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## **Social work research as a practice of transparency**

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### **Introduction**

**In the discipline of social work, researchers have explicitly argued that social work research is inherently normative rather than neutral and value free (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004; Gredig, Shaw & Sommerfield, 2012). As Shaw and Gould (2001) asserted, social work shares a common commitment to the realization of human rights, social justice and social change, which is constitutive of human societies. The social work researcher, therefore, ‘is never a *tabula rasa*’ (Mehta, 2008, p. 237), since social work research always inherently intervenes in existing assumptions about social problems. The role of social work research in the process by which knowledge is generated as socially constructed in relations of power implies that the ways in which research deals with existing assumptions about social problems should be open to scrutiny and contestation (D’Cruz & Jones, 2004). As D’Cruz and Jones (2004) have argued, it is important to understand this dimension of generating knowledge as *political*; which refers to the critical awareness that research findings and knowledge claims emerging from social work research can be seen as questionable and agonistic issues rather than as neutral facts (Mouffe, 2005; Author’s own, 2009). This requires ‘a greater degree of reflexivity [...] to think about what assumptions about the world are taken for granted and what questions and answers are not addressed or precluded by particular pieces of research or particular research designs’ (D’Cruz and Jones, 2004, p. 9). As a process of**

knowledge construction and production, doing research requires reflexivity by the researcher, which means that ‘the researchers should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny’ (Mason, 1996, p. 6).

In this article, we report on a small research project in which a collective of social work researchers in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) tried to think critically through some of the questions and complexities they were confronted with in social work research. As Mehta (2008, p. 236) has asserted aptly, although researchers often face tussles and huge contradictions, they ‘rarely articulate them’. For this collective of researchers, the research question implied which choices were made during the research process and on which grounds were these choices based? They collectively addressed this question to sharpen the reflexivity about the underlying assumptions and choices made during their research projects.

### Social work research and the social problem of poverty

Although this debate may be applied to a diversity of social problems (e.g. child maltreatment, substance abuse problems, domestic violence, etc.), our own project focused on social work research applied to the social problem of poverty. Since poverty is an extremely normative social problem (Cordon, 1996; Lister, 2004), it has been argued that the radical need for reflexivity and openness about the choices made during the research process is particularly true in the case of social work research about poverty issues (Author’s own, 2013). We focused more in particular on interpretations and applications of the concept of *participation* as one of the central issues in contemporary social work research, policy and practice on poverty issues (Beresford,

2002; Lister, 2002, 2004). Over the last few decades in social work research, policy and practice, the importance of the explicit recognition of the viewpoints and perspectives of people in poverty has been stressed, and it has been argued that ‘they have the capacity to place, and indeed sometimes to force, life knowledge on the political, professional, academic and policy making agenda’ (Beresford, 2000, p. 493). Particularly in participatory social work research ventures, the impetus has been to reconfigure the power relations implicated in knowledge production, thereby emphasizing the participation of people in poverty in co-constructing knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2008; Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2008). Documenting and analyzing the life knowledge of people living in poverty has gained prominence since the 1990s, since it has been considered that:

opening our ears to the voices of the poor [...] is vital to the humanising of citizens and institutions, including research [...] and offers a unique potential contribution to the overall corpus of knowledge because it reflects the point of view of people on the fringes of society concerning their own lives, as well as society and its primary institutions (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, pp. 99–100).

As a radical shift from the existing research paradigms in which people in poverty were predominantly portrayed and treated as objects of research, ‘participatory research attests to the struggles of the powerless to find a place of dignity and respect in society’ (Lister, 2004, p. 120). People in poverty have been recognized as subjects shaping their own lives, and therefore researchers have explored their life knowledge in research ventures (Lister, 2002; Mehta, 2008).

Nevertheless, social work research conducted with people in poverty involves a diversity of ethical complexities, dilemmas and ambiguities (Beresford, 2010; Krumer-Nevo, 2005). The fact that poverty is a normative issue implies that choices must be made, legitimized and openly discussed in constructing social work research related to poverty. Although it can be argued that these themes and choices may have an ‘everyday’ sort of quality, ‘the considerations in making such choices are less frequently discussed’ (Cordon, 1996, p. 9). In discussing the relationship between research ethics and reflexivity, for example, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) referred to ‘ethically important moments’ in doing research, implying the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research, as situations in which there is a stark choice between different options, each of which seem to have equally compelling ethical advantages and disadvantages. These dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities require that researchers develop reflexive potential and the necessary openness to discuss their doubts and considerations in making such choices during the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2008). In our research project, we attempted to engage with this issue.

