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“It All Starts with Family”: Mechanisms of Intergenerational Poverty in the Veenkoloniën, the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT**

Mechanisms that drive the intergenerational transmission of poverty have been studied widely, but to understand how these mechanisms are at work in real life we require studies on perspectives of families who themselves are living in poverty. In this study, we combine the perspectives of multiple generations of family households in a rural area in the Netherlands. We want to understand from their own perspective what prevents these families from escaping poverty. Twenty-three family households participated in intergenerational interviews. Results show that recurrent mechanisms were often perceived to relate to rearing practices, norm-setting and geographical mechanisms (immobility and perceived place-based stigma). Family habitus structures the mechanisms that prolong and perpetuate poverty.

**KEYWORDS**

Intergenerational poverty; families’ perspectives; family habitus; mechanisms

**Introduction**

Families that live in poverty for multiple generations do not have the experience or the capacity to generate economic capital (according to formal channels) and are less able to convert their social and cultural capital into economic capital (Noordhoff, 2008). Previous research shows that it is important for poor families to have all three forms of capital to get and keep a job and stabilize income (Lade et al., 2017; Noordhoff, 2008). Mechanisms that coincide with the development of capital are described in multiple studies and multiple contexts, but they do not often take into account the experiences of multiple generations of a family in which mechanisms are at work (Griggs, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2020; Upadhyaya et al., 2021). Bird and Higgins (2011) suggest that it is important to follow the full life cycle to explore what the key moments are in the life course and to identify those moments that are particularly sensitive for the transmission of poverty. The replication of mechanisms shows where the persistence of poverty lies (Cheng et al., 2016). Bird and Higgins (2011) also indicate that there is a lack of knowledge on the context-specific mechanisms and capabilities that protect new generations...
from poverty. Because families that live in intergenerational poverty struggle to escape it, or only manage a slight improvement in their economic capital, it is important to support the understanding and mechanisms of intergenerational poverty (Harper et al., 2003; Edzes & Strijker, 2017).

Therefore, in this qualitative research, we explore the mechanisms that endure in families, from the perspectives of the families themselves. We analyze the role of family (habitus) in the capability development of new generations. Which capabilities were they unable to develop which prevented them from moving out of poverty? We choose a qualitative perspective because the mechanisms people experience themselves are crucial in understanding the transmission of poverty. It also highlights a different perspective from those who view mechanisms from professional perspectives.

**Intergenerational transmission of poverty**

Over the past decades, the understanding of poverty and of how people escape from poverty has advanced in many ways, and has become more holistic (Baker et al., 2020). Now, multiple dimensions of poverty and their interaction are widely recognized to include, for example, people’s lack of ability to make choices, lack of access to services, social degradation and isolation, and vulnerability – as well as inadequate incomes, consumption, and wealth (Dorward et al., 2009). Previous, large-scale studies show that a person’s family background is likely to have crucial impacts on later-life socioeconomic achievement, regardless of the level of development of the country within which they live (Jenkins & Siedler, 2007). An industrialized and “developed” context may give some protection to the intergenerational transmission of poverty but does not rule it out. Hulme et al. (2001) even indicate that the intergenerational transmission of poverty is “both a characteristic and cause” of enduring poverty. He also concludes the mechanisms of intergenerational poverty are multiple and overlapping, though this socioeconomic group is still diverse.

In a review of (quantitative) studies on mechanisms of poverty, Bird (2007) sums up mechanisms that may play a role in the intergenerational transmission of poverty. These are 1) mechanisms involving family traits (teenage parents, unmarried or divorced parents or couples); 2) social capital (poor parents have more difficulty in educating their children); 3) environmental traits (living in poor areas/neighborhoods may affect the outcome of future generations); and 4) lack of cultural capital (with discrimination, exclusion and stigma as a result). This shows that not only economic, but also non-economic resources are important in the transmission of poverty (Guiaux et al., 2011; Nyamu, 2015). Bowles and Gintis (2002) find that the combined inheritance processes operating through cognitive performance and
educational attainments of those with well-off parents are important but that this explains, at most, three-fifths of the intergenerational transmission of economic status.

Apart from sociological factors, McEwen and McEwen (2017) also include biological mechanisms to explain the incidence of poverty. They state that next to social and structural mechanisms, the focus should be on the biological aspects that impact self-regulation of behavior. Lack of self-regulation plays an evident role in the attention control, planning, and the control of impulses and emotions.

From the preceding, we have come to understand that intergenerational poverty works through many facets of a family’s life, combining individual, family and contextual factors. Intergenerational poverty limits the ways that grandparents and parents transfer skills and capabilities to their children and makes it harder to set an example of good practice to new generations (Blanden & Macmillan, 2016; MacDonald et al., 2020). Though research shows that multiple generations impact each other, we have neglected to take on (effective) two- or three-generation approaches in services for family poverty reduction (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Upadhyaya et al., 2021).

**Perspectives of adults and children on poverty mechanisms in their families**

People’s perspectives on poverty and its mechanisms are still an understudied topic (Alkire & Santos, 2013; Kamruzzaman, 2021; Narayan-Parker & Patel, 2000), especially in developed societies (Serr, 2004) and built on intergenerational experiences (MacDonald et al., 2020, 2014). Research that has adopted intergenerational perspectives show that families themselves attribute the causes of their poverty to a lack of capital to assist labor market transitions. Researchers have observed differences in the experiences of the generations. The younger generations explain that they did not have a good start in life and they therefore missed opportunities to build the right capital. Children, during their young lives, inherit rather than create their poverty and are thus vulnerable to the settings, systems of relationships and cultural processes in which they are raised (Bird, 2007; Cooper, 2010). In a study by Heberle et al. (2018) children describe how the psychological state of their parents influenced their own behavior and feelings and perceptions of living in poverty (Heberle et al., 2018). Hill et al. (2003) describe three mechanisms that affect children living in poverty: 1) the lack of social contacts that would support them in achieving their aspirations; 2) territorial mechanisms, which restrict children in their movements and activities because of perceived safety issues; and 3) lack of resources and information.

