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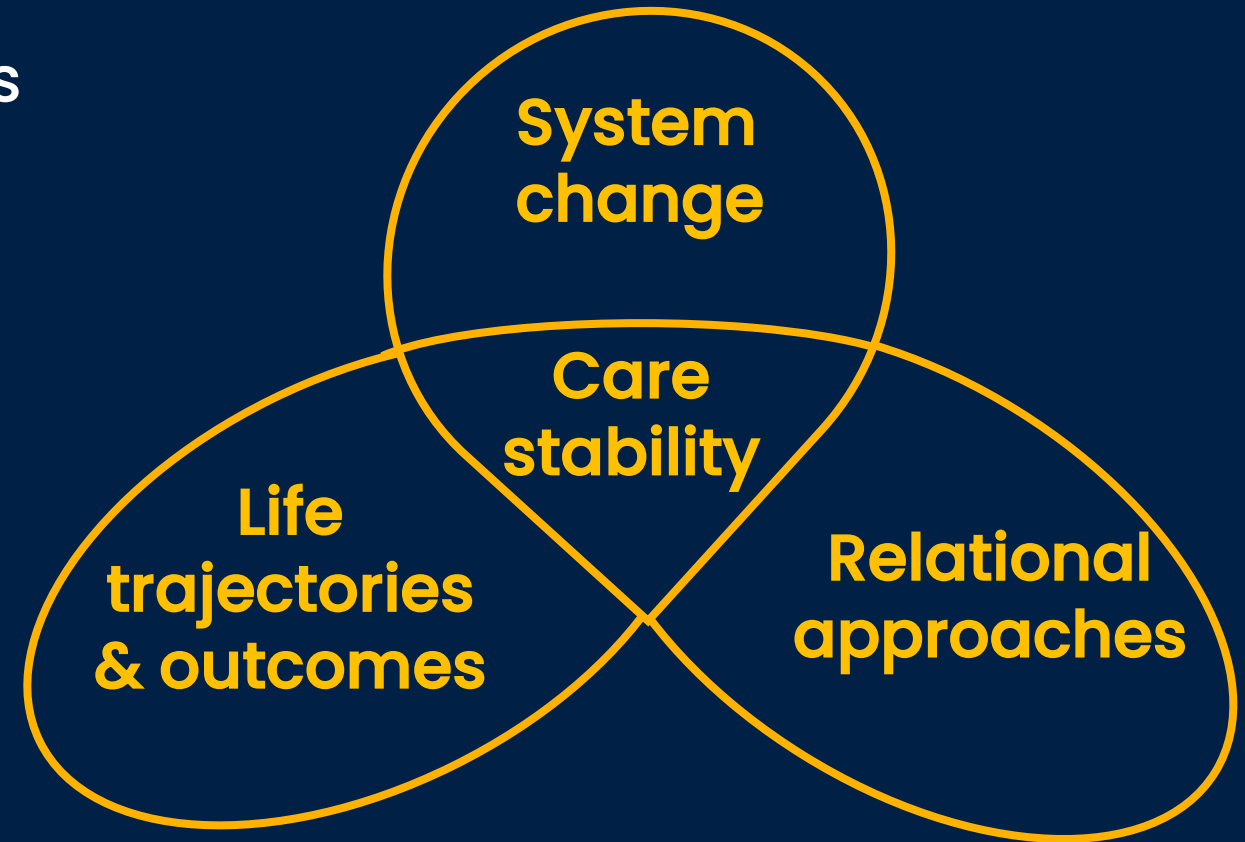
# Rees Centre External Webinar

Dr. Caroline Spaas, KU Leuven, Belgium

27<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Relational Poverty Perspectives as a Pedagogical  
Research Lens for Child Welfare and Protection Services

Research and evidence that enables practitioners, policymakers and the research community to understand and improve children's social care and education.