## **Methodology**

The outset of the project was at a seminar held at the Department of Social Welfare Studies of Ghent University, following a public lecture by Emeritus Professor Ruth Lister on re-conceptualizing poverty (see her extensive work on poverty and citizenship captured in her book *Poverty*, published in 2004). The seminar brought together a diversity of social work researchers, including Professor Lister, and policy makers whose work revolves around the topic of poverty. The lively debate in the seminar convinced the researchers of the need and usefulness of further deepening the debate on participative research on poverty. They wanted

to reflect critically on the ways in which they had constructed their research projects. It was felt that there were many dimensions to the research that had implications for generating knowledge and that a concrete engagement with the **political dimension** of research was necessary. A collaboration was formed between 13 researchers: nine were affiliated to a Master's of Social Work at a Flemish University (Ghent, Antwerp and Louvain), two were affiliated to an independent research centre 'Childhood & Society', and two were affiliated to the Flemish Children's Rights Knowledge Centre (*Kenniscentrum Kinderrechten*).

The group of researchers gathered on four occasions. At each meeting, which took about three hours, a research project where people in poverty were one of the partners was presented and discussed.

In the first meeting, we discussed a research project that was commissioned by the Flemish government (Ministry of Culture, Youth, Sport and Media, Department of Youth). Over nine months in three cities in Flanders, researchers from Ghent University explored the ways in which children in poverty spend and experience their leisure time during their summer holidays. Data were collected by means of an ethnographic research methodology. During the summer holidays, open qualitative interviews were conducted with children living in poverty in their natural contexts.

The second research project was also developed and commissioned by an external organisation. In this case, UNICEF Belgium commissioned researchers from the research centre 'Childhood & Society' (*Kind en Samenleving*) to undertake a project to generate knowledge about the meanings children in poverty attribute to their social reality. During a participative action research they made use of different expressive, participative and non-

directive methods – drawings, participative observation, theatre, photography, comics and so on – to explore the processes of meaning-making by children in poverty.

Unlike the first two studies, the third qualitative research was carried out as an independent PhD study. The researcher, affiliated to the University of Antwerp, explored the life world of people in poverty and studied the effects of social isolation and dependency on people in poverty's self-image and well-being. The study focused mainly on an exploration of the ways in which people living in poverty experienced social work intervention as supportive of their process of empowerment. The research data were collected by means of open, in-depth interviews and participatory observation, primarily within the homes of the respondents.

The last presentation covered part of a doctoral study at the Catholic University of Louvain. Commissioned by the Flemish governmental agency 'Child and Family' (*Kind en Gezin*), this research project focused on the development of an instrument for risk assessment of child abuse and neglect to be used by Child Abuse Trust Centres. Starting from a meta-position, the presentation offered insights into the ways in which the problem of child abuse can be defined and approached, including in complex situations where problems such as poverty are at stake.

**The discussions following the presentations were audio-recorded and documented in close detail, and the sound recordings were fully transcribed into text prior to the subsequent qualitative data analysis of the research material (Howitt, 2010). From the second meeting onwards, the synthesis of the previous meeting was also adopted in the discussion and served as the starting point to elaborate and deepen the next discussion. During our project, we collectively fine-tuned and identified four 'areas of choice': (1) what is the position of the researcher; (2) what is the definition of poverty and who has**

**the power to define it; (3) what are the methods to be used and how are they to be used; and (4) how are the results interpreted, represented and disseminated? The data were analysed by engaging in a qualitative content analysis that was applied as a strategy for data analysis that concentrated on the subjective interpretation of the content of the textual data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) as a ‘sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings’ (Patton, 2002, p. 453). This allowed us to examine and discuss the key themes, covering the doubts and considerations of social work researchers in making choices during the research process, that emerged in the discussions and were manifest or latent in the transcribed audio recordings. Finally, the first three authors of this paper elaborated a draft version of the paper, which was sent to the other partners for further reflection and discussion in order to refine the analysis.**

### **Areas of choice**

**In what follows, we present these four different ‘areas of choice’ and illustrate themes and choices which often stayed implicit during the different research projects.**