The middle and older generations attribute their poverty to unfortunate life events, ill health and hardships, sometimes from an early age (Dagdeviren et al., 2017; MacDonald et al., 2014). This often results in stressful lives and exclusion from the labor market and a disturbed family life (Ridge, 2009).
Also, adults in poverty often do not feel that they have a meaningful life. Over generations, families lose connections to diverse networks and input on mobility strategies, which can (geographically) isolate families living in poverty (Wills et al., 2017).

**Theoretical framework**

In this study we conceive of poverty as a state in which a person is not able to do and be, because of lacking opportunities (Hick, 2012; Sen, 1999). Having no financial resources or not being able to accumulate and build on financial resources can be one of the means, which prevent a person or family from developing a capability. In this article, we argue that we have to take on a perspective that includes mechanisms, which enhance the opportunities for a family to achieve fulfilling outcomes. The focus is on the role of family and place as intermediates, which makes it more difficult to escape poverty in its different manifestations.

**Family habitus**

Family continues to play an important role in the development of capabilities for new generations. The family makes a huge impact on the way a person perceives social structures, and family determines to some extent how people should act in social structures (Power, 1999; Reay, 2004). In the late 1970s, Bourdieu proposed the concept of *habitus*, to explain the reproduction of social inequalities in society (Archer et al., 2012). He argued that interaction of the habitus with resources and with the social context determine the relations of privilege and domination. In Bourdiesian terms, the habitus and specifically family habitus shape social structures (Bourdieu, 1979). The family habitus sets dispositions, in terms of what is “right” and “natural” to parents in terms of their parenting practices and their priorities for their children (Vincent et al., 2012). In terms of capabilities, the habitus of families is one of the conversion factors in developing capabilities. It can facilitate the formation and activation of capital (Vincent et al., 2012). Habitus plays a role in the development of social norms, nurturing one’s interest and aspirations and paving the way to fulfilling hopes and ambitions (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Habitus can simultaneously move people in certain directions of behaving, and it can facilitate alternative approaches to behavior (Reay, 2004). To understand intergenerational poverty, it is important to study how new generations/children make use of family habitus. A strong family habitus, which is incorporated in multiple facets of a child’s life (be it financial or health) has an impact on the capabilities a person develops and would want to develop
(Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). The role of family (habitus) thus should not be lost in the wider analysis of social, political and economic processes (La Placa & Corlyon, 2016).

**Family habitus and place**

Place and context impact the habitus (Navarro, 2006). The images of the history of a place and the culture of a place influence the construct of family habitus. It thus operates in the orientation to opportunities (Baker & Brown, 2008; Woods, 2004). The rural context of the study described in this paper should also not go unaccounted for in the mechanisms of poverty/opportunity deprivation. The relative isolation of a community and the significance of a social milieu in that community can allow a value system of not only the families, but also the institutions surrounding those families to become consolidated (Baker & Brown, 2008). The place of living, be it rural, thus often delineates a safe place for families with their origin in an area. When family habitus acts in a “field” it is familiar with, it will feel comfortable. When habitus acts in an unfamiliar field it can lead to transformation, but also result in uncertainty (Reay, 2004). Therefore, moving to other places and crossing a physical boundary may lead to insecurity amongst families who have lived in a region for generations. Parents with low income can just as effectively parent in less deprived areas when they are ensured of social support and integration within a familiar community (La Placa & Corlyon, 2016).

**Methodology and setting**

In light of our aim to obtain an emic perspective on intergenerational poverty, 23 families (of multiple generations) were involved in the study. At the time of the study, these families all lived in a rural area in the Netherlands called the Veenkoloniën (in English, the peat colonies). Because the context of the study throws light on the mechanisms of poverty, we first introduce the study setting.

**Study setting**

The Veenkoloniën is located in the northeastern part of the Netherlands, extending beyond the borders of two provinces (Groningen and Drenthe) (Figure 1) and spread out over seven municipalities.

At the time that it was an active peat colony, between the 16th and the 20th centuries, workers extracted peat from the lands. The peat was shipped and exported on the long canals that connected the villages to the larger cities in the region. The landscape is still dominated by these canal villages and the straight lines of the canals and roads (Stol, 1991; Strijker, 2007).
Workers who worked in the peat colonies to extract peat were low-skilled migrant workers from other parts of the Netherlands and neighboring Germany. Life was considered hard, especially for the workers, who did not only do hard manual labor, but also lived in poorly constructed huts and received low wages (Stol, 1991). Differences between social classes were large (Van der Schoot, 2006), and in the former peat colonies socio-economic inequalities created a historic link to poverty.

Nowadays, the area still has a relatively high percentage of households living in enduring poverty. With the end of active peat exploitation and the relocation of industries in the mid-20th century, many people moved away from the Veenkoloniën. But families of the former workers often did not have the opportunity to move. These families came to live on social welfare benefit or other publicly funded income schemes. Forming a large proportion of the low-income families in this region (Edzes & Strijker, 2017), many of these families with low income stayed put (Winkels & Duyvendak, 2003). The combination of the rural setting, the low mobility of families and the overly autochthonous or indigenous background of the families with low income make the region an interesting research area (Edzes & Strijker, 2017). The residents of the area still have a positive outlook on the region (Rijnks & Strijker, 2011), despite its history of inequality.

