Lister 2004; Clarke and Stewart 1997; Main 2014). The wellbeing of the child was the starting point of these networks who aim to combat child poverty, and therefore this viewpoint entails the risk of implementing conditional social work practices towards parents who risk to be constructed as citizens who are deserving of support and resources only for the sake of their children. Although child-centered interventions seem to construct the child as the main reason for intervention in several practices, other practices challenge this subtle conditionality towards parents and were developed within and across the networks in relation to the family as a whole.

In some of our interviews with central local network actors (Networks A and B), a social investment paradigm was present in (child) poverty reduction strategies. Children, in this vein, were considered as potentially worthwhile and beneficial social investments. This was argued in Network A because of the higher potential of breaking the cycle of poverty if the interventions were targeted towards young children. The problem was framed as a problem of inequality and consequently the interventions were aimed at closing the gap between the rich and the poor at a young age, to prevent children from falling behind in school and in participation in leisure time activities. The coordinator of this network stated that this may have a bigger return to society and that children will get more experiences to build on. So in Network A, having a child aged between 0 and 3 years old was an explicit condition of being included in the support that was provided by the network. Although this policy choice directly targets children, the actions taken by the network partners affected the well-being of all family members, because structural dimensions like housing, employment, social support, financial support, etc., impacted on the family as a whole. In the interviews, local policy

makers from Network A made it clear that it was crucial to include the context of the child to combat child poverty, because children who grow up in a family in poverty experience fewer chances and increased exclusion in multiple life domains. In Network B, a focus on talent development appeared to be one of the drivers to invest in children. One of the policy makers explained that it was a matter of following the political and scientific discourse in his choice to target young children and even claimed that targeting, for example, a 14-year-old would not make a difference in the effort to break the cycle of poverty. In this way, the needs of older children and also of parents were not taken into account, and so they risked exclusion from the network's focus.

The focus on children may equally well be used as a strategy to include all family members. Some of the network actors in Networks A and B, for example, argued during the interviews that it is less stigmatizing if the well-being of the child serves as a starting point for interventions. They argue that parents don't have to feel approached because they are poor, but because they are a parent. A local welfare actor of Network B stated that when the wellbeing of the child is central to the intervention, this makes other family members more willing to cooperate with services. So the child oriented strategy was used to achieve a family oriented strategy.

In Network C, a change in staff occurred and, as a consequence, the support offered also changed over time. The original aim of the network was to provide a multi-dimensional and family approach, including childcare performed by pediatric nurses and parent support performed by social workers. After a while, the team evolved and consisted predominantly of pediatric nurses instead of social workers. As a consequence, the network gradually focused more on childcare than on parent support. During the participant observation, it was clear that even though they received questions from parents that deal with very complex and difficult situations, the network became more child-oriented.

3.3.3 Instrumental versus life world-oriented approaches

In order to develop high quality provision for families by dealing with fragmentation and sectoral segregation (Roose & al., 2013), some network members argue that the well-being and concerns of parents and children in poverty situations need to be considered as multidimensional, with reference to providing material as well as immaterial support including issues of health, housing, employment, and education (Lister 2004; Allen 2003; Broadhead *et al.*

2008). The networks in our study made different choices in providing resources to parents and children: some were taking into account the life worlds and concerns of both parents and children, whereas others developed welfare services in more instrumental ways.

In that vein, the networks in our study made different choices in providing support to parents and children. Network A started their actions from the aspirations, life worlds and concerns of families in poverty situations. Network B and D for example, developed welfare services in more instrumental ways and actions and outcomes were defined beforehand by social workers, without consulting the families about how they would define and construct it.

Network A, for example, organizes individual support trajectories where the needs of each individual family served as the starting point of the interventions. The support was based on the dialogue and negotiation about the questions and needs of the family. Consequently, on many occasions material as well as immaterial resources were provided, and many different life domains were covered, acknowledging the multidimensionality and complexity of the problems of trying to realize welfare rights on several life domains, including housing, childcare, employment, and allowances.

Another example manifests itself in Network B, which aimed to be a new gateway for families in relaying questions from parents to social work organizations. Additional attention was paid to the inclusion of poor families in newly developed parent support initiatives. Yet, defining the needs of families in instrumental ways (i.e., their need for parent support) may have contributed to their exclusion, as Network B faced difficulties in reaching poor families. During a network meeting, the coordinator told the partners that she received 33 questions, mostly from parents who don't live in poverty, that were mainly educational and relational in nature. One could wonder if the instrumental definition of concerns (as primarily educational) created this problem, in cases when poor families did not consider their problem as educational or relational, but as material in nature. Structural dimensions of combating poverty, like housing and employment, were not included domains of action in Network B.

Network D started from a street corner work approach to reach vulnerable citizens. The importance of outreach was stressed by the partners and coordinator as *"it helps our provision to understand the needs of our potential users"* (own translation). Even though this was the explicit starting point of the network, according to the coordinator the strategy changed due to financial

reasons from a life world oriented approach to having an externally defined and specific mission, life domain, and target group. At present, the interventions are mainly situated in domains of youth and school (to prevent early school leaving and bullying). This resulted in the fact that some of the network partners did not and could not fully commit anymore to deal with other life domains, even when these issues seemed to be vital for the families involved. One partner formulated this as follows: *“If we don’t start over the whole process, we cannot be sure that we are not excluding some families according to the fact that we do not engage in a more in-depth analysis of what is at stake”* (own translation). The switch to a focus on youth and school also led to a disengagement of partners who did not work in these specific fields, as they were aware that this evolution would exclude people.

3.4 Concluding reflections

In this article, we explored the debates about normative value orientations of inter-organizational networks amongst a wide variety of welfare actors who collectively aim to tackle a wicked issue such as child poverty. Our results show that it was impossible to identify a clear-cut or one-dimensional strategy in the networks dealing with child poverty. Based on the conceptual difference between charity- and rights-oriented social work practices that are captured in three fields of tension, we observed a diversity of normative value orientations and divergence in the operational and strategic choices that were made within the networks under study. Hence, although the four local networks shared an overall goal and purpose - i.e., combating (child) poverty – we observed major differences in the strategies that were developed. In our view, this relates to the recognition that these tensions about how to tackle wicked issues could not, and should not, be ‘solved’ through inter-organizational networks.

Hence, rather than considering the creation of these networks as a goal in itself, we consider them as additional instruments for local policy makers and welfare organizations to remain engaged in a constant process to give meaning to these tensions. The findings clearly show how the search for a shared vision and the collective development of concrete operational practices gives rise to disagreement and sometimes even conflict. One recurrent driver for discussion related to the fact that network partners became aware that their strategies simultaneously seemed to include some families yet exclude others, especially with reference to the question of whether the network activities contributed to the realization of the rights of families in poverty situations (see Hughes and Mac

Naughton 2000). Embracing democratic disagreement might therefore be advantageous as Lubeck (1998: 290) asserts:

“ Finding comfort in consensus, may make us too sure that what we know is best for ourselves is also best for others. Uncertainty, by contrast, is unsettling, it makes us wonder, listen and try new things. It opens up the possibility that things can be other than they seem.

In this vein, it is not surprisingly that we observed that network goals and strategies were regularly challenged, renegotiated, and thus evolved in organic ways over time. More importantly, however, our study shows that an openness for collective debate and reflection could also challenge dominant assumptions and self-evident problem definitions of strategies to deal with child poverty and is therefore desirable (Schiettecat, 2016c). These processes of reflection, which occur both within and across organizations that constitute a network, are vital and meaningful as they serve as levers to incorporate the needs, concerns and meaning-making of the families and children who might benefit from the network activities (Grunwald and Thiersch 2009; Schiettecat 2016c). Schiettecat (2016b: 8) argued that this pursuit of a potential surplus value for citizens ‘reveals an important question about the normative frame of reference, that guides network actors when they collaborate’. Rather than protecting children in poverty as supposed ‘victims’ of the so-called ‘bad’ education of parents, we argue that poor children are always children of poor parents (Mestrum 2011).

We therefore argue that combating child poverty requires networks which operate as platforms for collective debate and reflection in the development of a common rights-oriented rather than charity-based normative value orientation over time; yet this crucially requires that democratic disagreement and even conflict are fostered. Our research shows that the involvement of the Public Centres for Social Welfare as key actors in the development of networks to combat child poverty is therefore crucial, since they have the formal and public mandate to realize the right to human dignity in Belgium for all citizens in universal, unconditional, and life world-oriented ways. In that sense, we argue that combating the wicked issue of child poverty can only be significant when it is embedded in a rights-oriented approach (McKeown *et al.* 2014; Anthony *et al.* 2011; Smith *et al.* 2008), in which the realisation of children’s rights is always interrelated with a proactive realisation of the welfare rights of their parents (see Lister 2006; Schiettecat *et al.* 2014).

CHAPTER 4

The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium

Abstract

Workfare programs are often seen as a key policy to prevent citizens to fall into poverty. In the context of the evolution of welfare policies and poverty reduction strategies, a gradual revision and erosion of welfare to workfare strategies has been taken place, which entails that citizens are required to embody workfare programs to keep their right to allowance. Relying on the set of ideas of critical scholars who have referred to a newly emerging class of “the precariat”, we tackle how workfare programs, despite lifeworld-oriented and unconditional strategies continue to be developed by social workers, keep recipients in trajectories that offer few possibilities and fail to improve their living conditions. We focus on a qualitative research project in which we investigate citizens’ trajectories in workfare programs. While exploring the practices and normative value orientations of social workers that support them, we tease out whether, and if so, citizens would sooner or later position themselves in the labour market or in the contrary if they will fall into more precarity resulting in a no-win situation.

Keywords

Lifeworld-oriented strategies, citizens, workfare, social work strategies

4.1 Setting the scene

During the last decades, social activation of economically inactive citizens into employment on the regular labour market increasingly appears to be a key social policy strategy in Belgium, as part of its national social inclusion policy (Raeymackers et al., 2009; Oriane, 2012; Roets et al., 2012; Cantillon, 2017). This development is captured in the concept of 'social inclusion', that is promoted since the implementation of the Lisbon and EU2020 strategy of poverty reduction at the European level since 2010 (see Schiettecat et al., 2017). In that vein, social activation policies and practices are justified by the promise that poverty can be prevented or mediated by activating and reintegrating into society those who have been marginalized from education or the labour market, or by enabling them to reintegrate themselves (Jorgenson, 2004; Nothdurfter, 2018). Although social inclusion and activation policies and practices concentrate on "championing the rights of poor, marginalized, oppressed and socially excluded groups in society" (Gray, 2014, p. 1751), critical social work scholars have argued that social activation rhetoric, policy and practice equally well reflects the dominant expectation that citizens actively acquire marketable skills and knowledge (Lorenz, 2005; Villadsen, 2007; Oriane, 2012). This emphasis squares with the dominance of welfare-to-work strategies, which emerge since the early 90's as a key aspect of anti-poverty policy making and imply that social welfare policies and practices are increasingly shifting into welfare-to-work strategies that constitute the basis of social assistance in diverse countries (MacDonald & Marston, 2005; Good Gingrich, 2010; Roets et al., 2012; Vrancken, 2012; Garrett, 2019).

Western welfare states have accordingly capitalized on the ideal of an active, employable, self-reliant citizen who meets social obligations (Clarke, 2005). It results in a form of welfare conditionality in terms of access to public welfare benefits, resources, and services. Economically inactive citizens are to meet particular obligations or patterns of behaviour to claim assistance (see Dwyer, 2004; Fletcher & Flint, 2018). This welfare conditionality particularly emerges when economically inactive citizens are dependent on welfare benefits, being referred to as social zero gravity, which also leads to the use of sanctions, being justified by "notions of the duties and obligations of citizens and a paternalistic belief that marginalised groups need to be facilitated to behave appropriately and incentivised to take up support" (Fletcher and Flint, 2018: 772). Since the welfare dependency of economically inactive citizens is often framed as a burden for the so desired economically prosperous society (Garrett, 2018), social workers are

required to judge whether it is reasonable to grant welfare benefits (see also Good Gingrich, 2010; Garrett, 2018). People who are dependent on the social welfare system might therefore be easily subjected to controlling and disciplinary social work interventions, because they are supposedly to blame and punish for their perceived passivity, dependency and laziness, and need to be activated “into self-reliance, independence, competitiveness, and industriousness” (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, p. 1801).

Sharp critiques however have been raised about welfare policies and practices in terms of the emergence of a so-called ‘precariat’, a new class situated “below the middle class” (wage society) concerning individuals in the status of underemployment” (Castel, 2011, 422). The precariat concerns individuals who are required to accept low-wage jobs, ranging from insecure interim to forced part-time, temporary, unregulated flex-jobs that are made available for the labour force. Full-time employment standards with decent wages are substituted to new forms of atypical jobs (Castel, 2011) that leads to employment instability and social insecurity (Vrancken, 2010; Lewis et al., 2014). Also in the European Union, the so-called modernization of welfare policies has been promoted with reference to ‘flexicurity’ (see Mestrum, 2014): the labour market does not provide enough qualitative jobs to all yet the public expectation entails the obligation that everybody activates themselves and work. Castel (2011) points at the paradox of the ‘working poor’ or the *underemployed* who are caught in economic dynamics that structurally disadvantage and exploit people who already live at the bottom of the social fabric. Also, Good Gingrich (2010) identifies the paradoxical nature of procedures and practices at stake in social activation and assistance programs, resulting in ‘managed precariousness’. Her research shows that welfare-to-work programs are explicitly designed and managed to provide inadequate material and social resources to find or keep employment, which paradoxically leads citizens to accept precarious working conditions as ‘working poor’. In the end, getting a low-paid job instead of a welfare allowance often does not increase recipients’ income as well as it does not improve their living conditions. As such, the lack of proper income, lack of quality and stability of their employment (Paugam, 1996), position citizens in the precariat, as a subcategory, and keep them in a “no-win situation” with reference to the absurdity of paradoxical situations and expectations in which welfare recipients are caught (see Roets et al., 2012).

Inspired by these research findings, our contribution is based on a qualitative and biographical research study in Belgium that aimed to retrospectively investigate citizens’ trajectories, as they are involved in welfare-to-work

programs in the French speaking part of Belgium. We aim to grasp their perception of social activation policies, the strategies social workers develop to support them, and try to figure out if those strategies lead to improve their living conditions.

