The social construction of the cash transfer mother in Soweto, South Africa: the emergence of social stigma?

Tessa Hochfeld
Sophie Plagerson

International Conference:
“Social Protection for Social Justice”
Institute of Development Studies, UK
13–15 April 2011
The social construction of the cash transfer mother in Soweto, South Africa: the emergence of social stigma?

Tessa Hochfeld and Sophie Plagerson
Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg
tessah@uj.ac.za
sophieplagerson@hotmail.co.uk

Introduction

It is well-established in literature on social policy that the provision of welfare benefits to individuals, in particular, means-tested social assistance, is very often accompanied by a rise of negative discourses about the recipients. Conservative ideologies about poor people’s unwanted ‘dependence’ on the state and the social imperative for them to be ‘self reliant’ and independent means that receiving welfare benefits is looked down on and stigmatised. However, analysis of this phenomenon mostly takes place in high income contexts where the state is trying to rationalise welfare services, and where recipients of welfare form a small minority in society, often sharing group characteristics that make it easy to create stereotypes about those who receive welfare (for example, young black lone mothers in the USA). In contrast, what does welfare stigma mean in a context where the majority of people are poor and where the state is responsive to this?

South Africa is a middle income country with high levels of inequality, widespread poverty and massive unemployment. A large scale cash transfer programme pays a monthly grant to 15 million people (of a population of 49 million); this is the state’s largest and most successful poverty alleviation strategy. In particular, as Lund (2011, p. 5) points out, the body of research on the Child Support Grant, such as Adato and Bassett (2008), Agüero, Carter, and Woolard (2006), Case, Hosegood, and Lund (2003), and Coetzee (2010), concurs that “the grant is reaching children living in households in deep poverty and has positive measurable impacts on, among other things, child nutrition and school attendance”. Concurrently, very clear negative discourses on social assistance receipt have emerged, namely assumptions that cash transfers create welfare dependency, and that the Child Support Grant in particular encourages early and multiple child-bearing. However, little is known about how welfare beneficiaries view themselves as recipients, and how these negative social discourses are interpreted in the light of their own and others’ severe needs.

This study critically examines female Child Support Grant (CSG) beneficiaries’ interpretations of public attitudes toward them, as well as their own rationalisations of why they and others receive the grants. Women recipients appear to hold contradictory views on grant receipt concurrently, and both praise the benefits of the grant as well as repeat negative discourses about others who get a CSG. It is our argument that this tension is partly created by the specificity of the context of poverty, inequality and social protection in the global South, of which South Africa is an instructive example. As cash transfers in the South extend their reach, especially in Africa, and reach maturity, especially in Latin America,
reflection on stigma and other social discourses about recipients will help us to understand their social impact better.

From a social justice perspective, this paper seeks to unpack some of the complexities of welfare receipt, in order to inform the long-term design of social protection programmes in ways that enhance recipients’ dignity and autonomy. The study therefore aims to help trace the impacts of social discourse on the outcomes of social policy.

Social welfare and justice

Underlying ideologies of welfare profoundly affect how social protection is designed, implemented, received, and understood. All social programmes reflect the underlying ideological stance of the state, both explicitly in relation to the stated political objectives and implicitly reflecting how the state understand social need (Casey & McKinnon, 2009; Devereux & White, 2010).

A social justice perspective sees social protection, and welfare more broadly, as having intrinsic worth as a means of economic redistribution and an ethical response to social inequities (Hassim, 2008). It draws from a human rights framework where social protection is a normative entitlement (Gaunt & Kabbeer, 2009; Künremann & Leonhard, 2008; Piron, 2004) and as the intention is to guarantee each person “the means of achieving decent living conditions, it contributes to respect for [human] dignity” (Euzéby, 2004, p. 110). Amartya Sen’s capability approach (1999, 2009) links the notion of social justice to the freedom to “choose a life one has reason to value” (1999, p. 19). Thus, in his view, welfare is about substantively freeing up people’s capability to make real choices, not just on an economic basis, but in the full range of social opportunities potentially available to each human. Social justice scholars such as Sen therefore open the way for us to recognize the potential of social protection measures to protect people not merely economically, but socially too: that is, mitigating social risks such as exploitation, inequity, and social exclusion. Therefore a human rights and social justice approach to welfare sees social protection as a universal entitlement, as a social contract between all citizens and the state, as a fair means of economic redistribution, and as a necessary and legitimate means of correcting inherent structural social inequities (Künremann & Leonhard, 2008).

However, social protection has over the last decade been predominantly understood in the language of the neo-liberal global agenda as a risk management strategy to ensure a certain level of economic security for poor populations. Typical neo-liberal and conservative views of social protection are that it is a drain on national economic resources, it encourages laziness and unwanted dependency on the state, and it should be unnecessary in a well-functioning economy. These views inevitably give rise to the idea that the poor are needy due to their own inadequacies and lack of work ethic, are irresponsible, and are overwhelmingly undeserving of state assistance.

Dominant ideologies strongly influence the choice of public policy in welfare, and also, by extension, how welfare recipients are perceived and treated, and the presence and proliferation of welfare discourses. Discourses also, in turn, influence ideologies, which are always in the process of being shaped and shifted in response to social changes. The worldwide debate on welfare dependency is a good example of how public discourses are socially constructed, most often in ways that serve powerful or elite groups (Asen, 1996). The notion that welfare in general, and cash transfers in particular, encourage an unhealthy and unwanted dependency on the state is strongly influenced by neo-liberal and neo-
conservative politics, and is used to argue for the pulling back or rationalisation of welfare services in industrialised nations as well as the need to limit welfare reach in developing nations (Christopher, 2004; Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Lens, 2002; Lowe, 2008; Quinn & Magill, 1994; Seccombe, James, & Battle Walters, 1998).