Figure 1. Map of the Veenkoloniën.
Recruitment of families

The families were included in the research through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. In this study the researchers worked closely with a coalition of parties, the Alliantie van Kracht (Alliance of Power), which advocates for the improvement of poverty policies and interventions in the region under study. Amongst the coalition of parties are municipalities, housing associations, social work and voluntary organizations. This coalition contributed to the recruitment of families for the study. The parties who work closely with families in intergenerational poverty made the initial approach to families.

In addition, families were involved in the study through active fieldwork. The primary investigator and co-researcher attended several initiatives for families with low income (e.g., local food bank, community centers, and courses to address low literacy) and placed advertisements in local newspapers and community centers. They also joined meetings organized by citizens in initiatives that supported low-income families. Five families became involved in the study through professional organizations, four through citizen initiatives, nine families through active fieldwork, and two in response to advertisements. Three families became involved through snowball sampling (contacts of families that were interviewed). The sample is spatially distributed over the region of the Veenkoloniën in the Netherlands.

Methods

The study is based on the life histories of 23 families living in intergenerational poverty. In all families, multiple generations were interviewed. The life histories of the families were collected in in-depth interviews. Family histories are used to uncover transitions in families and to highlight the importance of family relations (Miller, 2007). To visualize the family history, the interviewees fleshed out their family tree, to give an idea of the origin of family members, depth of contact and main life events in their family history. Interviewees indicated that visualizing a family tree showed recurrent mechanisms and differences between generations. Subsequent interviews revolved around the following themes: mechanisms of poverty; identification with poverty; family life and poverty; coping and mobility strategies; poverty in a rural area; and help and assistance. For the children interviewed, the interview guide focused on their daily life and limitations arising from a lack of financial resources, family life as well as their ideas and decisions about their future. All interviews ended with a pile-sort exercise in which the participants ordered 13 cards depicting “basic needs” according to their importance and feasibility in a life of lacking financial resources.
The families had the choice to be interviewed individually or jointly with family members of other generations. Based on their personal preference, the interviews were scheduled in a private setting or a public space. Eventually, three interviews were done in a public space. The interviews lasted between half an hour and 2.5 hours. The fieldwork was done from September 2018 until June 2019.

The interviews were conducted in tandem with a schooled academic and a professional-by-experience in poverty. We combined academic experience with practical experience to improve the validity of the interviews and elicit answers with more depth. It also allowed the participants to relate to either one of the interviewers, depending on their preference (an interviewer who had a similar (socio-economic) background to them and/or one without experience of poverty). It proved to create a deeper rapport with the participants.

**Analysis**

The combination of different methods, the family life tree, the interviews, and the pile-sort exercise allowed for triangulation of our research findings. This helped to confirm or highlight results and contributed to the internal validity of our results (Carter et al., 2014). Furthermore, interviewing multiple generations within a family allowed for data source triangulation, again contributing to the validity of the data (Carter et al., 2014).

The interviews and family trees were analyzed with Atlas Ti. (Smit, 2002), a data-processing programme for qualitative analysis. Through a two-stage coding process, inductive codes as well as deductive ones were developed, categorized, and analyzed. First, inductive as well as deductive codes were created, using thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Deductive codes were derived from scientific literature which discussed mechanisms in poverty. Mechanisms were coded based on participant’s answers to the following questions:

1. *What prevented you from achieving things you would have liked to achieve?*
2. *What caused your poverty? Where did it start?*
3. *What is or has been the role of your family in your impoverished situation?*

Coding the lifelines of the individual household members in the family trees also resulted in codes on mechanisms of poverty, as described by the participants. The comparison of life trees of members of one family highlighted the similarities in mechanisms the families experienced and led to additional codes on returning mechanisms.

**Ethics**

All participants gave their permission for the interview and the recording of the interviews, based on the ethical guidelines of confidentiality (use of pseudonyms), minimization of harm and attention to the power relations
between the researcher and participants (O’Reilly, 2009). We adhered to these guidelines by anonymizing the names of the participants and not disclosing other private information in an identifiable manner. We paid attention to the power relations between the primary investigator and the participants by 1) giving options to skip questions and withdraw from the study at any time; 2) paying attention to create rapport between the participants and the primary investigator; and 3) giving children a choice as to whether or not they wanted their parent present in the interview setting. Participants were given the opportunity to read their transcript and respond and correct it if necessary. Data were initially stored on the primary investigator’s personal computer, anonymized, and uploaded on a protected shared drive, in accordance with the GDPR guidelines.

**Participants**

In the 23 family households, interviews were held with at least two generations (17 families) and in some cases three generations (6 families), accounting for a total of 52 in-depth interviews. Though we aimed to interview multiple generations of a family, it was not possible to interview three generations in all families, because of death, poor health, broken family ties with these relatives or the lack of willingness to participate. Table 1 shows the characteristics of participants in the study.

**Results**

Figure 2 illustrates the life course trajectory of a family involved in the study. It shows that in individual life course trajectories there are individual mechanisms at work. The major focus of this analysis will be on the “family” mechanisms, as described by multiple generations in one family, portraying the role of family habitus in the development of capabilities in new generations.

This example of the Herbers family shows that the grandparent we interviewed started his life in a youth home, had ill health, and suffered from alcohol abuse. The life stories of the middle generation show how the mechanisms that drove the oldest generation into poverty worked out differently in the individual lives of the middle generation. One of the siblings suffered from a lack of love and communication between him and his parents, the limited skills his parents were able to teach him, and the strong sense of safety and attachment which he felt in the place he grew up in and was afraid to leave. He felt that these mechanisms were also responsible for his poor health, and that they became an undeniable part of illegal practices that he developed (and as taught by his father) and the inability to manage anger issues, because of stigmatization. His sister experienced similar conditions, but was able to shake off stigmatization, and experienced
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Interviewed family members (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Composition of core household</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Worked in life?</th>
<th>Current type of income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Amsing</td>
<td>Hilde</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ron</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tammo</td>
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<td>Man</td>
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<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theo</td>
<td>Married, 2 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Family de Boer</td>
<td>Gerard &amp; Pietje</td>
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<td>54 &amp; 56</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Laura</td>
<td>Single, 2 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Family de Jong</td>
<td>Teun</td>
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<td>Ina</td>
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<td>Social welfare</td>
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<td>Old age Pension</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Trijntje &amp; Samantha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Peters</td>
<td>Clara</td>
<td>Divorced, 4 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Marian &amp; Anne</td>
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<td>Woman</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Single, 2 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dirk</td>
<td>Married, 2 children</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Loan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
less “bad luck” when it came to keeping her job. At the time of the interview, the youngest generation was still in primary school, had suffered from his parents’ divorce, but felt supported by the open communication, love, and care of his parents.