In what follows, we will first explain more in detail what is at stake in activation policies and workfare programs (normative criteria/indicators) in Belgium. We will focus on the evolution of welfare-to-work strategies. Second, we will describe the methodological strategies we used. Finally, we will discuss the research findings and address the concluding reflections.

4.1.1 Rights-oriented strategies

In the post-war period, as a response to the horrors of the Second World War a collective social justice aspiration was considered essential for democracy (Dean, 2015) and materialized in the implementation of welfare states, and social protection and social security systems. This resulted in the desire to realize universal human rights through the recognition of social equality, manifested in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Maesele, 2012). Since this declaration, the states ratified that they committed themselves to secure human rights for every citizen (Turner, 2008; Dean, 2015). With this declaration, a new socio-political goal was introduced by the state next to labour market qualification and guarding the social order in society: to create equal opportunities for everyone to live a life in human dignity (Bouverne-De Bie, 2005; Lister, 2007). Yet, the meaning of human dignity in the Declaration was not clearly defined, which left the term open for various and diversified interpretations (Chan & Bowpitt, 2005). The introduction of the right to human dignity is often defined as a Copernican Revolution (Pieters 1980-1981), and as a transition in the thinking on welfare relying on a socio-political and rights-based normative value orientation (Bouverne-De Bie, 2007). The principle of social protection in the welfare state included the democratic realization of the right to human flourishing and the realization of social services to do so.

In Belgium, this principle and normative value orientation has been institutionalized in 1944, in the light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, as a policy rhetoric in the law of the Belgian welfare state, a.k.a. Office National de la Sécurité Sociale (O.N.S.S.) in French. The social welfare state was designed to decrease the risks that the labour force could face in their life trajectories in terms of labour market dependency. Mainly the idea was to create a system that provides social

allowances in case of unemployment despite workers' unmarketable skills, lack of qualifications, unfitted conditions (old age and/or conditions of (chronic) illness and disability), and labour market's inability to integrate everyone. To make the system sustainable in terms of funding, social security contributions were collected from workers and employers' wages through a sophisticated tax system. Besides, major public policies were developed to the decommodification of key economic sectors to provide a set of basic rights to every citizen in terms of housing, health, education, and transports. For the first time in modern history, major policies responses were addressed to radically reconfigure the relation between the state and the market, by guaranteeing to everyone, independently of their access to income, a certain set of rights in terms of (full) employment, health care, education, social security, and housing (see Malpass, 2008). So, it was not mainly about rights in the abstract sense, but about this idea of social rights and a "collective ownership" of some crucial key economic sectors. The underlying normative framework (Palier & Surel, 2005) of social protection was to develop a collective vision of solidarity by ensuring rights principles to secure the labour force's living conditions.

4.1.2 Workfare-oriented strategies

Since the 80's, research has shown that citizens must increasingly fulfil conditions to get and keep their rights and allowances. The gradual process of further conditionalization leads to total or partial suspension of the income for individuals who turn-down any job offer *without justifiable motives* (Dumont, 2007). The beneficiary must now increasingly satisfy conditions to be helped or assisted (Vrancken, 2002). The activation principle that leads to the suspension or suppression of the income runs counter the social welfare architecture and illustrates the shift from welfare to workfare, from rights-based oriented to instrumental workfare strategies, activation policies and accountability. This new social arrangement is built on individuals' self-responsibility (Vrancken, 2010) and overshadows unconditional protection by self-responsibility's euphoria. The generalization of the principle of conditionality of access to the most fundamental rights acts as an ideological shift, which we have been witnessing for the past forty years. Welfare policies were implemented according to rights-oriented normative frameworks. Although the policy rhetoric has been institutionalized, it can be argued that this framework has nonetheless gradually eroded by the development towards a welfare-to-work state, which carries the risk of a further intensification of the un/conditional coupling of protection to the goals of labour market qualification and social order (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2005). The tendency that consisted, during the 1950s and 1960s, of

applying the principle of rights-based oriented strategies is tending to disappear, giving way to an increasing conditionalization in welfare policies.

4.2 Research methodology

4.2.1 Research context

We adopted an interpretative and qualitative research approach, to get an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the experiences of citizens when they are activated into employment by local social policy and social work. We therefore adopted a case study approach and selected an institution in the French speaking part of Belgium to study citizens' lives trajectories, with a particular focus on workfare programs. We selected a small-sized institution located in an urban community in the French speaking part of Belgium that provides support to a little less than 60 recipients. Recipients are redirected to the service by public welfare institutions, such as the Public Center for Social Welfare or the Public Service for Professional Training and Job Provision. The service provides support to recipients that can fit two selection criteria: having the unemployment status and being involved in a mental health care trajectory (being followed by psychiatrist or psychologist).

4.2.2 Strategies of data collection

Our strategy consists of combining two research strategies. First, we engaged in the analyses of a specific workfare program using a research strategy that combines semi-structured interviews with social workers and semi-structured retrospective biographical interviews (Roberts, 2005) with citizens that are involved in the program.

The qualitative interviews with social workers (n=6) allowed us to gain a better understanding of the underlying logics of intervention, the institutional contexts, its ways of working, and its strategies. We reconstructed citizens' trajectories (n=10), with a particular focus on identifying the strategies they develop to deal with normative activation frameworks. The objective was to reconstruct recipients' biographical pathways, with a specific focus on how their labour market status evolved and what is the added value of social workers support in this specific institution. By using snowball sampling at the previous stage with social workers to select recipients, we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews at recipients houses that took between 34 minutes and 2 hours. All of them are relying on welfare benefit whether is on unemployment or disability benefit or

even on PCSW. We are using alias to ensure anonymity and confidentiality to all participants we have interviewed. The research was approved by the ethical committee of the University and informed consents were systematically obtained.

Table 1: recipients characteristics

	ALIAS	G	AGE	WELFARE BENEFIT	WORKFA RE BACK-GROUND	MENTAL HEALTH BACKGRO UND	PROFESS IONAL BACKGRO UND
1	Amelia	W	50	Unemployment	7 years	Psychiatric hospital	Full time secretary for a year
2	Isabelle	W	26	Disability	2 years	Psychiatric hospital	Half time cashier for a year
3	Lucien	M	28	PCSW	6 years	Psychologist	Half time volunteer for a year
4	Beatrice	W	53	Disability	2 years	Psychologist	None
5	Chloe	W	26	Unemployment	2 years	Psychologist	Half time cashier for two years
6	Jean	M	27	Unemployment	4 years	Psychologist	Full time mechanic for a year
7	Arnaud	M	53	Unemployment	6 years	Psychiatric hospital	Full time bakery for 15 years
8	Julie	W	54	Disability	6 months	Psychologist	Full time logistics for 25 years
9	Julien	M	47	Disability	2 years	Psychologist	Full time logistics for 20 years
10	Anne	W	51	Disability	1 year	Psychologist	Full time project manager for 21 years

4.2.3 Strategies of data analysis

We analysed our data through a qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005, 1278) define this as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systemic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. Qualitative content analysis takes in a holistic approach to grasp the complexity of what is studied, but at the same time tries to deal with this complexity by gradually reducing it (Kohlbacher, 2005). We elaborate the literature review of both scientific and grey literature.

In a second stage of the process of data analysis, an abductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was applied to analyse the interviews with local social policy and social work, as well as the biographical interviews with citizens. As a result, we identified three analytical themes that embrace the richness of the findings. In the next sections, we draw on empirical dimensions to qualify the lifeworld-oriented strategies developed by social workers when providing support to recipients. Then, we stress structural issues that recipients are facing on the labour market that keep them in a no-win situation.

4.3 Findings: Lifeworld-oriented social work practices

The life trajectories of citizens are, above all, real journeys where the different dimensions of employment, training, family life, conjugal life, health, and mental health are intrinsically intertwined. The tendency to institutions and programs' hyper-specialization as well as territories fragmentation, in the context of the Belgian federal state, hinders the possibility of proposing a lifeworld-oriented support in which the trajectory of the citizens would be perceived in every aspect. As we shall see, any accident, any hindrance in one of the dimensions has snowball effects on recipients' life even if they get life-world oriented and unconditional support from front-line social workers. Before developing on structural dimensions that are facing citizens, which keep them in a no-win situation, we will first analyse the strategies developed by front-line social work based on the experience of citizens. The empirical data from the interviews with citizens shows the unconditional and lifeworld-oriented nature of the strategies developed by their front-line social worker. We describe these strategies through field practices such as building a relationship based on mutual trust or providing

lifeworld-oriented support in professional integration trajectory that follows recipients particularities.

4.3.1 Trust-based relationship

The dimension of professional discretion was key for every welfare recipient we interviewed. They all maintain a trust-based relationship with front-line social workers. From their perspectives, building a trustworthy relationship with front-line social workers relies on unconditional and long-term support. The following quotes illustrate the positive effect of establishing a trust-based relationship and its impact on citizens' trajectories, especially those who are experiencing social exclusion. In these situations, the social worker assumes the role of confidant, trustworthy person, or even a so-called professional "friend", which constitutes, without a doubt, a real added value in recipients' trajectories. This phenomenon relates to professional attitude towards recipients that are not left alone.

“ So that's it, when I see her, it's a booster in fact. Because sometimes, when I don't find any jobs or trainings before a meeting with her, that's alright, we see each other and we talk, even sometimes about other things, there is a link between us. And she will never say to me "no, you have to do this or that ". She understands me. She listens to me". (Beatrice)

“ I don't have too many friends to talk to. I never had many. Just going to see my agent, half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, that helps. Every appointment starts with a "how are you"? We do that for fifteen minutes and then we do some job searches. If I call and she doesn't answer, the next morning she calls you back. She doesn't leave you out. I said to her, you're my coach yes, but you're also a friend. It goes well with her. I am better now. I have found a certain balance". (Arnaud)

4.3.2 Lifeworld strategies

The unconditional nature of long-term support provided by social workers limits the stigmatization that recipients often experience in their everyday lives, whether at the level of the civil society, the media, or the support they got from other welfare institutions. The life-world strategy, because of its unusual character - compared to other workfare institutions, such as PCSW, which often persist in trying to assess recipient's motivation to fit activation narrative - deserves to be highlighted. The recipient is perceived as being caught in a situation in which the lack of both material as well as immaterial resources

provides complicated challenges. The multidimensional aspect of support is particularly appreciated by recipients who point out the excessive segmentation of support offered by other welfare organizations. The following interview excerpts report the lifeworld approach developed by front-line social workers. The support they provide goes beyond the dimensions strictly linked to professional integration, by considering different areas of their lives, such as housing, transportation expenses, administrative procedures of all kinds, psychological support, and support for successful training.

“ I was looking for a place to live. She could also help me with the application form for social housing. She gave me information on where to go to get other required papers. Because it's good to have a list of papers but you don't always know where to go to get them. She told me. She also told me that volunteering was no longer my priority, but that housing was. (Amelia)

The strategy that consists of not imposing a framework to recipients has the effect of making them actors in their own lives and placing their needs at the core of the support. The following quotes stress the complexity of recipients' trajectories and their need to receive lifeworld-oriented support from an intensive follow-up during a training to a negotiation with an employer's recipient to adapt his workstation.

“ I was trained as a computer technician. She helped me a lot in every step of the training. Because I am a very anxious person. For example, when I had a thesis to deliver, she followed what I was doing, if it was good, what needed to be reshaped and so on. She encouraged me not to give up during the training. I did it well, I passed, and I know it is also because of her. (Lucien)

“ She also intervened to ask for the authorization of the noise-cancelling headphones in my company (he suffers from hyper auditory sensitivity). So, the agent intervened, again, because I couldn't articulate what was wrong. It's not just the job (professional integration), it's everything else. It's all these little hats that she wears that I think are wonderful. (Jean)

4.3.3 Professional integration strategies following recipients particularities

Citizens expressed great difficulty to understand the sphere of workfare programs and its codes. Some of them have had a long professional career, between 7 and 21 years in the same company, while others could rely on welfare benefits for years. Therefore, they often have no experience of workfare programs regarding its codes, whether in the context of writing a CV or a covering letter or in a reorientation trajectory.

“ I said to myself why not, let's go. After 7 years of not working (relying on mental health benefit), you don't know where to go or where you're going, you don't know what you should do, what is expected from you. So, I applied to the service for support, and I got this social worker. (Amelia)

Besides, they are not aware of recent changes in legislation governing the right to welfare benefits. They found themselves particularly ignorant and consequently powerless, as the next quote illustrates.

“ I experienced a burnout. I realized that I knew absolutely nothing (about workfare programs) and that at my age (50) starting the program was very difficult. I didn't know what I wanted to do and how to look for a job. I couldn't see myself doing it alone. Even though I'm a basic person who tries to learn about things, I was not aware of the magnitude of this thing. She (social worker) helps me a lot to understand the codes. (Anne)

Recipients who were particularly distant from the labour market or workfare programs appreciate that social workers allow them to set up preparatory steps before integrating the labour market. Starting the program by following trainings or developing volunteering experiences are quite productive, especially for those who suddenly quit a long-term job due to a burn-out.

“ Volunteering helps me with that. That's my only goal, to make things happen. I multiply experience to get to know what I want, in which position, in which sector. (Amelia)

The implementation of prior steps was key to deal with mental health issues they face after the burn out. Moreover, many of them wanted to drastically move away from previous positions and sector of activity, which required reflection and time. The possibility of developing a voluntary work or starting training, to keep their right to a social allowance, allowed them to continue a form of activity that was essential to their well-being.

“ When I started the support, I was a bit lost. I realized that I couldn't go back to the way I was (going back to old job). So, I wanted someone to help me see where to go and what the solutions were in front of me. There are times when you can do things that you don't like at first sight and then you discover that it suits you. I absolutely wanted to do something that would keep me busy, that would allow me to envisage the future. (Julie)

4.4 Discussion, a “no win situation”

It was striking to realize during the interviews with the social workers, which was subsequently corroborated in the interviews with citizens, that they position themselves as guardians of the rights of the people they support. This practice of social work, which consists of enabling individuals to assert their social rights, is a drastic change from the practices that are common in contemporary workfare programs. By developing this vision of social work, social workers consider the recipients not as objects of social policies but as subjects of rights. Nevertheless, despite unconditional and lifeworld-oriented strategies, that happen to be very effective, recipients are facing structural issues that keep them in a no-win situation.