# Relational Poverty Perspectives as a Pedagogical Research Lens for Child Welfare and Protection Services

Prof. dr. Caroline Spaas, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, KU Leuven  
Rees Centre, Webinar Lunchtime Series, 27 January 2026

# Webinar overview

1. Family poverty in Belgium
2. Poverty in child welfare and protection services
3. Relational poverty perspectives and poverty-aware practice
4. Toward a microrelational research agenda
5. An invitation to dialogue and a sharing of ideas

# Family poverty in Belgium

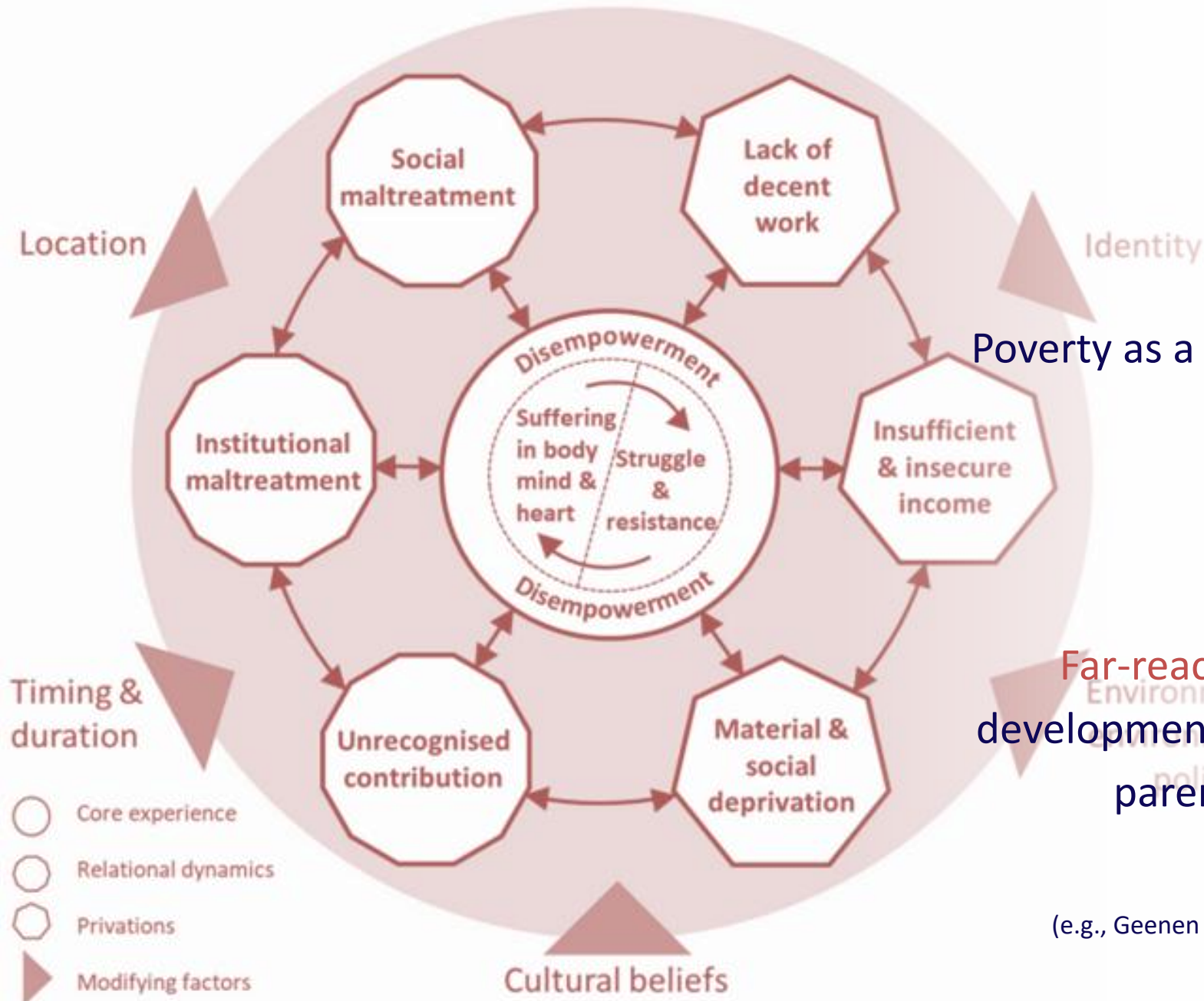
18,3% of the Belgian population at risk of poverty and social deprivation, with large regional differences (EU-SILC data; Robben, Marana, Spaas, & Hermans, 2025 Statbel, 2024)

