

intended as a relatively meagre but broadly accessible means of poverty alleviation and women empowerment (Lund, 2008; RSA, 1996). While it is too early to say whether or not the observations related by our participants actually match an observable reality – further empirical research would be an urgent necessity to follow this up – clearly, those who have been assigned to help children *and* their caregivers escape the trappings of poverty and patriarchy, regard young mothers as an impediment to poverty alleviation, rather than a group of potential, and “deserving” agents in the long and complex process of poverty alleviation, empowerment and social development.

The history of social work globally has been littered with such punitive, individually focused world views and approaches where social workers and their allied professions label the victims of structural inequality, oppression and powerlessness as the deviant ones who need to be controlled and rehabilitated, instead of critically engaging with the societal structures and practices that may have brought about the so-called deviance in the first place (Chambon, Irving & Epstein, 1999; Dominelli, 2002; Leonard, 1997; Parton, 1996; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004). However, social work’s history is equally speckled with critical discussion and attempts to develop alternative – feminist, structural, radical, and anti-oppressive – approaches to helping (Allen, Pease & Briskman, 2003; Dominelli, 2002; McLaughlin, 2007; Mullaly, 1997, 2002; Payne, 2005; Pease & Fook, 1999). These latter contributions may indeed have considerable potential to inform a debate in South African social work on how to utilise the CSG – and other grants – in the country’s social development agenda.

VIEWS ON ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY

Participants’ views on how child poverty should ideally be addressed reflect similar contradictions as do their perceptions of uses and abuses of the CSG. Here however, conservative, residual and punitive suggestions on the one hand and developmentally, or even institutionally oriented contributions on the other appeared much more balanced. Some participants in our study expressed the view that people should make efforts to be self-supporting instead of being “dependent” on government to support their children. By the same token, several participants asserted that if government invested in job creation, recipients’ alleged dependency on grants might as a result decrease. What was missing from such suggestions however, was evidence of knowledge about, in-depth understanding of, and critical reflection on the structural nature and large scale of unemployment in South Africa (Barker, 2003; May, 1998; Terreblanche, 2002), or for that matter, the limited scope and inherent limitations of public works, poverty relief and economic development programmes on the other (Hölscher & Mubangizi, 2007; Lund, 2008; McCord, 2004; Mubangizi, 2008; Skewyiya, 2006).

Thus, the above mentioned themes of “laziness”, “dependency” and a “blaming-the-victim” discourses continued to characterise these participants’ suggestions on how child poverty should ideally be addressed. One of our interviewees suggested:

“If the government can give handouts only, as most people are using the grant for their needs rather than fulfilling their children’s needs, and there is only a few that are so willing to take care for their children. I can say it is those that are extremely desperate for the money.”

And another suggestion was:

“Forcing mothers to buy food and uniforms for their children. This can be done if there are people to monitor this, for example social workers or whatever. Everyone who receives this grant should have a social worker whom they report to after six months.”

Ethical concerns and impracticalities of controlling grant recipients' daily spending practices, or of administering voucher systems aside (Lund, 2008), it merits noting that the line dividing control from care in social work has always been a blurred one, and such suggestions were tempered – at times by the same participant within the same contribution – with a range of creative responses concerning social work's potential to work collaboratively with grant recipients, using community work and community development approaches in the interest of social development, women empowerment and poverty relief. Propositions in this regard were, amongst others, the facilitation of community awareness programmes on diverse issues such as teenage pregnancy, family planning, grant access and children's rights, as well as community education programmes on how to utilise the CSG in the best interest of children. A further suggestion was informed by the participant's awareness of the complexity and long-term nature of social development:

“The best way to alleviate child poverty is education. As much as education takes a long time for a person to see the results, but it is one of the many solutions. Child poverty can be best addressed through educating mothers ... The Department [of Social Development] should form allies with the Department of education and form a 20 year plan to alleviate poverty by empowering more women [through education] that is, give more bursaries to women.”

Finally, several participants agreed that the CSG should be increased. Their view was that despite receiving the grant, many children were still affected by poverty as the amount was inadequate to address basic needs. In addition, the majority of participants felt that the grant should be extended to children up to the age of eighteen to enable them to complete schooling. Suggestions were also made that additional pay points needed to be established especially in areas far from the city centre. This would save on transport costs for families who were already financially stretched. Accordingly, some social work students and volunteers proposed that social work should engage communities in social action around issues such as increases in grant payment, or more broad-based and effective government strategies towards poverty relief.