### ***What is the position of the researcher?***

Two of the research projects were commissioned by policy makers, one was commissioned by an external, non-profit funding body, and one was funded directly by the University. In the discussion, it became clear that the relationships of the researchers with policy makers or with the external, non-profit funding body heavily influenced the design of the research projects, particularly with regard to their limitations of scope and time. When policy makers or funding bodies defined the scope of the research project and prescribed the research problem,

including which research question(s) and research participants should be included, this placed considerable pressure on the researchers. For example, the whole of the first research project took only nine months. Although the policy makers asked the researchers to make inquiries with as many children in poverty as possible and to focus only on their perceptions of the existing offer of pre-structured and targeted leisure time activities, the researchers discovered that the notion of 'leisure time' as such did not actually resonate with the vocabulary and experiences of the majority of research participants. Therefore, the researchers tried to access deeper layers of meaning and had to renegotiate their research focus with the social policy makers that had commissioned the research.

In the end, all of the researchers positioned themselves in different ways while exploring the research problem according to what they considered to be valuable theoretical and methodological frameworks that made sense for working with people in poverty. However, the approach taken to social work research might be an instrumental one and the researchers might embrace and reaffirm the strategies and designs prescribed by social policy and practice (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2002). In an instrumental approach, research and the development of social policy and practice are seen as separate functions, since policy is expected to be informed by research and practice as well as by policy in an objective way: 'the task of research is to provide precise, reliable and generalised information [...] that feeds instrumentally back into the policy-making process, and enables policy makers to reach the best decision on the basis of the information available' (Adams et al., 2002, p. 115). This instrumental approach to research takes away from the sound analysis of the social problem in the discussion. The question about how, why and for whom a situation is socially constructed as a problem ignores what the problem actually may mean for different stakeholders, and it fails to raise broader issues of social change. For example, in the fourth research project the

researchers discovered that the instrument for the risk assessment of child abuse, developed on behalf of the governmental agency 'Child and Family' to be used by Centres for Child Abuse (*Vertrouwenscentra Kindersmishandeling*), was applied in social work practice in a very straightforward and even blinkered way, whereas their intention was to offer social work practitioners a tool to develop a reflexive practice. They brought their wider experience and broader view on social work researchers to bear, inspired by Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic struggle', which implies that social relationships of understanding are constructed through and in misunderstanding, or in spite of misunderstanding; that is to say, they are constructed by a sort of tacit interaction guided by the concern to negotiate over claims of knowledge and power. This also involved them in positioning themselves at a point of tension between getting too involved and keeping a distance (Elias, 1982). They perceived their research venture as the site of a political struggle in which they exercised their symbolic power by a process of questioning and renegotiating the ownership of the research project in which researchers facilitated the expression of different perspectives on social realities and problems by policy makers and practitioners. Rather than negotiating this shared ownership of policy and practice at the end of the research venture when fundamental conflicts may appear, they started this process of negotiation at the beginning and it carried on throughout the research process. These efforts resulted in a sort of instruction booklet for social work practitioners that accompanied the instrument for risk assessment of child abuse. The objective was to maximize the instrument's reflexive potential in keeping the repertoires of interpretation open-ended, rather than turning it into a vehicle for the 'right' diagnosis of child abuse.

***What is the definition of poverty is used and who has the power to define it?***

The discourse of 'listening to the voices of people in poverty' in research ventures is currently quite popular, but it is beset with complexities and ambiguities (Krumer-Nevo, 2005); hence, another area of choice deals with key questions about how to identify and involve people who are in poverty during the research process and how to represent their voice (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Ellis et al., 2008). This area of choice embodies specific and interrelated issues, including the question whether researchers are aware that they are intervening in existing problem definitions of poverty and that their research evolves in relations of power. An important subject of discussion touched on the different roles and positions of researchers in constructing and producing the concept of poverty in the course of their research process. These roles and positions are influenced by the awareness of the existence of different concepts and definitions of poverty in research, policy and practice, which emerge in shifting and changing social, political and ideological contexts (Lister, 2004). For example, the discussion crystallized into the question of whether researchers defined poverty as an objective reality that they defined *on behalf of* the research participants, or whether they considered poverty as a socially constructed and sensitized concept (Blumer, 1954) that they attempted to understand and interpret while working *with* people in poverty as research participants. Their position on this question influenced the way in which they approached people in poverty, and it particularly played a role in defining who they considered to be people who were living in poverty and on what grounds, as well as in which research contexts they set up their research.