4.5 – 6% of families at risk of severe deprivation

12,17% of children aged 0-3 at-risk of growing up poor (poverty of opportunity index; Opgroeien, 2024)

**‘To count’ or ‘count for nothing’?** (Lister, 2015; 2021)

# Family poverty in Belgium



Poverty as a state of financial, social, cultural, and relational inequality

(e.g, Bray et al., 2020; Lister, 2021)

Far-reaching consequences on children's development, physical and mental health, on parents' health, parenting, and family relationships

(e.g., Geenen & Corveleyn, 2015; Wray, 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2012)



Belgian children who grow up in poverty are **four times more likely** to encounter **child welfare and protection** services than their peers who do not grow up in poverty

Smeyers, 2016



# Poverty in child welfare services

National and international **overrepresentation of families in poverty** within child welfare and protection services (e.g., Bradt et al., 2015; Bywaters, 2020; Opoku et al., 2025)

**Child welfare inequalities** (Bywaters, 2020)

Bias versus need: prevailing research gap in Flanders/Belgium (e.g., Bradt et al., 2015)



# Poverty in child welfare services

A strong focus on **risk and (un)safety** in parenting (e.g., Baartman, 2019; Dewanckel et al., 2021; Lewis & Brady, 2018)

**Contrasting** goals, hopes, and **welfare strategies** (e.g., Schiettecat, 2016; Skinner et al., 2024)

**‘Pedagogicalisation of poverty’** as hegemonic discourse in (Belgian) child welfare and protection services (e.g., De Coene et al., 2025)

# Poverty as the wallpaper of practice, or policy?

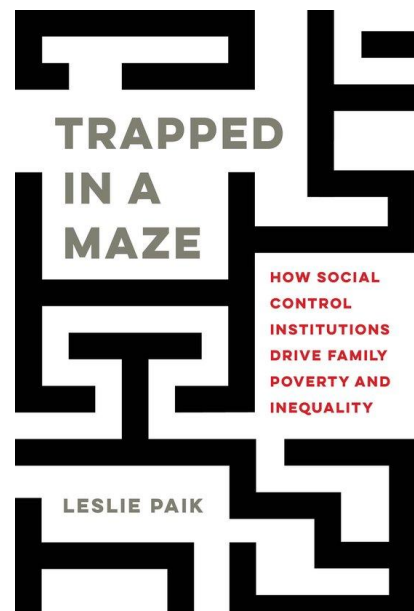
Dewanckel et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2018



Background photo: Leyla Aerts


# Poverty in child welfare services

Risk to reproduce social injustice and deepen poverty through (extensive and multiple) child welfare and protection involvement (e.g., De Coene et al., 2025; Paik, 2021; Skinner et al., 2024; van den Bosch-Höweler, 2022)



## REVIEW ARTICLE

### The Unintended Consequences of Social Work Policies and Practice in the Context of Poverty and Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review

