



Rees Centre External Webinar

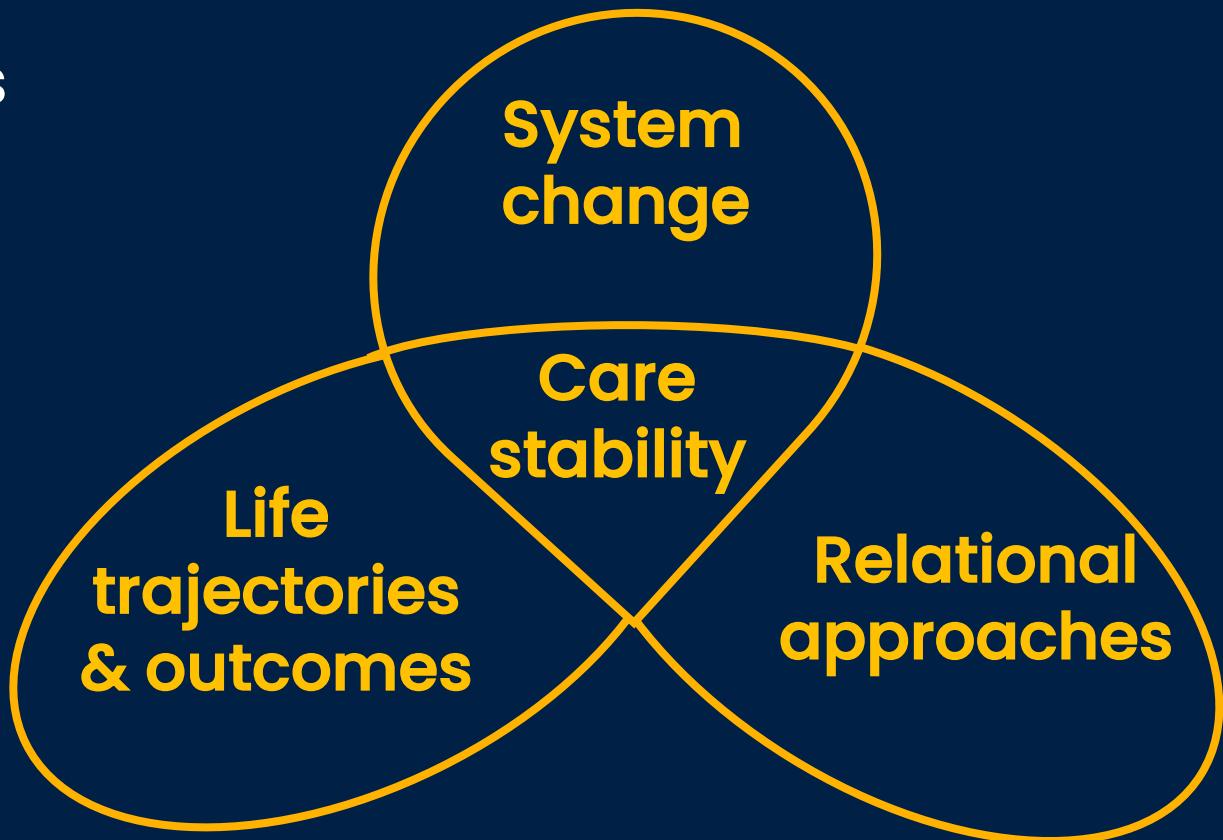
Dr. Caroline Spaas, KU Leuven, Belgium

27th 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

Location

Identity

Timing & duration

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

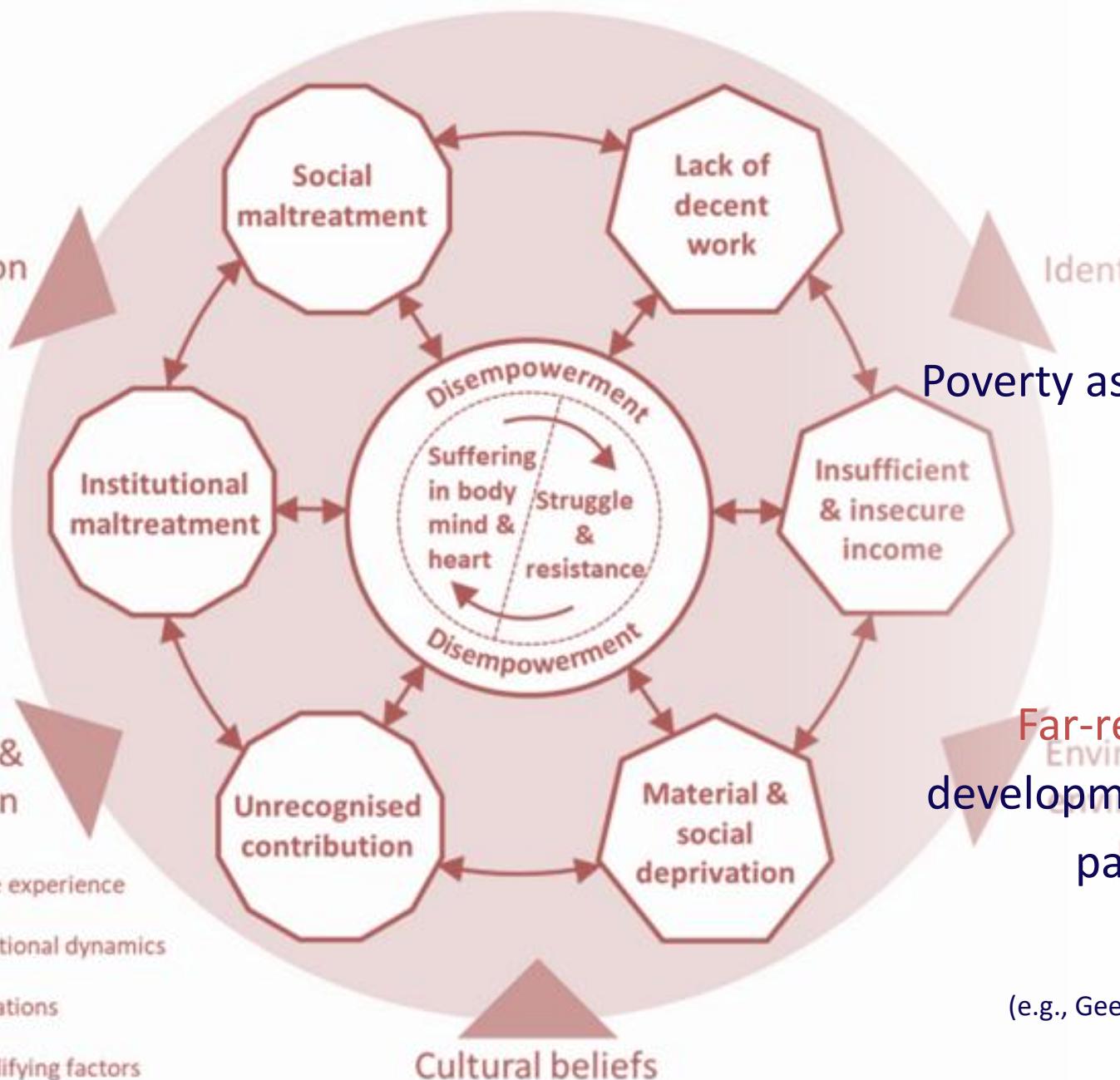
(e.g., Geenen & Corveleyn, 2015; Wray, 2015; Yoshikawa et al., 2012)

Core experience

Relational dynamics

Privations

Modifying factors





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?

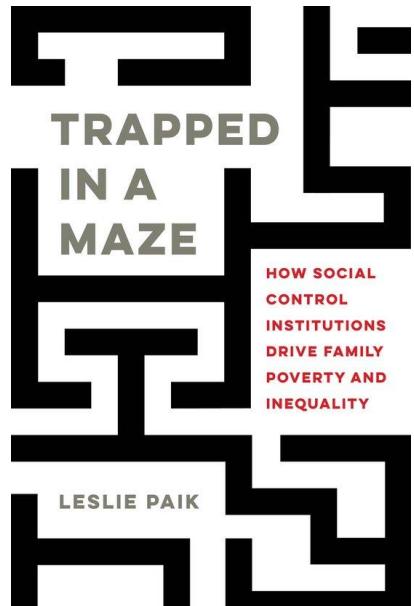
Dewantel et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2018



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^{1,2}  · N. Hodges³ · E. Kennedy^{1,4}

