ABSTRACT

1. Preliminary Title

Exploring How Peer-Work Influences Wellbeing in the Contexts of Poverty: A Realist Evaluation in Switzerland

2. Research Question

How, through which mechanisms, and under which contextual conditions do Peer-Work interventions affect the wellbeing of their beneficiaries in poverty contexts in Switzerland?

3. Links to the Thematic Focus of PROWEL Program

This doctoral research project aligns with the objectives of the PROWEL Program at the University of Fribourg, which seeks to analyse the production, reproduction, and transformation of wellbeing at the individual level.

Peer-Work is defined as the support provided to a person affected by poverty by another person who was in the same situation and who has received specific training for this purpose (Bonnami, 2019; De Corte & Kerstenne, 2015; Metzner et al., 2020; Rey, 2025). By examining how Peer-Work influences the wellbeing of people living in situations of poverty or at risk of poverty, the study addresses poverty as a central social issue and situates it within the broader framework of social inequalities.

The research analyses which relational, symbolic and practical mechanisms are activated during the interaction between beneficiaries and peer within the one-to-one Peer-Work interventions, implemented in private and public institutions across three Swiss cities with high rates of social assistance poverty. The aim is to understand how, through which mechanisms, and under which contextual conditions these processes generate changes in the wellbeing of Peer-Work beneficiaries, namely individuals living in or at risk of poverty. Furthermore, by adopting a conception of wellbeing that encompasses subjective dimensions, this study fully engages with the interdisciplinary framework on welfare and wellbeing promoted by the PROWEL Program.

4. Research Goal / Abstract

This doctoral research is embedded within the research project "Peer-work for people affected by poverty: Concept, implementation and impact (POPCORN)", funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and conducted at the Bern University of Applied Sciences from August 2025 to July 2029. The pilot research project aims to develop and implement Peer-Work in the context of poverty within public and private institutions in the cities of Bern, Biel/Bienne, and Neuchâtel, as well as to assess its impact on beneficiaries' wellbeing and on existing support services, using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative and quantitative).

In this context, the aim of my doctoral research is to analyse the mechanisms activated through Peer-Work interventions to improve the wellbeing of people living in or at risk of poverty. This study focuses on understanding how and under which conditions this innovative social intervention can influence wellbeing using quantitative methods guided by a Realist Evaluation model.

5. State of Relevant Research / Research Gap

In Switzerland, poverty is defined from a multidimensional perspective (Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe, 2020). When drafting laws and measures to address poverty, the cantons rely on the directives of the Swiss Conference of Welfare Organisations (Chiapparini, 2020). According to these guidelines, people whose monthly income falls below the social subsistence minimum and who are therefore unable to cover the costs of goods and services necessary for a socially integrated life are considered poor (Schweizerische Konferenz für Sozialhilfe, 2020).

In 2022, 8,4% of the Swiss population was affected by economic poverty (Federal Statistical Office, 2025b), and 16.4% were at risk of poverty[1] (Federal Statistical Office, 2025c). Additionally, 6% experienced material and social deprivation (Federal Statistical Office, 2025a) manifested, for example, in the inability to cover an unexpected expense of CHF 2,500 within a month. Poverty is often recurrent over the life course: more than half of those affected experience it repeatedly (Office fédéral des assurances sociales (OFAS), 2025, p. 91). Groups particularly exposed to poverty include single individuals, single-parent families, children, retired people, people without recognised educational qualifications, and people with migration backgrounds (ibid.).

In Switzerland, the underutilisation of social benefits is estimated at 20–40% of eligible individuals (Office fédéral des assurances sociales (OFAS), 2025). This underutilisation may have important consequences: a deterioration in health conditions is observed before and during the early years of benefit receipt (Kessler et al., 2021; Ridley et al., 2020). From the perspective of the Capability Approach (Sen, 1992), people living in poverty or at risk of poverty who do not use social benefits not only have limited financial resources but also face restrictions in their effective ability to access services and exercise their social rights.