This example illustrates that there are mechanisms that cause families to move into poverty and mechanisms that keep them in poverty. Secondly, it is not always the whole family which is troubled by living in conditions of poverty. Third, families almost always experienced a set of mechanisms that contributed to their financial situation. Lastly, though we found poverty to last for multiple generations in a family, most families had jobs at some points in their professional life.

Table 1. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Interviewed family members (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Composition of core household</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Worked in life?</th>
<th>Current type of income</th>
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<td>Tom &amp; Fenna</td>
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<td>Angela</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Janita</td>
<td>Married, 3 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Loan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cindy &amp; Kor</td>
<td>&amp;</td>
<td>Man</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Disability benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family van Veen</td>
<td>Katja &amp; Kim</td>
<td>Married, 3 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Disability benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Visser</td>
<td>Kees &amp; Rosa</td>
<td>Married, 2 children</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Old age pension</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>With partner, 3 children</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Wijbenga</td>
<td>Lennart</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Divorced, 1 child</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>Social welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mariëlla</td>
<td></td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Family trajectory and related mechanisms.
**Family mechanisms**

The analysis of the mechanisms that families in intergenerational poverty experience often started with the following discussion, which highlights the importance of the role of family habitus in the discussions on mechanisms of poverty:

**Interviewer:** How did you become poor?

**Rob (2nd generation):** It all starts with your parents. They lived in a time that was poor. People in the Netherlands were poor, and then they got married and suddenly had a child that they had to take care of. They did not have money to take care of their children. Then these children, including me, do not have a good starting point.

**Vanessa (2nd generation):** I only remember my parents staying at home. They did not have official jobs. I lived with them and my little brother. You don’t know any different, you are raised this way […] I felt rather sad that my father did not have a job.

Rob as well as Vanessa shared that their poverty started with the poor economic situation of their families. They both highlight they did not know any different and, in that way, were influenced in their views of what is normal or what their destiny could be. This view was shared by multiple second-generation interviewees. They articulated that the poverty of their parents was created by the circumstances they faced then. Time-based mechanisms showed a lack of governmental support and traditional patterns of early marriage. Over the individual life courses of participants of the first and second generations, we also distinguished life events that caused poverty, such as accidents, poor health, and divorce.

From this discussion, we dug deeper into the family mechanisms that prevented new generations from escaping poverty. On the distinction between falling into and remaining in poverty, participants felt that family socialization and contextual mechanisms were more instrumental in perpetuating poverty than individual mechanisms or bad luck. According to the participants, these mechanisms substantially contributed to a bad start in their youth and teenage years and that these mechanisms kept them in poverty.

**Not being able to communicate/share feelings**

Firstly, participants spoke about a lack of love and communication within the family. Specifically, second- and third-generation participants reflected on the impact that the lack of love and communication had on the development of their opportunities. Participants identified two explanations why such lack kept them from escaping poverty. Firstly, participants would not speak about problems they had or skills they could not develop because they did not want
to place an extra burden on their parents. By not sharing difficulties, they relieved the family of additional stress and reduced fights and disagreements in already difficult circumstances. Secondly, participants explained that in their families they did not develop the skills to show love and to communicate well, as was the case in Nico’s life story.

**Nico (2nd generation):** My mom and dad did not have a great childhood. My mother grew up in a children’s home and my dad also had his share of difficulties, so they did not learn how to show love and communicate. I still remember when I was with my first girlfriend and she jumped on the couch and gave her mum a big hug . . . . I never had that. That is something I missed and somehow I refrained from showing affection to my own kids. I could never control my feelings, because we did not talk at home, and that anger drove me on the wrong path.

Previous studies show that non-supportive relationships between parents and children without the expression of emotions are more likely to facilitate the transmission of a lower socio-economic status, because of lower educational attainment and more antisocial behaviors (Cheng et al., 2016; Scaramella et al., 2008). Also, individuals that have been exposed to poor supervision during childhood, display similar parenting skills when they become parents, influencing social competence and achievement across generations (Capaldi et al., 2003). In our study the realization of the impact of the parenting style of the former generation on the experience of poverty often came later in life. Nico explained that his realization came when he saw his girlfriend being close to her parents. Also, an anger management course made him realize that he was not taught how to cope with emotions, which had prevented him from retaining employment and furthering his education. Also, Dorinda and Petronella realized later in life that they avoided sharing feelings in their family, and felt neglected because they were unable to share their feelings, which made them unable to share difficulties and reinforced a sense of isolation and lack of support in their school work.

**Dorinda (2nd generation):** She [Petronella, Dorinda’s mum] does not see the inability to share feelings as poverty because she was not taught how to share those feelings. However, I think it is poverty. I indulge my children with love and attention. I want them to feel that. I want to compensate for what I have missed. But my mother prefers to ignore such considerations and puts them aside.

