

Neoliberal Impact on Social Work in South African Non-Governmental Organisations

Abigail Ornellas

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0751-4752>
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
abiornellas@gmail.com

Lambert K. Engelbrecht

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6549-7183>
Stellenbosch University, South Africa
lke@sun.ac.za

Abstract

The South African social work profession, which can be considered to still be in the early stages of rebirth post-apartheid, has been affected by neoliberal compromise. This paper reflects on the impact of neoliberalism on South African social work, particularly within the context of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as perceived and experienced by front-line social workers and social work managers. The findings highlight some of the unseen struggles of South African social work practice, as the profession is caught between the demands of social development and neoliberalism. This study invites the voices of front-line social workers to join academic debate and offer on-the-ground insight which social work academics might not be able to identify. In doing so, the discussion around neoliberal impact on South African social work and NGOs is deepened, allowing for authentic reflection on the challenges for the profession within an environment of neoliberal and developmental conflict.

Keywords: neoliberalism; social work practice; non-governmental organisations; management; supervision

Introduction

Within the South African, and indeed broader international social work community, there has been a growing argument that the practice of social work is being influenced by a shift in welfare and policy dialogue, largely as a result of competing neoliberal versus developmental ideals (see for example Harris 2003; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). Where developmental principles, such as those presented in the international definition of social work (IFSW 2014), encourage social workers to consider macro, structural and collective solutions to social problems, neoliberalism advocates for individualised, privatised and commodified practices which can often displace the



collective agenda (Ornellas, Spolander, and Engelbrecht 2018). Despite its post-apartheid developmental commitments (Xaba 2014), the undertaking of a 1993 IMF loan has seen South Africa slowly beginning to compromise on developmental values for a more market-driven approach to the economy and the arena of social development (Bond 2000). The South African social work profession, which can be considered to still be in the early stages of rebirth post-apartheid (Ntebe 1994), has been affected by such neoliberal compromise (Gray and Lombard 2008).

Although the adverse effects of neoliberal compromise are being increasingly recognised and discussed within international and local academia (see for example, Bond 2000; Desai 2002; Engelbrecht 2015; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004), there is a concern that such discussion and examination within the South African social work profession is limited to this academic periphery (Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Pullen-Sansfacon 2015) without a sufficient exploration of the lived experiences and understandings of neoliberalism for on-the-ground social workers and managers. Narsiah (2002, 3) recognises, “while academic engagement on such issues is essential, there is a risk that opportunities for progressive change may be missed” if such discussion is limited to the parameters of the academic community.

In order to explore the implications of neoliberal compromise on South African social work, the aim of the empirical study was to gain an understanding of the implications of neoliberal principles on social work within South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as perceived by front-line social workers and social work managers. This article draws on the doctoral thesis of the first author (Ornellas 2018).

Contextualising Social Work within South Africa

South African social work is wrapped up in the colonial, capitalist and apartheid beginnings of South Africa (Smith 2014), and throughout the country’s early history, the profession has faced criticism for being swayed by the whims of the state, maintaining rather than resisting the liberal status quo, including the segregationist policies and legislation of the apartheid era (Chetty 1999; Smith 2014). Early social work training was based on Western models that opted for a more clinical and individualised approach to intervention (Smith 2014), and focused more specifically on the poor white problem (Patel 2005). It is the absence of an appropriate social work response to apartheid policies that garnered significant backlash post-1994 (Smith 2014).

Thus, post-1994, the social work profession was forced to relook at its values and intervention approaches, and essentially reformulate itself in order to remain valuable within a post-apartheid democratic society. The White Paper for Social Welfare (Republic of South Africa 1997a) is considered the founding document for this newly evolved profession (Engelbrecht 2015), and demonstrates commitments much like those

outlined in policy documents such as the RDP and the Constitution. This new social work was to be rights-based, functioning within the parameters of equity, Ubuntu, non-discrimination, human rights, people-centredness, human capital, sustainability and partnership between the state and civil society (Gray 1998).

The rebirthed social work profession became known as developmental social work (Midgley and Conley 2010); definitions for developmental practice include one that is integrated and holistic in its approach, operating from person-in-environment and non-discriminatory models, the strengths perspective and the linking of micro and macro approaches (Gray and Lombard 2008; Patel and Hochfeld 2013). However, social work itself has been challenged by neoliberal influence (Sewpaul and Holscher 2004).

While many of the welfare commitments of the ANC (1994) that were developed post-1994 have been maintained, there have been noted compromises through the infiltration of neoliberal principles over several years. One glaring example of this is the replacement of South Africa's socialist RDP by a more market-centric Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy in 1996 (Bond 2000; Republic of South Africa 1996). According to Desai (2002, 19), GEAR represented a "neo-liberal' service delivery model where the private sector (and private sector principles) dominate", where "the state acts as a service 'ensurer' rather than a service provider" and where "municipal services are 'run more like a business'."

Conflict between the developmental (RDP) and neoliberal (GEAR) principles in the country continue to be reflected in new policy developments, including for example, the National Development Plan (NDP) for 2030 (National Planning Commission 2011), and the Comprehensive Report on the Review of the White Paper for Social Welfare, (Department of Social Development 2016). This conflict has been mirrored in social work practice.