The various changes in the welfare benefit's legislation, governing the granting and maintenance of the allowance, lead citizens into more and more precarity. The income' amount - whether unemployment or disability allowances places those entitled into an extremely precarious economic situation and forces most of them to live below the poverty line. Besides, the narrative that consists in making them responsible for their own fate without considering labour market inability to offer them long term and decent jobs that match their specificities has counterproductive effects on their mental health. The condition for maintaining the benefit, including the necessity to integrate the labour market in the medium or even short term, is a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

Our research identifies two profiles of recipient, disemployed and underemployed, which enables us to propose an articulation that covers the multiplicity of recipients' trajectories and its evolutions. In the long run, the two profiles that we identify appear to be modalities for the articulation of individualized trajectories that are difficult to meet outside of more individualized intervention practices focused on support, as proposed by the service. The two profiles are considered at the confluence of the two Social Security domains covered by the institution, namely employment and disability (mental health)

benefits. Each profile is built upon three dimensions that are: 1) the greater or lesser distance from the job market, 2) the greater or lesser distance from workfare programs and finally 3) the greater or lesser trajectory in mental health. We note a common to both recipients' profiles, which is the cultural dimension of workfare programs. Both must integrate the culture of the system through its words, its codes and the legislative framework which frames it. A system that they do not master, but in which and from which they can nevertheless move and develop strategies.

The first profile of recipients is characterized by: 1) a significant distance from the job market with very low probabilities of finding a stable job, whether full-time or part-time; 2) a very intense trajectory in workfare programs and finally 3) a heavy trajectory in mental health. We label them as "underemployed", following Robert Castel's concept of underemployment (Castel, 2002), because their lives are heavy, fragile, marked by social, relational and resources hazards, but also by a great fragility on the labour market in terms of income and real perspective.

Historically, this recipient's profile was not subject to conditionalization for maintaining its welfare benefit. Recent reforms in welfare sectors (unemployment, disability, social assistance) insist on recipients' duties to meet workfare programs criteria, to which they must endorse to maintain the income. The growing implementation of conditions within welfare legislations has counterproductive effects on their health and mental health. The unsuitability of workplaces for workers with disabilities, the common pedagogical models of workfare trainings, the lack of job supply on the labour market, the overvaluation of diplomas and titles to the detriment of one's own experience, all hamper the possibility for the underemployed to get training or to find a stable job.

“ When I do job seeking, I tell my social worker that I have found a job. But it's a bit difficult in my case because my psychiatrist tells me that I can't do more than 20 hours a week, but it's not easy to find someone (employer) who accepts. And then I don't have the CESS (high school degree), I did all my learning by myself. But employers are looking for diplomas and at least the CESS. Now, I'm looking for PCSW job. But they only offer full time job which with my condition I cannot do. (Lucien)

They experience a great fragility when being confronted to social workers who do not provide support based on mutual trust. The activation narrative is difficult to integrate for those for whom the labour market or training conditions do not consider their own specificities such as the unsuitability of workplaces, the

unsuitability of training methods or the fact that the workfare trajectory they are following does not guarantee them access to a steady and adequately paid job. They feel unfit to respond to the injunctions imposed by professionals who do not adapt to their specificities. In the long run it has the effect of demoralizing them and placing them in inextricable situations. Besides, the stigmatization they experience in their daily lives, whether with professionals, with their entourage or in the way the media and the political-economic system report on welfare status to which they are entitled, places them in a position of inferiority that, *in fine*, socially excludes them further and furthers.

The second profile of recipients is characterized by: 1) a former secure position in the labour market; 2) the absence of knowledge of the mechanisms of welfare-to-work programs and its reforms and finally 3) a light mental health trajectory. We label them as "disemployed" because these people, after having lost a full-time job due to a burn-out, seem to be de-socialized regarding the evolution of welfare state legislations and unable to understand workfare programs' codes and words.

Most of the dimensions mentioned above for the "underemployed" are shared by the "disemployed", to which we add dimensions that are specific to them. Firstly, the tightening of the conditions for granting and, above all, maintaining the welfare allowance, for "unemployment" or "disability" benefits, generates counterproductive effects on their life trajectories. They all expressed great difficulty in recovering from the burn-out they suffered and insist on the need to take time to rebuild themselves personally to envisage a successful professional reorientation. The time limit on the right to a welfare benefit and its increasing conditionality generate great stress for them. Moreover, as we stressed earlier, they experience great difficulty in understanding the mechanisms, codes, and language of workfare programs, which makes them particularly fragile. This lack of knowledge creates great discomfort, limits their possibilities of asserting their rights and weaken their mental health.

“ When I contacted the program, I was completely lost, my future was unclear. I realized that I couldn't go back to the way I'd been (former job). So, I wanted someone to help me see where I was heading and what the solutions were for me. (Julie)

We are concerned about the phenomenon of growing precariousness and its effects on recipients entitled to social protection and welfare benefits. Arnaud trajectory who is on the hedge between profile 1 and profile 2, shows the great

inefficiency of workfare programs aimed at permanent integration into the labour market. His trajectory suggests a bleak and reassuring future for the "disemployed" and the "underemployed" who would not find the keys to successfully integrate the labour market with a decent salary. Recipients that are kept in this production of paradoxical no-win situations are wondering if the possibility to reintegrate the labour market is real or whether they will continue their long descent into precarity as this quote asserts:

“ I was a baker for 15 years. Then I stopped because baking, at some point, turns your brain upside down. Then I worked as a road worker, collecting rubbish bags for two years. Then, I did a training course in gardening. From there I did an internship with a boss which didn't work out. From there, I may be forgetting things, I did a training course on warehouse jobs, I did some warehousing. And then I did another training course, afterwards, in horticultural mechanics. I did that for six months. Then I started the program here and the social worker advised me to focus on forklift operator positions, as I had the certificates. You do 10 days on one side and then they don't call you anymore. They don't tell you why. But that's temporary work. The last time I worked at postal office too, at the sorting centre and as a postman. Now we're concentrating on logistics.
(Arnaud)

Recipients lose the desire and hope to see their living conditions improve through a stable job and a decent salary. As we stressed above, recipients' life trajectories are built on dimensions of employment, training, relationships, health, and mental health that are intrinsically linked. The phenomenon of no-win situation, which sees recipients switch from one type of benefit to another, from one right to another, generates greater precariousness in life trajectories. Many structural phenomena weaken the quality of support provided by social workers. Any accident, any hindrance in one or more of the dimensions mentioned above has a knock-on effect on the trajectories, which must be rebuilt or attempted to be rebuilt to limit the phenomenon of social collapse.

Finally, we would like to draw the reader's attention to a research hypothesis that came to our attention during research process. The classic analysis of social policies tells us that the policies that were carried out in a sectoral manner also contributed to defining, categorizing, and differentiating the public. However, based on our results, which are anchored in recipients' life trajectories, we observe a de-differentiation of the public. Clearly, they define themselves through the situations they experience, based on real journeys that intersect, or

even entangle, the different sectors and no longer define them in a univocal manner.

CHAPTER 5

The Un/Deserving Child

Abstract

Child poverty remains a complex social problem in Western societies. In the context of the complex historical reconfiguration and transformation of the institutional welfare state framework in Belgium, we discuss a qualitative research project on the philosophy and practice of a philanthropic Foundation providing support to children in poverty situations. While exploring the practices of the Foundation's social partners, our findings show how a discursive distinction between un/deserving children can be at stake in anti-poverty strategies. We also tease out whether the Foundation might function as a little stone in the shoe of public actors in the welfare state system.

Keywords

Child poverty, social work strategies, neophilanthropy

5.1 Setting the scene

An extensive body of international social policy and social work research shows that child poverty remains a stubborn, complex, and multi-dimensional problem for social policy makers in most Western societies (Platt 2005; Lister 2006). Worldwide more than one billion children live in a situation of poverty, having no adequate access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation, or water. Recently, Reynaert et al. (2021) address that 22% of children in Europe are at risk of poverty. Compared with working-age adults (aged 18-64 years; 21,5%) and older people (aged 65 years and over; 18,6 %), children have the highest risk of living in poverty. In Belgium more specifically, 22,2% of children live in poverty today, a number that has not decreased significantly over the last decades while it became, over the same period, a high priority in Western welfare states (REF)

Throughout history Western welfare states have accordingly considered the provision of resources and support to children in poverty situations, implying a priority given to social work to intervene in these situations (Parton 2011). The concept of (child) poverty, however, is not a neutral, but rather normative and ideological construct, differing according to the ways in which it is defined and constructed by diverse actors in different societies (Lister 2004). From the constitution of a distinct legal status in the context of child labour to the recognition of childhood as a specific domain of social intervention, contemporary anti-poverty strategies often entail different, and often contradictory, meanings, perspectives, and strategies, especially in the case of child poverty (Platt 2005; Couture 2007; Van Haute et al., 2018; Jacquet et al., 2019).

In this article, we focus on a qualitative research project which investigates the social meaning and practice of a Foundation in Belgium, which provides support to children in poverty situations in collaboration with social partners. We explore the practices and normative value orientations of the Foundation's social partners when they provide resources and support to children and their families in poverty situations, and tease out whether, and if so, how the Foundation might be a little stone in the shoe of public actors in the welfare state system. In what follows, we first explore how a construction of the un/deserving child might be produced by contemporary welfare rationalities, discourses, and imaginaries, and explain our conceptual frame of reference.

5.1.1 New charity economy, neo-philanthropy, and child poverty reduction strategies

While children have been the object of social policy and legislation since the 19th century in the context of modernization and industrialization, the definition of childhood poverty and how it has been problematized over time has been subject to profound changes in the relationship between citizens, the state, civil society, and the market (Dean, 2015; Dekker, 2007; Mayer, Lohmann & Grosvenor, 2009; Lorenz, 2016).

A complex historical transition can be observed in (child) poverty reduction strategies from charity- to rights-oriented ideas and practices, which reveals elements of continuity and discontinuity (Maesele, 2012). In terms of continuity, critical scholars have argued that our societies have made a distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor at the end of the 19th century, yet social policy and social work currently echo a 19th century binary and pre-welfare state distinction between deserving and undeserving citizens (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Roets & Kessler, 2024). These scholars scrutinize the increasing emphasis on welfare recipients' merit, which tends to replace the public commitment to secure their citizenship and rights and results in a focal concern for the behaviour and so-called competence of the poor (Garrett, 2018; Jacquet et al. 2022).

In terms of discontinuity, scholars have referred to a *newly* emerging discursive distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, which manifests itself during the last decades (see Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012; Krumer-Nevo 2016; Kessler, Oechler & Schröder, 2019, p. 365). Terms are used such as 'neo-philanthropy' (see Villadsen, 2007), 'new philanthropy' (see Morvaridi, 2016), and 'new charity economy' (Kessler et al., 2019). With reference to the recent intensification of class relations and the growth of inequality, Kessler et al. (2019) introduce the term *new charity economy* and argue that "this term can be categorised as being 'new' because [it] results from and expresses the transformation of the welfare state". New forms of philanthropy and charity - such as food distribution, the donation of charity clothes, and furniture that can be recycled - have emerged on the back of the erosion of social protection and social security principles which were key pillars of the constitution of the welfare state across Europe, a neoliberal market economy, and increasing social inequalities (Dean, 2015; Morvaridi, 2016; Kessler et al., 2019). In their recent work, Kessler, Oechler and Schröder (2019) stress that this transformation of the welfare state also entails a striking and changing orientation of actors being involved in anti-poverty strategies.

In that vein, we see a recently emerging and alarming critique on both formal as well as informal social work being involved in the production of new charity economies in the shadow of the welfare state (Kessl, Oechler & Schröder, 2019, Roets & Kessl, 2024). A recent example concerns an actual social policy strategy that has been developed to combat child poverty in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). In the policy period of 2015-2019, the Flemish Minister of Poverty Affairs has launched an anti-poverty strategy with the aim to provide 1 € meals for children in poverty (see Flemish Anti-Poverty Action Plan, 2015a, 2015b). Our research on these initiatives showed that a diversity of social work actors has been strongly involved with, and entangled in, the development and implementation of these initiatives, in which healthy and affordable meals were provided to children and families in poverty situations on the condition that they accepted family support (see Flemish Anti-Poverty Action Plan, 2015a, 2015b; Children's Rights Commissioners Office, 2017). In that vein, to tackle food insecurity was considered a relevant strategy to tackle child poverty, which dismisses the redistribution of material resources, such as family income and child benefits, according to social protections principles (Lister, 2004, 2006).

These developments and findings are relevant for social actors dealing with child poverty reduction strategies, where initiatives including formal/professional as well as informal/voluntary and civil society actors, concentrate on the provision of resources and support to children. Western welfare states have however recently developed a new concern about what causes harm to children, implying a renewed priority given to social work for intervention in supposedly alarming situations, such as children living in poverty (Parton 2011; Roets et al., 2016). In policy discourses and practices, it is argued that poverty prevents children of acquiring the necessary social and cultural capital to integrate socially (Goldson & Muncie, 2009) and of becoming responsible 'citizen-workers of the future' (Lister, 2003).

Although addressing child poverty is perceived as intrinsically legitimate, the structural conditions in which children live – expressions of poverty and inequality that are also experienced by parents - are substituted with a conceptual emphasis on the individual responsibility for the parents (Couture, 2007; Goldson, 2002). As Goldson (2002) argues, a well-established conceptual schism has been resurrected in the form of the 'deserving' troubled child and the 'undeserving' troublesome', so-called incapable parents, who do not behave according to the norm of 'responsible' parenting. It can however be argued that the child, in its own rights, is therefore constructed intrinsically as the un/deserving child since children are always (economically) dependent on the

parents or adults in the household in which they live (Lister, 2006). In that sense, anti-poverty strategies might be paradoxical in the long run. If parents are being judged and possibly sanctioned as undeserving charity cases (Paugam, 2014), there are intrinsically implications for children in these families as well.

5.2 Research methodology

We adopted a qualitative, interpretative research approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Contextual empirical data were collected to gain an in-depth understanding of the philosophy and working principles of a Belgian Foundation, and of the working principles underlying the practices of their social partners.