**Petronella (1st generation):** Well, I learnt to put away such feelings, but that is not what I do anymore now. It is just, I also did not learn how to be affectionate and you [Dorinda] showed me it could be linked to other stuff in our lives, having financial problems and such. I was depressed and did not pay enough attention to you [Dorinda].
Dorinda learned about the impact of this side of her poverty during her education to become a professional-by-experience in poverty. This training encouraged her to consider her experience of poverty from a different perspective. It gave her confidence to talk about the situation with her mother and stepfather. It encouraged her to show her children the love she never shared and felt and also to support her children in doing homework wherever she could. Petronella indicates that her daughter showed her that this mechanism was at work in her youth as well and that she felt unable to express her love to her daughters. Many participants who reflected on the relationship between the sharing of love and affection and their poverty concluded that because they were not supported in their expression of feelings in general, it also affected how they should find support when they experienced obstacles in living with little financial resources.

**Being able to commit to family norms/not being able to escape family norms**

In line with the ability to communicate within families, many of the participants felt it was easier to commit to family norms than to escape or change family norms. When we relate that to poverty, grandparents, parents, and children felt more confident and able to follow their parents’ career path than to change it. Also, children stated that they did not have an example or role model that would make them rethink their career path. Ina and Laura (mother and daughter) shared how Laura started to work in her mother’s secondhand shop.

**Ina (2nd generation):** Children just do what they want. So when I knew she wouldn’t proceed in school, I asked her to come to help me in my secondhand shop.

**Laura (3rd generation):** Yes, my mom wanted me to finish school, but she also knew that I wouldn’t listen to her. She did not persist. I saw what she could do without education and I wanted to help her. […] We are one big family in the shop.

Laura as well as Ina acknowledged that school was not a priority in their lives and that they found other opportunities to support themselves. More often we interviewed parents and grandparents that did not persist in pursuing education because they felt there were other opportunities to have a satisfying life. Ina set up a secondhand shop to support people living in poverty. She started this initiative to support people who did receive (enough) government support. Laura was keen to help her mother in this initiative and felt her mother was an example to her and that it would fit her family norms to pursue the same career. In other participant accounts, we observed how intergenerational transmission of family norms supported some to pursue work or practical education, but reflection on the wish to change life paths was also evident.
Dorinda (3rd generation): I was 17 and I was offered a nice job. And when you grow up in poverty, you think “I’ll take that job.” I was also motivated to do that: take the job. So after high school, I did not proceed with further education. I was offered that job. I did want to a high school diploma, and I was almost there. Then I took that job. Now I know that you will not get anywhere with only a diploma from high school.

Katrien (2nd generation): When I went to high school, I got the advice to enrol in secondary school education that prepares students for university. But my parents thought that it would be better if I enrolled in vocational education. I did finish the preparation for vocational training, but I never felt at home. I dropped out of school after my high-school diploma, which gave me a difficult start.

Anne (1st generation): I now know that she feels that way, but well, I also learned from my parents that you won’t work hard if you enroll in theoretical education. You do that when you have a hands-on job. [...] But that she did not finish her practical education, that’s not on me. She quit herself.

Anne (father) and Katrien (daughter) explained that both were affected by their parents’ point of view. Katrien felt uncomfortable about taking up practical education, but did not share her own opinion at the time. According to Anne, he felt he had to support his child in getting a “real” job. For him, this meant an education with a purpose. Families grow up with a set of norms and family values and socialize with their children on those bases (family habitus). These can play a role in the ideas about education, money and work. The families in this study saw how these ideas contributed to staying in poverty. When parents and grandparents consider work to be more important than education, it may affect employment opportunities on the job market and the financial stability of later generations.

In a discussion between two friends, Bart and Bas, who both grew up in poverty, we observed conflicting perspectives on the priority of work and education. Both teenagers were influenced by the older generations. For one, this resulted in the idea that work can adversely affect wellbeing, while the other viewed hard work as a way to support the household.

Bas (3rd generation): My family is very traditional. My grandparents worked in the peat colonies. My mother is married, but never had any education. Well, primary education, [but] she was lazy herself. That was why she was very annoyed when she found out that I was also a lazy child. She said: “You have to do something, otherwise you will end up like me.” I looked around me and thought: but this is fine, isn’t it? Turned out that she received some inheritance money from my aunt, who benefited from a similar financial windfall. It does have to do with personal motivation as well.
**Bart (3rd generation):** I also see that in my family. My parents also did not have a lot of money. My grandparents do have money, but they act like they have little money. I still find that weird. My dad is crazy, he has arthritis, his legs are in bad shape. But he says: you need to earn money. He works 10 hours a day on a construction site. I give him another one and half, two years and then he will be dead in his grave.

**Bas:** But he is right; you will have to earn money. Will you go on benefits then?

**Bart:** Well, it is better than destroying yourself.

**Bas:** I don’t think he sees it that way. He cannot take care of his wife and children if he doesn’t work.

**Bart:** We would rather have him on welfare. However, he is way too proud. My parents do not complain that all the money goes to my aunt, uncle, and nephews. It would make more sense if my parents complained, but they do not ask for money.

The distinction between Bart and Bas shows that they feel differently about what is most important in life and therefore have developed different views on the importance of work. Bart is strongly influenced by the impact of work on his father’s health, which supports his view that work may be unhealthy. Bas learned that earning money is important to support his family. Though other mechanisms are at work, the perspectives on work and education in the family can catalyze the response of adolescents making decisions about work or education. It shows that identification with a social group can be a mechanism for remaining in poverty: participants feel secure and supported by this network. Ria and Kenny explained how their family and social network supported them and helped them survive their difficulties.

**Ria (2nd generation):** I only remember my parents staying at home. They never had work. You do not know any different, you grow up that way. And with our neighbors, we get things done. One cuts everyone’s hair, another helps when something needs repairing. That’s how you help each other.

**Kenny (3rd generation):** And because […] is a problem area you can be more open about poverty. People talk to each other about their daily troubles. Because of the others, you find the strength to survive in this situation.