The relationship between the state and informal sector has thus seen shifts toward a more business-orientated approach through changes in funding policies, responsibility allocation and the introduction of Terms of Payment Agreements (TPAs) between the state and NGO groups (Engelbrecht 2015; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). Within this context, South African social work faces significant challenges.

Theoretical Framework of the Study: The Neoliberal Impact upon Social Work

Against the neoliberal shift which has taken place within South Africa, much like in noted global social work trends (Harris 2003), a social work business discourse has emerged, which holds contradictions for developmental approaches. South African academics have argued, in fact, that as neoliberalism began to infiltrate South African policymaking as early as 1996 (through GEAR, for example), a market-centric culture

has found its way into developmental narrative, and at times, has masked itself with a developmental agenda (Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). For example, developmental discourse in South Africa has been presented alongside the principles of entrepreneurship and market participation (Bond 2000); individual self-help continues to be promoted within service delivery masked as empowerment, while forgoing more macro-based considerations (Ornellas, Spolander, and Engelbrecht 2018).

These neoliberal shifts are most evident within the South African NGO context, where business principles are fast taking over a developmental agenda (Miraftab 2004). Increasingly, social work activities have been outsourced to the NGO sector through funding and social work posts subsidies under the NPO Act (Republic of South Africa 1997b). These services are regulated through contractual agreements between the state and NGOs for service rendering, referred to as TPAs. However, with such funding come TPAs that stipulate the outputs and service activities of the NGOs. There has been a noted conflict between a rights-based and developmental approach to NGO-based interventions, and a business-orientated expectation of competition, efficiency, performance audits, hierarchical management and cost-effective measures (Engelbrecht 2015).

The study presented in this paper identified four primary themes within literature that represented neoliberal contradictions within social work practice, both globally as well as within a South African context, namely, marketisation, consumerisation, managerialisation, and deprofessionalisation. These themes are briefly unpacked below, in terms of theoretical definitions. The reflections of front-line South African social workers and managers on how these themes play out in their day-to-day practice are presented under research findings.

Marketisation

A suggested impact of neoliberalism on global and local social work, particularly within the NGO context, is the marketisation of social work (Gray 1998; Harris 2003). Within neoliberal theory, the assumption is that markets are efficient and should be introduced in as many and as wide a range of contexts as possible (Harvey 2007). “Neo-liberalism holds that the social good will be maximised by maximising the reach of market transactions and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey 2007, 3). Social welfare and social work are thus often seen as representing the state’s excessive spending, and neoliberalism advocates that such spending is shifted to the market, where it is believed service delivery will be more efficient.

NGOs are thus becoming increasingly expected to act as private operations in the rendering of their services, relying less on government support and funding (Desai 2002). Social services are being outsourced by government to NGOs and where funding is provided, it is done through a contractual relationship that has been viewed by some as facilitating the shift of the welfare NGO to that of a business-orientated organisation

governed by output and performance (Engelbrecht 2015; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004; Xaba 2014). However, at the same time, while being expected to act as private operations, NGOs also continue to be bound to the state in terms of the rendering of previously and/or traditionally state-run services through the means of service agreements and their reliance on government subsidy (Harris 2003).

Consumerisation

The second theme emerging in literature was the consumerisation of social work, where market-centric principles of individualism, privatisation and commodification dominate social work practice (Engelbrecht 2015; Harris 2003). Welfare discourse becomes primarily centred on the individual, asserting that individuals are responsible for themselves and should thus be self-reliant when it comes to securing their well-being (Gray and Lombard 2008). The influence of such narrative on social work practice is the overemphasis on individual empowerment over and above dealing with the structural and macro underpinnings of social challenges individuals may be facing (Ornellas, Spolander, and Engelbrecht 2018). Initially, such discourse can be understood as empowering. However, when looked at more closely, and in combination with other neoliberal values and policies, the discourse of self-reliance is married with state abdication of the responsibility for citizens' basic rights and well-being (Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). Instead, blame is allocated to the individual for any social problems they may experience, regardless of whether these problems are as a result of structural and policy-based failures (Ornellas, Spolander, and Engelbrecht 2018).

Individuals are therefore held responsible for the challenges they face under a state's shortcomings (McDonald 2006). Shifting this level of responsibility onto the individual disguised as empowerment perpetuates stigma and reinforces blame and is used to highlight welfare as creating dependency (Bond 2000).

Managerialisation

The third theme in literature was the emergence of a business management agenda within social work, which, within the South African context, has been particularly evident within the NGO sector (Engelbrecht 2015). The assumption underlying the neoliberal concept of managerialism is that organisations, social services, and in fact all operations, would be most effective if they functioned using business principles (Clarke 2004). With the expectation for NGOs to run as private operations as outlined in earlier themes, business discourse in terms of output, norms, procedures, standards and cost-efficiency, are becoming increasingly evident in the functioning and running of welfare organisations (Engelbrecht 2011, 2015; Harris 2003). Clarke (2004, 129) suggests, "[P]erformance" is a particular development within this framing of organizational control." Performance indicators are developed to measure organisational objectives, establish targets, and monitor progress in relation to these identified performance indicators (Harris and Unwin 2009). Statistical output is emphasised over and above the quality and process of interventions (Harris and Unwin 2009) and a prevalence of top-

down management, particularly by non-social workers, is overriding the supervision role (Engelbrecht 2015).