5.2.1 Research context

In its approach to child poverty reduction strategies, the Foundation targets a specific group of the general population, in this case children living in extreme poverty conditions; and provides them a annual allowance up to €1200. Its strategies are based on a drastic selection, according to preexisting criteria, that determine which children can be supported and which children are not 'deserving' to receive financial support in terms of criteria of 'extreme poverty'. As such, the Foundation works in a residual way and intervenes only in situations of 'extreme' poverty when all other potential resources of financial support are supposed to be absent. In addition to these criteria to select a child for financial support, the Foundation develops a collaboration with a local 'social partner' - a structure that is often in contact with the child as part of its activities - to ensure the follow-up of the file and management of the allocated budgets. The implicit idea of the Foundation is that parents are considered not responsible enough, and therefore 'undeserving', to receive the financial support. Consequently, a child who meets these admission conditions can potentially benefit from the Foundation's support. The selection of children is elaborated in two stages, the first stage or the first filter is the social partner who submits the application. The second stage is the analysis of the case and the arguments being made by social partners, and the selection of beneficiaries by a social commission of the Foundation which meets once a month or more if the situation requires it. It should be noted that the Foundation has two social commissions, one for the French-speaking part and one for the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

5.2.2 Strategies of data collection

We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) with social partners (n=20: 10 in the French-speaking part and 10 in the Dutch-speaking part, referred to in the analysis as P1 – P20) across Belgium and with the Foundation's administrators (n=7: 3 in the French-speaking part and 4 in the Dutch-speaking part, referred to in the analysis as A1 – A7).

The constitution of the sample of social partners interviewed in the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking part was underpinned by reasoned choice (Friedberg, 1988) to include diversity in the sample. The definition of the desired participants in terms of selection and recruitment criteria was based on characteristics according to the types of partners (school, NPO, PCSW, etc.), the regional representativity in terms of the provinces in which social partners operate, and the functions and number of years social partners have been active. The selection was elaborated based on a list of social partners offered by the Foundation.

In what follows, we provide an overview of the selected social partners.

Social partners

- Provinces: Namur (n=1), Liège (n=2) , Luxemburg (n=2), Brabant Wallon (n=1), Hainaut (n=2), West-Flanders (n=4), East-Flanders (n=2), Antwerp (n=2) + Brussels (n=4)
- Duration of the interviews: between 1 and 2 hours
- The first 10: French-speaking side, the last 10: Dutch-speaking side

Table 1: Social partners (Interview number, respondent code, type of organization)

1	P1	PCSW	
2	P2	Foster Institution	Care
3	P3	Youth care	
4	P4	PCSW	
5	P5	Foodbank	
6	P6	School	
7	P7	Foster Institution	Care
8	P8	PCSW	
9	P9	School	
10	P10	School	
11	P11	School	
12	P12	PCSW	
13	P13	PCSW	
14	P14	Orthopedagogical Centre	
15	P15	Pedagogical Institute	
16	P16	Orthopedagogical Centre	
17	P17	School	
18	P18	School	
19	P19	School	
20	P20	School	

5.2.3 Strategies of data analysis

The interviews were all audio-recorded or videotaped (in case of online interviews due to covid-19 restrictions) and fully transcribed. The data were analyzed by means of a thematic qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), defined as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002: 453).

The data were analyzed by engaging in a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), using the existing research insights on child poverty reduction strategies and empirically based ‘feedback loops’ to enrich the existing

body of research. In that vein, we relied on a conceptual frame of reference that has been developed by Maesele (2012), Jacquet et al. (2020), and Roets & Kessl (2024) and identifies three central fields of tension that indicate the features of, and distinction between charity- and rights-based orientations that unfold within the context of current welfare arrangements addressing (child) poverty: whereas selectivity, conditionality and instrumental approaches refer to ideas being rooted in charity-oriented welfare discourse and social work practice, universality, unconditionality and lifeworld-oriented approaches refer to rights-oriented value orientations in welfare discourse and anti-poverty strategies. The analytical question was therefore articulated as follows: how does this construction of the un/deserving child manifests itself in practices of the Foundation and its social partners that are to be situated in a complex nexus of charity- and rights-oriented approaches, power relationships and inequalities? As such, we have organized the central findings of our research structured around three analytical nodes: selective versus universal; conditional versus unconditional; instrumental versus life-world oriented.

The analysis is the result of extensive exchange between all authors. The first analytical insights were discussed and further refined in a constant dialogue.

5.3 Research findings: Deserving versus Undeserving children?

5.3.1 Selectivity versus universality

Selectivity refers to the creation of criteria that determine whether citizens have the right to a certain welfare state intervention and entails a categorization between those who deserve this and those who do not meet specific conditions that give access to social service provision as undeserving citizens (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). A universal approach implies that all citizens have the right to make use of support that is provided (Villadsen 2007; Maesele 2012). In that vein, selectivity refers to the construction of target groups, and aims to direct public resources towards the most disadvantaged to maximize equality on the condition that they are willing to accept the social norm (Martin 2010). However, in the implementation of these policy rationales, selective approaches often have stigmatizing and unexpected effects (Maesele 2012).

The partial outsourcing of children selection is a key aspect of the Foundation' strategy. The outsourcing allows the Foundation to identify children who could

benefit from its support. The trust granted by the Foundation to its social partners is well appreciated as a recognition of their expertise, regardless of the type of partner the Foundation collaborates with NPO, PCSW, schools, etc. However, the strategy of trusting social partners is concomitant with the responsibility they bear while selecting children and applying for intervention. Although the Foundation is growing and supporting more and more children each year – with reference to the number of 1252 children in 2020 (Foundation, 2021b) - it is financially and organizationally not feasible to support all children experiencing poverty in Belgium and therefore leads to more stringent selection criteria. The selection process leads to identifying children who ‘deserve’ and those who ‘do not deserve’ to receive support. This means that they must sort out the eligible children:

“ We're not going to be able to submit applications for all our beneficiaries'... No, we're really trying, now, to... It's always the problem of sorting out poverty between those who are less poor and those who are poorer, and still being able to make a sort of classification of needs. (Interview P4)

Evaluating the growing number of applications, the social commission relies on the criterion of extreme poverty in the decision-making process. Although this is “*not an exact science*” (interview A4), it is argued that extreme poverty speaks for itself.

Social partners are aware that the extremity of the poverty situation is decisive for obtaining social commission’s approval. As such, the interviews with the social partners were peppered with harrowing situations in which they asked the Foundation to intervene. However, this dynamic that consists of establishing who deserves and who does not deserve the Foundation support might generate a competition between children, putting social partners in a difficult position to decide which children experience the most distressing situation. This might also entail the risk that depending on the school or the foster care population, the probability for a child to be supported by the Foundation may increase or decrease:

“ We thought about other young people, in particular a young person we have just received who is in a similarly precarious situation and for whom we could also introduce a grant. But the message I received was: "obviously, you can't introduce a grant for all the young people you have"... Because we can not take in 17. So, you must weigh up, you must think a little bit. You must be reasonable. (Interview P2)

Some social partners expressed their discontent about the expectation to portray the poverty situation in terms of harshness. Although they understand the social commission's need for detailed and descriptive input to evaluate the situation, they raise the concern that it might undermine the last bit of parents' pride.

Moreover, the Foundation's social partners are very different organizations in terms of mission, target audience (children for schools, parents for the PCSW, etc.), but also in the ability to diagnose children's poverty situation (a PCSW has more information on the socio-economic situation of families), etc. This diversity of profiles is not reflected in the type of collaboration the Foundation develops with its social partners. The Foundation specifies that partners are intermediary between the eligible family and the Foundation. It is the partner who helps the family to assess the child's needs, analyzes the situation and determines the relevant elements to be shared with the Foundation.

Both the French and Dutch versions of the document that must be completed do not specify the elements that have to be considered or rejected to carry out the poverty diagnoses. Therefore, social partners develop different strategies that have consequences for children's eligibility. Depending on the social partner involved, details are communicated to the Foundation. Some partners working for a public institution, which disposes an in-depth insight of families' finances, are reluctant to share too much information. In the same vein, ethical questions are raised concerning the fact that the far-reaching social research is put in the basket of the social partner. Some of them dig deep into the (financial) privacy of families to ensure that abuse is avoided and to guarantee that all the other financial resources are exhausted, while others do not. The following quote shows that out of a certain mistrust, some social partners insist on a home visit, enabling them to accurately assess the situation:

“ A home visit is very interesting; I usually do that too along the applications. I once had people refuse to let me visit because they had a big dog, and I would say 'I also have a dog at home, I'm not afraid of dogs. So, it's really like that sometimes... Afterwards I heard from the teacher, there's a Jacuzzi at home, there's a big flat screen at home. So, I ask myself do they really need that help? (Interview P14)

On the one hand this intrusive strategy may prevent abuse, but on the other hand it assumes that parents are not transparent and must put their pride away. As such, this might unintendedly lead to a selection by which some vulnerable children are not fished out:

“ Those are actually the most difficult conversations. From the moment they get the Foundation's support, it's not too bad, but as a school it's very difficult to discuss financial issue with the families. We see that it doesn't work out. And we especially also notice that a lot of families, especially one target group, our blacks, if I must put it that way, don't accept that. But that's really a pride issue. (Interview P18)

5.3.2 Conditional versus unconditional

Judging the willingness to behave according to social norms is rooted in the idea of 'goodwill' (Maesele 2012). The component of goodwill refers to the dependence of the poor on those providing help and the goodwill of those providing help to assist those 'deserving' it (Payne 2005; Leighninger 2008). In social work, welfare conditionality refers to the fact that access to publicly provided welfare benefits and services is dependent on individual citizens first agreeing to meet obligations or patterns of behavior (see Dwyer 2004; Fletcher & Flint 2018). People's access to welfare resources is restricted due to conditions that are implemented to change people's behavior. In that sense, the argument goes that people do not have rights without fulfilling their responsibilities. An unconditional approach implies that all citizens have the unconditional right to make use of support that is provided, without conditions or goodwill (Martin 2010; Brady & Burroway 2012).

As regards the relationship between social partners and the children they support, apart from the fact that partners have discretionary space and margin in following up cases, they must however respect a few conditions imposed by the Foundation such as delivering an annual report. However, extra rules and conditions are imposed regarding on how social partners define poverty and on

how they position themselves on the continuum of care and control, which is an inherent part of their double mandate.

Some partners add additional admission criteria concerning the merit or motivation of the families they wish to support:

“ I want families who are invested. And so, it's essential for me to have that relationship with them. And the children too, because the children they need to know where the money is coming from. (Interview P9)

Foundation money is never entrusted to the parents. Based on the same logic, the Foundation does not communicate what amount of money they make available to the parents.

“ So, the Foundation gave me the information not to give the detailed amount. So, I'm vague. But it's always very tricky. (Interview P6)

Hence, the social partners receive the funds and are expected to manage it responsibly. In practice this leads to diverse approaches when informing parents about the available budget, reflecting different perspectives on people living in precarious situations, the cause of these situations and how they behave (ir)responsibly in it:

“ We don't pass on amounts to the families because we know they are going to abuse it a bit. Misuse it, in the sense of, if they knew, they would call social partner saying, there is budget left, can I buy that? (Interview P14)

It should be noted that the liberty and trust granted by the Foundation to its partners also comes along with the responsibility of managing the budget allocated to each child. The partners usually do not have a professional mandate to work on such issues. Although they do not have to submit a request for each expected expense for the child, they are required to submit a summary sheet of the expenses every six months. These expenses can be legitimized if they fit in one of the five basic needs: 1) a hot meal a day, 2) decent clothes, 3) medical and paramedical care, 4) hygienic care and 5) leisure activities.

This list leaves a lot of space for interpretation and in this vein, difficult decisions on spending resources are outsourced to individual care partners who all have their own normative orientation, resulting in different strategies that affect parents. Although the Foundation's trust in the social partners is highly valued,

the need for more guidance from the Foundation resonates, as the care partner from the following quote feels "un cavalier seul":

“ Maybe it might be good for the Foundation to draw the line more clearly. (...) Just kind of that we're all on the same wavelength because right now it's basically a little cavalier seul in your actual case, so to speak, of 'yes, I think that's necessary...' It's wet finger work: What are we going to do? Where is the wind going to go? What are we going to choose? (Interview P14)

This lack of precision in the use of the budget by the partner leads to a great disparity between partners, which is explained by each partner's perception of poverty and the strategies to be put in place to struggle against it.

Social partners are very aware that they are expected to meet the children's needs as if it were their own children on the one hand and to manage the budget in a responsible way on the other hand:

“ I think that €1200 is doable. That's not too much and not too little. It's also true, if it's not spent, say after six months I still have €100 or €200 left for a child, then that's supplemented, then €425 is added again. So, it's like, OK, you must keep that account like a good stay-at-home mum or dad. If they get more, I don't think it would be healthy, because the wastefulness might surface instead of buying two pairs of trousers, we're going to buy three, and so on. (Interview P14)

In doing so, a variety of practices sprout, with some partners not willing to make the support provided more conditional, while others adding additional admission criteria:

“ I had to convince the mother by saying: 'Well, you see, you still earn as much, and you can buy her birthday presents rather than just a dress and shoes because that will drain the account'. I directed her. We bought her birthday presents, but because we had received the grant but hadn't spent the money, I choosed educational games. It would be nice if she had a blackboard because she's starting elementary. So, she could write this, that, and other things. (Interview P6)

The quotes reveal that decisions are motivated in terms of reasonableness and necessity that are weighed based on the extent to which they contribute to broadening a child's future opportunities. Moreover, the social partners' own

normative orientation shines through in this decision making and prioritizing process about justifiable costs, referring to their own family situation as a frame of reference:

“ At the Foundation, the philosophy is: as a care partner you treat the children as you would treat your own child - well of course always a bit of weighing up of, is that really important now - that that's a different philosophy. (Interview P12)

Despite the Foundation's goal to develop unconditional strategies (beside the selection criteria that are imposed on children) to support children living in poverty, interviews with social partners show that in practice they tend to develop strategies with children that are more conditional than what the Foundation expects.

5.3.3 Instrumental versus life world-oriented strategies

An instrumental social work practice means that the aim of what is to be done is defined from an external viewpoint and without considering what is meaningful for welfare recipients (Maesele 2012). This entails that the outcomes of the interventions are defined beforehand by the social workers, without consulting the welfare recipients about their definition of problems and solutions (Roose *et al.* 2013). Life world-oriented principles and practices, on the other hand, consider the aspirations, life worlds, and concerns of people in poverty situations (Grunwald & Thiersch 2009). This implies that social workers focus on the complex and dynamic relationship between the individual and society. According to a social justice orientation, the interplay between lifeworld and system becomes vital as they analyze how the everyday life is contingent on social and systemic forces (Grunwald & Thiersch 2009; Roets, Roose & De Bie 2013).