Because “escaping poverty is harder for women owing to gender inequalities in the household, institutions and the market which reduce their range of income-earning options and the return to their labour and education” (Kasente, 2000, p. 28), and because care services women provide remain not only unpaid, but largely invisible (Christopher, 2004; Folbre, 1994, 2008; Lowe, 2008; Shakespeare, 2000), women’s capability to survive without the support of welfare services is constrained compared to that of men, even in a context with men too are very poor. Therefore the issue of welfare dependency is inherently gendered, and recipients are constructed in racist and sexist ways which ensure that the welfare needs of women, particularly lone parents, are individualised and pathologised (Asen, 1996; Fraser, 1987; Lowe, 2008).

Similarly, welfare ‘entitlements’ are often seen to be an opportunity to shape, indeed, ‘reform’, recipients behaviour to conform to dominant understandings of what is acceptable and ‘deserving’ (Albelda, 2001; Gordon, 1994; Wilcox, Robbennolt, O’Keeffe, & Pynoch, 1996). There is clear international growth in conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and other behavioural requirements for receiving welfare benefits. While in some nations the CCT model has been judged as successful, for example, Progresa / Oportunidades in Mexico (Adato, Brière, Mindek, & Quisumbing, 2000), conditional requirements can be extremely punitive and unrealistic, such as the welfare to work model in the TANF programme in the USA (Cancian, 2001).

Analysing these discourses of welfare allows us to see how prevailing ideologies in social protection are constructed, and how this so often feeds into conservative beliefs about welfare recipients (Lens, 2002). It is not only society’s elite groups that subscribe to these beliefs, but often, too, welfare beneficiaries themselves. A good example of this is research by Seccombe, James and Battle Walters (1998), conducted in the USA. They found that women welfare beneficiaries they interviewed overwhelmingly used individualist negative stereotypes, dependency discourses and demeaning cultural explanations for why others get welfare, but used fatalistic or structural explanations to explain their own receipt of welfare. In other words, the social discourses of blame are pervasive and reach beyond dominant groups into the talk of even those disadvantaged by this very language. The authors conclude that “the hegemony of the individual perspective is a strong and stubborn barrier to dealing constructively with poverty and welfare reform” (Seccombe, et al., 1998, p. 849).

Investigating the social construction of welfare beneficiaries in South Africa can make an important contribution to the literature on the global South as little has been written on stigma in these contexts. Further, as the context of poverty in low income vs. high income countries are so different, that is, widespread poverty vs. residual / minority poverty, it is important to link recipients’ understanding of welfare and stigma to how they conceptualise poverty. Therefore in this paper we will examine how CSG recipients understand their own and others receipt of the grant in the context of pervasive poverty and widespread grant receipt.
The Child Support Grant

In South Africa poverty is routinely associated with structural failures in the economy; high rates of unemployment are blamed for the persistent poverty and inequality experienced by a large proportion of the population. Therefore the commonly viewed cause of poverty in South Africa is a lack of jobs, and in this paper we interpret this as a structural understanding of poverty.

South Africa is an interesting mix of rights-based social policies and more conservative neo-liberal social discourses. Receipt of cash transfers has a relatively long and largely stigma-free history in South Africa. Old Age Pensions have been given to all population groups since 1944 (although no longer the case, historically black pensioners received lower values than the white elderly). Pensioners’ social status has been shown to have improved due to their economic contribution to households which has been substantial in poor areas (Lund, 2006), and because of this Old Age Pensions have been traditionally valorized and applauded. This ‘virtuous’ context for cash transfers has been the base on which the state has expanded grants over time, most intensely since the end of apartheid, to touch a large majority of poor people either directly or indirectly. This ‘virtuous’ context for cash transfers is very different to those found in industrialized nations, even those with strong welfare states.

The Child Support Grant was introduced in 1997, at the height of the progressive drive of the new post-apartheid government. It is explicitly redistributive, providing 10.1 million poor children under the age of 16 years old a monthly amount of R250\(^1\), identified via generous means testing\(^2\). The grant was progressively conceptualised: firstly, it was originally unconditional and thus unconnected with attempting to change behaviour; secondly, it is explicitly rights based (Richter, 2009); and thirdly, it pioneered the notion of ‘follow the child’ which means the grant is paid to the primary caregiver of the child, whomever that may be (Lund, 2008) and so has been de-linked from the tradition of accessing children only through their mothers.

However, there has been significant erosion to the rights discourse in South Africa in recent years (Lund, 2011) for complicated reasons ranging from the political to the social, and the window of opportunity for social protection conceptualised in ways to progressively transform society (Sabates-Wheeler & Devereux, 2008) seems to have closed. More conservative economic policies globally as well as the political shifts the ruling party has made from the far left to the centre since they came into power in 1994 have contributed to the more conservative discourses now washing through the country. For example, the notion of the deserving vs. the undeserving poor has become more common in the public domain (Hassim, 2000). Further, there has been a recent introduction of a conditionality for the CSG, school attendance, which is illogical and potentially very administratively costly for little return (Lund, 2011) in the face of almost universal primary school attendance in South Africa (Coetzee, 2010). In addition, social discourses of dependency and pro-natal effects of CSG continue to abound, even in the public statements of political leaders, despite clear evidence to the contrary (Hassim, 2000; Makiwane, 2010; Steele, 2006). Finally, in a social rejection of the progressive idea that both women and men should be eligible to collect cash transfers to support their caregiving of children, 96% of recipients of

\(^1\) Approximately £20, which can buy a sparse basket of basic groceries such as oil, maize-meal, tea and sugar, but little more. As of 1 April 2011 this will increase to R260 per month and the cut off age will increase to children under the age of 17 years.