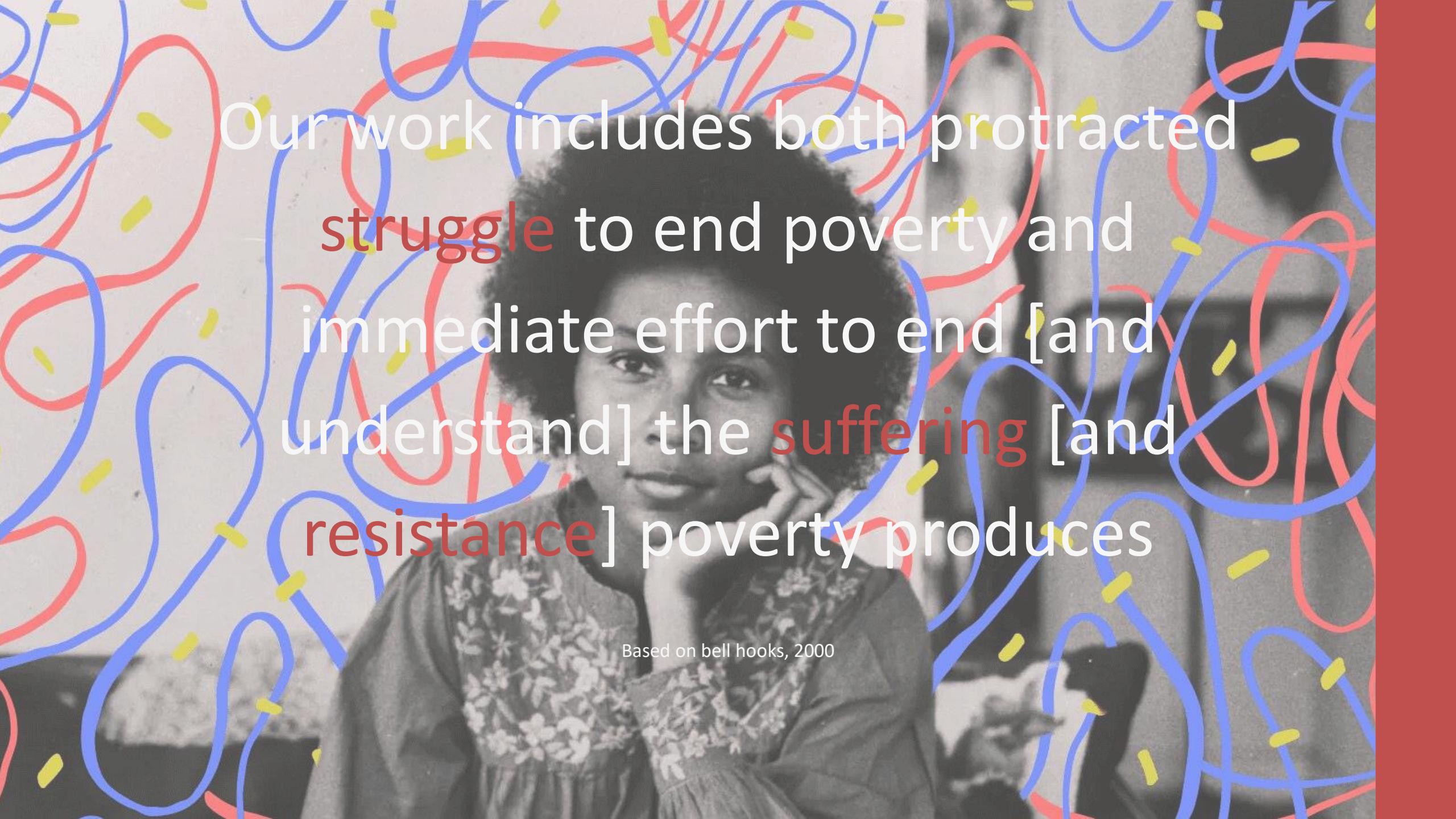
Relational poverty perspectives

'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: disrespect, 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)