The Foundation wants to "*break the vicious circle*" of poverty and "*offer real chances for the future*" to the children it supports (Fondation, 2021a). By supporting children financially, they aim to gradually solve child poverty in Belgium. The following quote explains their logic:

“ Today there are 1,300 Foundation children, the plan is to help 2,000 children by 2024-25. Those 2,000 children don't stay children, they grow, they become adults, they start families. Now take an average of two children for each, is 4000 people who no longer cost anything to society, but contribute to it themselves. We put that out in a graph, and we come to realise that over a 30-year period, we would take between 75,000 and 100,000 people out of poverty. Then we are probably going to solve a very nice portion of poverty in a sustainable way. (Interview A4)

Even if it is possible to provide a child with occasional help, the core of its proposal lies in the possibility of offering long-term support. This contrasts with and is a critique on, public policies and poverty reduction strategies today. Long-term financial support is undoubtedly an innovative feature in child poverty reduction strategies. Moreover, the Foundation prolongs this financial support when the youngster starts higher education:

“ I think that the Foundation is unique. Because it helps children from the moment, they become Foundation children until they reach the age of 18 or longer and continue to study. So, it's not a one shot. I think we are. So, it's a long shot support in the child's life so that they can have everything that a child in a normal situation has. (Interview A3)

The participation of young people in formal education in Western societies is deemed essential for their current as well as for their future well-being. As such, the Foundation values education and sees it as an essential leverage to engage in the struggle against child poverty. The following excerpt illustrates that the Foundation invests in deploying youngster's talent, while at the same time leaving room for the aspirations of young people:

“ It's open to all kinds of degrees. We are never going to impose one type of study. Young people are free to do the studies they prefer, that they want to do. I believe 100% in the free choice of everyone to be able to choose their future and to be able to work towards their goal. (Interview A3)

Throughout several interviews with the Foundation administrators, success stories are shared, invariably referring to obtaining a degree or job, being aware that a diploma and a job provide the best protection against poverty:

“ We paid for those studies, and a few months ago I received a very pleasant email. One child followed a communication degree, got her diploma and now is in the labour market. She has broken the cycle of poverty; she no longer costs to our society but brings into our society. (Interview A7)

However, the above excerpt can be read in instrumental terms of developing human capital, connecting with the historical socio-political goal of labour market qualification. In a nutshell, the aim is to equip people to find and to retain suitable jobs, which has a positive correlation with economic growth, as outlined in the following quote:

“ We had a study done because we also wanted to know: every euro we invest in a child, what is the return for our society? I was a bit surprised when you see that every euro times five, times nine returns to our society. So, then I think we have a strong story after all. (Interview A7)

The whole idea of investing in the children with the final goal of active economic participation reflects an instrumental goal. Yet it is noteworthy that in times where welfare state redistribution of resources is under pressure and poverty reduction strategies are increasingly focusing on the empowerment of poor individuals by mobilizing the inner resources, the Foundation is radically pulling the card of long-term financial support, acknowledging that poverty is both a lack of material and immaterial resources. Children 's aspirations and capabilities strongly depend on the available resources and material living conditions. Therefore, the financial support offered by Foundation is much appreciated by partners as it immediately affects the everyday life of families (both children and parents).

Moreover, although the stories that are recited as a success explicitly refer to future degrees and jobs, the guidelines set out by the Foundation concerning meaningful costs are much more focusing on the well-being of the child in the here and now. So, in addition to having an approach based on investing in education, the Foundation intervenes in all areas of life, taking the aspirations of the children who receive support into account.

“ We don't make judgements about needs and if it is written that there is 120 euros in the budget per month for cigarettes for young people, that is not our problem. And this is the big danger that we must not fall into, and we must be extremely careful. We must not pass on our values and our representations on the way the budget is managed. (Interview A2)

The broad range of financial interventions are embracing the life worlds of children and youngsters:

“ *Actually, we want to integrate the children more towards society or let them participate. So very often the budget from the Foundation is spent on membership fees for scout, for a sport, for dance, also the uniforms there. (Interview P15)*

Although there is an overarching instrumental goal of contributing to education and future employment, the concrete strategies developed by the Foundation as well as the concrete interpretation of children's needs by social partners reflect a life world-oriented approach.

Furthermore, during one of the interviews with the social partners, a practitioner revealed that her experience with the Foundation's flexibility to meet children's needs ignites the debate internally about the limits of the public welfare state apparatus, aiming to stretch the range of interventions:

“ *I think this cooperation does show that the PCSW cannot always provide an answer to everything either. As a social worker in a PCSW you know that you can't solve everything. As much as you'd like to, you can't ask support for the same family every month, it's not possible. I also see the difference with families who get the Foundation support. I put that in the social report to approach the committee members saying: "Look how valuable that would be." And maybe next time, the PCSW can have the philosophy of: We are going to take charge of that. (Interview P11)*

In another interview, a social partner working in the PCSW also raised the question of the financial limits of the public apparatus linked to the action developed by the Foundation:

“ *I find them really useful at the moment because, unfortunately, maybe that's the problem that we don't have enough resources. Maybe the Foundation should not exist. Maybe we should have more resources so that private people don't have to help families. But that's the way it is. The means of public services are not enough. (Interview P1)*

One single case may rouse the need to think about more universal anti-poverty strategies, which potentially affect a broader range of children in poverty. This broad life-world oriented perspective is facilitated through their funding system that works fast without major accountability issues, enabling social partners to

intervene based on the needs captured. Here they differ from (and might critique) the public apparatus. At the same time, this entails the risk that social partners ask for funding rather than making an appeal to the public welfare state apparatus.

5.4 Concluding reflections

Our analysis of the interview data covers the perspectives and experiences of the Foundation 's social partners, which allowed us to explore lessons we can learn from their practices. We return briefly to the three analytical dimensions that we mobilized to analyze the data collected from the social partners of the Foundation and that enabled us to explore the quality of their child poverty strategies.

The analysis shows that the support offered by the Foundation to a child is almost unconditional, life world-oriented and selective. The child can benefit from an annual budget from the moment he or she is taken into care by the Foundation. This strategy of the Foundation is very different from the strategies developed by other private and public actors in the field of poverty reduction strategies who offer one-off assistance. In addition, the budget allocated can be increased when the child is faced with extraordinary expenses, such as medical operations or the acquisition of a laptop. The flexibility of the allocated budget allows for greater coverage of the uncertainties that arise in a child's life. The absence of a cultural judgement for how the budget can be used has the effect of reducing the stigma that children, and by extension their parents, may experience. However, the Foundation only supports children in situations of extreme poverty, which shows a blindness for how social inequalities are (re-)produced and interfere in the lives of other children who need support. Moreover, the Foundation's strategy to rely on social partners to use the budget reveals a great distrust towards parents.

The unconditional nature of the support and its long-term implementation are the cornerstones of the Foundation's strategy in child poverty reduction strategies. This is in line with the various recommendations made by the scientific community, both in social science research in the field of child poverty and in legal analyses of children's rights. Ultimately, the Foundation's strategy that promotes the long-term development of the children has a greater long-term social impact on their lives than the usual private or public strategies. Besides, the ways in which the Foundation works with its social partners can also be

described as quasi-unconditional. The latitude enjoyed by the social partners in the management, allocation and justification of the budget allocated to a child is a major asset for the Foundation. On the one hand, the partners benefit from the necessary autonomy for the follow-up of the children. On the other hand, this autonomy has the effect of legitimizing their expertise. However, the outsourcing management of a child case to its social partners appears problematic, especially when social partners practices are more conditional and instrumental than the Foundation's expectations.

Finally, we stress the problematic nature of the Foundation's economic design. The budgets allocated to children entirely depend on the ability to raise money from companies and individuals using tax-optimization schemes. The market dependency strategy drastically moves away from traditional public-private partnership in philanthropy and thus raises question about its viability and sustainability.

CHAPTER 6

General conclusion

“ Modern society no longer accepts the whim of the benefactor, nor the privileged position of the poor known to him. The general opinion is that since the community is in fact made up of an infinite number of legal, social, and economic ties, characterized by a host of actions and reactions of the most diverse kinds, there is no longer any place for this charity, but rather for the advent of solidarity. The organized community must become the compensating body that distributes among all citizens the benefits that they need and that only it knows and appreciates in part. (Léon-Eli Troclet, Founding Father of Belgian welfare state, 1945)

The emergence of the social protection system after the end of the Second World War marked a profound change in the Belgian society. The social conditions of the industrial era, coupled with social movements unprecedented in modern history allow the development of the welfare state, this historical exception, this cultural and social revolution. The welfare state's vision of modernity nuanced the major metaphysical principles of the industrial era, whether it was the "invisible hand" of the market, which drastically limited State intervention in regulating the economy, or the commodification of the social space.

Two centuries of fierce class warfare led to the birth of A new social contract based on welfare policies, public services and decommmodification of key sectors of the economy (labour, health, housing, education, transport, etc.). As we stressed in the dissertation, the Belgian welfare state has had influenced PCSW strategies in the three decades that followed on the “invention of the social”, with above all the right to a minimum income and the right to social integration in the seventies.

To understand what welfare principles were driving the social protection model, we opted for Léon-Eli Troclet's above quote. The way Troclet understand the community as a compensating body that protects every individual, meaning that the time for charity-based poverty reduction strategies relying on private and public benefactors was over, highlights the political aspiration of the welfare state and its driven principles. Beside the fact we are glad to pay tribute to the great work that was done by Léon-Eli Troclet, our dear fellow Liégeois, we would like to rely on his quote and assert our political position.

As social work researchers we consider our activities as highly political (Krumer-Nevo,2017), which requires us to take a stance when developing both theoretical

and methodological frameworks. The political perspective we assume in this dissertation is built upon choices that guided the course of both methodological and theoretical perspectives. The theoretical framework of welfare and workfare we developed as well as the general orientation of the dissertation focusing on interactions between front-line social workers and citizens are driven by our political understanding of the social question and therefore are influenced by, among others, Léon-Eli Troclet, Robert Castel and Walter Lorenz political vision.

From the current time juncture, we developed a central research question that embodies the theoretical and empirical dimensions we mobilized in this dissertation. The central research question of this dissertation was: how does the erosion of welfare principles at the heart of PCSW poverty reduction strategies, embodied in the shift from welfare to workfare, interfere with social work practices and citizens' trajectories?

Based on this general research question, we elaborated a methodology to question past and current welfare policies with a specific focus on PCSW's poverty reduction strategies, at the macro level. We also questioned how welfare institutions implement these policies and what are the strategies developed by social workers at the meso-level. Furthermore, we focused on the micro-level by analyzing front-line social workers strategies and practices as well as by drawing citizens' life's trajectories.

6.1 Contribution to new theoretical knowledges in this field

All along the chapters, we developed transversal dimensions that we would like to summarize here first. We will then shortly draw on the conclusion of each chapter.

From the very first steps of the research process, we developed an extensive literature review on the evolution of the social question to get a better grasp on the current orientation of welfare policies and more broadly on the Belgian social question. The central research question we established also reflects the general

theoretical orientation we opted for which consisted of analysing how structural issues, such as the welfare political orientation, interfere with social work practices and keep citizens in precarious situations. The evolution of PCSW legislation as well as the further conditionalization of social rights have structural impact on social workers and the citizens they support as we demonstrated more critically in chapter 4. Structural issues are weakening the living conditions of citizens that rely on welfare provisions and are interfering with social workers ability to support them. Nevertheless, we also underpinned the central position that endorse social workers at the heart of public strategies. We showed that despite the current welfare matrix, social workers and welfare services are bypassing the rules they are supposed to implement by developing collective and individual strategies such as discretionary power when supporting citizens. Social workers that are driven by welfare principles are taking a stance when using discretion with citizens, sometimes against their own institutional strategies, to remain loyal to the commitment they made to them. Social workers renegotiate and resist recent shifts in social policies and by doing so, they provide local welfare system of protection that limit the effect of welfare policies.

We also attempted to demonstrate the constructed and political nature of poverty (Lister, 2004). We show two visions that are driving poverty reduction strategies embodied in the framework of welfare and welfare. These visions help us understand the tensions in this field. On one hand, welfare orientations focus on providing multidimensional and unconditional support relying on rights-oriented and lifeworld-oriented strategies when on the other hand, welfare orientation focuses on human capita relying on instrumental, selective, and conditional strategies. The key research findings show that policymakers, social workers, and front-line social worker develop poverty reduction strategies according to one of these visions. Most of the tensions we underlined in the dissertation come from the dissensus between actors who do not share the same vision. We demonstrated that these two ways of implementing support are driven by personal values and political aspiration. The many interviews we conducted lead us to believe that social workers tend to work in like-minded institutions. We believe that our analysis of the interactions between social workers and between and citizens are contributing to a deeper understanding of what is at stake in the field of social work and poverty reduction strategies.

We also discussed the wicked issue of child poverty. The re-emergence of the narrative within the welfare matrix, that consists of putting aside parents and even blaming them, to provide a human-capita investment strategy to their kids. Moreover, we stressed the ineffectiveness of this strategy on the living conditions

of the children, considering that above all, those children are depending on the household resources they are living in.

In chapter two we reveal that Public Centers for Social Welfare and social workers are developing strategies that are rather selective, conditional, and instrumental than universal, unconditional and lifeworld oriented. We also stressed the construction of stereotypes, conditions, and binaries in social work practices that operates a dichotomy between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients by focusing on citizens' merit rather than securing their rights.

In chapter three, the findings show how disagreements and even conflicts emerged from the unfruitful search for a shared vision and collective development of concrete operational practices. To overcome these tensions, we suggest developing collective debates and reflections which could lead to challenge dominant assumptions and self-evident problem definitions of strategies to deal with child poverty. We argue that networks, and especially PCSW, are key actors in the poverty reduction strategies since they have the formal and public mandate to ensure rights-oriented strategies to the most vulnerable.