\(^2\) If you are a single parent or caregiver you must not be earning more than R30 000 (£2,500) per annum and if you are married your joint income must not exceed R60 000 (£5,000) per annum. You cannot get this grant for more than six children who are not your biological or legally adopted children.
CSGs are women, largely the biological mothers of the child (Voster & de Waal, 2008). This reflects the persistence of the idea that care of children is an exclusively women’s domain.

Therefore progressive policies on cash transfers and strong historical support for cash transfers, co-exist with a socio-political context of conservatism (Lund, 2011), a combination that is repeated with some variation in other parts of the developing world where a liberal agenda is being pushed back by global socio-economic conservatism.

The paradox of the co-existence of conservative and progressive ideologies helps us to understand how women getting Child Support Grants interpret and understand their own personal positioning in relation to wider social constructions of cash transfer recipients. This paradox is what opens the space for recipients of the CSG to identify with the circumstances that they share with other recipients but at the same time to disapprove of grant receipt for certain women, creating a tension in their narratives.

**Methods**

The study draws on data collected in Doornkop, an urban community in Soweto, Johannesburg. The area represents the poorest ward in the region and consists of small brick or concrete government housing and informal shacks. While poor, Doornkop residents all have access to piped water on their stands (although mostly not inside their houses) and the area is fully electrified. Primary schooling is free³, a school nutrition programme in the primary school provides 2 meals a day for all school learners, and those who can’t afford to buy school uniforms for their children are provided these by the Provincial government. Two primary health care clinics serve the Doornkop area and give free health services to all pregnant women and children under 6 years old, and charge minimal fees to others. This ‘basket’ of state services is of tremendous value to the community. Nevertheless it does not change the economic status of the people who live there: they are still largely unemployed and poor. The chronic lack of stable household income means that over 80% of women in Doornkop who look after children under the age of 16 years receive one or more CSG (Patel & Hochfeld, forthcoming).

We interviewed eight women from 344 names on a database of a household survey on women receiving CSGs (Patel & Hochfeld, forthcoming). These 8 women were purposively selected to represent different ages, numbers of CSGs and housing types. One interview of approximately an hour long was conducted with each woman in her home in Doornkop. One of the authors was present at each interview, which was conducted by an interviewer in isiZulu, using a standard interview guide. The interviews therefore covered similar ground, namely the woman’s everyday experience of the grant, her reasons for needing the grant, how she understands / characterises grant recipients, and her description and views on public discourses on the grant. We also investigated recipients’ views of poverty and welfare, and whether these are perceived as related. The interviews were then transcribed and, finally, translated from isiZulu into English.

The analysis took two paths; firstly it was thematic, focusing on the aspects of women’s stories that explained how they understood poverty, others’ CSG receipt, and the integration of the receipt of the CSG in their own identities. Secondly, we also focused on the narrative itself, and the way women spoke about their experiences. Therefore we explored how language and form shaped the women’s stories.

---

³ The local primary school is what is known as a ‘no-fees’ school under the Department of Basic Education and Training’s system of fully subsidising school fees in poor areas.
differently to the content (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and “how the myths within a wider culture infuse and shape individual narratives” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 10).

Profile of participants

The eight women range in age from 23 to 60 years old. Six of the eight live in concrete or brick structures, but these homes are small and generally only 2-roomed: one for sleeping and one for living and cooking. Only one has an indoor toilet. Two women live in backyard shacks made of corrugated iron, boarding, and other temporary materials. While small and stiflingly hot due to the metal roofing, these homes are furnished and very neat and clean. All the homes have access to electricity indoors, and municipal piped water outside in the yard, bar one which had water piped into the house.

While the women looked after between one and five children each, none receive more than two grants. The reasons range from children being too old to be eligible (that is, over 15 years old), to children who are staying temporarily in the home, to the difficulties of getting the correct documentation to apply for the grant. Two households had a young baby for whom the mother had not yet applied for a grant. While all are poor, the households where there was another form of income in addition to the CSGs were clearly better off than those which rely solely on grant money.

It is striking that of the eight women, only two live with their partners and in most cases, fathers gave little or no financial support to their children. Even where the fathers’ whereabouts are known, contact with their children is mostly on an ad hoc basis or non-existent.

A short description of each participant appears in the appendix. All names have been changed.

“I don’t want to be called poor. Who wants to be called poor?” Structuralism, shame and poverty

Poverty and structure

Participants offered two main definitions of poverty. The inability to feed and clothe oneself and one’s children is one definition. In these conversations, going to bed on an empty stomach was the most commonly used boundary between poor and not poor. Using this definition participants generally did not describe themselves as poor as most reported they always had something to eat before sleeping, even if it might be ‘inferior’ food (meat is widely regarded as the most desirable meal, while ‘pap’, corn meal, the staple starch in South Africa, and spinach or cabbage was eaten when money was tight). The CSG was spoken about as the critical mediator between these two states, supporting research that shows the grant intervenes to prevent severe nutritional deficits (Agüero, et al., 2006; Coetzee, 2010).