In other words, the fact that our participants embraced simultaneously residual *and* developmental *and* institutional notions of welfare, coupled with creative ideas on the various roles and strategies social work could adopt in a national endeavour to address child poverty, suggests the following: There is potential for the mainstreaming of alternative discourses on women, poverty and disadvantage, and for alternative notions of welfare and social work to become more thoroughly embraced over time. A prerequisite for such change in attitude and approach would of course be that relevant research and policy debates continue to be pursued by the profession at large.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARDS A CRITICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Amongst the social workers, students and social service volunteers in our study, conservative and residual notions of welfare and at times, misogynistic views of poor and sexually active young women were dominant. Yet, these were balanced with some recognition of the need for a CSG, of the difficulties around implementation of the grant, and of the role of social workers in making it a more effective tool of poverty alleviation, women empowerment and social

development. At the same time, our participants' responses suggest a dearth of factual and historical knowledge, which, if found to be common, would need to be addressed so as not to undermine the ability of welfare practitioners to base their interventions in critical social analysis. Three specific concerns that emerge from this study's findings are presented in this section, together with our recommendations as to how social work educators and practitioners might best respond.

To begin, participants appeared to generally lack knowledge of the CSG and poverty and instead used stereotypes to interpret personal observations and to make broad generalizations. The knowledge gaps and lack of understanding of the grant, its purpose and role within a developmental welfare paradigm displayed by social workers, students and volunteers point to a need to re-look at student training and the provision of in-service training/continuous education for social workers and volunteers. Such education and training should include information giving and updating of factual knowledge. It should also serve to deepen welfare practitioners' understanding of the historic emergence and structural nature of poverty, unemployment, the disempowerment of women in South Africa, as well as the relationship between social security and social development.

Then, participants across all three samples were concerned about the perceived negative effects of the grant on the "social and moral fibre" of South African society in general, the claim that it "caused" teenage pregnancy in particular, and the alleged abuse of the grant by care givers, specifically young mothers. In spite of these – possibly widespread – perceptions, such effects would be difficult to prove. This is firstly because of the general absence of simple cause-and-effect relations between different social phenomena. Secondly, ten years into the grant's existence, empirical research has already been able to correlate the CSG with several indicators of poverty alleviation and social development. Thirdly, even in as far as our participants' observations might be true, illegal activities tend to elude research. Nonetheless, the contradictory nature of responses gleaned from this study suggest that further – quantitative and qualitative – studies into the actual use and possible abuse of the CSG by its recipients, as well as the reasons behind this are needed. For if it turned out to be true that abuse was significant, its complex, social, historical, cultural and political causes would have to be explored in-depth.

In as far as the said allegations have already been proved to be unfounded, more research might be necessary into how far, and if so why, welfare practitioners persist in holding onto anti-poor and misogynistic stereotypes and prejudices. Such understanding of South African social work's own ideological foundations – and contradictions – might facilitate our moving further away from victim-blaming, demarcationist approaches to welfare (Dominelli, 2002) and controlling, punitive forms of practice. Instead, social work would be enabled to develop, and participate in already existing, focused and targeted strategies of advocacy around poverty and gender inequality, as well as strengths-based, anti-oppressive practice and social justice-oriented, radical and structural responses to these phenomena.

Finally, we had suggested above that the current emergence of neo-liberal economic and residual welfare paradigms and policies is a global phenomenon. In this context, the South African social development and welfare project might well serve as a refreshing alternative to this trend. It might be a helpful point of reference for welfare practitioners and activists in the former welfare states who trying to defend notions of social justice and solidarity against the current tide of conservatism in their countries. At the same time, it might appeal to those in other developing, specifically sub-Saharan, countries who are working to establish developmental welfare states under extremely adverse economic and political conditions. Yet,

the post-apartheid welfare debate in South Africa has been characterised by contradictory ideological discourses (Hölscher & Sewpaul, 2006; Hölscher, 2008; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2007). These contradictions, if not critiqued, may contribute inadvertently to the entrenchment, rather than replacement of residual notions of welfare. They could consequently serve to prevent social workers, students and social service volunteers from finding their appropriate place and role in the social development landscape of South Africa. For all these reasons, we would do well to explore all possible means and avenues to ensure that the South African developmental welfare project is understood, embraced and actively supported by welfare practitioners.

The Child Support Grant represents an important structural and symbolic point of reference in this debate. And the incongruous nature of our participants' responses concerning a number of aspects of the grant point – importantly – to the potential for change in social service provider's thinking and approaches to practice. For when perceptions of the unintended (negative) effects of the Child Support Grant are balanced with an awareness of its intended (positive) effects, as well as visions of how its effectiveness could be improved in future and why this should be so, then the foundations are laid for an invigorating debate on the future direction of welfare policy in South Africa. A pre-requisite for this to happen is that social workers, students, volunteers, and of course policy makers in the welfare sector engage critically with their own ideological leanings, perceptions and prejudices vis-à-vis empirical research findings.

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