In chapter four, we unraveled a no-win situation that citizens involved in workfare programs are experiencing. Despite rights-oriented strategies following welfare principles, the longitudinal data show how structural issues that citizens are facing are interfering with social work strategies and practices. For example, the ongoing dismantling of the last safety net provided by welfare institutions such as PCSW has counterproductive effects on their trajectories. At the end, citizens lose hope to see their lives improving.

In chapter five, we show that the undeserving parents' framework from chapters 2 and 3 is further developed, in a very wicked way. The narrative that consists of assuming that child poverty must be tackled by cutting ties with parents is very alarming. The new business and social model developed by the Foundation is on the one hand highlighting PCSW strategies limits such as the inability to provide a long-term, unconditional, and lifeworld-oriented support to children living in poverty. On the other hand, we stress the problematic nature of the Foundation's economic design. The budgets allocated to children entirely depend on the ability to raise money from companies and individuals using tax-optimization schemes. The market dependency strategy drastically moves

aways from traditional public-private partnership in philanthropy and thus raises question about its viability and sustainability.

6.2 Social policy and social work practice implications

“ The plan goal was to, which is why we were criticised, we were told that we should have made many more for the extreme poverty such as reinforce the "extreme cold" plan targeting homeless people, that we should have helped the poor, people relying on PCSW. Yes, we agree, but we also had to deal with the economic context in Wallonia. So, we concluded that the plan must reach all Walloons. Obviously not Walloons with an income, although everyone can switch. So that was the principle we wanted to sell at the time. Life events can mean that anyone can fall into precariousness. (Coordinator of the plan to combat poverty)

We would like to start this section by drawing the reader attention to different alarming phenomenon that led us to believe that the further erosion of welfare principles will generate more and more precarity, putting the most vulnerable into inextricable situations. Recipients we had the opportunity to interview are suffering from the current political agenda, which we summarized as the workfare matrix. Finding across chapters show everyone intentions to develop anti-poverty policies and strategies, yet the shift from welfare to workfare and the subtle erosion of social protection principles tend to produce paradoxical and absurd situations for citizens and social workers. Despite the massive amount of time, energy, resources, the implications of policy show alarming counter-productive outputs.

The sociohistorical perspective on poverty reduction strategies we developed contributes to understand how the general orientation of social policies interfere with social work practices and citizens' lives. Research materials show the ongoing erosion of social protection principles in favor of more individualized strategies, following the human capital investment and further conditionalization

narratives. The shift from welfare to workfare, highlighted by the sociohistorical perspective on PCSW policies and strategies, is interfering with social workers' practices and is worsening the living conditions of recipients. The paradoxical production of a no-win situation we developed, based on a longitudinal and biographical methodology, shows the damaging effect of the workfare strategies on social workers practices and most of all on citizens' lives. Workfare is built upon the principle that the labour market is the best tool to prevent someone to fall into poverty or to extract him from its precarious status. However, the paradoxical production of a no-win situation we stressed in chapter 4 shows the necessity to develop structural public strategies rather than relying on PCSW legislation that implies that the only solution lays in the ability of each citizen to be marketable. Besides, we stressed the emergence of neo-philanthropy actors who are building market-based child poverty strategies that might challenge PCSW's policies and strategies.

Nevertheless, the quote above illustrates public institutions inability to develop structural strategies. There, the Coordinator of the plan to struggle poverty, stressed the main objective that was behind the plan, which consisted in targeting every citizen considering that everyone was at risk of poverty. We were shocked to realize that traditional and differentiated strategies, inherited from social protection principles that targeted the most vulnerable, were considered out of the scope of public poverty reductions strategies. The quote illustrates the ongoing destabilization of the working class, from which public policies and strategies are ineffective, and where individuals are blocked of upward mobility, such as getting a stable job with a decent wage, and therefore are experiencing insecurity. The workfare orientation of the Plan he assumes is drastically moving away from social protection principles that considered public strategies as tools to prevent citizens from falling into poverty. As we have stressed in the dissertation, the welfare state was built upon the principles of social protection and social security, which meant that welfare policies were designed to prevent citizens from falling into poverty by providing rights-oriented and unconditional support. The fact that the coordinator assumes the inability of public strategies to secure individual life's trajectory, is, among other policies and strategies, installing citizens in "erratic trajectories", alternating employment and non-employment, alternating mobility of activity and inactivity (flexibility) which creates uncertainty in their life's trajectories. The lack of occupiable places, meaning a position of social utility and public recognition, in the social structure left no room for the most vulnerable unemployed such as unexperienced

workers, older workers, unemployed young worker looking for a job or long-term unemployed who are considered as "useless people of the world".

As we stressed in the dissertation, social work is currently increasingly influenced by and entangled in the above-mentioned changing historical and social arrangements (Kessl, 2009; Lorenz, 2016; Garrett, 2019). Social work, however, has a relatively autonomous public mandate in the welfare state to shape 'the social', with reference to the question how a social justice orientation is incorporated by social work throughout the historical developments (Lorenz, 2008; Kessl, 2009). Whether social work might be shaping 'the social' in our societies is an ambiguous, uncertain, and complex issue (see Lorenz, 2007). The currently emerging welfare state rationality, however, incorporates social work actors and ingrains their social justice aspirations and practices (Kessl, 2009; Garrett, 2019). Social work is a front-row witness of the widening discrepancy between the formal recognition of rights and how these rights are substantially realized in practice (see Boone et al., 2018; Dwyer, 2019) and finds itself enmeshed in critical complexities and dilemmas associated with a welfare state stringently based on the contributory rights of citizens (Turner, 2016).

In what follows, we attempt to revisit the potential role of social work in the light of its quest for social justice and for the realization of human rights (see Lundy, 2011), and aim to identify terrains for a future social work research agenda dealing with this issue. Our point of departure is that social work's public mandate shapes the complex and dynamic interplay between the individual and society according to a social justice project and in relation to the specific historical, political, social, and cultural circumstances in which citizens are located (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009; Lorenz, 2016). The vital question for social workers is how they can continue to 'fulfil their mandate to be responsible for the social dimension of public life' (Lorenz, 2005, p. 93) in contemporary times. The notion of social workers as 'applied social policy makers' is meaningful in this context. It has been associated with the strategies of professional discretion of social work (see Dubois, 2010; Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2011; Warming and Fahnøe, 2017). Professional discretion can be situated at the street level in its relationship with social policy and refers to the political and politicizing nature of social work. Researching the Non-Take up of Social whilst 'making use of discretionary spaces and powers, social workers negotiate between policy goals and service users' needs, interpret, and adapt policies to concrete individual situations' (Dewanckel & al., 2018, p. 301). Rather than merely being executors of policy goals and rationales, social workers are indeed 'policy makers rather than policy takers' who co-construct policy whilst shaping the relationship between lifeworld

and system. Also, Garrett (2019, p. 190) argues that social workers are apt to 'find ways of surviving, negotiating, accommodating, refusing and resisting' and do not merely 'act like automatons envisaged in the governmental plans and strategies of the powerful' (Clarke, 2005, p. 159).

6.3 Future scenarios for research

As we stressed in the above paragraphs, we show the very diverse entanglements of social policy, social work, and citizens where the erosion of social protection principle is at stake. The theoretical and methodological frameworks we developed in this dissertation are built upon our main research goal that consisted in focusing on the interactions between frontline social workers and citizens. To do so, we elaborated theoretical dimensions to get a better understanding and describe those interactions. In the same vein, we developed dimensions to analyze the dynamics that are shaping citizens' trajectories. We believe the main strengths of our dissertation lies there.

We would like to further develop scenarios for longitudinal research that focus on citizens' trajectories collecting qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative methodology we developed when interviewing citizens have been resourceful to draw on their trajectories and have a better grasp on the dynamics that are at stake. To broader the perspective even more, we would like to add a quantitative dimension such as housing and income but also measure how families experience mobility in and out of poverty because of networking or social work support. Besides, and as we were a bit disappointed not to be able to interview parents and children for the Foundation, we would like to investigate citizens' experiences in the context of neo-philanthropy. As we stressed in chapter 5, private sphere is becoming a key player in the field of poverty reduction strategies. We would like to keep developing research on those topics.

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English summary

Over the last forty years, poverty reduction strategies have evolved in the Belgian political system, percolating through the heart of public action mechanisms (Palier & Surel, 2005). The poverty reduction narrative has gradually become a field on its own in the political spectrum, with countless political representatives at all levels of the Belgian federal state. From the Communities to the Federal State with the Regions in between, poverty reduction strategies are developed at all levels of the state. Among other political positions, it includes a Secretary of State, one minister in each region, one Public Center for Social Welfare in each municipality, whose areas of decision-making cover public measures to struggle poverty. In the same vein, countless private organizations continue to emerge and position themselves in the field of poverty reduction strategies, such as private foundations and Non-Profitable Organizations. We believe that the emergence of Poverty Reduction Strategies on the political agenda as a public action strategy (Palier & Surel, 2005) shows the gradual shift in sociological terms, from one cognitive and normative matrix or paradigm (Palier & Surel, *infra*; Krumer-Nevo, 2016) to the other, with reference to a vital shift from welfare state principles to the workfare state. The gradual emergence of this latter paradigm, theorized as a workfare paradigm emerging in the active welfare state, has profoundly reshaped the Belgian social question and reshuffled the cognitive and normative frameworks of social protection and social security inherited from the social pact of 1944 with reference to the welfare paradigm in the social welfare state (Vrancken, 2012).

The knowledge ambition of our doctoral research project is to examine how contemporary social policies orientations and the focus on poverty and child poverty reduction strategies directly interfere with social work frameworks and interventions. Our exemplary focus will be on the most prominent public institution that embodies poverty reduction strategies in Belgium, the Public Centre for Social Welfare in each municipality and its evolution over the last hundred years. Furthermore, we will demonstrate the erosion of social protection principles in the framework of poverty and child poverty reduction strategies, from the perspective of social work practices and families, considering that child poverty must always endorse a family-oriented approach. We provide an in-depth insight into the strategies of social workers in dealing with the wicked issue

of (child) poverty, in relation to the perspectives and experiences of the families and (local) social policy strategies. In that sense, we aim to be inspirational for scholars, social work strategies, social practices and policy makers that want to engage in developing poverty reduction strategies.

Different and evolving layers can be further discovered in this dissertation, in which we first introduce the theoretical and conceptual framework (chapter 1) and then build on it to discuss current poverty and child poverty reduction strategies based on the perception of social workers and citizens. We firstly do this in a broad sense by reflecting on the diverse strategies developed by front-line social workers when interacting with families living in poverty (chapter 2). We also analyse varying strategies that are deployed by inter-organizational networks in dealing with normative value orientations when collectively tackling child poverty (chapter 3). Furthermore, we built upon a more in-depth research phase to shed more light on social work poverty reduction strategies and practices and their effects on citizens' trajectories (chapter 4). In the same vein, we investigate a new child poverty reduction strategy/model between a private foundation and the corporate sphere. Finally, we offer concluding reflections to explain what our contribution to the new theoretical knowledges in this field of research is. We will stress policy and social work practice implications, and will discuss the strengths and the limitations, especially in methodological terms, of the dissertation and open the discussion to envisage future scenarios for forthcoming research.

This doctoral research project was conducted between 2014 and the beginning of 2023 and consisted of four separate but interconnected studies. After establishing an extensive literature review on social work, (child) poverty reduction strategies and the current social question at PCSW, atheoretical and conceptual framework was further developed for each study. The goal was to investigate the welfare- and workfare state arrangements and the role of professional social work practices that might re-produce poverty and precarity, revealing a no-win situation. We delved deeper into the issue of the 'subtle' (re)configuration of the welfare state, poverty and precarity such as the idea that work is the best protection against poverty even if work happens to be precarious, or that the work-care nexus is detrimental for (single) families with children, or again that Belgium historical and contemporary arrangements regarding conditionality have always been rooted in PCSW legislations but are also subject to discontinuity.

The central research question of our dissertation is as follows: how does the erosion of welfare principles at the heart of PCSW poverty reduction strategies, embodied in the shift from welfare to workfare, interfere with social work practices and citizens' trajectories?

The erosion of social protection is at the core of every sub-chapter being developed either as part of PCSW strategies and social work practices in local networks (chapters 2 and 3) or as part of the strategies implemented in a specific workfare program (chapter 4) or between social workers and a private Foundation (chapter 5). Throughout the studies we challenged PCSW and social work' strategies to understand the current social question and the implications for citizens, with a specific concern about families with children. Undeniably, the erosion of welfare principles in PCSW strategies is interfering with the life of families and challenging daily social workers practices.

Chapter 2: Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity.

In this chapter, we tackle conceptually the main problem statement of this dissertation: what might the potential role be of PCSW and social workers in the fight against child poverty? The study attempts to gain an in-depth and dynamic understanding of the mutual experiences and perspectives of the social interactions between social workers and families living in precarity. The research question for the second chapter was as follows: which poverty reduction strategies do social workers develop when interacting with families in four integrated local networks in Belgium? Are those strategies tainted with stereotypes, binaries, and condition?

We developed a methodology based on semi-structured interviews with social workers to determine the strategies they are implementing, and participant observations of interactions between parents and social workers in day care centres and parenting workshops. While investigating in this question, we introduce and elaborate broadly on the social disqualification theory of Robert Castel and Serge Paugam, in which citizens experience morale degradation, and build on these ideas to develop our conceptual framework. The qualitative analysis allowed us to characterize Public Centers for Social Welfare and social workers strategies as individualistic rather than solidaristic, focusing on citizens' merit

rather than securing their rights. We also revealed that social workers construct stereotypes, conditions, and binaries between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor when interacting with citizens.

Chapter 3: Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: Inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection.

In this chapter, we explore social workers strategies and local networking practice in 5 municipalities targeting families living in poverty. The focus of the project was to examine the role of social workers and PCSW in the development of local inter-organizational networks being supported by federal social policy measures. The research question for the chapter 3 was: what are child poverty reduction strategies developed by institutions (mainly PCSW) and social workers when being involved in local networking for the sake of child poverty reduction?

The methodology is constructed on semi-structured interviews with networks coordinators and social partners to understand their positions in the networks and what are the child poverty reduction strategies they want to implement. Here we build on three fields of tension in the literature (selective/universal, conditional/unconditional and instrumental/lifeworld) to capture the rationales, strategies, and actions that are directed towards families and children, and to illustrate complex debates for local welfare actors. The results show great disparities in the normative value orientation within and between networks as well as the predominance of selective, conditional and instrumental-oriented strategies, mainly driven by PCSW that often act as network coordinator.