Participants said the following:

Since I never slept on an empty stomach, no, I cannot say that I am poor. (Nosipho)
Poverty is just seeing the child poor, not being the same as the other child even when they play... since they are now hungry... [Since receiving the grant] he is no longer hungry, their stomach is full since they are receiving the food... there is no poverty anymore. (Margaret)

There are different forms, levels, of poverty. I mean being very very poor. It’s mainly food. If you are just sleeping on an empty stomach today, tomorrow you sleep on an empty stomach, would you consider yourself as being alive? ... But then I am not there yet [because of the grant]. I do eat the cabbage, but I never went out and told my neighbour that today I ate the cabbage. I am like them, who woke up having eaten meat the previous day [This participant means that while she is eating inferior food, she is equal to her wealthier neighbours as she at least eats regular meals]. (Nosipho)

A second definition of poverty is its equation with unemployment. The quotes below are examples of commonly made comments:

There is a lot of poverty here in South Africa, many people are struggling, they are not working. (Pumla)

This money that they are receiving [the CSG], [it is because] they are not employed, you find that they are not working, they do not have anything for their living, if you try to look for the job, you do not get it. (Zandile)

This was very pervasive as a theme. Unemployment and poverty were understood as linked in a simple causal relationship, the former causing the latter, and not the other way around. Hence poverty is not defined by grant receipt: that is, there is not the assumption that if you receive a grant you must be poor. Nosipho describes this relationship clearly:

I was working but I lost my job. But then when I was working, I could see what I was working for, I was able to buy within a year a TV, this one in this house, I bought this table in this house even though it just does not have chairs. I bought a..., a..., a room divider. Within one year I bought those things. On the second year I bought a fridge just this one which is now dilapidated, do you understand? ...Only two years but ... I could see what I worked for so I am telling myself that the government, this money..., he should rather give us employment. (Nosipho)

Defining poverty is thus complex and nuanced. On the one hand, recipients are mostly poor if poverty is defined as unemployment; but, on the other, it is not necessary to be indigent or hungry to receive the grant. The meaning of poverty seemed to swing between these meanings in the progression of women’s narratives, although the meaning of unemployment seemed to predominate. Consequently, women believed that the CSG saves people from starvation but cannot change people’s social position.

**Blame and shame**

Mostly, therefore, respondents used a structural understanding of poverty to explain their own circumstances. There was no clear differentiation between ‘me’ and ‘them’ when women spoke about causes of poverty and material need: there was a strong sense of a common poverty, the cause of which was shared. Being poor was directly related to a lack of employment and paid work was seen as the key to exit poverty.
Yes, I am poor...I am indeed serious... I am not working, isn’t it? Not everything should be my mother’s responsibility. (Zandile)

Education, in turn, was the ‘step up’ to good paid employment.

Maybe God may love [my grandchildren], maybe they will study at school so that they and their children will be independent... I don’t like [the idea of my grandchildren’s children on the grant]. I think that if... if they can grow up and attend school and learn, they will be able to get the right jobs and work, isn’t it. So that when they have their children, they will be able to provide for their children, and know that they are working and tell themselves that they are not expecting the government to provide for their children, but that they need to work. (Joyce)

While a structural understanding of poverty implies that being poor is not, therefore, the fault of the individual, it was striking how many respondents who had a clear, technical, non-emotive, and non-blaming definition of poverty (lack of employment), nevertheless felt shame and discomfort when applying the label to themselves. They overwhelmingly preferred not to be called poor. This is evocatively described by one of the respondents in the following exchange:

Mpho: They [CSG recipients] don’t see themselves as poor. I don’t see myself as poor so I don’t think they will want to see themselves as poor. They are poor, they don’t want to be...It’s like calling names, you are saying, you are poor like if you are gossiping about that person. They do not like that... They see that they are poor but they don’t want to be told they are poor.

Interviewer: Would you say the same about yourself?
Mpho: I would say so about myself, I don’t want to be called poor. Who wants to be called poor?
Interviewer: Well you can say you may want to be called poor so you can receive [a grant]?
Mpho: No. If they want to cut the grant because I don’t want to be called poor they can do that.

Perhaps the reluctance to self-identify as poor or shame at being labelled as poor is because of the resultant lack of individual power this implies: if you are labelled as poor, it is much harder to change your circumstances than if your financial struggles are just a temporary state. Individual coping strategies, particularly in the vein of the notion of ‘self-reliance’, was a theme in many of the younger women’s stories. Young women spoke about how the grant can be a ‘step-up’ in more ways than just to buy food for the family, and it was striking how much their language echoed the state’s strong discourse of self-sufficiency, for example:

I rather take this assistance and break it down in a manner that I think it can help me you see, on the other side[meaning at the same time] be on the look out for vacancies... If I had ways maybe if I have a capital to do something for myself like a business, right, I would have done that to meet the government’s grant half way, you see. (Victoria)

Unless you save the grant, taking it to the bank, and..., make a plan to maybe multiply and participate in a stokvel4, you will just not see what you did with it. (Nosipho)

Get the money; you do something with it, don’t sit and complain and say it’s not enough. (Mpho)

---

4 Community savings scheme
Structural explanations of poverty therefore do not rule out the role of coping strategies: women believed the movement out of poverty requires both structural changes (more jobs) as well as individual responsibilities (women have the responsibility to look for or create some form of income). Women expressed this in the following ways:

> Since they are receiving the grant, it does not mean that your hands have been chopped such that you cannot go out and look for work, as I am saying that there are... temporary jobs, maybe you are working as a domestic worker, maybe you go around doing the washing for people, something like that. (Thandeka)

> I do not want to sit and depend on it, I also want to have something that is entirely mine, the wages. (Victoria)

Therefore coping was not just having resources, it was also about generating the resources oneself, and then feeling in control over the decisions on how to consume them. This echoes Sen’s (1999, 2009) ideas that choice and control are central to genuinely having a life of value.