G. C. M. Skinner<sup>1,2</sup>  · N. Hodges<sup>3</sup> · E. Kennedy<sup>1,4</sup>

# Relational poverty perspectives

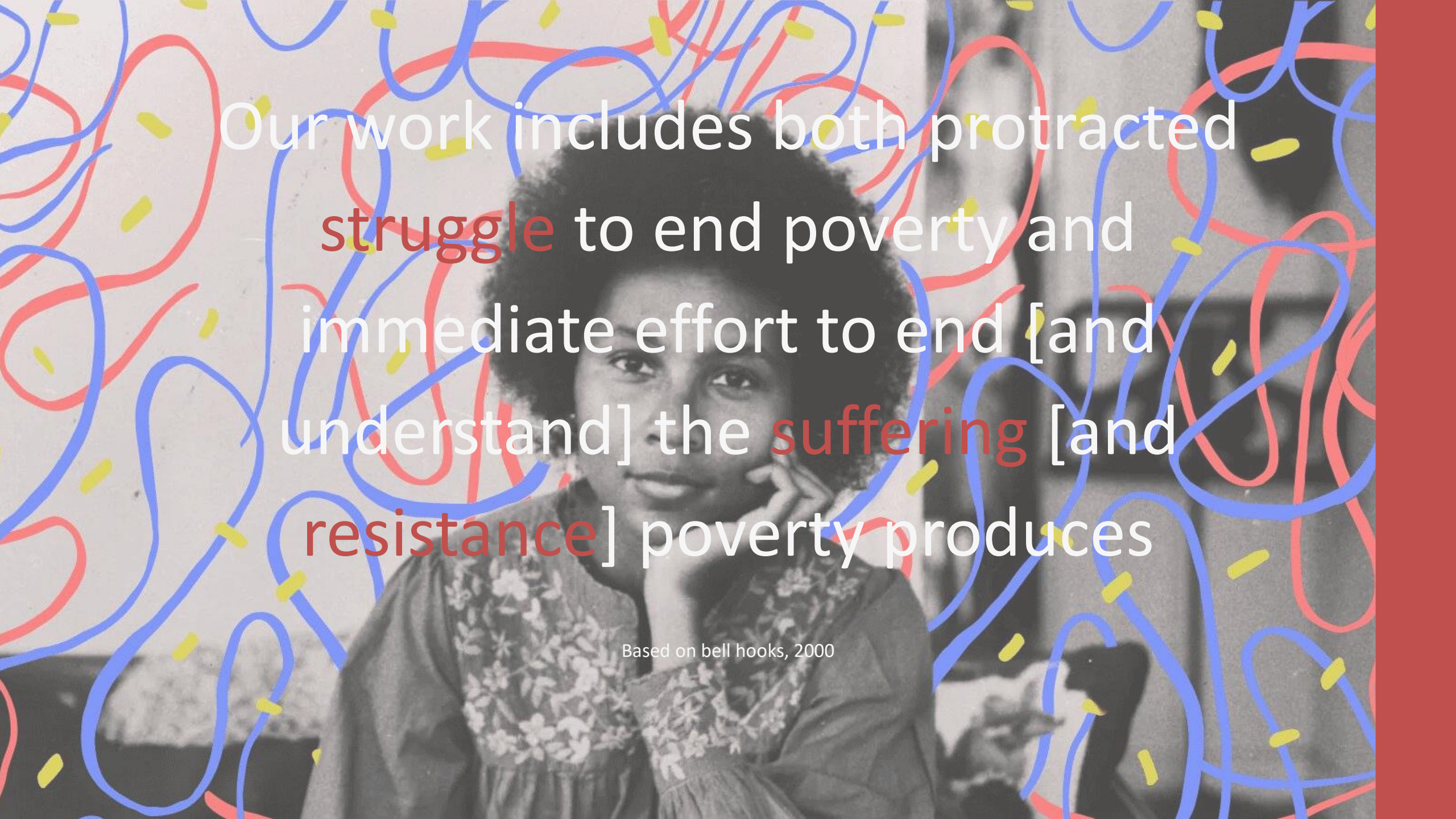
**‘People are poor due to relations, poverty is in itself a relation, and this in turn impacts relations’** (Saele, 2023, p. 179)

**Relational-aspects of poverty:** disrepect, shame and stigma, discrimination, othering, attack on dignity and self-esteem, lack of voice, denial of human rights... (Lister, 2004; 2021)

Misrecognition and denial of rights in **child welfare encounter** (e.g., De Coene et al., 2025; Featherstone et al., 2018)

Developing **poverty-aware approaches** toward social justice in child welfare and protection services: policies and practices of recognition and redistribution (e.g., Gupta et al., 2018; Featherstone et al. 2018; Krumer-Nevo 2020)





Our work includes both protracted  
**struggle** to end poverty and  
immediate effort to end [and  
understand] the **suffering** [and  
**resistance**] poverty produces