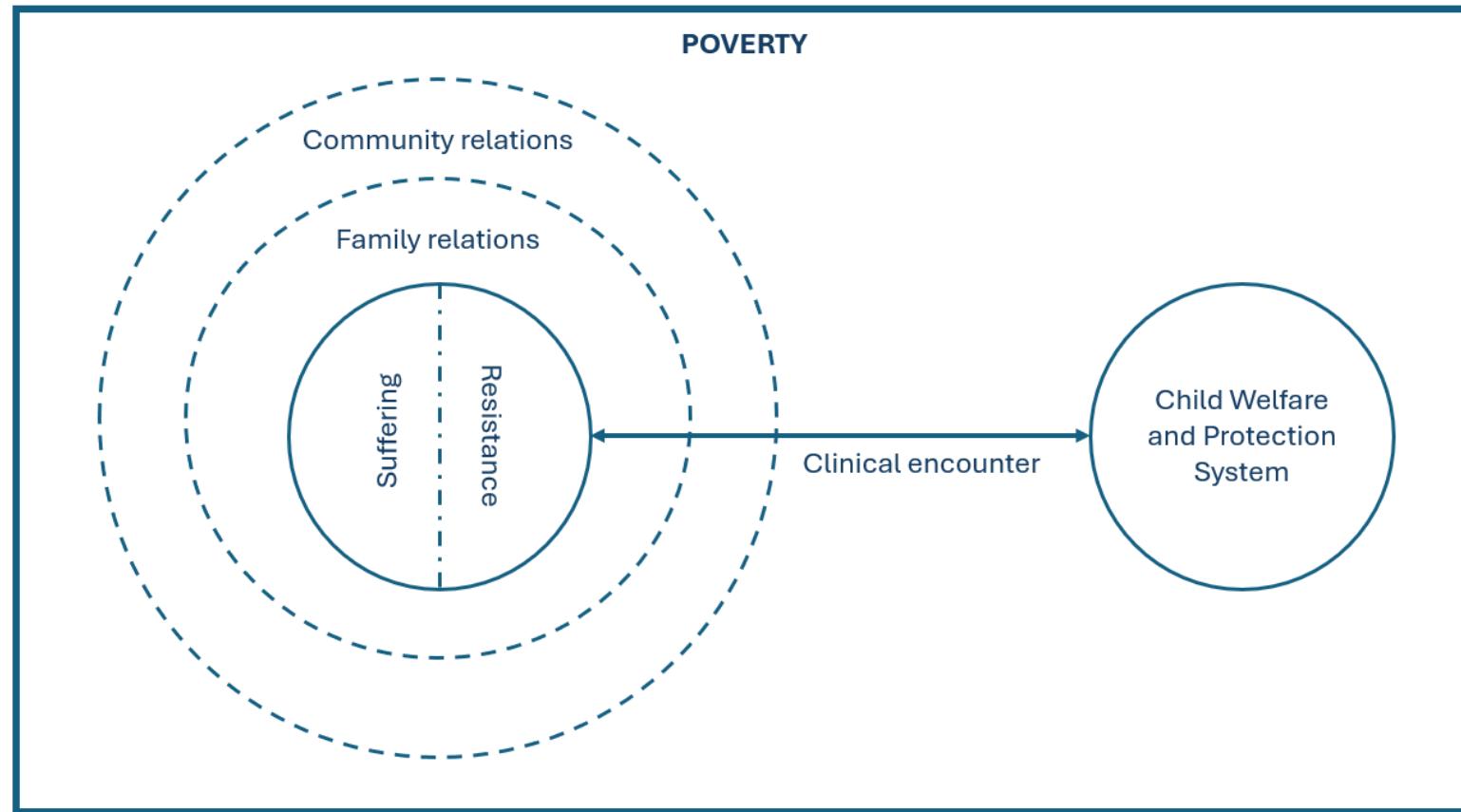
Connecting relational poverty perspectives to novel and existing theoretical frameworks

(Saele, 2023)

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

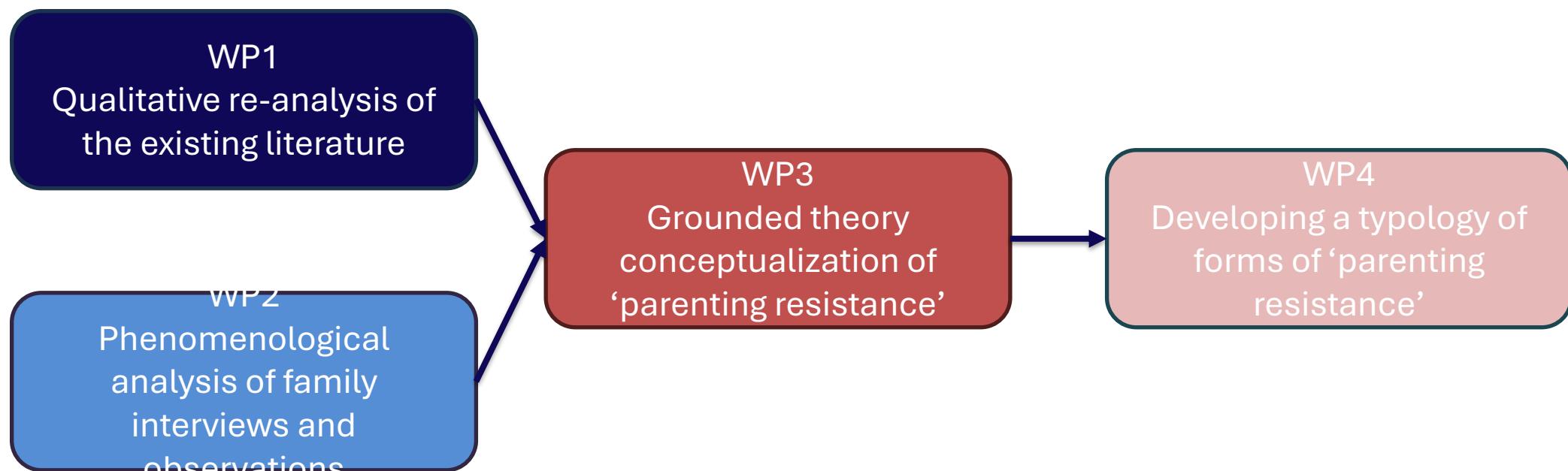
Toward a microrelational research agenda