In one of the research projects, the researchers selected research contexts in which processes of meaning-making in working with a diversity of children, including children in poverty, took place. While trying to gain an in-depth understanding of how and why situations in which children were living got coded and were acted upon as 'poverty situations' in the

processes of interaction in these particular contexts, they sought to find which children were named and named themselves as living in poverty. Rather than directly approaching children in poverty as 'being poor' as an act of researchers employing the power to define who is poor and in what particular context they should be approached, they used the ways in which children self-identified themselves as being poor as a starting point; in doing so, they tried to construct non-intrusive relationships with the children and attempted to establish high levels of rapport and trust with them in opening up their life worlds. As soon as the children identified their situation as 'living in poverty', the researchers explained their intentions as researchers. These researchers considered this process of negotiation as a 'formed consent' rather than as a formally closed 'informed consent'. They perceived their research process as a complex yet participatory process in which they sought to decode the children's concerns and problem definitions in relation to poverty.

Other researchers selected organizations as research contexts where only children in poverty spend their leisure time. They asked the children about their living conditions, yet noticed that many children did not view themselves as being poor. Problems also arose at the beginning of this research process since these organizations functioned as gatekeepers and wanted to protect the children's and their parents' privacy with the argument that they were vulnerable and at risk of being exploited by the researchers. The organizations had an inhibiting role as they required that the children's families and parents had to give their consent and permission, which resulted in a time-consuming exercise for the researchers.

In another research project, people in poverty were approached at home where the researcher was introduced by social workers working in poor neighbourhoods. These social workers had a long-term commitment to these situations and selected the research participants based on a

list of multidimensional factors. In this project, the social workers adopted a position in reserve and functioned as gatekeepers. Interestingly, the research participants frequently constructed different power relationships with the researcher and the social worker. For example, in one of the home situations, although the house was extremely hot when the social worker and the researcher arrived, the mother turned off the gas fire as soon as the social worker left, informing the researcher that she was fully aware of the expectation that it has to be warm when you have a baby. In another situation the social worker warned the researcher that the father had aggressive moods and had been in prison, although the father eventually turned out to be very keen on telling his story to the researcher. These situations indicate that the position of the researcher as an 'outsider' may – in some situations – be a privileged one in gathering information, allowing the collection of data that is complementary to the social worker's insights.

In the discussion, some researchers argued that people in poverty should be approached directly and should be called 'poor' by the researchers, since researchers always inherently intervene in social realities when labeling issues. By being direct, the research is far more transparent and avoids the risk of research participants feeling deceived and exploited. Whereas the process of negotiation about the identification of poor children in one of the research projects was seen as valuable in avoiding the victimization of children in poverty, other researchers argued that this is only relevant when the experience of being poor is the subject of a discussion between the researcher and the research subjects that avoids the risk of romanticizing poverty as a social problem. Yet other researchers argued that directly selecting and calling people 'poor' during the first contacts while leaving out the process of negotiation runs the risk of not making explicit the underlying assumptions about the problem of the definition of poverty in specific research projects or research contexts.

***What are the methods to be used for understanding poverty and how are they to be used?***

The dominant assumption that poverty issues can only be fully understood when theoretical knowledge is combined with the life knowledge of people in poverty also confronted researchers with methodological considerations and dilemmas, which constituted the third area of choice.

As ‘participatory research’ can be interpreted and conducted in various ways (Laderchi, 2001; Moules & O’Brien, 2012), different configurations were discussed. The question arose of whether ‘the voices’ of people in poverty should be directly or indirectly included in the research projects, and on what grounds these choices were made. Also, the choice of the ‘appropriate’ participatory methods and the extent to which people in poverty are able to participate in different stages of the research process were important subjects of reflection.