Based on bell hooks, 2000

# Relational poverty perspectives

Emerging (macro & meso) **relational analyses** of family life and child welfare in situations of poverty (e.g., De Coene et al., 2025; Faevelen, 2026; Sanfelici, 2022; Schiettecat et al., 2017)

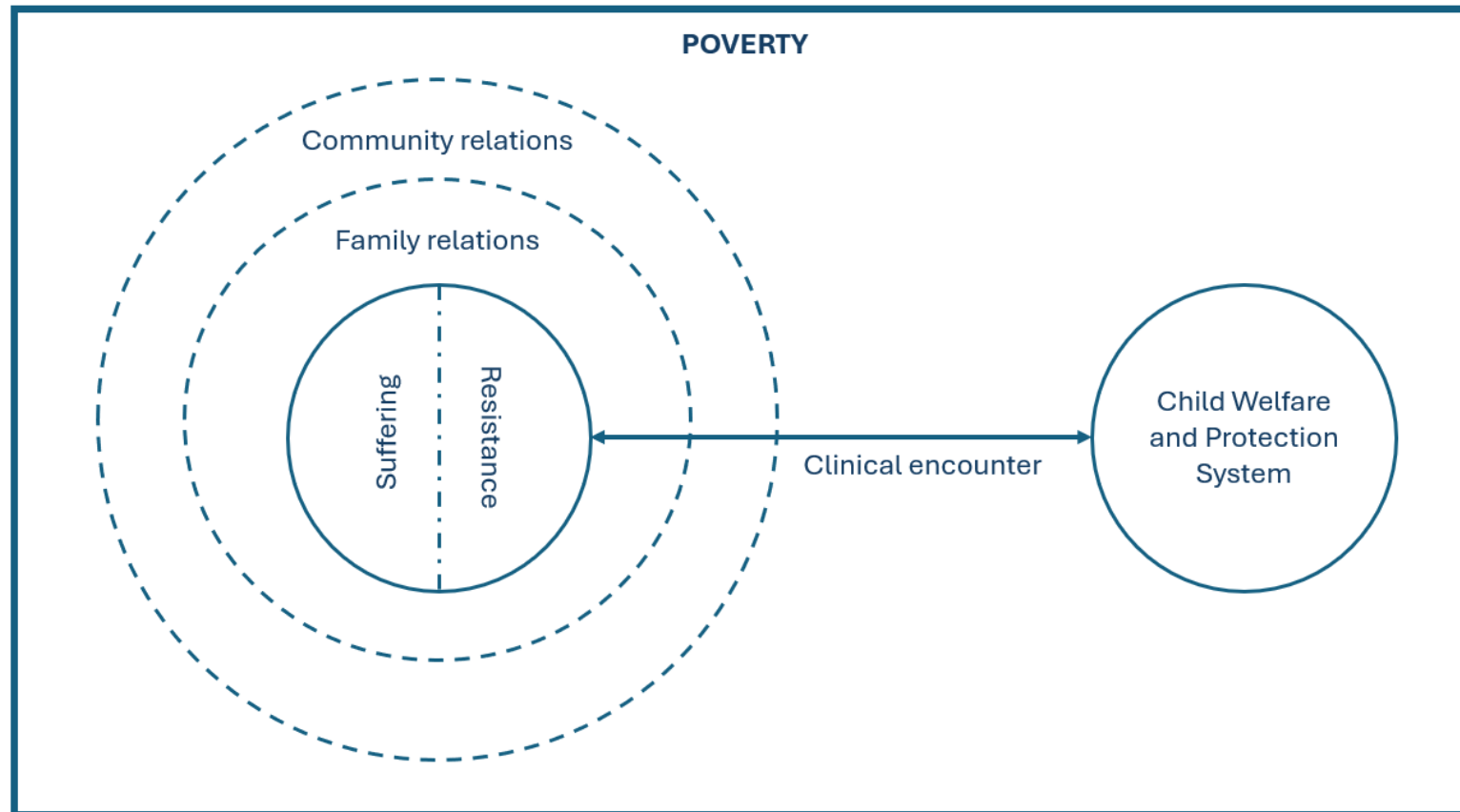
Translation into everyday care practice often **abstract** (e.g., Morris, 2018)

