

Exploring the tensions of sustaining economic empowerment of persons with disabilities through open labour market employment in the Cape Metropole

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) who enter and exit employment at a company in the Cape Metropole of the Western Cape Province in South Africa. The aim of the study was to explore the factors which cause PWDs to remain in or leave employment in the open labour market. The literature review will consider the concepts of disability, poverty and economic empowerment. A collective case study was used and in-depth interviews with five disabled employees were analysed to generate categories and sub-categories from the data. Two themes are discussed, namely "I can say I got a home, it's a home to me" and "Disability in the workplace: a double-edged sword". The themes represent findings that revealed that money earned through employment motivated the participants and improved their independence, self-sufficiency and their contribution to society. Simultaneously though, it was found that earning an income caused increased stress for the participants, due to the effects that it had on their eligibility for a disability grant. The paper concludes by giving recommendations concerning economic empowerment of PWDs in the context of the social security grant.

Key words: disability, economic empowerment, employment

Introduction

Levels of unemployment amongst PWDs became an international focus when the United Nations adopted the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for PWDs in 1994¹, and subsequently through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006 (UNCRPD)². Globally, governments were urged to develop laws and regulations related to employment that do not discriminate against PWDs and to eliminate obstacles to their employment.

The apartheid regime of South Africa (1948 – 1994) was fraught with the legacy of inequality, which permeated all spheres of society, including the field of work. As a result of transformative efforts by the post-apartheid South African government, laws and their supporting documents that address these inequalities, were developed (Employment Equity Act of 1998³; Code of Good Practice on Key Aspects of Disability in the Workplace, 2001⁴). The integration of PWDs into all spheres of society was also given special attention through the White Paper on the Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS)⁵ which addresses the challenges faced by PWDs within the South African context. This INDS suggests that PWDs are more likely than other people to be poor because of the strong relationship between disability and poverty. It, furthermore, states that disability *reinforces* and *deepens* poverty. The INDS proposes that creating equal opportunity for PWDs in the open labour market would break this cycle of disability and poverty.

In response to the INDS, the provincial government of the Western Cape developed the Integrated Provincial Disability Strategy (IPDS) in 2002⁶ to address the issue of disability in the province. The IPDS identifies economic empowerment of PWDs as a key policy issue in the Western Cape and proposes that protective workshops for PWDs be transformed into viable and sustainable units of economic empowerment.

The Department of Labour also published a Technical Assistance Guideline on the Employment of People with Disabilities in 2003⁷, which offers practical advice on how to accommodate PWDs in the workplace. In 2003, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act⁸ was introduced, prescribing how economic empowerment should be established in South Africa for previously disadvantaged groups such as PWDs, black people and women. The Act aims to increase the number of PWDs who will

manage, own and control enterprises and productive assets, as well as achieve equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels of work.

It is clear that the Provincial government provides a legislative framework for integrating PWDs into the open labour market. However, when the level and nature of unemployment of PWDs is scrutinised, it shows that to date their efforts have met with limited success. The National government also responded in a proactive manner regarding the issue of PWDs and employment, as demonstrated through the many laws and documents that address their needs at a legislative and policy level. As part of the proposed national and provincial strategies, the Department of Social Services and Poverty Alleviation attempts to address poverty amongst PWDs through a social security system.

While considering the abovementioned laws and documents, the UNCRPD² will be the main instrument guiding public policy in realising the human rights of PWDs, allowing them to assume full responsibility as members of society. The INDS⁵ rightfully states, though, that translating the human rights of PWDs into specific measures and programmes such as those suggested above, remains a major challenge. This paper explores the nature of some of the challenges in sustaining the right to work and employment linked to the tensions of earning a salary and being productive compared to just receiving a disability grant.

As equalising opportunity for PWDs in the employment arena is an objective of the Employment Equity Act³, the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of PWDs who enter and exit employment in a particular open labour market setting. The purpose of the study was to explore those factors that cause them to remain in or leave employment. It became clear throughout the study though that the dynamics of the social security system in South Africa cannot be ignored as a factor that influences employment opportunities for PWDs.

Literature review

Previous studies and literature related to disability, poverty and unemployment were reviewed to inform the focus of data gathering for this research. These factors were identified as having significant influence on sustainable economic empowerment. The relationship between these different aspects is given here.



Disability and poverty

The relationship between poverty and disability is evident: the one condition generally perpetuates the other^{9,10,11,12,13}. Allowing PWDs to become economically active by entering into employment, could counter the effects of poverty. However, such opportunities are restricted.