Social work service delivery becomes overwhelmed with a preoccupation with procedures, norms and standards, as well as the employment of efficiency and cost-effectiveness as the yardstick through which organisational and social work objectives are identified (Engelbrecht 2015). Such a simplification of the social work process does not take into account the complexity of the profession's interventions.

In addition, the employment of business principles such as cost-effectiveness and standardisation minimises the human element of social work practice to the ticking of boxes; this has often been referred to as the MacDonalised processes (Ritzer 2009), whereby complex and human-centred processes are broken down into repeatable tasks and activities to produce uniform results and outputs.

Deprofessionalisation

Both globally and locally, there are growing concerns that the task of social work is being given over to less qualified or alternative professions as a means of cost-saving (Engelbrecht 2015; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). Engelbrecht (2015) highlights the growing influx of alternative professions such as child and youth care workers, social auxiliary workers (SAWs) and community development workers (CDWs) within social service delivery. While these professions are certainly valuable as complementary and supporting roles, when viewed as more cost-effective replacements of the profession, rather than additional supporting functions, a slow deskilling and blurring of professional lines begins (Engelbrecht 2015; Harlow et al. 2012).

In addition, Engelbrecht (2015) further highlights the employment of non-social workers to manage and supervise professional social workers; this is a particularly South African phenomenon. These managers often have little knowledge and understanding of the social work process and enforce business-like principles and expectations with little understanding of how these might impact upon social work interventions (Engelbrecht 2015).

It is within the context of the above emerging themes within literature that the empirical study was implemented, giving voice to the front-line social workers and managers within South African NGOs on their perceptions of the influence of neoliberal contradictions on their work and identity.

Project Methodology

Design

The study was qualitative and interpretative in its approach, understanding and interpreting a phenomenon (in this case, neoliberalism within social work practice)

through narrative, dialogue and meaning (Bryman 2012). A collective case study design was used (Gillham 2010).

Data Collection and Sampling

In-depth interviews were conducted with front-line social workers and social work managers from five purposefully selected South African social work NGOs within various fields of social service delivery. Collectively, the NGOs represented designated child-protection organisations, faith-based and family-orientated organisations, rehabilitation organisations, social development organisations, and human rights and activism-orientated organisations. The respondent sample was a total of 24 front-line social workers and social work managers.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data collected from the interviews were analysed through existing theoretical propositions, in this case, the identification of themes in literature as presented earlier in the text; these informed the explorations of the empirical study (Stake 1995; Yin 2009). Additionally, qualitative findings were analysed through the use of logic models, which involves empirically matching observed events to theoretically predicted events in literature (Yin 2009), as well as cross-case synthesis, whereby findings from each individual NGO case study across were aggregated against broader emerging themes (Yin 2009). Through this approach, several categories of findings within each identified theme were yielded and have been presented below alongside narrative excerpts.

Data Validation

The validity of the research study was strengthened through the use of pattern matching. Reliability was developed through an adequate and detailed explanation of the data collection process. Credibility was achieved through ensuring that the subject matter of the interviews and empirical analysis was accurately identified and described. The use of five different case studies, several different participants on different levels of management, and the determination of patterns helped to ensure stronger external validity and some level of transferability. Dependability was determined through establishing a research process that was logical, well-documented and audited.

Ethical Considerations

This study was bound by the general ethical code of the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP 2011), and received ethical clearance from the Department of Social Work Ethical Screening Committee at Stellenbosch University.

Research Findings

As indicated earlier in the text, the study identified four primary themes within literature that were seen as being at work within social work practice: a) marketisation, b) consumerisation, c) managerialisation, and d) deprofessionalisation. Upon reflections and critical responses from the participants on these topics, several categories for exploration within each of the four themes emerged. For the purpose of this paper, the primary and most striking results will be offered.

Theme A: The Marketisation of Social Work

Expectation for NGOs to Rely less on Government

Findings within this sub-theme suggested that social workers felt NGOs were being expected to rely less on government support and funding, and to instead procure their own funding (aside from post-based government subsidies, which were recognised by many as significantly dropping). There was an agreement that NGOs were being expected to run as private operations, despite taking on much of the welfare service rendering within the country.

Yes, there is an expectation to rely less on government support and funding, even within the NGOs themselves, it's not just from government. The attitude from NGOs is that we are too reliant on government. (Participant A, Organisation A)

There were differing opinions as to whether NGOs that rely less on the state was considered to be a negative or positive development. Not all the participants agreed on why this expectation was increasing. Some felt the government simply did not understand what it costs to do the work NGOs were undertaking, others felt it was a result of policy shifts and changes, while others argued that it was less of a purposive act by the state and rather a reflection of the current economic environment.

Findings within this sub-theme suggest, however, that the participants were almost entirely in agreement that NGOs were undertaking most of the social service delivery in South Africa and that they were doing so within an increasingly financially barren environment. While some participants highlighted that in some cases, the state was taking on or taking back NGO services (i.e. statutory work), they identified this as more of a cost-saving exercise than the state wishing to support the social work function. The participants agreed that funding from the state was lessening, while the workload and expectation of NGO output was not; the participants felt that NGOs were still taking on most of the work within the social welfare field.