Chapter 4: The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium.

In the fourth chapter, we investigate citizens' trajectories involved in a workfare program. We focus on the analyses of social activation as a social policy and social work strategy and its impact on citizens' life trajectories. The research question for the chapter 4 was: does the development of unconditional and lifeworld-oriented strategies in a workfare program protect citizens from poverty?

We opted for a longitudinal methodology based on biographical trajectories of citizens involved in workfare programs and semi-structured interviews with front-

line social workers, managers and directors from institutions who run the welfare programs. Here, we build on the theoretical framework and the concluding reflections we developed in chapter 3 to stress the impact of social work following rights-oriented, unconditional, and lifeworld-oriented strategies when working with citizens. The results show that even though social workers implement welfare principles when providing support, recipients are still facing structural issues such as the labour market inability to offer long-term positions fitted to their needs and qualifications. This results in generating a no-win situation for citizens who are kept in a social zero-gravity situation.

Chapter 5: Un/Deserving child

The study explores child poverty reduction strategies and social work practices in the context of neo-philanthropy. The focus of the study is to analyse child poverty reduction strategies developed by a private Foundation and its social partners when providing support to children in poverty situations. The research question for the chapter 5 was: what are the poverty reduction strategies developed by a private Foundation and its social partners when intervening with families? Furthermore, what does it say about the evolution of the Belgian Welfare state?

We interviewed twenty social partners and seven Administrators of the Foundation. Here, we rely on the same three fields of tension we developed in the chapter 3 (selective/universal, conditional/unconditional and instrumental/lifeworld) to capture the rationales, strategies, and actions that are directed towards families and children, and to illustrate complex debates between local welfare actors and a private Foundation. Our findings show how a discursive distinction between un/deserving children can be at stake in anti-poverty strategies. We also tease out whether the Foundation might function as a little stone in the shoe of public actors in the welfare state system by dismissing PCSW and developing market-based strategies.

In the last section of this dissertation, we offer concluding reflections to explain what our contribution to the new theoretical knowledges in this field of research is. We stress policy and practices implications as well as we discuss the strengths and the limitation, especially methodological, of our dissertation.

Finally, we open the discussion to envisage future scenarios for forthcoming research.

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

De voorbije veertig jaar zijn de strategieën voor armoedebestrijding geëvolueerd in het Belgische politieke systeem en doorgedrongen tot de kern van de mechanismen van overheidsoptreden (Palier & Surel, 2005). Het verhaal van de armoedebestrijding is geleidelijk aan een eigen domein geworden in het politieke spectrum, met talloze politieke vertegenwoordigers op alle niveaus van de Belgische federale staat. Van de gemeenschappen tot de federale staat met de gewesten daartussen, op alle niveaus van de staat worden strategieën voor armoedebestrijding ontwikkeld. Naast andere politieke functies zijn er een staatssecretaris, een minister in elk gewest, een Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn in elke gemeente, wiens beslissingsdomeinen overheidsmaatregelen voor armoedebestrijding omvatten. In dezelfde geest blijven talloze particuliere organisaties ontstaan en zich positioneren op het gebied van strategieën voor armoedebestrijding, zoals particuliere stichtingen en non-profitorganisaties. Wij geloven dat de opkomst van strategieën voor armoedebestrijding op de politieke agenda als een openbare actiestrategie (Palier & Surel, 2005) de geleidelijke verschuiving in sociologische termen laat zien, van de ene cognitieve en normatieve matrix of paradigma (Palier & Surel, *infra*; Krumer-Nevo, 2016) naar de andere, met verwijzing naar een vitale verschuiving van de principes van de verzorgingsstaat naar de workfare-staat. De geleidelijke opkomst van dit laatste paradigma, getheoretiseerd als een workfare-paradigma dat ontstaat in de actieve welvaartsstaat, heeft de Belgische sociale kwestie grondig hertekend en de cognitieve en normatieve kaders van sociale bescherming en sociale zekerheid, geërfd van het sociaal pact van 1944, herschikt onder verwijzing naar het welvaartsparadigma in de sociale welvaartsstaat (Vrancken, 2012).

De kennisambitie van ons doctoraatsproject bestaat erin te onderzoeken hoe de hedendaagse oriëntaties van het sociaal beleid en de focus op strategieën voor armoedebestrijding en kinderarmoede rechtstreeks interfereren met de kaders

en interventies van het sociaal werk. We zullen ons bij wijze van voorbeeld richten op de meest prominente publieke instelling die armoedebestrijdingsstrategieën belichaamt in België, het Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn in elke gemeente en de evolutie ervan over de laatste honderd jaar. Bovendien zullen we de erosie aantonen van de principes van sociale bescherming in het kader van strategieën om armoede en kinderarmoede te bestrijden, vanuit het perspectief van sociaal werk en gezinnen, aangezien kinderarmoede altijd een gezinsgerichte aanpak moet ondersteunen. We bieden een diepgaand inzicht in de strategieën van sociaal werkers in het omgaan met de wicked issue van (kinder)armoede, in relatie tot de perspectieven en ervaringen van de gezinnen en (lokale) sociale beleidsstrategieën. In die zin willen we inspirerend zijn voor wetenschappers, strategieën voor sociaal werk, sociale praktijken en beleidsmakers die zich willen engageren in het ontwikkelen van strategieën voor armoedebestrijding.

Verschillende en evoluerende lagen kunnen verder worden ontdekt in dit proefschrift, waarin we eerst het theoretische en conceptuele kader introduceren (hoofdstuk 1) en er vervolgens op voortbouwen om de huidige strategieën voor armoede en armoedebestrijding bij kinderen te bespreken op basis van de perceptie van maatschappelijk werkers en bijstandsontvangers. We doen dit eerst in brede zin door na te denken over de verschillende strategieën die eerstelijns maatschappelijk werkers ontwikkelen in hun interactie met gezinnen die in armoede leven (hoofdstuk 2). We analyseren ook de verschillende strategieën die door interorganisatorische netwerken worden ingezet om om te gaan met normatieve waardeoriëntaties bij de collectieve aanpak van kinderarmoede (hoofdstuk 3). Verder bouwden we voort op een meer diepgaande onderzoeksfase om meer licht te werpen op strategieën en praktijken van sociaal werk voor armoedebestrijding en hun effecten op de trajecten van bijstandsontvangers (hoofdstuk 4). In dezelfde geest onderzoeken we een nieuwe strategie/model voor armoedebestrijding bij kinderen tussen een private stichting en het bedrijfsleven. Tot slot bieden we afsluitende reflecties om uit te leggen wat onze bijdrage is aan de nieuwe theoretische kennis op dit onderzoeksgebied. We benadrukken de implicaties voor het beleid en de praktijk van sociaal werk, en bespreken de sterke punten en de beperkingen, vooral in methodologische termen, van het proefschrift en openen de discussie om toekomstige scenario's voor toekomstig onderzoek te overwegen.

Dit doctoraatsproject werd uitgevoerd tussen 2014 en begin 2023 en bestond uit vier afzonderlijke maar onderling verbonden studies. Na het opstellen van een uitgebreide literatuurstudie over sociaal werk, strategieën voor (kinder)armoedebestrijding en de huidige sociale kwestie in het OCMW, werd een theoretisch en conceptueel kader verder ontwikkeld voor elke studie. Het doel was om de welzijns- en werkgelegenheidsstaatsarrangementen en de rol van professioneel sociaal werk te onderzoeken die armoede en precariteit zouden kunnen reproduceren en een no-win situatie zouden kunnen onthullen. We gingen dieper in op de kwestie van de 'subtiele' (her)configuratie van de welvaartsstaat, armoede en precariteit, zoals het idee dat werk de beste bescherming tegen armoede is, zelfs als het werk precair is, of dat de combinatie werk-zorg nadelig is voor (alleenstaande) gezinnen met kinderen, of opnieuw dat de Belgische historische en hedendaagse regelingen met betrekking tot voorwaardelijkheid altijd geworteld zijn geweest in OCMW-wetgevingen, maar ook onderhevig zijn aan discontinuïteit.

De centrale onderzoeksvraag van ons proefschrift luidt als volgt: hoe interfereert de erosie van de welzijnsprincipes die de kern vormen van de armoedebestrijdingsstrategieën van het OCMW, belichaamd in de verschuiving van welzijn naar workfare, met de sociale werkpraktijken en de trajecten van bijstandsontvangers?

De uitholling van de sociale bescherming staat centraal in elk subhoofdstuk dat ontwikkeld wordt als onderdeel van OCMW-strategieën en sociaal werkpraktijken in lokale netwerken (hoofdstuk 2 en 3) of als onderdeel van de strategieën die geïmplementeerd worden in een specifiek workfare programma (hoofdstuk 4) of tussen sociaal werkers en een privéstichting (hoofdstuk 5). Doorheen de studies stelden we de strategieën van OCMW's en sociaal werkers in vraag om de huidige sociale kwestie en de implicaties voor bijstandsontvangers te begrijpen, met specifieke aandacht voor gezinnen met kinderen. De erosie van welzijnsprincipes in OCMW-strategieën interfereert ontegensprekelijk met het leven van gezinnen en vormt een uitdaging voor de dagelijkse praktijk van maatschappelijk werkers.

Hoofdstuk 2: Stereotypen, voorwaarden en binaries: analyse van processen van sociale diskwalificatie ten opzichte van kinderen en ouders die in precariteit leven.

In dit hoofdstuk pakken we conceptueel de belangrijkste probleemstelling van dit proefschrift aan: wat kan de potentiële rol zijn van OCMW's en sociaal werkers in de strijd tegen kinderarmoede? Het onderzoek probeert een diepgaand en dynamisch inzicht te krijgen in de wederzijdse ervaringen en perspectieven van de sociale interacties tussen sociaal werkers en gezinnen die in precariteit leven. De onderzoeksvraag voor het tweede hoofdstuk luidde als volgt: welke strategieën voor armoedebestrijding ontwikkelen maatschappelijk werkers in hun interactie met gezinnen in vier geïntegreerde lokale netwerken in België? Zijn deze strategieën gekleurd door stereotypen, binaries en voorwaarden?

We ontwikkelden een methodologie op basis van semigestructureerde interviews met maatschappelijk werkers om te bepalen welke strategieën ze toepassen, en observaties van interacties tussen ouders en maatschappelijk werkers in kinderdagverblijven en opvoedingsworkshops. Terwijl we in deze vraag investeren, introduceren we de sociale diskwalificatietheorie van Robert Castel en Serge Paugam, waarin ontvangers van uitkeringen morele degradatie ervaren, en werken we deze ideeën verder uit om ons conceptuele kader te ontwikkelen. De kwalitatieve analyse stelde ons in staat om de strategieën van de Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn en de maatschappelijk werkers te karakteriseren als individualistisch in plaats van solidair, met een focus op de verdiensten van bijstandsonvangers in plaats van op het veiligstellen van hun rechten. We onthulden ook dat maatschappelijk werkers stereotypen, voorwaarden en binaries tussen 'verdienende' en 'onverdiende' armen construeren in hun interactie met bijstandsonvangers.

Hoofdstuk 3: Omgaan met kinderarmoede: Inter-organisatorische netwerken als forums voor collectief debat en reflectie.

In dit hoofdstuk onderzoeken we de strategieën van maatschappelijk werkers en de lokale netwerkpraktijk in 5 gemeenten die zich richten op gezinnen die in armoede leven. De focus van het project was het onderzoeken van de rol van maatschappelijk werkers en OCMW's in de ontwikkeling van lokale interorganisatorische netwerken die ondersteund worden door federale sociale beleidsmaatregelen. De onderzoeksvraag voor hoofdstuk 3 was: Welke strategieën voor kinderarmoedebestrijding worden ontwikkeld door instellingen (voornamelijk OCMW's) en sociaal werkers wanneer ze betrokken zijn bij lokale netwerken voor kinderarmoedebestrijding?

De methodologie is gebaseerd op semi-gestructureerde interviews met netwerkcoördinatoren en sociale partners om te begrijpen wat hun positie is in de netwerken en welke strategieën ze willen implementeren om kinderarmoede te bestrijden. Hier bouwen we voort op drie spanningsvelden in de literatuur (selectief/universeel, voorwaardelijk/onvoorwaardelijk en instrumenteel/levenswereld) om de rationales, strategieën en acties te vatten die gericht zijn op gezinnen en kinderen, en om complexe debatten voor lokale welzijnsactoren te illustreren. De resultaten tonen grote verschillen in de normatieve waardeoriëntatie binnen en tussen netwerken en het overwicht van selectieve, voorwaardelijke en instrumenteel georiënteerde strategieën, voornamelijk aangestuurd door OCMW's die vaak optreden als netwerkcoördinator.

Hoofdstuk 4: De productie van paradoxale no-win situaties: een casestudy van sociaal activeringsbeleid en -praktijk in België.

In het vierde hoofdstuk onderzoeken we de trajecten van bijstandsontvangers die betrokken zijn bij een workfare-programma. We richten ons op de analyses van sociale activering als een strategie van sociaal beleid en sociaal werk en de impact ervan op de levenstrajecten van bijstandsontvangers. De onderzoeksvraag voor hoofdstuk 4 was: beschermt de ontwikkeling van onvoorwaardelijke en op de leefwereld gerichte strategieën in een workfare-programma bijstandsontvangers tegen armoede?

We hebben gekozen voor een longitudinale methodologie op basis van biografische trajecten van bijstandsontvangers die betrokken zijn bij werkverschaffingsprogramma's en semigestructureerde interviews met eerstelijns maatschappelijk werkers, managers en directeurs van instellingen die de werkverschaffingsprogramma's uitvoeren. Hier bouwen we voort op het theoretisch kader en de afsluitende reflecties die we ontwikkelden in hoofdstuk 3 om de impact te benadrukken van sociaal werk dat rechtgeoriënteerde, onvoorwaardelijke en op de leefwereld gerichte strategieën volgt in het werken met bijstandsontvangers. De resultaten laten zien dat, ook al passen sociaal werkers welzijnsprincipes toe bij het bieden van ondersteuning, ontvangers nog steeds te maken hebben met structurele problemen zoals het onvermogen van de arbeidsmarkt om langdurige functies aan te bieden die aansluiten bij hun behoeften en kwalificaties. Dit leidt tot een no-win situatie voor

bijstandsontvangers die in een sociale nul-zwaartekrachtsituatie worden gehouden.