Connecting relational poverty perspectives to novel and existing theoretical frameworks  
(Saele, 2023)

>> Toward a **microrelational analysis** of family poverty and child welfare services (Spaas, 2025; in press)

# Toward a microrelational research agenda

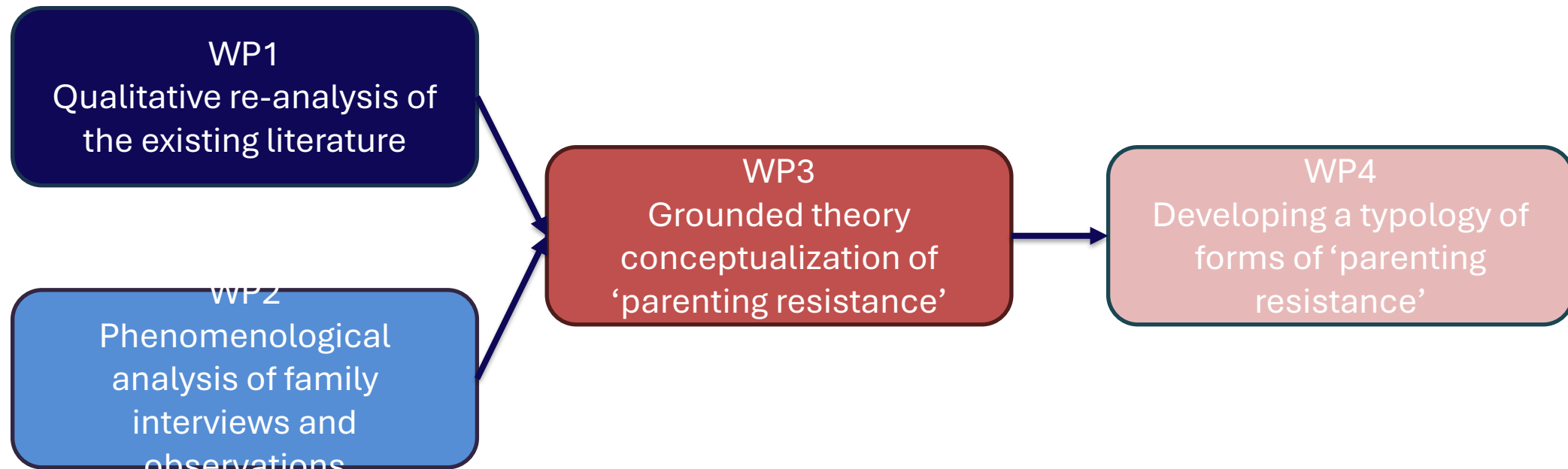
(Spaas, in press)