Ria and Kenny did not find support to change their financial poverty but rather found support in coping with their financial poverty. Other participants revealed that contact with people from outside their close community made them aware of other opportunities and abilities. Identification with people who had different ideas about mobility and the resulting networks that were established paved the way for new choices. Tom explained that the school he attended may have made
a difference in his mobility and career. Because he went to a comprehensive school that offered several streams of education and he did not have to switch schools, he had an easier transition to other kinds of networks and mobility.

**Tom (3rd generation):** I think I came into close contact with people who motivated me to do something different. If I had taken my father’s path, I wouldn’t be where I am now. And I believe that the school also helped. I know people who attended this school close by and they could only do exams in preparation for vocational education [in Dutch: VMBO] and then they decided not to further their education. At my school you could enrol in different levels and streams of education, so the transition was easier. I do not want to say these are the facts, but I see a difference there.

Tom acknowledged that he may have had an easier transition out of poverty because he was able to connect to other people within the safety of his school environment. Participants who move out of poverty recognize that it is not easy to give up the social support and security from their community. In economically poor circumstances, family life often becomes a private affair. Families become more home-centered and family-oriented, which gives a larger orientation of family habitus as well (Tomanović, 2004). When the orientation extends to other spaces, public or institutional, or other social contexts, as in the case of Tom, the orientation of family habitus can diminish, and habitus can become more diversified.

**Being able to manage finances**

Participants of all generations acknowledged that if they had had better financial skills, they would have been less vulnerable to financial difficulties and debt. This shows that economic capital is directly influenced by skills learned from important others. Many participants mentioned and recognized this mechanism the most, and they felt that it was present throughout generations of their family. Clara, Fenna and Tom found explanations for circumstantial changes throughout generations, but all three observed that familial resources did not support their financial capabilities:

**Clara (1st generation):** Well, people used to take on debt because they had no money. At the bakery, the milkman. The same with my parents. You could take out a credit note at the grocery store, but in the end, you had to pay. And that is how they fell into debt. They did not know how to handle money. And they left those matters to me.

**Fenna (2nd generation):** I never learnt from my parents how to spend my money sensibly. [They did not teach me that] first you take care of your responsibilities and then see what money you have left. That is not what happened.
**Tom (3rd generation):** I learned from other people how to deal with money. I saw from my own family what I should not do, but how should I handle my finances? My girlfriend, her parents are from a “good” family. From them, I learned that saving is important and I learned how to save money. So, others have taught me and if that hadn’t been the case, I might have ended up in the same situation as my parents and family.

From the account of Clara, we observed that there was close interaction between societal structures and family capabilities. Because people were allowed to accumulate debt at multiple stores, they were able to put food on the table, but they did not develop the necessary skills to handle scarcity or reverse their position of scarcity. These societal impacts have not changed, and a family’s financial behaviors have also passed on to new generations. This is reflected in the accounts of second-and third-generation family members, whose experience of insecurity in planning their finances were attributed to the lack of financial skills in their own family.

Some parents explicitly left it to their children to gain knowledge about finances themselves. They explained it as a way to prepare them for independence.

**Miep (2nd generation):** We never put boundaries on finances. There are things they have to discover on their own. That is how my parents did it. You cannot control everything.

Though parents often explained that they wanted their children to grow up and be independent, which entailed no strict boundaries on finances, it also exposed the insecurities of some parents when handling their family finances. In most families in this study, multiple generations struggled to understand, use, and control their expenditure and finances, which meant that they were unable to teach their children the very skills they themselves lacked.

**Family-place mechanisms**

Families generally live in the Veenkoloniën for quite some years and most feel rooted in the region. Most of the family members have continued to live in the region because their families have a close relationship with the region. Many families echoed a similar sentiment: *I live here because my family has a history here.* We observed that family habitus not only impacts family relations and perspectives of economic capital itself, but also the place from where a person produces economic capital. In this way, place is intertwined with the poverty of a family and can be integral to where families choose to live (Howley & Howley, 2010).
**Being able to stay put**

In these sections, the participants shared how they experienced mechanisms of intergenerational poverty through the linkages between family and place. Family habitus played a role in the development of norms and skills, and also in the diversity of places families connected to and the mobility that families wanted to achieve. A large group of families in this study had a strong connection to the street, neighborhood or village where they lived. Several generations of one family summed up memories and emotions linked to their neighborhood. Leaving a trusted environment can create tension, as well as a reduction of the number and diversity of those people who remain. In a small number of families, there was a direct connection between destabilizing the family situation and destabilizing the place. According to Samantha and Nico:

**Samantha (3rd generation):** I will never leave this place. I was also afraid to go to […] for my education. So I am glad I do not have to go there anymore. My children don’t miss me any longer. Here it is child-friendly, children play outside and we have barbecues with all the neighbors. You are pulled outside. We are always there for each other.

**Nico (2nd generation):** This is the place I want to be. The street does have its reputation, but this is the house of my parents and I do not want to leave it. That’s also one of the reasons I got a divorce. She wanted to get another house, but I did not want to leave. My father has the same sentiment. When we were on holidays, on the way there he drove 80, 90 km/h, but on the way back it was 110.

Nico and Samantha show that family habitus is built in these places. Both mention tensions when they have to leave the place, because they miss the familiarity and family members or family circumstances are affected. Though families indicated they are resilient to the rural place history and the representations of the Veenkoloniën, in most families the embodiment of living in the rural area and stigmatization of the area have become part of family habitus, as also shown in earlier studies (Corbett, 2013; Howley & Howley, 2010). Because of a strong attachment to place, participants experience a neighborhood or place stigma as a mechanism of intergenerational poverty. A family name or a street name could elicit negative reactions from “outsiders.”