I said to our National Chairperson, you did not appoint me to raise funds ... but I wasn't appointed to raise funds and neither were the social workers. Social workers should have the money to do their jobs. ... I'm not a marketer. (Participant A, Organisation A)

Of particular concern, was the limitation of state funding toward certain activities, while exerting a continuing expectation that other activities, not subsidised or supported by the government, would still be run by NGOs. It served as a contradiction to the message of NGOs needing to act as private operations; they had to do so financially, but had little control over how this affected their mandate or functional output:

In terms of the funding, they fund only child protection, but what is expected of you is to do the basket of services, and that's everything, and a huge problem for me is that ... mediation and parental rights and responsibilities is part of the children's act, but for funding purposes it's part of families, that's not part of the Children's Act ... so we do meditation but we don't get the funding for that ... We don't have a choice. (Participant K, Organisation E)

Dominance of Contractual Relationships

Alongside the expectation of NGOs to run as private operations, as well as the reduction of state funding and support, came the dominance of contractual relationships, which was of particular concern for the study participants. Specifically, the TPA between NGOs and the Department of Social Development (State) emerged as a recurring sub-theme. The participants outlined the TPA as dominating the functioning and output of NGOs, despite yielding minimal subsidiary funding. Many participants identified the TPA as creating a negative working environment for NGOs, not allowing for process and/or flexibility of definitions, nor reflecting an adequate understanding of the NGO context.

In discussions around NGO funding and output, the relationship between the NGO sector and government (the Department of Social Development), was often raised in relation to the TPA agreement and how this dominates and/or controls NGOs, their outputs and their service delivery. As articulated by Participant B and Participant A, in order to procure subsidiary funding from the state, the NGOs enter into an agreement that dictates the overall actions of the NGO:

The funding we get from government, we have a TPA, a transfer payment agreement, where they say what you must do and the amounts you must do and it's according to their criteria that you must work and you must reach those goals in order to get the funding. So now your focus is so on that, that you cannot do anymore extra, even though you want to."(Participant B, Organisation A)

They [government] are funders, but they're also referees. They make the rules and they decide how much you get. (Participant A, Organisation A)

As much as the issue of funding from the first sub-theme limited the service delivery of NGOs, so the TPA was regularly offered up by the participants as an additional restraint, creating a negative and challenging work environment. The participants attributed this to several conditions, including the reliance on statistics rather than process, limitations that the TPA imposed in terms of the type of work NGOs were financially supported to

render, and the high (and fixed) figures NGOs were expected to deliver as quantitative outputs, which placed a strain on the capacity, resources and autonomy of NGOs.

Currently, there are 13 separate statistic forms that each SW branch needs to submit to the department monthly ... it's getting totally out of hand ... what they do with it, I don't know ... nothing comes from it, according to me ... they change it constantly. (Participant D, Organisation A)

There were concerns with the rigidity of the TPA, in terms of its use of definitions, units of measurement and its understanding of the NGO context. With such rigidity, came the feeling that the TPA facilitated statistics and figures, rather than it did process and quality of work, becoming, as one participant suggested, “the ticking of boxes” and “the shooting with a shotgun.”

The participants further expressed concerns that the TPA seemed to focus predominantly on funding casework rather than macro- and community-based work. In addition, the TPA did not fund management or administration positions within NGOs; this created additional strain for social workers who often had to take on these responsibilities if funding for these positions could not be found privately.

Theme B: The Consumerisation of Social Work

Overemphasis of Individualism

Discussions within this sub-theme allowed for an in-depth exploration of what participants ultimately felt their role as social workers should be, the nature of intervention they should be implementing (versus what they could or were implementing), and how the funding and contractual challenges explored in earlier themes affected their intervention approaches. The viewpoints of the participants varied in terms of their understanding of their role as a social worker; some believed that macro-based approaches were incredibly important and should be undertaken by social workers, however, others felt that while necessary, macro work was not, in fact, the responsibility of social workers. However, the emerging consensus was that the participants simply did not have the time, capacity or funding for approaches that went beyond casework.

It's hard to do community and casework. Because sometimes we feel like, due to our caseload, we don't get to focus as much as you would need to with your clients ... Sometimes, some of these goals we don't reach with our clients due to high caseloads and trying to reach targets ... trying to accommodate everyone. (Participant O, Organisation E)

Many of the participants indicated that they were often unable to undertake community-based projects or initiatives owing to time and capacity limitations. In addition, the participants further highlighted funding and resources as a barrier to community work

and macro perspectives in intervention; the individual empowerment approach was considered to be the most feasibly effective option for social workers in practice.

It [macro work] is something that we should be doing, but if we didn't have such a big caseload, we would. When do we get time? Cause community work needs to be planned, you need to look for funding, you need to find projects ... it takes a lot of investment and time, which we don't have. (Participant O, Organisation E)

Many argued that the TPA did not necessarily encourage a macro approach or community-based interventions within the social work profession, particularly at the child protection level. Instead, statutory casework was the primary output focus.

