

A Review of ‘That Child Support Grant Gives Me Powers’-- Exploring Social and Relational Aspects of Cash Transfer in South Africa in Times of Livelihood Change

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1. Project overview

In the light of declining employment for low-skills workers and the deterioration of agrarian livelihoods in post-apartheid South Africa, government grants such as the Child Support Grant (CSG) has become a reliable source of income for impoverished households in rural South Africa. CSG is a modest social grant (USD 33 per children per month) that is given to primary caregivers (all women) of children under 18 years. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which CSG produce “micro-level” transformative social effects on women in a rural village called Cutwini in the Eastern Cape of South Africa (one of the poorest areas in the country). Residents in Cutwini are mostly unemployed and about 85% of all households receive CSG since 2002. CSG is a regular and predictable source of monthly income for most of these impoverished households.

This is an exploratory study that seeks to answer the following research question: *What is the perceived social effects of CSG on women living in rural South Africa—does CSG have transformative social implications for women on three different levels: individual (feeling of dignity and independence), intra-household (gender and inter-generational relations), and community (solidarity and reciprocity)?*

The authors point out that there have been many quantitative studies on the impact of unconditional cash transfer, but most of these studies only focus on material benefits. In contrast, there is a paucity of qualitative studies that focus on the direct experiences of cash transfer. To fill this gap, the authors believe that this study can identify the potential benefits of cash transfer beyond material benefits—for example, the expansion of women’s autonomy and improved social trust. These subjective transformations might themselves be perceived by women as “resources” that are as valuable as material wealth. As cash transfer have become an ubiquitous poverty reduction strategy, this study will provide a more holistic view on the benefits of cash transfer on the impoverished in South Africa.

2. Sampling

The rural village Cutwini was likely chosen as the focus of the study because it is representative of other poor regions in South Africa (as described in other studies referenced by the authors) with high unemployment and low agricultural activity. For triangulation purposes, women who were 19 to 60 years old and who received 1-7 CSGs were purposively sampled for in-depth interviews. There was likely some informality/flexibility in the sampling process—the authors had to seek out women in the village (the study population) who are willing to talk to them, while at the same time ensuring that there is a variety of interviewees in terms of age and the number of grants received. In all, 33 in-depth interviews were conducted. The sample size was likely driven by time and budget constraints. In addition, the authors likely stopped interviewing once theoretical saturation was achieved.

3. Measurement

First, the authors collected information from CSG beneficiaries through in-depth interviews. Although these interviews were semi-structured, they revolved around the following:

1. **The subjective experience of receiving the CSG at the individual level.** Common responses include increased autonomy, agency, independence, dignity/respect (*isidima* in the local language), and social recognition.
2. **Perceived changes at the intra-household level.** This includes relationship with the husband, household power dynamics, and inter-generational relations (relationship with elder relatives). For example, most women reported increased decision-making power in the household from

having regular income and thus the ability to contribute to the needs of the entire household. For some women, they also perceived that their husband had feelings of shame because of losing his identity as the breadwinner of the family. Women also reported improved relations with older relatives because they are less dependent on them (for money and food).

3. **Perceived changes in community level relationships.** This includes changes in solidary and reciprocity in the village. For example, most women perceived improved reciprocity and social networks because CSG allows them to participate in rotating savings and credit schemes.

Second, the above questions and themes were partly “inspired” by previous studies in sub-Saharan Africa (referenced by the authors) on the effects of cash transfer on “micro-level subjective well-being” and the social power of the beneficiaries within the family and the community. In addition, it is likely that the authors used data from previous household surveys to understand the demographics and economy of Cutwini and the Eastern Cape. Thus, the authors used secondary data (archival research) to inform their study. Third, the authors also mentioned collecting information through informal conversations with people in the community (though no further details were given). This might be a form of “design flexibility” exercised by the authors that allowed them to collect information more efficiently (ex: ask people where to find women of a certain age).

4. Methods of data analysis

Unfortunately, the author made no mention of how they organized and processed the notes/transcription from the in-depth interviews, and how they performed thematic analysis of the interview texts. This reduces the confirmability of the results (since other researchers cannot evaluate whether the analysis had bias or distortion). It is also hard for other researchers to assess the extent to which the conclusions are believable (more on this in Section 5). That said, for *a few selected interview excerpts*, the authors described how they are suggestive evidence for the benefits of CSG. For example, the authors quoted “raw” interview excerpts that suggest positive effects of CSG on *isidima* (one’s dignity/respect). The authors provided the larger narrative context of the quote and described the colloquialisms that were used. Crucially, the authors provided an analysis of the quote: the interviewee attributes power and dignity to the CSG, which comes from a sense of recognition of her as a “person” in the community because she can help others in times of need. Interestingly, non-verbal cues such as “with pause” and “with strong emphasis” was denoted in the raw text. This shows that non-verbal cues can be an important source of information. In sum, although a few selected quotes were analyzed in the paper, more can be done to increase the creditability of the study. Without access to the entire set of interview texts and a description of the process in which themes were identified, I would have doubts on the analysis because it is possible that the authors only selectively presented certain quotes to support their prior beliefs.