Older women, however, seemed to more readily accept that being poor was their ‘fate’ or ‘lot’ to just accept, expressed simply by Margaret in the following way:

> I just told myself that it will happen the way that it is going to happen. (Margaret)

A sense of the power of the individual was also responsible for the weak expectation of the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Again education was the key; women assumed that their children would not need grants. For example:

> Actually probably they may not need it since perhaps [my grandchild] will study and get a job that will pay him well and be able to afford children, will raise them well, you see that his children will no longer receive the grant if that is the case. Yes, it [will be] different. (Margaret)

This is in marked contrast to research in developed contexts where women in welfare assume their descendents would be similarly trapped in poverty (Seccombe, et al., 1998).

Therefore grants are a tool in the survival strategies of women, grants contribute to a sense of power and control, and are a step towards independence. On their own, however, grants cannot change women’s social conditions. Women believe strongly that while poverty is structurally caused, overcoming it is in the hands of the individual and what they do with the slim resources at their disposal.

“Those who don’t have the grant look down on those who get the grant”: Individualism: blame vs. pride

In contrast to this strong structural perspective, a number of other themes were expressed in individualist language, typically to describe others’ receipt of grants. Women were aware of how negative discourses on welfare stigmatized the CSG and therefore reflected negatively on them personally. For example,
Those who don’t have the grant look down on those who get the grant, they are saying like they are lazy, they don’t want to work and then they have to wake up early in the morning and do stuff for themselves, they don’t have to depend on anyone. Forgetting if they were in the same situation as those who get the grant they wouldn’t say that. So they don’t know the situation. (Mpho)

People are aware of it [the CSG]. It’s just that another person can see themselves such that if I can go and apply for a grant I will be degrading myself... Now if you explain to them that you see one, two, three it will help you, they open up, something is revealed to them and they then go and apply also. (Margaret)

It seems as if to me... they look down upon me since, isn’t it you know, maybe I do not have anything, you see. (Joyce)

While in the above quotes the women were able to identify the injustice of being stigmatized unfairly, they tended to do the same to other grant recipients. Therefore the lack of differentiation between ‘me’ and ‘them’ mentioned earlier in relation to women’s definitions of poverty is quite different when it comes to narratives about welfare: there was a rather strong differentiation, ‘me’ identifying with structural causes of welfare receipt and ‘them’ relating far more to individualist explanations. Themes of stigma and blame drew particularly strongly from the individualist perspective. It was striking that the language women used for themselves was quite different in quality to the language used when talking about others. They were nuanced, insightful, and thoughtful in self-talk, but broke with these insights quite clearly when talking about others.

Six individualist themes stood out, four of which echoed traditional negative welfare views seen internationally, but with a distinct South African flavour. Two on the other hand had a different signification, devoid of individual blame and shame.

Negative discourses on welfare

1. The grant encourages laziness:

None of the women believed that they themselves were lazy, but some did think that the grant assisted other people to take no initiative. For example:

*I can say others, they get spoilt, right, in such a way a person does not think of doing something right, that they can do to..., to back the grant up, you see. It means that there are people who are relaxing, who are seated who do not care...they are lazy anyway since actually there is nothing else that they are thinking of, they wait for that pay day, that day of the grant. (Victoria)*

Some women understood clearly how this discourse affected them personally, and were able to explain in insightful ways that talk of laziness stigmatises those who wish to work but can’t find employment. This insight was reserved for their own circumstances, however, and was not applied to others. For example:

*I think that the grant maybe is destroying people in a way that they do not think of doing things for themselves and others to not look for jobs. Whereas for instance I*
have been looking for work for a long time, I know that I tried to look for a job, I am not successful, you see... I also do not want to sit. (Pumla)

So even me also you know [the community think]... that I’m in that group that doesn’t care anymore, who’s abusing the grant, [because] I’m not working, I’m unemployed and it’s many years now. It’s seven or eight years, you see. And that thing is hurting me, okay? So somebody who is looking at me in a distance okay, cannot see what I’m thinking about or I’m not sleeping at night trying to change my situation. You see, you cannot see that, he or she would say she’s relaxing; she’s not looking for any job now, you see. Because she’s getting the grant. Maybe that grant is enough for her. And yet it’s not. (Victoria)

2. The grant encourages teenage fertility

A very common and strong discourse in the general community, grant recipients did repeat the notion that young women have babies in order to access grant money.

Old women and men they are saying, that now children are now giving birth recklessly so that they will get the grant from government and it’s wrong... who is going to look after these children after that? The load is heavy. Why, even these mothers are not working, they are giving birth. And the first thing that is done by the..., this youth is wrong because they give birth to these children, they are not getting married, they are not doing anything, but they are busy giving birth at home, isn’t it. (Joyce)

This is a discourse repeated elsewhere in the world, and has been noted as a common rationalisation for limiting welfare benefits to poor young women (Seccombe, et al., 1998)

3. Deserving vs. undeserving recipients

What women use the grant money on is a topic of great interest for recipients; and there is a clear sense that those who use the grant money ‘well’ (on the child, for household food, for business purposes) deserve it, while those who use it on themselves and not the child do not deserve it and are wasting state resources. Therefore the definition of ‘deserving’ is based more on how the money is used than the level of poverty or need prior to grant receipt. As a variation on this theme, more pervasive than the teenage fertility discourse, was the idea that younger women are less responsible with the money, and older women spent the grant money ‘well’.