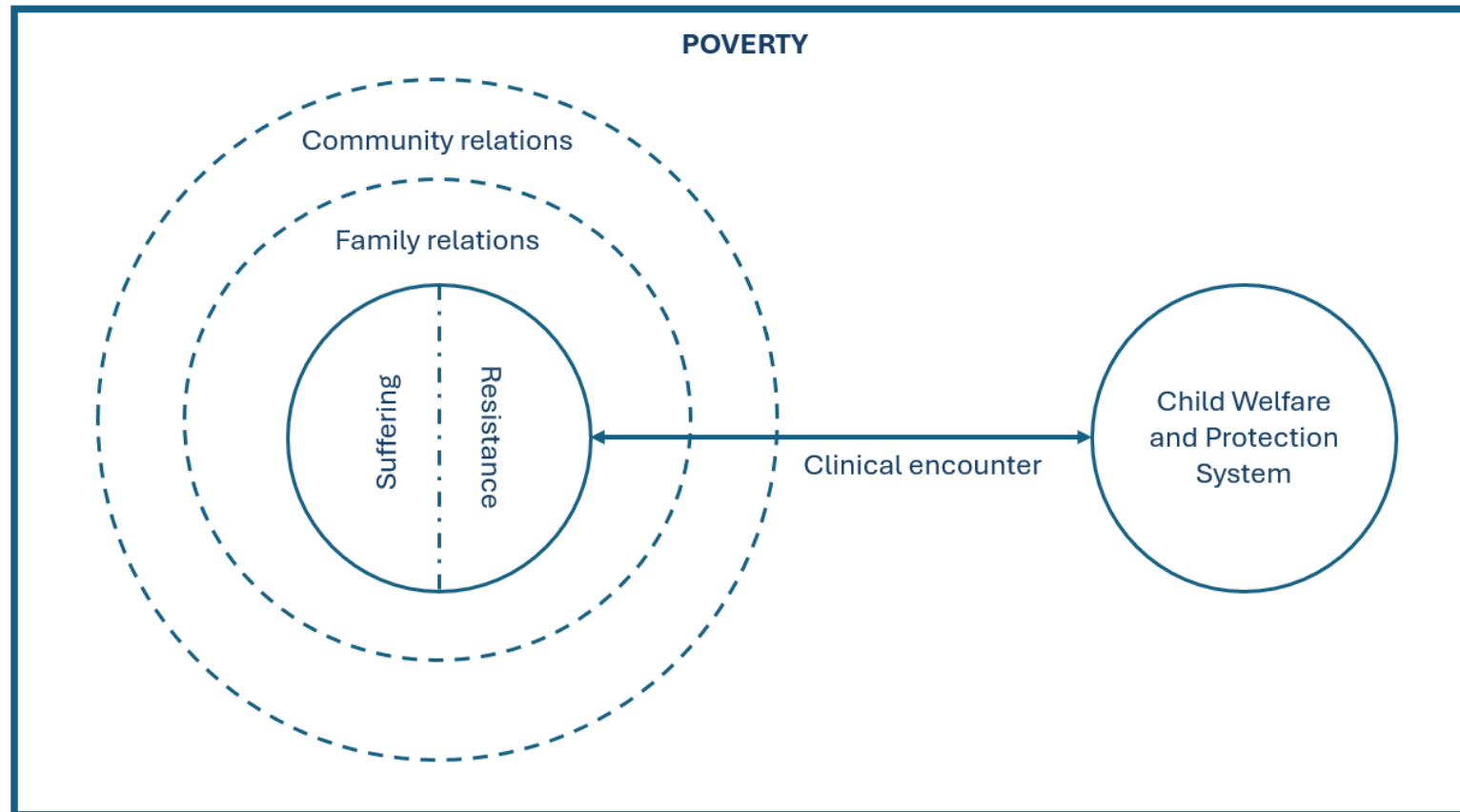
# Parenting-as-resistance

(Lakatosova, Van Leeuwen, Corveleyn, & Spaas, in prep)



# Toward a microrelational research agenda

(Spaas, in press)