Three of the research projects chose to *directly* involve people in poverty. In their attempt to elicit the life knowledge and experiences of these individuals, the researchers employed a variety of deliberately chosen methods, but based on different considerations. In projects that had been commissioned to examine a predefined research question by a subsidizing agency, researchers additionally struggled to address the issue of which methodological approaches could do justice to both their task and the life worlds of people in poverty. This challenge became very tangible in one of the research projects, where the term ‘leisure time’ – a core concept of the initial research question – did not seem to resonate with the vocabulary and conceptions of the participating children. The researcher therefore preferred not to consider ‘leisure time’ as an established reality, but rather as a social construct. In the dialogue with

children in poverty, she preferred to employ an open definition of 'leisure time', and she explored the various meanings children in poverty attached to different time regimes. In this project, open qualitative interviews were conducted as a method to open up and reconstruct the initial research question, starting from the life world and experiences of the participants. Another team of researchers commissioned to explore the meanings that children in poverty attribute to their social realities focused rather on the question of which techniques would be best suited to address the given research question. They came up with a range of alternative and creative methods that sought to give all children involved in the research venture a chance to express themselves in a way that corresponded with their life worlds. Not all of these techniques necessarily entailed a direct interaction with an interviewer, especially in the first stage of data-collection. For instance, some of the respondents were invited to take photographs of objects, situations and so on that they liked or disliked. Others could write a rap song about these topics, draw a picture or make a video diary. The researchers noticed that, depending on the choice of research methods, similar issues could yield different results. The video diary, for example, appeared to be the only space where children brought up the topic of bullying. Other means of promoting the expressive power of the research participants were to be found in yet another project that involved conducting in-depth interviews with adults in poverty situations. While explaining their experiences with social work interventions, the respondents could make use of a booklet with statements, such as about the possible characteristics of professionals, to support their comments and perceptions. A fourth research team consciously decided to consider the life (and service) experiences of people in vulnerable situations and their experiences with social services only in an *indirect* way. In accordance with their aim of developing and enhancing reflexive practices within Centres for Child Abuse, the researchers primarily made use of literature reviews and ran focus groups with practitioners.

In the discussion, epistemological as well as pragmatic arguments were voiced to justify the dominant tendency to evoke the voices of people in poverty through their direct participation in research projects. Epistemologically, the researchers argued that direct listening to the life knowledge and experiences of previously excluded groups in society may generate better knowledge. A more practical argument held that the direct involvement of people in poverty has been given high priority in policy and research contexts, which in turn stimulates the further development and expansion of participatory methods.

Although these methods were attractive to both the funding organizations and the general public, more listening may not inevitably mean more hearing. In the first place, the extent to which the research participants were involved profoundly differs, not only between projects, but also between the stages of a research project. When people in poverty are included in research, their participation is often confined to the data-collection phase. However, some of the researchers also attempted to involve research participants in the process of data analysis, although participation in the initial processes of problem construction rarely happens. Moreover, several of the researchers were concerned about a merely instrumental use of the frequently demanded participatory approach, which Beresford (2002) described as a ‘box ticking’ exercise or ‘tokenism’. They argued that researchers should take into account that the question about ‘how’ to involve people in poverty should not dominate the more ethical consideration of ‘why’ methodological choices are made. The involvement of marginalized voices within research projects was considered to be an important and complex, yet not a necessary condition for research.

***How are the results interpreted, represented and disseminated?***

While critically reflecting on issues of representing the voices and perspectives of people in poverty, we became aware of what has been framed as ‘a crisis of representation’ (Ellis et al., 2008); that is, the uncertainty that researchers experience in describing and representing social realities to a wider audience while being aware that they are always engaged in *interpretative* accounts that cannot completely capture the lived experiences of research participants. As researchers always make a claim to scientific authority in writing about these realities, attention was given to the ways in which research ventures functioned as sites for the production of knowledge and power (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Researchers have an inherent practice of translating realities into public issues. This interpretative practice of making sense of research findings was considered to be political. The meanings given to research insights inherently grow through the processes of interaction between the researcher, the research subjects, and policy and practice. This relates to the possibilities of public and democratic debate with social actors in our societies in the creation of solidarity and social justice. In order to untangle this ‘crisis of representation’, Andreola (1993) asserted that issues of representation are interrelated with the encompassing theoretical and methodological approaches throughout the research process (see also areas of choice numbers 2 and 3), which requires reflexivity about how research is constructed, interpreted, reported and disseminated.