However, what is worth highlighting is that some participants felt that social workers were choosing to remain focused on casework as a comfort zone; NGOs needed to be willing to step outside of their traditional boundaries and explore alternative options for social work practice.

Theme C: The Managerialisation of Social Work

Business Agenda within NGOs

The participants in the study identified a growing business discourse within the NGO sector. They emphasised that this discourse was taking preference to human agency, preventing social workers from being truly effective in their service rendering and interventions. Again, this was often brought back to state TPA expectations in terms of output compliance, a preoccupation with statistical results, and the time-intensity requirements of reporting for the Department of Social Development. The participants identified as being under enormous pressure to meet the number-based outputs of the TPA in order to retain their subsidiaries, as well as private funding. This was impacting on their capacity for social work interventions.

That [expectation to run as a business] we are suffering from. We have to run like a business ... financial needs. We now have to stop them from doing that, it doesn't concern you as a social worker, but now you're playing more of a management role. (Participant I, Organisation D)

Primarily, the expectation for NGOs to run as businesses seemed to come from financial constraints and motivations. This was labelled as having a negative impact on social work practice.

Efficiency and Cost-effectiveness as Yardsticks

The second sub-theme to emerge was the limitation of social work intervention within NGOs by considerations of what was cost-effective and efficient, over and above what had authentic and long-lasting impact. Funding was at the heart of much of this discussion. The participants had deep concerns about how this was affecting their

decision-making processes. For example, the participants outlined having to reconsider the value of a home-visit with clients against the availability of petrol and the cost-efficiency of alternative intervention methods, such as a telephone call.

If I need to be wherever, I need to drive with the work's car, its petrol, what is the cost? You always need to have a budget in mind in doing these things ... Even if you go into communities ... you get questioned, why were you there? Why do you drive so many kilometres? And it discourages you because you're doing your work ... And that can have a big impact on your work, you feel so discouraged, you think, oh fine, let me just do whatever I can do, you don't do the extra, you do what you are told to do. (Participant B, Organisation A)

The above narrative is extremely concerning. The limitation of over-emphasis on cost-efficiency negatively affects the work of NGOs, and social workers feel they must rigorously justify their use of resources when working with clients, families and communities. The participants expressed feeling discouraged and reluctant to undertake broader initiatives. Often the interventions that would, according to the participants, lead to the most sustainably impactful change were considered costly and inefficient.

... if you think about statistics ... always the question ... are you doing it in the most cost-effective manner? If you see these people in groups, is it more cost effective than seeing them individually? My question is again, is there sustainable change and where does sustainable change happen? (Participant H, Organisation C)

These narratives seem to correspond with the earlier presented arguments of the participants, in terms of their lack of community- and macro-based intervention. Below, for example, Participant S refers to the lack of group work interventions due to insufficient financing:

[Cost efficiency] especially comes into play when we're doing groups with our children – office doesn't have any money to really contribute to that. (Participant S, Organisation E)

Thus, casework remains the dominant intervention method simply, at times, because it is more economically feasible.

Preoccupation with Procedures, Norms and Standards

The third sub-theme which emerged in the empirical data was the concern that statistical outputs were considered more valuable than the quality of interventions. The participants raised concern that there was an overemphasis on ticking boxes, rather than on process. In turn, the minimum norms and standards laid out predominantly by the TPA, as well as other guiding policy documents within South African legislation, were also identified as placing pressure on NGOs, particularly within the context of limited funding.

Sometimes in crisis, we tend to just rush to see if the client is safe, but with procedure comes doing the necessary assessments and steps, so we are restricted by that. (Participant S, Organisation E)

This preoccupation was deemed as restricting effective interventions with service users. The participants shared that this was reducing their complex and human-oriented practice to one of ticking boxes.

I sometimes feel that we shoot with a shotgun. And whomever we hit, great stuff. And the other ones just fall out of the bus. And again, then we're ticking boxes and we're not making change ... Often to me, if you make a change in one person's life the whole year, at least you've done that ... [Or] if you say I've been working the whole year and I'm shooting with a shotgun. I've hit a few shots and I'm not quite sure if I did hit them, but at least I can tick the box. (Participant H, Organisation C)

It becomes like ticking boxes and you forget about the human factor. (Participant C, Organisation A)

Such business-orientated emphases were not only impacting the work of social workers, but in fact the mental health and well-being of the social workers themselves.

Every month, the management team is focused on, what did we achieve ... it's like you say, it's more like a business than it is to us also being human beings, getting overworked, there's very little support in overall to debrief ... just have to constantly focus on what should be done, what should be done now. (Participant S, Organisation E)

The expectation for social workers and NGOs to align with established procedures, norms and standards that did not take into account the qualitative need or impact, was often attributed to the prevalence of a top-down management culture. The participants referred to an increasing prevalence of top-down management strategies in their working environment. This was identified as being implemented often by managers who were not social workers and therefore had less understanding of the nature of social work practice and what was required for effective intervention.

Supervision has become about Management

The final sub-theme to emerge was centred on the supervision of social workers within the NGO environment. The study found that many study participants had a severe lack of supervision.