Several individual and institutional factors contribute to this issue. On the one hand, at the individual level, factors such as self-efficacy, knowledge of available social benefits and the perceived usefulness of these benefits, the ability to overcome feelings of shame and stigmatisation (Nadai et al., 2025), confidence in interactions with authorities (Moret & Dahinden, 2009), and the administrative skills required to navigate bureaucratic procedures (Baumberg, 2016; Janssens & Van Mechelen, 2022) play a significant role. On the other hand, at the structural level, institutional practices may hinder access, including complex procedures, discriminatory attitudes, or a lack of information about available services (Nadai et al., 2025).

Support services should therefore recognise and integrate the needs of people affected by poverty in order to ensure effective access to benefits and services (Beresford & Branfield, 2006; Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2020; Levesque et al., 2013). In this context, people at risk of poverty should not be regarded as passive recipients of the support services that concern them. Rather, they should be recognised as agents with intentions and rational considerations, who have the right to participate in the (further) development of these support measures and in the decisions related to them. From this perspective, accessible, low-threshold, and participatory interventions are essential for effectively reaching and supporting individuals experiencing poverty, thereby contributing to the improvement of their wellbeing.

In recent decades, Peer-Work has gained recognition and has been studied at both national and international levels in disability support, addiction counselling, and hospital psychiatry (Braukmann et al., 2017; Burr et al., 2019; Simmons et al., 2023; Zuaboni et al., 2021). These studies show that Peer-Work in these areas enhances people's wellbeing by reducing stigma and loneliness, fostering hope, awareness, self-efficacy, and confidence, and providing emotional relief and acceptance (Chinman et al., 2016; Gidugu et al., 2015; Klee et al., 2019).

Accordingly, in the field of poverty prevention and alleviation, Peer-Work is beginning to be adopted, and there are some descriptive experiences in social organisations in Switzerland and internationally. However, systematic studies are lacking, with limited evidence regarding concepts, implementation methods, and impact analyses. Nevertheless, studies conducted in Switzerland and Belgium show that low-threshold counseling and information services, combined with the active participation of affected individuals, help counteract underutilization of social benefits (Moret & Dahinden, 2009), improve access to social organisations (De Corte & Kerstenne, 2015), and contribute to better health outcomes (Burr et al., 2024; Heumann et al., 2016; Zuaboni et al., 2021).

This lack of systematic evidence, together with the potential of Peer-Work in social organisations and the multiple benefits that people living in poverty or at risk of poverty can derive from it, highlights the

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[1] The European Union has set the at-risk-of-poverty threshold at 60% of the median equivalised disposable income (Federal Statistical Office, 2025c).

need to examine how Peer-Work may activate mechanisms, thereby concretely contributing to the wellbeing of beneficiaries in the context of poverty in Switzerland.

6. Theoretical Frame

For my doctoral research, the key concepts guiding my study are Peer-Work, poverty, participation and subjective wellbeing. Accordingly, the theoretical framework is based on established theories and approaches that help analyse, interpret and observe how, when and why Peer-Work influences the wellbeing of people living in or at risk of poverty within social organisations in the context of poverty.

To this end, the key concepts to be examined in the context of participation and poverty are the following:

- Capability Approach (Sen, 1992): It provides a multidimensional understanding of poverty, moving beyond a purely financial or material perspective. Poverty is seen as a lack of freedoms and opportunities to pursue goals that individuals value, including access to health, education, and participation in social and cultural life (Venkatapuram, 2013). The approach distinguishes between functioning (what people achieve) and capabilities (the real opportunities they have to shape their lives). This perspective highlights the importance of considering individuals' choices and opportunities when assessing wellbeing, making it particularly relevant for evaluating the impact of Peer-Work.
- Poverty-Aware Paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2020) and User Involvement Approach (Beresford & Carr, 2012): these two established approaches are based on the assumption that people affected by poverty must be helped to expand their scope for action in order to overcome structural conditions, providing them with an environment that promotes their ability to exercise their rights (Chiapparini & Eicher, 2019).

