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Cash, Care and Social Justice: A study of the Child Support Grant

Tessa Hochfeld

Abstract

South Africa claims to be a developmental state with redistribution and justice at the heart of its social policy. The existence of large scale social investment programmes support this claim, such as the well-regarded Child Support Grant (CSG), a cash transfer disbursed to over 11 million poor children monthly. Substantial evidence exists of the important positive material impacts of the CSG. However, is the material improvement of people's lives enough to deliver social justice?

In this study I investigate the social, care, and gendered impacts of the CSG in poor households in Johannesburg in order to investigate whether this cash transfer delivers social justice for the primary caregivers of children getting the grant. Theoretically and empirically I understand social justice as a balance of redistribution, recognition, and representation, drawn from Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2009, 2013a) work, in order for individuals to live with freedom, agency, and dignity. I combine Fraser's trivalent theory of social justice with the applicability of the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000, 2003, 2011; Sen, 1999, 2009) to explore the reality of how policy plays out for the individual women who get the grant.

Via a feminist narrative approach, I uncover the immediacy, intricacy, and intimacy of the lives of six women who get a CSG on behalf of one or more children in their care. These narratives offer clues to critical areas we need to consider for building a truly just society, and point to the unrealised transformative potential of welfare policy.

The study findings corroborate the redistributive benefits of the CSG, and identify some specific positive recognition and representation outcomes too. However, evidence from the data in this research exposes the devastating failures of the South African state in delivering substantive recognition and representation justice, therefore falling short of offering dignity and freedom for caregiver recipients. The narratives demonstrate that, however effective and important, the CSG is a narrow instrument which cannot act alone to offer social justice. Its potential is undermined by institutional, ideological, and political failures which are particularly stark in the area of welfare service provision.

Following from these findings, I take issue with the characterisation of the state as 'developmental', arguing that a crucial aspect missing from their practice is the practice of care. While the CSG has taken South Africa some distance on the road to social justice, the missed opportunities and crucial shortcomings in caring for a population in need mean we still have a long way to travel.