In a lot of organisations there is no supervision, really, that is the sad truth. If we work strengths-based with clients, how can we not work strengths-based with our own staff? (Participant A, Organisation A).

Here you get it [supervision] once a month when it's necessary. You go if you have a problem, that's when you get supervision, when things get too much, and sometimes it's too late because we as social workers burn out. (Participant Q, Organisation E).

For some, this lack of supervision was primarily due to a dearth of resources and funding for supervisory posts. One organisation, for example, had a single supervision position that stretched across three office branches and over 15 social workers. Thus, although there was a noted attempt to keep management and supervision functions separate, there simply was not capacity for the supervisor to undertake effective and meaningful supervision practices.

This concern was expressed by social work managers and supervisors alike. The participants acknowledge that there simply was not sufficient time or capacity to undertake effective supervision and support for front-line workers. Where supervision did exist, it had become about management activities, reviewing outputs, procedures, norms, standards and cost-efficiency measures rather than allowing a space for debrief or therapeutic support for social workers.

We're not getting to take care of the staff anymore because there is too much red-tape, there's too much paperwork ... you take less care of the human factor ... and from top structure, you are being enforced to be like that in a management position. (Participant C, Organisation A)

It's because of this load, this casework, there's too much ... there isn't really time for supervision. (Participant V, Organisation E)

Theme D: The Deprofessionalisation of Social Work

Deskilling and Reduction of Professional Discretion and Identity

There was agreement from the participants that social work was undergoing a dip in skills, discretion and identity within the NGO context. The participants referred to this as the cheapening of the profession. This was identified as stemming from several issues, including a decrease in funding and resources; management by non-social work professionals; a poor respect for the output of NGOs within the social welfare field; and insufficient training, which was often linked to an urgency to output high figures of registered social workers over and above quality.

As discussed in earlier themes, social workers are facing increasing pressure to meet set targets and statistical outputs, with less capacity for human-centred interventions. This was, some participants believed, a form of deskilling, in that it was limiting the nature of intervention work and thereby reducing what social workers were capable of doing. Many identified that within this context, the identity of the profession was poor. The neoliberal limitations of funding and management expectations were leading to a diminished sense of professional autonomy and identity. The participants felt they could no longer practice much of their training and were limited to functions, such as

fundraising, that was outside of or did not utilise their expertise. In addition, the complex practice of social work was being taken up by alternative or sub-professional groups who did not have proper training; this was further affecting the identity of the profession.

Practice Taken up by other Sub-professions

The uptake of social management positions within NGOs by non-social workers was raised in earlier themes. In addition, the introduction of sub-professions such as SAWs and CDWs was identified for some as creating a sense of identity confusion and adding to the deskilling of the social work profession. The reasons for this were varied. Some felt that SAWs and CDWs had been introduced as cheaper options for social work, requiring less training and investment, were paid a lower salary and therefore had less subsidiary impact for the state.

One of the reasons [government is giving more SAW posts], to be cost effective ... If we could choose between a social work post or a SAW post, we would perhaps rather take a SW post, but the others are cheaper. That's also a deprofessionalisation of social work, because in your NGOs, often the board would go for the cheaper option ... (Participant A, Organisation A)

Thus, although these positions were introduced as supporting sub-professions for social work practice, they were beginning to override social work employment posts, despite being unable to take up statutory-based work. This was seen as an outright deprofessionalisation of social work, disrespect to the qualification of the profession, and a poor understanding the complexity of the profession's work.

Everywhere you go, they won't give you social work posts from the department, they will give you social auxiliary worker posts, but when you're a designated child protection organisation, there is actually no work for a SAW, there's limits to what they can do. (Participant A, Organisation A).

Many argued that the poor training of these sub-professions in fact added to the workload of social workers rather than supported it. The participants expressed concerns over a blurring of professional boundaries, thereby causing confusion within the NGO context, as well as for other professional groups and the service users themselves.

A selection of participants did not agree with or echo the sentiments of the participants in the first category, but rather proposed that SAWs and CDWs were in fact helpful and supportive for the social worker. However, the participants raised concerns that clear boundaries and training differences between these sub-professions and that of social work were needed to avoid any confusion or further deprofessionalisation. This was recognised as a current issue that requires attention.

Discussion

The above empirical presentation highlights a broader set of challenges facing the social work profession within the South African NGO context. When reflected upon alongside emerging themes within literature, these findings can be understood as linking back to local (as well as global) changing narratives and expectations as a result of neoliberal contradictions and shifts. The existing conflict between these neoliberal shifts and the post-apartheid developmental agenda has resulted in the social worker navigating an often complex and compromising environment.

The findings highlighted several dilemmas within South African social work. It was evident that NGOs are struggling financially; this played a large role in the other themes. NGOs expressed deep financial challenges and concerns, limiting the ability of social work staff to render quality services to individuals, groups and communities. The restrictions of the TPA further added to this complexity. The participants felt that the TPA was creating a negative work environment, dominating NGO activities with expected outputs, targets, and high levels of reporting against a backdrop of already high caseloads and limited resources. Furthermore, the TPA was labelled as greatly restricting the work of NGOs, inhibiting the nature and process of social work intervention and narrowing complex human interventions to the ticking of boxes and inflexible definitions of successful and impactful interventions. This is a clear reflection of the marketisation of social work (Harris 2003), and the finance-centricity of social work activities (Desai 2002; Patel 2005).