Actually these young [women] do not stay with the children, they take these children and drop them here with the grandmothers, the grandmothers will remain suffering not knowing what they are doing, what they do with the children. When [the mothers] leave [the paypoint] they will not say that are going to give it to the grandmother who is with my children..., there are just a few who will say as I am carrying this amount of money I am going to take it and leave it with the [grandmother looking after]the child... Isn’t it actually they say, actually I am going for a hair do... [I want] this type of a skirt in town... you see then that she no longer wants this money for the child, she just want it for herself now.(Margaret)

All the women believed they used the grant ‘correctly’, but had stories of those who did not. A few women shared how they themselves had been unfairly stigmatized as an ‘undeserving’ recipient. For example,
Zandile: Others think that perhaps you do not deserve this money for the grant.

Interviewer: They think that you are not suffering?

Zandile: [They think] You do not deserve it. [...] Isn’t it I sometimes assist my mother, isn’t my mother runs this thing the tuck shop she makes the ‘vetkoeks’5, I sometimes assist her, they think that my mother will assist me, I say to them this is not my mother’s child, she is mine.

4. Imali yeqolo

An unexpected and, as far as we can tell, up until now undocumented public discourse very specific to South Africa is the notion oft-reported in this study of imali yeqolo. Literally translated from isiZulu, imali yeqolo means ‘money of the back / lying down money’, referring to the act of falling pregnant and/ or the act of giving birth. Loosely translated this term means ‘compensation money’, which draws from the traditional requirement that a man who impregnates a young woman before marriage pays compensation (in the form of cattle or other wealth) to the woman’s family as a form of penance. In the modern form, imali yeqolo appears to imply that the state pays compensation to women for children that she is unable to support via her own means. It is pejorative, implying unplanned pregnancies and shame on the woman’s part. In this way, it is a form of gendered individualism: the CSG is compensation money from the government which blames women who can’t afford children for falling pregnant. Men’s responsibility is not part of the equation.

‘Imali yeqolo’... It means you will sleep [have sex] and wake up carrying the grant, you will sleep [have sex] and fall pregnant, isn’t it since it is called ‘imali yeqolo’... the money of the back... Which means you just sleep, when you wake up, you wake up with the money of grant, you see,... You just sleep for the grant. (Victoria)

Mpho: Isn’t it with us they say it’s our money for ‘iqolo’ ‘the back’, like free money, ‘imali yeqolo’, the money that you did not work for.

Interviewer: Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

Mpho: It’s a bad thing because [it is seen as] free money, you have to have kids and go get the free money, stay there, go and get that free money and do nothing.

‘Imali yeqolo’... It means that it’s the money for the mother who gave birth to a child... It means the mother is the one who is [responsible]; the mother is the one who looks after everything... I do not see it as a good thing, I do not know what I can say, I do not know what I can call it. (Joyce)

Women attributed this attitude to not just the general public, but specifically to men; it appears that men are rationalising the receipt of coveted state cash transfers as necessary to compensate for women’s shame, and therefore not something that should be envied.

[Men are] insolent towards us actually they say it’s our back ‘iqolo lethu’ they say by the way that money is for your back ‘iqolo lenu’... They actually say my sister...we are receiving the

---

5 Deep fried savoury dough, like a savoury doughnut. This is common township food.
money for the back since we are the ones who bend when we go to give birth, men call it... ‘imali yeqolo’ (Thandeka)

You know I don’t like it [the term ‘imali yeqolo’], I hate it because one day we were coming from church it was Friday. Another man was drunk, talking all these sorts of things about women and the money of grant... the way women they use that money, that they go to buy new clothes, make her hairs. [I think he spoke this way] because [there is a] war... between the woman and... that man. (Victoria)

Thandeka: [The government] likes us, he does not like them [men], that is why he is giving us this ‘mali yeqolo’... That is what they say, they say it’s money for their back, isn’t it?... They say so because we bend, isn’t it... when we go to give birth to children... men just say ‘ei’ don’t bother us with ‘imali yeqolo’ for these ones.

Interviewer: When they say, don’t bother us with the ‘Imali yeqolo’, it means they do not care about it?
Thandeka: It means that they are not..., they do not care about it, actually my sister, it’s because it’s not coming to them, a man always just want something to come to him... it’s jealousy that eh it’s not coming to them..., they do not receive it, we are the ones who receive it, a man wants to be the one who receives all the time.

Non-blaming individualism

Two other issues raised relate to the individualist perspective but in a very different way.

1. The CSG is a ‘gift’

All women expressed some form of gratitude that they were receiving the grant. In this context they spoke of the state as a benevolent carer who is sees their plight and that of their children.