Hoofdstuk 5: Onverdiend kind

De studie onderzoekt strategieën om kinderarmoede te bestrijden en sociale werkpraktijken in de context van neofilantropie. De focus van het onderzoek is het analyseren van strategieën voor armoedebestrijding bij kinderen die ontwikkeld zijn door een particuliere stichting en haar sociale partners bij het bieden van hulp aan kinderen in armoedesituaties. De onderzoeksvraag voor hoofdstuk 5 was: wat zijn de strategieën voor armoedevermindering die een particuliere stichting en haar sociale partners hebben ontwikkeld bij hun interventies met gezinnen? Wat zegt dit bovendien over de evolutie van de Belgische welvaartsstaat?

We hebben twintig sociale partners en zeven bestuurders van de Stichting geïnterviewd. Hier vertrouwen we op dezelfde drie spanningsvelden die we ontwikkelden in hoofdstuk 3 (selectief/universeel, voorwaardelijk/onvoorwaardelijk en instrumenteel/levenswereld) om de rationales, strategieën en acties te vatten die gericht zijn op gezinnen en kinderen, en om complexe debatten te illustreren tussen lokale welzijnsactoren en een private Stichting. Onze bevindingen laten zien hoe een discursief onderscheid tussen kinderen die het niet verdienen en kinderen die het wel verdienen in het geding kan zijn bij strategieën voor armoedebestrijding. We zoeken ook uit of de Stichting zou kunnen fungeren als een kleine steen in de schoen van publieke actoren in het welvaartsstaatsysteem door OCMW's te verwerpen en marktgebaseerde strategieën te ontwikkelen.

In het laatste deel van dit proefschrift bieden we afsluitende reflecties om uit te leggen wat onze bijdrage is aan de nieuwe theoretische kennis op dit onderzoeksgebied. We benadrukken implicaties voor beleid en praktijk en bespreken de sterke punten en beperkingen, vooral methodologische, van ons proefschrift. Tot slot openen we de discussie om toekomstscenario's voor toekomstig onderzoek te overwegen.

Résumé en français

Au cours des quarante dernières années, la lutte contre la pauvreté est réapparue dans le système politique, s'infiltrant au cœur des mécanismes d'action publique (Palier & Surel, 2005) de l'État belge. La lutte contre la pauvreté est progressivement devenu un champ à part entière, avec d'innombrables représentants politiques à tous les niveaux de l'État fédéral belge. Des Communautés à l'État, en passant par les Régions, des stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté sont développées à toutes les niveaux politiques. Parmi d'autres positions politiques, on trouve notamment un secrétaire d'État, un ministre par région, un centre public d'action sociale dans chaque commune, dont les domaines de décision couvrent les stratégies publiques de lutte contre la pauvreté. Dans le même ordre d'idées, d'innombrables organisations privées continuent à émerger et à se positionner dans le champ de la lutte contre la pauvreté, telles que les fondations privées et les organisations à but non lucratif. Nous pensons que l'émergence des stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté en tant que mode d'action publique (Palier & Surel, 2005) ou privé illustre le passage progressif d'un modèle social à l'autre ou, en termes sociologiques, d'une matrice ou d'un paradigme (Palier & Surel, *infra* ; Krumer-Nevo, 2016) à l'autre, de la matrice de l'État-providence « welfare » à celle de l'État social actif « workfare ». L'émergence progressive de cette dernière a profondément remodelé les cadres normatifs hérités du pacte social de 1944 (Vrancken, 2012).

L'ambition de notre projet de recherche doctorale est d'examiner la manière dont l'orientation contemporaine des politiques sociales, et particulièrement l'accent mis sur la lutte contre la pauvreté et la pauvreté infantile, interfèrent avec les stratégies des travailleurs sociaux et tendent à aggraver les conditions de vies des ayants-droits à un revenu de remplacement. Pour ce faire, nous nous concentrons principalement sur les institutions qui incarnent les stratégies publiques de lutte contre la pauvreté en Belgique dans les communes, à savoir les Centres Publics d'Action Sociale, et l'évolution de la législation qui encadre

leurs actions au cours des cent dernières années. En outre, nous démontrons l'érosion des principes de protection sociale dans l'élaboration des stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté et la pauvreté infantile. L'ambition générale de notre thèse est d'élargir les connaissances théoriques et empiriques sur les stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté des travailleurs sociaux et la manière dont elles interfèrent avec la trajectoire de vies des ayants-droits dont les familles en situation en pauvreté. Pour ce faire, nous avons approfondi la question de la (re)configuration "subtile" de l'État-providence, de la pauvreté et de la précarité, comme par l'exemple l'idée que le travail est la meilleure protection contre la pauvreté même si le travail est précaire, ou que le lien entre travail et soins est préjudiciable aux familles (monoparentales) avec enfants, ou encore que les dispositions historiques et contemporaines de la Belgique concernant la conditionnalité de l'aide sociale ont toujours été enracinées dans les législations du CPAS, mais sont également sujettes à discontinuité.

Dans un premier temps, nous analysons les stratégies développées par les travailleurs sociaux de première ligne lorsqu'ils interagissent avec des familles qui vivent dans la pauvreté (chapitre 2) et celles des travailleurs sociaux lorsqu'ils participent à des réseaux locaux de lutte contre la pauvreté infantile (chapitre 3). Par la suite nous développons deux études de cas, la première sur un dispositif d'insertion professionnelle (chapitre 4) et la seconde sur des stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté développées par une Fondation privée et ses partenaires sociaux (chapitre 5), afin de saisir avec plus de finesse les stratégies des travailleurs sociaux et l'influence de celles-ci sur la trajectoire de vies des ayants-droits à un revenu de remplacement. Enfin, nous proposons une série de réflexions transversales aux différents chapitres qui mettent l'accent sur les différentes implications politiques et pratiques de notre dissertation.

La question de recherche centrale de notre dissertation est la suivante : comment l'érosion des principes de protection sociale au cœur des stratégies de réduction de la pauvreté des CPAS, incarnée par le passage du welfare au workfare, interfère-t-elle avec les pratiques professionnelles des travailleurs sociaux et avec la trajectoire de vie des ayants-droits à un revenu de remplacement?

Chapitre 2: Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity

Dans ce chapitre, nous abordons conceptuellement la problématique principale de notre thèse, à savoir le rôle des CPAS et des travailleurs sociaux dans la lutte

contre la pauvreté infantile. La question de recherche de ce deuxième chapitre est la suivante : quelles stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté les travailleurs sociaux développent-ils lorsqu'ils interagissent avec les familles? Ces stratégies sont-elles teintées de stéréotypes et de conditionnalité ?

Nous tentons d'acquérir une compréhension approfondie et dynamique des interactions sociales entre les travailleurs sociaux et les familles qui vivent dans la pauvreté. Pour ce faire, nous développons une méthodologie axée sur des entretiens semi-directifs avec des travailleurs sociaux ; afin de déterminer les stratégies qu'ils mettent en œuvre; et des observations participantes lors d'interactions entre les familles et les travailleurs sociaux dans des lieux d'accueil de la petite enfance et lors d'ateliers proposés dans ces mêmes structures. Notre analyse qualitative révèle que les stratégies des Centres Publics d'Action Sociale et des travailleurs sociaux se concentrent essentiellement sur le mérite des ayants-droits au détriment d'un soutien leur garantissant une protection sociale. Dans leur pratique quotidienne, les travailleurs sociaux élaborent une dichotomie entre les méritants et les non méritants, ce qui a pour effet de stigmatiser certains ayants-droits. Les résultats de recherche démontrent aussi la distinction nette qu'opèrent ces travailleurs sociaux entre les enfants, les méritants, et les parents jugés eux non méritants.

Chapitre 3: Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: Inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection

Dans ce chapitre, nous explorons les stratégies des travailleurs sociaux au sein de 5 réseaux locaux (communaux) qui ciblent les familles vivant dans la pauvreté. L'objectif de ce chapitre est d'examiner le rôle des travailleurs sociaux et des CPAS dans le développement de réseaux inter-organisationnels locaux financés par des budgets fédéraux. La question de recherche du chapitre 3 est la suivante : quelles sont les stratégies de réduction de la pauvreté infantile développées par les institutions (principalement les CPAS) et les travailleurs sociaux lorsqu'ils travaillent en réseau ?

La méthodologie que nous développons repose sur des entretiens semi-structurés avec les coordinateurs des réseaux et les partenaires sociaux afin de comprendre leur position dans les réseaux et les stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté infantile qu'ils mettent en œuvre. Nous nous appuyons ici sur trois champs de tension dans la littérature (sélectif/universel, conditionnel/inconditionnel et instrumental /domaines de la vie) pour saisir les logiques, les stratégies et les actions dirigées vers les familles et les enfants,

mais aussi pour illustrer les débats complexes qui émergent entre les partenaires de ces réseaux. Les résultats montrent de grandes disparités dans l'orientation normative inter-réseaux et intra-réseaux, ainsi que la prédominance des stratégies sélectives, conditionnelles et instrumentales des CPAS qui assument la majorité du temps la coordination des réseaux.

Chapitre 4: The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium

Dans ce quatrième chapitre, nous étudions la trajectoires de 12 ayants-droits à un revenu de remplacement engagés dans un dispositif d'insertion professionnelle. Nous analysons ce dispositif d'activation sociale et les effets qu'il produit sur les trajectoires de vie des ayants-droits. La question de recherche du chapitre 4 est la suivante : Le développement de stratégies universelles, inconditionnelles et multidimensionnelles dans le cadre d'un dispositif d'insertion professionnelle protège-t-il les ayants-droits de la pauvreté?

Nous avons opté pour une méthodologie axée sur les trajectoires biographiques des ayants-droits et sur les stratégies des travailleurs sociaux de première ligne qui les accompagnent. Nous mobilisons le cadre théorique et les conclusions du chapitre 3 pour analyser un dispositif d'insertion professionnelle qui développe des stratégies universelles, inconditionnelles et multidimensionnelles aux ayants-droits à un revenu de remplacement. Les résultats de cette recherche démontrent l'influence des enjeux structurels auxquels sont confrontés les ayants-droits, et ce malgré les stratégies des travailleurs sociaux dont notamment l'incapacité du marché du travail à offrir des postes à long terme adaptés à leurs besoins et à leurs qualifications. Il en résulte une situation sans issue pour les ayants-droits qui sont maintenus dans une situation d'apesanteur sociale.

Chapitre 5 : The Un/Deserving Child

Dans ce chapitre nous explorons les stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté infantile et les pratiques professionnelles des travailleurs sociaux dans le contexte d'une collaboration avec une Fondation privée. L'objectif de cette recherche est d'analyser les stratégies de réduction de la pauvreté développées par la Fondation et ses partenaires sociaux. La question de recherche du chapitre 5 est la suivante : quelles sont les stratégies de lutte contre la pauvreté d'une fondation privée et de ses partenaires sociaux lorsqu'ils interviennent

après des familles pauvres? Qu'est-ce que cela nous apprend sur l'évolution de l'État-providence belge ?

Nous avons interrogé les partenaires sociaux et les administrateurs de la Fondation dans le cadre d'entretiens semi-directifs classiques. Les données ont été analysées selon le cadre théorique du chapitre 3 (sélectif/universel, conditionnel/inconditionnel et instrumental/monde de la vie). Les résultats de recherche révèlent des pratiques qui consistent à établir une dichotomie entre les enfants qui méritent le soutien de la Fondation et les parents qui eux, jugés inaptes et improductifs, ne le méritent pas. Par ailleurs, nous relevons le caractère original des stratégies développées par la Fondation dont notamment les stratégies orientées multidimensionnelles et sur le long terme qui procurent à ceux-ci un soutien d'une envergure qu'aucune autre institution publique ou privée ne propose. Nous alertons enfin sur l'émergence de ces nouvelles stratégies, portées par les acteurs de la néo-philanthropie, qui ont tendance à rendre le modèle proposé par les CPAS obsolète.

Dans la dernière section de la dissertation, nous proposons des réflexions transversales aux chapitres précédents afin d'expliquer notre contribution aux nouvelles connaissances théoriques dans le champ de la lutte contre la pauvreté et le travail social. Nous soulignons aussi les implications politiques et pratiques de nos analyses et discutons des forces et des limites, notamment méthodologiques, de notre démarche. Enfin, nous ouvrons la discussion pour envisager de futurs scénarios de recherche.

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Data Storage Fact Sheet (no. 1)

% Name/identifier study: **Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity**

% Author:Jacquet Nicolas

% Date:2021

1. Contact details

=====

1a. Main researcher

- name:Jacquet Nicolas

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Jacquet, N. & al, (2021), *Stereotypes, conditions, and binaries: analysing processes of social disqualification towards children and parents living in precarity*, 2021, *British Journal of Social Work*, Oxford University Press, United Kingdom, p.17

Jacquet, N. (2024). *The erosion of social protection principles: a qualitative research on the role of social work in the lives of citizens in precarious situations* (doctoral dissertation)

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% Name/identifier study **Dealing with the wicked issue of child poverty: Inter-organizational networks as forums for collective debate and reflection**

% Author:Nicolas Jacquet

% Date:2020

1. Contact details

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% Name/identifier study: **The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium**

% Author: Jacquet Nicolas

% Date: 2023

1. Contact details

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Jacquet, N. & al, (2023), The production of paradoxical no-win situations: a case study of social activation policy and practice in Belgium, Submitted to the European Journal of Social Work

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Data Storage Fact Sheet (no. 4)

% Name/identifier study: **The Un/Deserving Child**

% Author: Jacquet Nicolas

% Date: 2024

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

Jacquet, N. & al, (2024), The Un/Deserving Child, submitted to Children and Society

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- [] all members of UGent
- [] other (specify): ...

3b. Other files

* Which other files have been stored?

- [] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: These can be found in the methodology section of the article.

- [] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: ...

- [] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: See findings section in the article

- [] files(s) containing information about informed consent: A blank copy of the informed consent is saved on my PC. Also, all signed informed consent pdf document are saved on my PC.

- [] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions: The document that was submitted to the Ethical Commission is on my PC.

- [] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: One Microsoft Word document contains an overview of all raw data collected.

- [] other files. Specify: ...

* 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): ...

4. Reproduction

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

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

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

v0.2