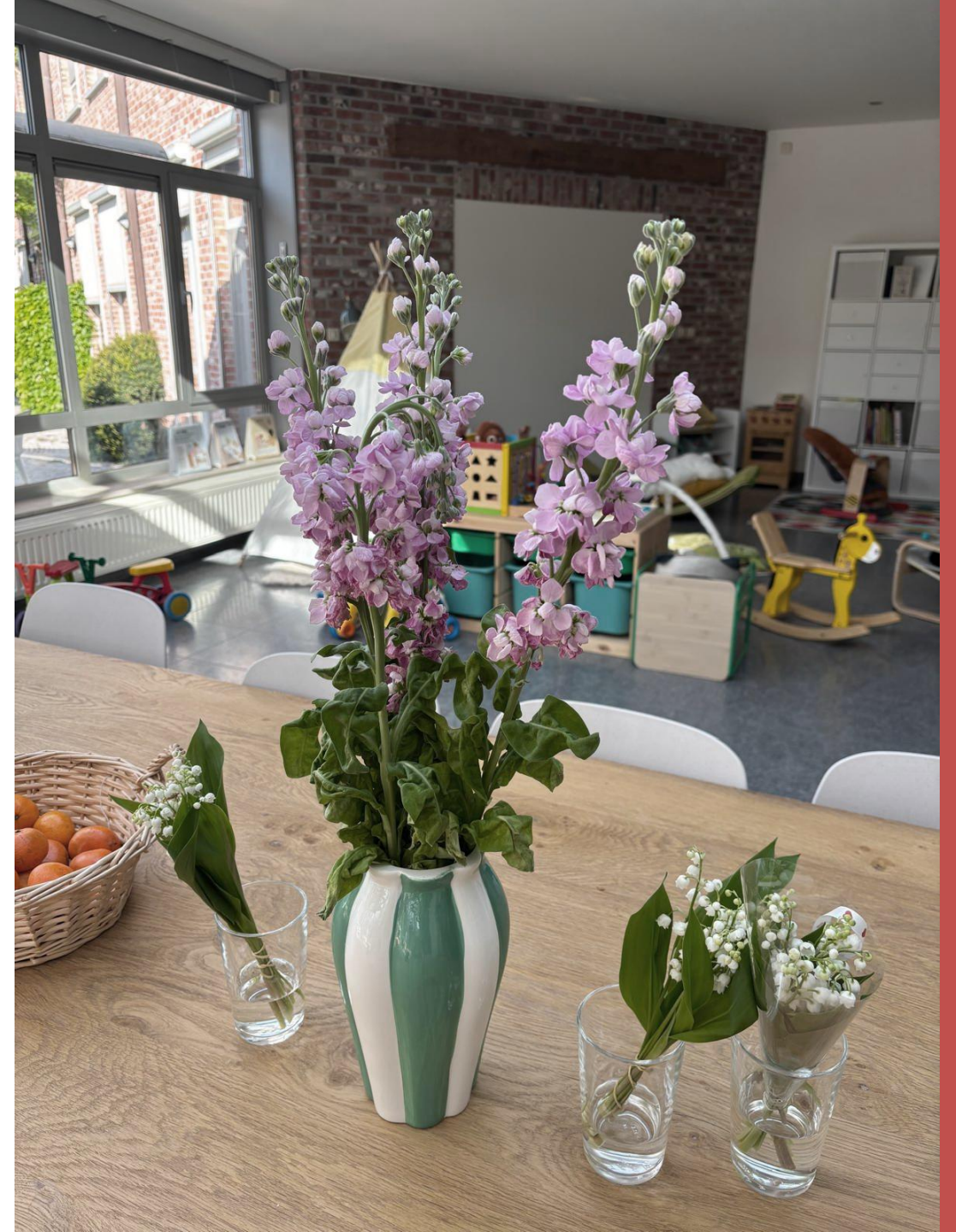


# Poverty in everyday family care encounters

A **three-phased study** using participant observation (55h), interviews (2+), and focus groups (1+) (Spaas, 2025-2026)

5 families, 19 team members

Shared family care (Spaas, under review)



# Poverty is always there (Spaas, in prep)

## Stress and participation

Poverty intensifies (parenting) stress and daily pressures.

Stress limits engagement: missed sessions, early departures, withdrawal.

## Everyday norms and contextual sensitivities

Everyday norms (self-care, cycling) can create tensions or blind spots.

Past histories and present constraints combine to shape participation and engagement.

# Poverty is always there (Spaas, in prep)

## Disclosure and attunement

Poverty can be openly discussed → opportunities for connection and collaborative problem-solving, whereby practical solutions appear to support relational trust.  
Shame or fear of judgment → silence, withdrawal.

## Family agency and resistance

Families take initiatives: raising awareness, pursuing education.  
Team support strengthens empowerment, even beyond formal therapeutic work







Case fragment 1





Case fragment 2



# Conclusion

- A relational analysis that enables a nuanced understanding of family relationships and parenting, as key site for welfare intervention, attending to both suffering and resistance.
- A relational analysis that makes everyday injustice visible, while also identifying possibilities for shared resistance and the repair of injustice in everyday care encounters.
- Empirical grounding for understanding how poverty shapes daily relational interactions in families and care settings, for shaping relation-oriented process research on family care (Spaas, in prep), and for advancing social justice through recognizing injustice and engaging in resistance together with families in everyday care.

A warm invitation  
to dialogue and a  
sharing of ideas



Thank you!