   It [the government] does give people the grant, maybe it can see that they are poor. (Zandile)

A number of women spoke explicitly about the CSG as a ‘gift’ rather than a ‘right’, raising the issue of grant insecurity. A gift is bestowed due to the benevolence of the giver, but there is no guarantee that this gift will always be given. Almost no women spoke of the grant as an entitlement, and they worried that the state will withdraw the favour in the future, either because the state might ‘run out of money’ or that it will stop the grant due to persistent misuse; women were thus anxious that they might have to pay for others’ mistakes or misuse. For example:

   I don’t think [my children’s children will get the grant]. Because I do not think that the grant..., it is being used on those wrong things..., it [won’t] still be available at that time. (Pumla)

   It’s something that is a present, you have been given, you cannot say maybe you are..., you are complaining or what... Actually I think that [the CSG] will cease to exist. If the government is going to... provide for the child, Ja, I think that [the money] will be used up. (Nosipho)
Uhm, it means we..., we do have the fear that one day the grant will be stopped you see, and then what are we going to do when the grant is no longer there then since the things will not always be there, where you will find that they change you see. (Victoria)

2. The CSG gives independence

Public concerns that the CSG creates welfare ‘dependency’ is common even in the SA context where high unemployment begs the question of genuine alternatives to relying on cash transfers. Women in this study, however, offer us a positive spin on the dependency question: they reported that a significant value of the CSG is how it saves them from the shame of ‘begging’ from or depending on neighbours, other community members, and especially male partners when financially desperate. They garnered a sense of self-reliance and independence from the grant which gave them dignity and pride amidst poverty and financial strain. This is reflected in the following words:

Awu! I feel that I am..., I am okay my sister, since as I was explaining that day that I usually tell myself that actually after receiving it I will no longer go out and ask for things from people, I know that when I come back I keep the money for transport, this is just what helps me my sister. (Thandeka)

Yes, [the grant is important] so that we do not sleep on empty stomachs, so that children do not sleep on empty stomachs and [I] end up going to the neighbours and be a problem to the neighbours asking for food. (Pumla)

So actually it just became worse these months then... [my neighbours] are also aware of the situation, that I need to go and look for a grant since they will also be [struggling] to provide me with that assistance..., if I ask for money from them, I have make a loan, I need to return that money. So...the reason why I needed to... receive the grant, [is so that my neighbours] will also be safe so that I do not frustrate them. (Victoria)

The value of this independence is particularly strongly stated when women speak about their desire not to be financially dependent on men, both casual boyfriends and long term husbands. The grant, therefore, is playing an important role as a facilitator of gender empowerment amongst poor women:

Isn’t it my husband helps me where he can, but I cannot rely on a man’s money. (Nosipho)

Sometimes... they... get into the poverty trap... for instance begging for money from a man and find that a man is cheating, he is doing his own things, now he knows that you are definitely going to be tolerate him since you want this money that he is going to give you, you see. So in that way I think that, eh, the government is playing some role, isn’t it for instance I decided that I do not want to see myself get sick in a certain way [respondent is referring to HIV infection] since I am running after a someone so that he can..., give me money you see, I rather take this assistance [the CSG]. (Victoria)

This sense of independence was extended at times to a general sense of well-being since the grant rescued them from the desperation of poverty. For example:
It [the grant] made a lot [of difference] since now... [I do not] go to sleep and ask myself I wonder what I will do with the child in the morning. So the difference was very huge especially in my mind, such that my mental state is always good, I think about things that I need to think about, that poverty that I used to think about before is no longer in my mind. So, now I am able to live just like any other mother. (Margaret)

[Now] I receive it for the child, we buy the child’s stuff, we do things for the child with her money. Mentally I feel good. (Zandile)

Conclusions

It seems therefore that in discourses on getting the grant amongst recipients, ‘individualism’ co-exists with ‘pragmatic structuralism’. By ‘pragmatic structuralism’ we mean that women believe poverty is structurally caused and not the fault of the individuals concerned. Coherent with this is their belief in the logic that poverty leads to a need for the grant, not the other way around where receiving the grant would identify you as poor. Compared with literature on grant recipients from the West, there is a stronger sense of shared difficulties - ‘we are all poor’ - and a belief that in the main, the others who get the grant are receiving it for similar reasons and using it for similar expenses. While the extension of these beliefs mean there is no inherent shame in being unemployed as the cause is beyond the control of the individual, the women did not like to be identified as poor and experienced this as shameful.

They also believe the provision of the grant is a humane response of the state to the intense material needs of the population, and not a grudging, conditional, or stigmatized offering.

Structural explanations of poverty did not, however, rule out the role of coping through individualised and creative survival strategies. The women believed that one has the responsibility to get out of poverty if one can and doing this required individualised effort and inventiveness in livelihood choices initiated via the use of the grant. While the talk on coping was strongly flavoured with the dominant public discourse on self-reliance, the grant was clearly a tool in the complex journey of survival and gaining a sense of independence, connecting with Sen’s notion of capabilities as a pre-requisite for freedom. In addition, women assumed there would not be an intergenerational transmission of poverty because their individual efforts and the efforts of their children were enough to disrupt or overcome structural causes of poverty. Hence women believed there were genuine opportunities for moving up in social position, given individual effort and education. We maintain this is one of the greatest differences between the South African context and welfare recipients in industrialised contexts, where women assume their children will face similar challenges and will also be poor and on welfare.

‘Individualism’ was prominent when exploring issues of stigma directly. We found that respondents were universally aware of negative mainstream discourses about the CSG. Standard stigmatising discourses about CSG beneficiaries were repeated by grant recipients, such as the grant encourages teenage fertility, laziness, and some recipients are undeserving because of what they choose to spend their money on; these things occurred via the irresponsibility, greediness and weakness of the individuals themselves. The pejorative notion of ‘imali yeqolo’, where the CSG is seen as compensation money for women who have children they can’t afford, is specific to South Africa and seems to be a form of individual blame particularly strongly gendered: directed at women by men.
But stigma was not simply ‘me versus them’ as Secommbe et al (1998) reported in their study. Rather, in our study stigma presented in two ways in conversations with women: on the one hand, when talking of others, they were at times as sweeping and generalising and ‘othering’ as the worst of the stigmatizing general public; but on the other, women were thoughtful and insightful about the injustice of stigma directed at themselves in their own life. Individualism was more positively invoked in the discourses around the CSG being a ‘gift’ and how the CSG contributed directly to a sense of autonomy and dignity, saving women from the humiliation and discomfort of financial dependency on others. This is a break from the assumption in both the developed and the developing world that cash transfers create dependency.