With regard to wellbeing, it represents a broad and multidimensional concept encompassing various dimensions and theoretical perspectives, including general, mental, psychological, subjective, spiritual, eudaimonic, and financial wellbeing (Zhang et al., 2024). The literature further highlights that even within specific dimensions, such as subjective wellbeing, there remain ongoing debates concerning its conceptualisation, measurement, and interpretation (Ormel et al., 1999).

In this doctoral research, I have chosen to adopt the concept of subjective wellbeing. This choice is motivated by the fact that subjective wellbeing moves beyond an exclusively objective view of living conditions, offering instead a perspective centred on individuals' own evaluations of their lives (Diener et al., 1985; Simona-Moussa, 2020; Venkatapuram, 2013). Although it does not constitute a comprehensive indicator of overall wellbeing, it remains fundamental, as individuals may respond differently to similar objective conditions depending on their expectations, values, and prior experiences.

More specifically, the study draws on the following theory of subjective wellbeing:

- Social Production Functions (Ormel et al., 1999) : theory that identifies two ultimate goals that all human beings seek to optimise (physical wellbeing and social wellbeing) and five instrumental goals through which they are achieved (stimulation, comfort, status, behavioural confirmation, and affection). I will examine how the Peer-Work facilitates the attainment of these instrumental goals.

These following theories are not used independently, but are integrated within the Realist Evaluation framework to conceptualise the mechanisms through which Peer-Work may influence beneficiaries' wellbeing (Chinman et al., 2016; Gidugu et al., 2015; Klee et al., 2019; Solomon, 2004): Theory of the stigma (Goffman, 1963), Theory of social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954), Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), Experiential knowledge (Borkman, 1999) and Theory of social support (Cohen et al., 1985).

7. Methodological Approach (Method, Sample)

This doctoral research adopts a Realist Evaluation (RE) framework, a well-established and promising approach in the education, social, and health sectors (Halsall et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2023). By

asking *"what works, for whom, how, and under which circumstances"* RE is particularly suited for evaluating complex interventions such as Peer-Work, which focus not only on outcomes but also on the underlying mechanisms activated in specific contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

The application of the Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) model within the field of poverty represents an innovative element of this doctoral research, as it contributes to expanding the use of RE in a sector that has so far been only marginally explored from this methodological perspective.

As indicated before, this doctoral research is embedded within the POPORN project at the Bern University of Applied Sciences, where the implementation phase lasts one year. During this period, I will primarily focus on data collection, using an online survey developed through LimeSurvey with the aim of gathering quantitative information. The research design follows a single-case study approach, intended to examine the longitudinal impact of Peer-Work on participants' wellbeing over time. It will be necessary to determine how many times and at what intervals each beneficiary should complete the questionnaire to obtain different data points during time per beneficiary.

Another important aspect to consider in the conduct of this doctoral research concerns sociodemographic dimensions. Poverty is recognised as a multidimensional concept, in which individuals may exhibit intersecting identities. For example, relevant target groups include people experiencing homelessness, individuals with a migrant background, young people in school-to-work transition, families with children, and sex workers. For my study is therefore important to define these sociodemographic dimensions.

8. Time Schedule

	2025					2026												2027												2028											
	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Literature and documents reviews	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
General structure (Introduction and Discussion)	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Paper 2: Methodology -> RE in the poverty context						■	■																																		
Preparation single case design and Lime Survey									■	■	■	■																													
Implementation POPCORN Project													■	■	■	■	■	■																							
Data collection													■	■	■	■	■	■																							
Paper 1 : Theoretical framework -> Poverty and																		■																							
Data analysis																			■	■	■	■	■	■																	
Paper 3: Results -> Outcome Peer-Work on																															■	■	■	■	■						
Completed work submission																																								■	■

9. Comments / Other Information / Collaboration

The integration of my doctoral research project within the PROWEL Program represents both a valuable opportunity and an intellectually stimulating challenge. It allows me to participate in and share knowledge and research findings with other doctoral candidates and scholars at both national and international levels, as well as to benefit from the programme's biannual workshops.

Furthermore, it is a great privilege for me to conduct my doctoral research under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Andreas Hadjar at the University of Fribourg as first supervisor, and Prof. Dr. Emanuela Chiapparini at the Bern University of Applied Sciences as second supervisor.

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