Within this environment, social work has become limited to an individualised approach that does little to deal with structural and macro factors, for which it has been globally criticised (Ornellas, Spolander, and Engelbrecht 2018). Here, strong correlations with literature-based concerns on the marketisation and consumerisation of social work can be identified (Gray and Lombard 2008; Harris 2003; Sewpaul and Holscher 2004). The participants recognised that macro- and community-based work was not taking place within the NGO welfare context, indicating insufficient time, capacity, resources, and funding to undertake macro interventions. In discussing funding and resource limitations, the TPA was again raised in terms of its predominant focus on casework in its output expectations and funding restraints. The participants, however, referred to tradition as also playing a part in keeping social workers and NGOs rooted in intervention approaches they were comfortable with, particularly in terms of established NGOs which came from philanthropic and religious backgrounds. This correlates with Smith's (2014) argument that South African social work remains swayed by traditional, Western and individualised means of practice that were dominant in its foundations.

Social work and NGOs in South Africa are being increasingly expected to act as businesses and this is having a negative impact on social work intervention (Sewpaul and Holscher 2004), with a focus on reporting and statistical output, rather than process and the human quality of service delivery. Within a management framework, cost-

effectiveness and measures of the efficiency were the yardsticks for successful performance, which correlate directly with the concerns raised by Engelbrecht (2015). The intervention activities of social workers in NGOs were inhibited by what was deemed cost-effective (Harvey 2007). This often left social workers feeling defensive, discouraged and disempowered. Often group-, community- and more macro-based initiatives were considered too expensive and inefficient in terms of funder and TPA output expectations.

The business-like measurement of cost-efficiency brought into the NGO environment a preoccupation with procedures, norms, standards and the predominance of a management knowledge and agenda (Engelbrecht 2015). The participants raised concerns that outputs were considered to be more important than the quality of work, and that there was an emphasis on ticking boxes, in the hope that it would have some meaningful impact, rather than truly having the resources, time and flexibility to render sustainability of effective work that may take a longer time to yield reportable impact. This preoccupation and expectation were delivered through the dominance of a top-down management who were largely non-social workers (Engelbrecht 2015); this particularly concerned participants, and for them was the primary reason behind clashes between management and workers. Non-social work managers simply did not understand the workload or intervention nature of social work. Supervision had been largely displaced by management roles and activities (Sewpaul and Holscher 2004), and the participants experienced significant concerns as to the lack of meaningful supervision and debrief, which were affecting not only the quality of intervention delivered to the service user, but also the mental health and well-being of the social workers themselves.

Within this environment, there is a concern that the profession is facing a deskilling and reduction in discretion, autonomy and identity (Harris 2003), which were evident in the empirical results. This was attributed to several factors, including the lack of sufficient finances and resources, and the defunding of social work posts, as well as the increased pressure and red tape of the TPA. The limitations of the TPA in terms of the nature, type and scope of social work services rendered were seen as aiding the deskilling of the profession, particularly in terms of participants feeling they were restricted by TPA outputs and could not work within their full capacity or qualifications, especially with regard to more macro interventions. The introduction of SAWs and CDWs, while recognised as beneficial, was viewed as compromising professional expertise when used as cheaper alternatives (Engelbrecht 2015). This is engendering a disrespect of the professional qualification and work complexity, as well as creating confusion among other professionals and the service-user group (Harlow et al. 2012). While the participants asserted the significance of SAWs and CDWs as supporting professions, they emphasised that clear boundaries were required to avoid any confusion or the displacement of the social worker.

Concluding Remarks

The impact of marketisation, consumerisation, managerialisation and deprofessionalisation has reduced South African social work to the ticking of boxes and cost-effective standardisation of interventions, undermining the autonomy and discretion social work professionals hold within their day-to-day practice. As the complexity of social work intervention is reduced to measurable statistics, the idea that this profession can be replaced with lesser or alternatively qualified individuals (who are more cost-effective) becomes increasingly viable, with insufficient consideration for the long-term impact this may have on the communities in which social work practices.

The challenges that face the South African social work profession, particularly within the NGO context raise a crucial question: Against the backdrop of such neoliberal compromise and conflict, are social work practitioners still able to render valuable services in our communities? If not, we need to critically reflect on the current policy, ideological and practice environment in which South African social workers are being expected to intervene. One cannot recognise the value of social work while reducing its intervention to individualistic, compromised and short-term statistical output. In particular, two areas require particular attention: the funding of NGOs in terms of scope as well as return of investment expectation; and the nature of output measurement within the TPA. It can be further asserted that without sufficiently reflecting on and exploring the experiences of social workers within a neoliberal climate, the infiltration of neoliberal ideology may be overlooked and unseen, and social policy may fail to recognise and properly deal with structural challenges to NGOs, the profession and the groups they serve.