**Nico (2nd generation):** Once I did the groceries with my mother and someone said: “But you are from that street. I can’t tell by the way you are dressed, you are properly dressed.” That doesn’t make sense, right? But people are prejudiced.

**Interviewer:** But do you think the image is right, although you do not think it applies to your situation?
Nico: Well, many people do not look well cared for and maybe they are better off in a solitary place. I also built a reputation. I was 21, 22 and I was infamous for my behavior. And when I say my last name, people look at me. That does not get you a good job.

Fenna (2nd generation): Nobody ever encouraged me to move out of social assistance benefit. I belong to one of the so-called [granieten bestand], my family has always had such an existence. So who encourages me? I already have a label that nothing will help me. And then I also live in [...], a place in which everyone says is hopeless.

By staying put, participants experience place-based mechanisms, from which a place-based stigma develops. Though they would like to continue to stay put, many participants understood that this stigma diminished their opportunities, which influenced their chances on the job market but at the same time nurtured an open attitude to their life stories. Though remaining in an area does not continue the cycle of poverty itself, it does focus the participants on local networks and lead them to believe and feel that these places are more secure. Cook and Cuervo (2020) found that family habitus has a grounding influence on young adults living in poverty in a rural area. Families in our study felt comfortable about and capable to being at home, but place-based mechanisms intensified family habitus, and they felt less capable of finding a job, connecting to a job or traveling for a job.

Not able to get and maintain a job
Families tried to guide their children to new opportunities, but their attitudes toward chances on the job market were influenced by contextual circumstances. This then affected family habitus (the interaction between actor and field) and, consequently, new generations who were influenced by their family’s opinion about their ability to obtain a job. We observed three ways in which the contextual circumstances influenced family habitus and through family habitus affected the views of new generations.

Firstly, the decrease in structural jobs is time-driven and area-bound. Because many of the families in this study did not move around a lot, they had experienced the loss of large companies from the regional job market, the move of “rich” people to other areas and the lack of structural jobs. It not only affected a temporal loss of jobs, but also ever decreasing chances of reentry into the job market. These structural circumstances made the participants most negative about improvements in their lives.

Karel (1st generation): We often fall by the wayside, but we do not let it affect our spirit. I mean, this has been the case all my life. My parents had to close their bakery because at that time the supermarkets opened and the retail sector changed. People became less dependent on traditional crafts and more dependent
on large-scale production. These changes have impacted our lives. I grew up with these disadvantages and there was no turning back. And now all employment is gone.

For Karel, one of the elderly participants, changes in economic structures can cause a whole family to live in long-term poverty. He felt he could not recover from the insolvency of his parents and was trapped in the same situation because of their bankruptcy. The changes in his region impacted his life through his parents’ circumstances. Karel indicated that these circumstances seemed to come naturally to his family and that chances to recover were rare. Hilde, one participant who lives in second generation poverty, also referred to the lack of opportunities for her family in this region.

Interviewer: How did you notice that employment opportunities decreased?

Hilde (2nd generation): Well, it started with my brothers. They were looking for jobs when the factories closed down. They could get new jobs at [...]. That factory is still here. But every time again, there are doubts about whether [this company] will stay. My eldest brother now works in shifts, but it is a very hard job. My younger brother could not cope. Every year there was doubt whether there would be money to pay all factory staff. So he quit. Back in the days, you would get a permanent contract. But times have changed. [...] And the companies are just not investing enough in this area.

Hilde mentioned the lack of certainty and job insecurity as an important factor in losing faith in the search for a job. She was affected by the lack of chances that were provided to her brothers. She felt that the area is not a recipient of large investments. Here we observed how families were impacted by their residency in a region, which reduced the motivation and belief there could be a change for new generations. Specifically, we observed that younger participants sensed that the available jobs did not offer benefits given the current system of allowances. This structurally demotivated these participants in their search for a new job. The capability to act on the situation of enduring poverty is fed by the context and the families’ responses to that context.

Secondly, families experience mobility constraints when it comes to commuting to work. It is mainly families in the smaller villages for whom the lack of (public) transport decreases their chances of a good education as well as the availability of jobs. Though this mechanism is not a primary cause for poverty, it restricts participation in the labor market and it is intertwined with increasing feelings of disadvantage. These feelings of disadvantage are passed on through the generations, as Lennart and Mariella show in their interaction.
Lennart (3rd generation): My mother already told me that it would be hard to reach [town nearby]. From here it is an hour by public transport. But if you take the car it is only 20 minutes. But we couldn’t afford another car. So I quit that study.

Mariëlla (3rd generation): Do you know what it is like from my village?

Lennart (3rd generation): That is even worse, right?

Mariëlla (3rd generation): The bus from […] , the last one leaves at 7 in the evening. After that time there are just no buses. First we had [belbussen], but they decided these buses were unnecessary. But when you have to work till 9 in the evening, that’s your problem. And some villages do not even have a bus stop, you first have to cycle to a bus stop. My mother says it is very unsafe.

Mariella indicated she not only felt restricted in her opportunities to move around, but also felt left out in decision-making that concerned her personal mobility. From the account of Lennart and Mariella, we observed how mobility issues were discussed within families and they had their own response to the lack of means of transport and mobility opportunities. This was also reflected in the opportunities that participants perceived were connected to institutions. Power relations, stigmatization, and the extended time it took to pay off debts diminished their motivation to search for a job or look for other financial solutions in their lives.

Petra (2nd generation): When you go to the municipality social services, they look at you a certain way, they make you feel “small.” Once I observed the people at the service desk and when people come with other questions the staff are very friendly. As soon as a person has a question on social benefit, they stop smiling. They treat people differently and that shouldn’t be tolerated. That’s not what I do.