Therefore these public discourses, while clearly permeate the conversations of even the poor themselves, are not monolithic as women find ways to reiterate their pride and dignity in the same conversations. In addition, they are not self-referential.

Overall, the narratives about grants are a combination of positive and negative discourses; so the repetition of mainstream negative discourses of misuse, dependency and teenage fertility was only one strain of the way people talk about grants. More striking was how they understood how negative discourses disadvantaged themselves, how their understanding of poverty meant they didn’t blame themselves for their social position, and, finally, how they saw the grant as a tool of survival, as step towards the mythical and future moment when they would no longer be poor.
References


Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to the women who shared their stories with us so openly and willingly. Many thanks also to Nhlanhla Jordan who was a most warm, sensitive and competent interviewer. The feedback from the CSDA writing group and the Wits / UJ women’s writing group was extremely helpful in shaping the ideas in this article.
Appendix: Profile of individual participants

Zandile is a young woman of 26 years old who has one 3 year old daughter for whom she receives a grant. She heard about the grant from her neighbours and it was also announced on the TV news. She lives with her mother in a small brick house, where some of the rooms are still only partly constructed. Zandile’s mother runs a small ‘tuck shop’ from a window in the side of the house, she sells cold drinks, chips, polony (processed meat) and vetkoek (deep-fried savoury dough) and this is her sole means of support. Zandile has no other income aside from the CSG, but she hopes to study further and plans to apply to UJ to complete a course in tourism. Zandile is still in a relationship with the father of the child but they do not live together and he gives her money infrequently and on an ad hoc basis.

Pumla is 29 years old and lives in a make-shift shack with her 2 children, aged 6 years and 3 months old. She gets one CSG, for the 6 year old, but has not yet been to apply for a grant for her baby. She heard about the grant from other women who receive it. While she completed her schooling, she has never worked as could not find employment. Her mother, who does not live with her, gets a disability grant and helps her support her children. She does not get help from the two fathers of her children.

Margaret is a 54 year old woman who lives in a small two roomed brick house with her two daughters, one of whom had given birth to a baby only 10 days prior to our visit for the interview, and her 10 year old grandson whom she has cared for since his mother (her third daughter) died of AIDS. Margaret has built two other small buildings on her property and earns her income by renting out the 4 rooms. One of her daughters has casual employment and the other is unemployed. The father of the boy did take him in for a short while after his mother died, but the child ran back to his grandmother and refused to return to his father after being poorly treated by his father’s new wife.

Nosipho is 41 years old and lives with 8 other people in a tiny two roomed brick house. She lives with her husband, who is employed behind the counter at an ice-cream parlour, and they have 3 children, 2 of whom get a CSG. Her 9 year old son has chronic asthma and she spends money on transport to the nearest hospital every month for his check up. Also living with them is her sister, recently retrenched, and her 3 children. Their father has long disappeared. Nosipho’s sister has been unable to get grants for her 3 children as the SASSA office wanted proof of her retrenchment from work which she was unable to supply as the company had never paid her unemployment insurance fund and gave her no formal documentation. Her sister spends every day going from area to area asking for work while Nosipho looks after the children at home.

Victoria is 44 years old and lives in a 2 roomed brick home with her 4 children. She gets 2 CSGs, for her youngest children: a 14 year old boy and a 10 year old girl. She heard about the grant when she was still working and did not need it. However, after she lost her job and got divorced she desperately needed help and so applied for the grant. The children’s father does not pay maintenance for the children.

Thandeka, a warm and energetic woman aged 38, lives in a backyard shack with her husband, his daughter from a previous marriage, and her own young grandson. She gets a CSG for both children. It took a while to arrange a grant for the girl as her biological mother had died and Thandeka had to apply for a death certificate to prove the biological mother was no longer the primary caregiver before she could receive a grant. She uses the money primarily to pay for transport for the children to get to school as the area of Doornkop in which she lives is too far from the schools for the children to walk. Thandeka’s husband is a taxi driver and earns a small salary from the owner of the taxi dependent on the number of customers he manages to get.
Joyce is a grandmother of 60 years old. She looks after her 5 grandchildren, only 2 of whom are receiving a grant. She also receives a disability grant for herself for a chronic condition. Joyce had 4 daughters, two of whom have died of AIDS and she has had to take their children into her care. She spoke bitterly about her daughters, complaining that none of them have been of help to her. She does not know where 3 of her grandchildren are living and their welfare is a great concern of hers as she suspects they have been abandoned with neighbours or distant relatives by one of her daughters with whom she has little contact. None of the fathers of the children have any contact with them nor give any financial support to Joyce. Joyce lives in a small run-down concrete home.

Mpho is a confident and self-assured young woman of 23 years old. Her mother died and her father remarried and lives with his new wife and family in another home. Maria lives in a concrete house with her young sister of 15 years (in grade 7) and receives a CSG for her care. Two older siblings who are not very involved in her or her young sister’s life also live in the house. Mpho does not work but is in a technology learnership programme, so hopes to gain experience as a beauty therapist which will eventually enable her to find paying work. She has only been receiving a grant for her sister for a year and a half – she didn’t know she was eligible for state assistance until then. She is not in a relationship and says she doesn’t want to have her own children in the future.