In the discussion, all the researchers shared insights about their own struggles with the complexity and ambiguity of interpreting and representing their rich research insights and findings. In one of the research projects, a diversity of interpretative repertoires emerged for interpreting and representing the perspectives of children in poverty. The research team realized that different interpretations of poverty were possible, depending on the extent to which the dynamic context in which their voices were produced was kept in the picture; these

ranged from interpretations in which poverty was constructed as an unquestionable, neutral fact to constructions of poverty as a problematic and questionable notion. Based on the ambiguity of the research materials, it was equally well possible to construct and interpret poverty as either an individual problem that engendered pervasive, deeply painful and damaging costs and effects on children's personal and psychological development, or as a non-problematic issue in the sense that the children were well-aware of their tragic position in life yet were capable of developing resilient strategies for coping and accepting their circumstances as well as creative strategies for survival to negotiate and overcome their situation. However, the researchers tried to interpret the relationship between the children's everyday realities, experiences and aspirations and the economic, social, political and systemic conditions in which they were growing up. In that sense, it was assumed that the children were both constrained and enabled by their situation. The researchers struggled with the awareness that although they adopted dialogical forms of representation and framed their findings as open-ended issues that could be translated in human interaction with the audience, their interpretation of the social problem at stake could only be represented as one of many possible and provisional social problem constructions.

In another research project, this process of interpretation and representation was at risk of being colonized by the organization that commissioned and subsidized the research project, as they claimed all the original research materials collected by the researchers in order to re-interpret them according to their frame of reference – they did not understand why the researchers did not want to give them all the raw and uncensored research materials, including photographs, in accordance with the informed consent of the children and their parents. The researchers criticized this children's rights organization for wanting to mobilize societal actors in the construction of a high level of cuddliness of children in poverty, portraying them

as victims of their situation while stressing their strategies for coping and survival. In the discussion, the researchers stressed that they were very much aware of the fact that their research findings would, so to speak, take on a life of their own when they were disseminated and therefore be interpreted by different actors, such as policy makers and social work practitioners. Here, the issue of ownership of the research findings re-entered the discussion. For example, several researchers created space for the submission of their preliminary interpretations and findings to the research participants during the research process, and eventually for returning the participants' stories to them. Another concern of the researchers entailed the question of whether the policy and practice that built on their research findings would be directed at individuals as the locus of intervention or focused on poverty as a social and political problem in our society. This concern shows that researchers are committed to influencing the policy and practice that shape the structures, discourses and practices influencing the circumstances in which the lives of people in poverty unfold (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

### **Concluding reflections**

**In this article, we have argued that social work research is inherently normative, since social workers attempt to influence social injustice with a desire to work *with/in* the world to change it. In that sense, social work research is always politically loaded rather than neutral in the construction and generation of knowledge (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). Engaging actively with this impossibility of neutrality refers to 'what Touraine (1985) has described as 'committed research', Katz (1992) as a 'politics of engagement', and Hooks (1994) as the 'ethics of struggle' both within the academy and beyond' (in Kitchin, 2000). This committed research implies that we position ourselves on the line as**

academics (Kitchin, 2000). As such, we asserted that the choices made by researchers should be discussed and made explicit. As Mehta (2008) wonders:

how aware and reflexive are researchers of their own biases and positionalities?  
Do final research accounts pay attention to questions concerning power and politics in the course of the research process? (Mehta, 2008: 23)

Our research aim therefore implied that we tried to discuss the choices that were made during our research projects, including making explicit on which grounds this happened. We discussed this more in particular in relation to poverty research. As a collective of researchers, we learned that the choices made, although they seem to be very obvious ones, often remained implicit during the different research processes. Hence, an important conclusion of this collective of researchers was that even though the addressed questions had no clear answers, social work research requires that researchers attempt to realise a *practice of transparency*. Rather than stressing the individual researcher's responsibility in dealing with this complexity, the pursuit of such a *practice of transparency* refers to the importance of the creation of reflexive space in research communities to *collectively* embrace and discuss the complexities of social work research. This begins with disclosure, but as Bourdieu says, 'to become aware of the mechanisms which make life painful, even unlivable, does not mean to neutralize them; to bring to light the contradictions does not mean to resolve them' (Bourdieu, cited in Mehta, 2008, p. 239). In this sense, Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 275) argued that the goal of being reflexive has to do with 'improving the quality and validity of the research and recognizing the limitations of the knowledge that is produced'. As such, it may be

**relevant for the wider social work research community to create a context in which choices in research ventures are collectively discussed with peers.**

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