Dorinda (3rd generation): My contact person, he tries to exert power over me. Only when he treats me at the same level will I cooperate. He knows that now. But he tries it over and over again. I speak my mind, but when people do not dare to speak up . . . That’s not how it should be.

As Dorinda explained, these settings often exacerbate the situation of poverty when people feel unable to explain their needs and feel disempowered by institutions. Feelings of disempowerment, lack of influence on external forces contrasted with feelings of support and being influenced by the family were recurrent themes in our findings. Drawing on the two sides of these mechanisms of intergenerational poverty leads us to conclude that what is needed is a better understanding of family influences, expressed through family habitus, and viewed through an intergenerational lens.
Conclusion and discussion

Through this study we highlight the perspectives of three generations on the transmission mechanisms of poverty within the direct context of the family household. Considering the perspectives of multiple generations sheds light on 1) the transmission of mechanisms within families and 2) how families shape external mechanisms within their family life. Since there are only a few examples of intergenerational qualitative research on poverty (MacDonald et al., 2020; Upadhyaya et al., 2021), we wanted to add to this field by taking on a multigenerational perspective on transmission mechanisms and the role of family habitus. We contribute insights on how persistence in poverty works and is experienced by families themselves.

We started this paper with the importance of different types of capital to earn an income and hold down a job. This study shows that families feel that they do not have all the abilities required to build capital. Capabilities cannot be formed because of familial deficiencies in social and cultural capital, stigma (lack of social capital), lack of financial knowledge and lack of education (lack of economic capital). From a recent empirical review, we know that financial scarcity impacts economic decision making through attentional focus and neglect, meaning that people living with low financial resources focus on this scarcity and neglect other useful information (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021). Still, there is little evidence that this also impacts their cognitive bandwidth (Bruijn & Antonides, 2021).

So, how does family habitus play a role in achieving or not achieving capabilities to escape poverty in this study?

In this paper, we discussed how poverty and the lack of capabilities are transmitted through generations. Because we discuss intergenerational poverty, we discussed the role of family habitus and how it keeps generations in the grip of poverty. We see the importance of recurring interactions between family members in the family mechanisms that participants discussed; the tendency not to share feelings, the lack of communication, difficulties in sharing knowledge about good financial management and the sharing of norms on work, education and identification with poverty. A discussion on family habitus shows that new generations are affected by these views and the ingrained beliefs about their families and social environment that “this is us.” But in an area such as the Veenkولoniën in the Netherlands, the new generations are impacted by a disturbed relationship between the context and the families living in poverty. Participants explain a misconception between jobs, transport and people and stigmatization of the place and people. What families share is a common social environment (MacDonald et al., 2020, Rutter & Madge, 1976). Families in poverty have often built their family habitus within a context of stigmatization, and lack of opportunities to work and travel, thus actually reinforcing capabilities which transmit poverty, but fewer capabilities
to facilitate moving out of poverty. The analysis of family habitus makes clear how new generations in poverty respond when they come in contact with a new “field,” but it also shows that family habitus should be connected to the context. Challenging the context to rebuild the connections between what families think is their fate and what they are actually able or should be able to achieve is the challenge in the field of poverty studies (La Placa & Corlyon, 2016). The attitudes and norms of family habitus of families living in poverty do not deviate from others socio-economic groups but are internally oriented. Remaining in poverty is not a conscious act, but society does not simplify or clarify the paths to move out of poverty (Albelda & Shea, 2010). This, in turn, is projected in the families that live in poverty themselves.

From this analysis, we observe that the focus of the government social policy is often on addressing the mechanisms that launch families into poverty, neglecting the mechanisms that keep families in poverty (van Ryzin, Fishbein & Biglan, 2018; Hong et al., 2020). We should consider how to intervene in the mechanisms that have long-lasting effects. In this way, families could be protected from the long-lasting effects of poverty and people could escape from poverty. Opening up the bubble of a family habitus and making sure new generations can connect to a variety of life worlds should encourage these generations to increase social connections and broaden their perspectives on the development of capabilities (Blitz et al., 2013). This, in turn, could increase the possibility of developing capabilities by taking more preventive measures against capability deprivations. Solid connections between people and place and people and institutions would prevent family habitus from developing in ways that prevent the development of capabilities. Multigenerational services can also contribute to increasing multi actor-involvement and increasing capabilities (Baker et al., 2020, Hill and Sharma, 2020).

The combination of individual life courses and the family life course shows that vertical mechanisms can cause a lifetime impact on poverty. In particular, childhood and the period of adolescence is characterized by many influences from parents and peers. In line with Yaqub (2002), it is therefore important to consider the timing of antipoverty prevention and intervention strategies. To turn life goals into capabilities, all resources to develop those capabilities must be introduced at the right period in a person’s life (Heberle et al., 2018). Family networks are crucial in this regard. Family members play a role in shaping and developing the life goals and aspirations of other family members. The family habitus also develop the abilities and ambitions that come with these aspirations, making this setting central for further establishing policy and intervention. Family histories are often complex and influence multiple life domains. In contrast, policy and interventions do not adequately consider a client’s family history. Often the aim is merely to solve a current financial problem.
There are limitations to this study. The sample is self-selected and relatively small. Despite their personal troubles and setbacks, participants were willing to be involved in the study. Also, women are overrepresented in this study. Despite these challenges, families themselves were aware of their abilities to work and recover from poverty. These also highlight the challenges we still face in addressing intergenerational poverty, how to connect families to opportunities, aspirations and new perspectives (Ejrnæs et al., 2020; Wills et al., 2017).

Acknowledgments

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Disclosure statement

This study was conducted according to the guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and all procedures involving human subjects were approved by the Research ethical committee of the Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen. Written consent was obtained from parents and their children involved in the study. Verbal consent was obtained from all adults involved in the study. Verbal consent was witnessed and formally recorded.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author (S.S. Visser). The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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