5. Credibility of the study and recommendations

Although the authors seek multiple data sources (women 19-60 years old with different number of grants), I feel that the creditability of the study could be improved if the authors also interviewed other members of the household and community. For example, the authors can interview the husband and get his perspective on whether CSG created new sources of conflict within the household, and to confirm whether the CSG causes “shame” for not being the main bread-winner in the family. Although the authors mentioned “informal conversations” with the people in Cutwini, they did not provide details on the conversation and the new knowledge/insights that were gained. I think that additional interviews with other members of the community (ex: religious leaders, money lenders) and NGO staffs

that facilitate the rotating savings program would provide a more complete picture on whether CSG improved social trust and solidarity within the community. Since the amount of CSG is small, it is possible that the effects on the community might be more limited than perceived by the beneficiaries of CSG. Aside from data sources, I feel that the authors did not triangulate with multiple methods—they only relied on secondary data and in-depth interviews. It would be interesting if the authors employed other methods such as focus group discussions (FGDs) with women of different age groups. FGDs can be used to focus less on individuals' experiences and more on assessing the general consensus experience amongst the women beneficiaries. I feel that this is especially useful for questions related to intra-household and community relations. In sum, I feel that the triangulation of data sources and methods can be improved.

As mentioned previously, the methods for data collection and analysis was not very transparent in this study. First, it is unclear whether the interviews were performed by the authors themselves or outsourced to a research agency. The settings in which the interviews took place were also not described—it is conceivable that the women were interviewed in the presence of her husband and/or other members of the household (ex: older relative). If so, this can introduce bias/distortion in the results and thus reduce the credibility of the study. Second, the content analysis method was also not described—with the exception of a few selected excerpts, it is unclear as to how the authors processed the data from the 33 in-depth interviews and derived insights/common themes from them. That said, it is also possible that the content analysis is a form of “tacit knowledge”—things that the authors know how to do but hard to codified and communicate. For example, the authors might know how to derive insights and identify themes from the interview transcripts “more than they can tell”, and thus the process was not described in detail in the paper. For this reason, despite the lack of details on the content analysis, I think the results are creditable to a certain extent. For the several selected quotes that were presented in the paper, the authors drew insights and made conclusions about the effect of CSG on the women in a logical and convincing way.

I have several recommendations to improve the credibility and dependability of the study. First, the authors should be more transparent on the data collection and content analysis methods. This would allow this study to be replicated elsewhere (ex: in a rural village in Lesotho) and make the conclusions of the study more believable. Second, the credibility of the study can be further improved by interviewing other members of the household (ex: husbands) and other members of the community. These additional interviews can be used to corroborate the views expressed by the women on the effect of CSG on intra-household and community relations. For the purpose of triangulation, FGD can be conducted with women of different age groups to identify a consensus experience of CSG. However, I understand that FGD is logistically challenging and requires good facilitation to guide discussions towards key questions/topics. Also, additional interviews might not be feasible for a small research team with limited budget and time.

In sum, I believe that many of the detail insights in this study (ex: the positive perceived effect on a woman's dignity from CSG because she can contribute to the household/community and therefore be treated as a “person”) could not have been otherwise obtained from quantitative data. This study opened my eyes to qualitative methods and their ability to probe into messy and seemingly intractable relationships in the real world.

References

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Post-Script A

The results from the quantitative study (assignment 1) and qualitative study (assignment 2) on the effects of unconditional cash transfer reminds me of an evaluation that was done in another industry—flight simulation.

- *Flight simulators are robotic platforms that are used to train pilots. Since it is very expensive for pilots to train on an actual aircraft, they are trained instead on flight simulators. However, the cockpit, aircraft systems and the response of the aircraft to pilot inputs must be “realistic” enough so that 1 training hour in the simulator can be considered as equivalent to 1 training hour on an actual aircraft.*
- *There are two ways to evaluate the “realism” of a simulator (as required by an aircraft certification authority like the FAA in the US). One is to use quantitative methods that essentially match simulation output data (roll, pitch, yaw, angle of attack, engine thrust) to actual aircraft data in various use-cases (landing, takeoff, climb etc..).*
- *However, usually a more critical factor in deciding whether a simulator gets certified is qualitative data from the test/evaluation pilot. They will do a takeoff/approach and they will be “interviewed” by the certification authority on various factors that are hard to measured quantitatively (force feedback of the controls, slight delay in the response of the aircraft after pilot input, the vibration of the landing gear as aircraft touches down, the overall “handling” of the aircraft).*
- *The quantitative tests provide a general assessment of the simulator (which engineers are generally overly obsessive about) but the qualitative test provides a deeper assessment on the fidelity of the simulator and have a decisive influence on whether it gets certified or not. Perhaps the same is true for evaluation of cash transfer programs—results from RCTs is important and they establish causality, but they do not capture the whole picture. As the result, solely relying on quantitative results means important benefits/adverse side-effects of the program might never be understood. For example, imagine if the cash grant in this paper actually leads to increased domestic violence and deterioration of inter-generational relationships – perhaps these negative impacts (invisible from quantitative study) out-weights the benefits of cash transfer.*