References

- ANC. 1994. Reconstruction and Development Programme: A Policy Framework. Johannesburg: African National Congress.
- Bond, P. 2000. *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bryman, A. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chetty, D. 1999. "Social Work in South Africa: Historical Antecedents and Current Challenges." *European Journal of Social Work* 2 (1): 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691459908413806>.
- Clarke, J. 2004. "Dissolving the Public Realm? The Logics and Limits of Neo-Liberalism." *Journal of Social Policy* 33 (1): 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279403007244>.
- Department of Social Development. 2016. *Comprehensive Report on the Review of the White Paper for Social Welfare*. Pretoria: Government Printers.

- Desai, A. 2002. "Neoliberalism and Resistance in South Africa." *Monthly Review* 54 (8): 16–28. https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-054-08-2003-01_3.
- Engelbrecht, L. K. 2011. "Die ACVV as Welsynspionier: Van Welsyn vir Armblankes tot Eietydse Uitdagings vir Inklusiewe Ontwikkelingsgerigte Maatskaplike Werk. (The ACVV as welfare pioneer: From welfare for poor whites to contemporary challenges for inclusive developmental social work)." *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 51 (4): 597–612. <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/86778>.
- Engelbrecht, L. K. 2015. "Revisiting the Esoteric Question: Can Non-Social Workers Manage and Supervise Social Workers?" *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 51 (3): 311–31. <https://doi.org/10.15270/51-3-451>.
- Gillham, B. 2010. *Case Study Research Methods*. London: Continuum.
- Gray, M. 1998. "Welfare Policy for Reconstruction and Development in South Africa." *International Journal of Social Work* 41 (1): 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002087289804100103>.
- Gray, M., and A. Lombard. 2008. "The Post-1994 Transformation of Social Work in South Africa." *International Journal of Social Welfare* 17:132–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2397.2007.00545.x>.
- Harlow, E., E. Berg, J. Barry, and J. Chandler. 2012. "Neoliberalism, Managerialism and the Reconfiguring of Social Work in Sweden and the United Kingdom." *Organisation* 20 (4): 534–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412448222>.
- Harris, J. 2003. *The Social Work Business*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203465004>.
- Harris, J., and P. Unwin. 2009. "Performance Management in Modernised Social Work." In *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations*, edited by J. Harris, and V. White, 9–30. Bristol: Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t895ct.6>.
- Harvey, D. 2007. "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction." *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political Science* 610 (1): 21–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206296780>.
- IFSW (International Federation of Social Workers). 2014. "Global Definition of Social Work." <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>.
- McDonald, C. 2006. *Challenging Social Work: The Institutional Context of Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Midgley, J., and A. Conley. 2010. *Social Work and Social Development: Theories and Skills for Developmental Social Work*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199732326.001.0001>.

- Miraftab, F. 2004. "Public-Private Partnerships: The Trojan Horse of Neoliberal Development?" *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 24 (1): 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X04267173>.
- Narsiah, S. 2002. "Neoliberalism and Privatisation in South Africa." *GeoJournal* 57 (1): 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026022903276>.
- National Planning Commission. 2011. *National Development Plan 2030. Our Future – Make it Work*. The Presidency.
- Ntebe, A. 1994. "Effective Intervention Roles of South African Social Workers in an Appropriate, Relevant and Progressive Social Welfare Model." *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 9 (1): 41–50.
- Ornellas, A. 2018. "Social Workers' Reflections on Implications of Neoliberal Tenets for Social Work in South African Non-Governmental Organisations." PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University.
- Ornellas, A., G. Spolander, and L. K. Engelbrecht. 2018. "The Global Social Work Definition: Ontology, Implications and Challenges." *Journal of Social Work* 18 (2): 222–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316654606>.
- Patel, L. 2005. *Social Welfare and Social Development*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Patel, L., and T. Hochfeld. 2013. "Developmental Social Work in South Africa: Translating Policy into Practice." *International Social Work* 56 (5): 690–704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872812444481>.
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *Growth, Employment and Redistribution: A Macro-Economic Strategy (GEAR)*. Pretoria: Ministry of Finance.
- Republic of South Africa. 1997a. *White Paper for Social Welfare. Government Gazette No. 18166*. Pretoria: Department of Welfare and Population Development.
- Republic of South Africa. 1997b. *Nonprofit Organisations Act, 1997 (Act No. 71 of 1997)*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Ritzer, G. 2009. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press.
- SACSSP (South African Council for Social Service Professions). 2011. *Policy Guidelines for Course of Conduct, Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers*. SACSSP.
- Sewpaul, V., and D. Holsher, eds. 2004. *Social Work in Times of Neoliberalism: A Postmodern Discourse*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

- Smith, L. 2014. "Historiography of South African Social Work: Challenging Dominant Discourses." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 50 (3): 305–31. <https://doi.org/10.15270/50-3-402>.
- Spolander, G., L. K. Engelbrecht, and A. Pullen-Sansfacon. 2015. "Social Work and Macro-Economic Neoliberalism: Beyond the Social Justice Rhetoric." *European Journal of Social Work* <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.1066761>.
- Stake, R. E. 1995. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. 2009. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Xaba, T. 2014. "From Public-Private Partnerships to Private-Public Stick 'em ups! NGOism, Neoliberalism, and Social Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *International Social Work* 58 (2): 309–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872813497385>.