(Spaas, in press)



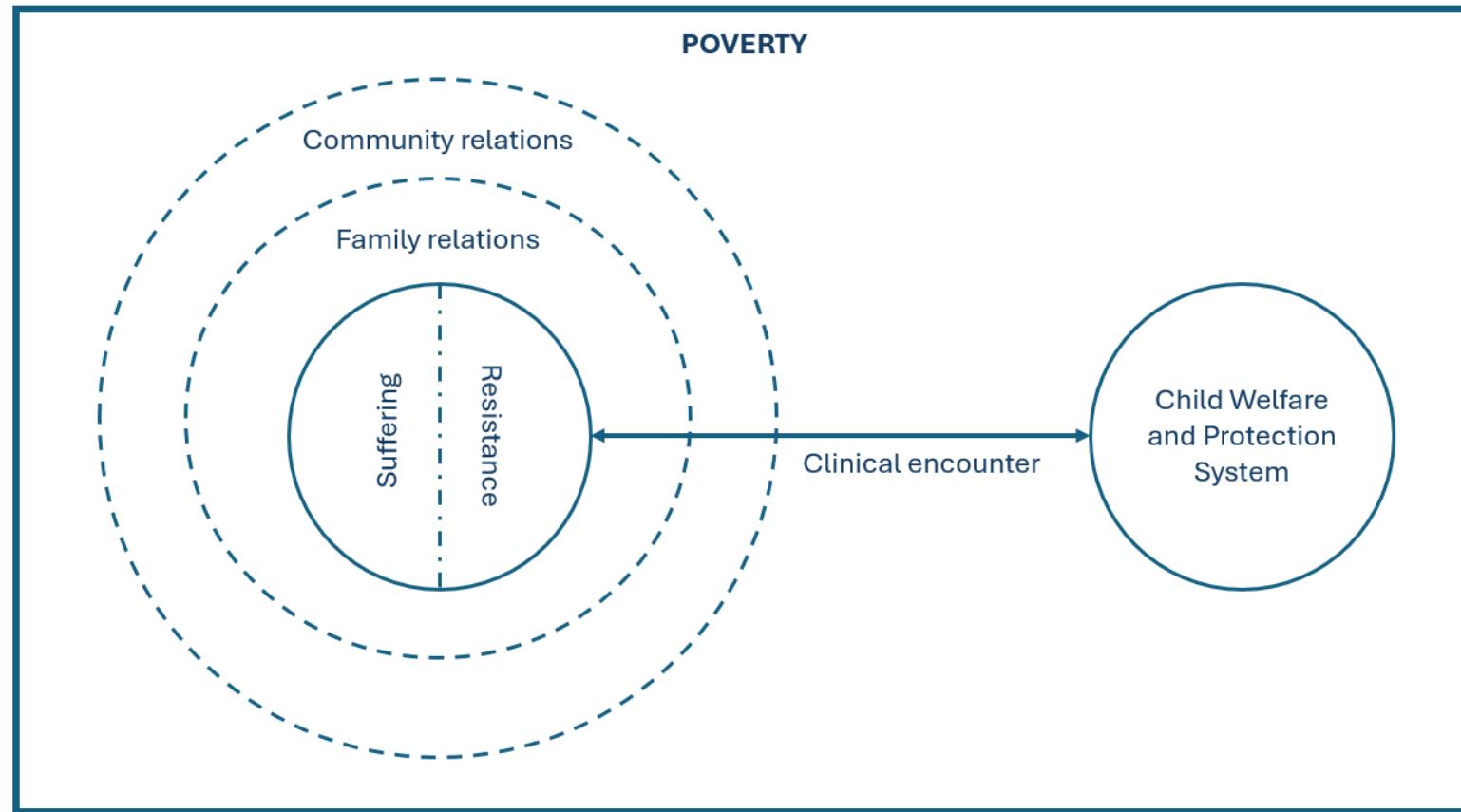
Parenting-as-resistance

(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!