Insufficient food resources expose poor people to hunger and makes them vulnerable to illness, and disease, while they have less access to treatment because of associated high medical costs and poor accessibility to services⁹. They tend to be exposed to danger in the environment for lack of security or are unable to protect themselves. Poor people who become employed are more likely to have low-paid, insecure or dangerous jobs which may generate insufficient income to sustain a household. They expose themselves to a high risk of injury, which, in turn, could lead to disability¹⁰. On the other hand, PWDs are "pushed into poverty" because they are either unable or not allowed to contribute towards the generation of income in a household, or they are over protected. Fourie, Galvaan and Beeton¹¹ agree that poverty poses serious risk factors to health, which are compounded by disability. The opportunities for PWDs to become economically empowered through work are, therefore, restricted in different ways, namely, through ill health and malnutrition or lack of knowledge and capacity to gain access to employment. Coleridge also found that disability creates and exacerbates poverty by increasing isolation and economic strain¹². Stone¹³ conceded that impairments are created and compounded through poverty in terms of restricted access to resources, basic health care, adequate nutrition and appropriate support. She identified denial of access to education, employment, training and involvement in decision making as ways that PWDs experience impoverishment. To counter the effects of poverty on disabled communities, the South African government utilises the social security system as one of its vehicles.

A social security system to counter poverty

The social security system allows for state grants to be paid out to various beneficiaries based on a set of criteria¹⁴. The disability grant, awarded to PWDs who are unable to work as a result of their disability, is one of these grants. According to the Social Assistance Act¹⁴, a person is entitled to a disability grant while he or she is unable to work. Should the person's ability or employment status change, the person is required to declare this to the Department of Social Development and the grant will be revoked, either in part or completely, depending upon the person's income level. The Department, in 2004, reported on the social and economic impact of the social security system in South Africa and stated that "South Africa's system of social security successfully reduces poverty"¹⁵. What they could not deny though, is that social security grants may encourage a household response that impedes job search. The disability grant's effect on poverty and unemployment amongst PWDs is, therefore, a focus of this paper.

Disability and unemployment

Oliver¹⁶ found that PWDs fare worse than other people in terms of employment, in that fewer of them are employed, fewer have high earnings, they work more hours to secure the same earnings as non-disabled workers and slightly fewer have good working conditions. PWDs are, therefore, "trapped in a situation of unemployment, underemployment and poverty". Kitchin, Shirlow and Shuttleworth¹⁷ agreed with Oliver. They identified three main consequences of excluding PWDs from the labour market: firstly, PWDs are denied the right to work and support themselves; secondly, extra living costs such as the cost of medication or physical adaptations have either to be met by PWDs themselves or the state; and lastly, social security payments to support PWDs are expensive and in many cases not adequate to maintain the basic, minimum standard of living.

In the Western Cape province of South Africa, 18,5% of the reported numbers of PWDs (186 579) are employed in the open labour market¹⁸. This means that 72,38% of PWDs of working age

(132 471) are unemployed in this province. These statistics are accentuated against the backdrop of national statistics, stating that in 2002, designated employers reported that only 1% of the total South African workforce consisted of PWDs¹⁹. Five years earlier, in 1997, the INDS reported the same statistic, indicating that the unemployment rate among PWDs had not improved⁵.

The relationship that clearly exists between disability, poverty and unemployment, and specifically its perpetual nature, form a downward spiral in which PWDs are trapped, as depicted by Engelbrecht in 2006²⁰(Figure 1).

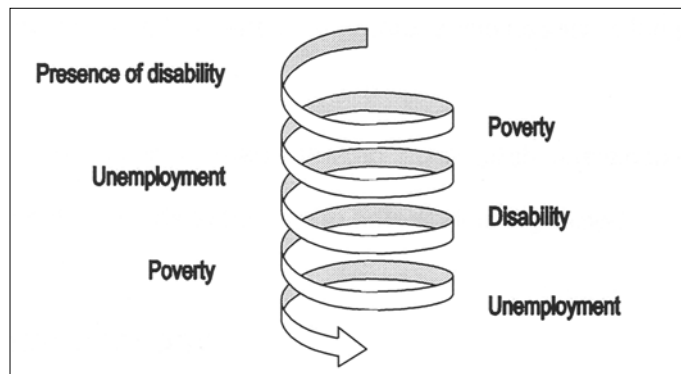


Figure 1: A downward spiral created by the deprivation trap²⁰

The need arises for a means to break this cycle which renders PWDs disempowered and poor. The concept of sustainable economic empowerment warrants exploration as a possible method to break the vicious cycle.

Disability and sustainable economic empowerment

Neath and Schriener describe the concept of empowerment as "an acquiring of power"²¹. They indicate that employment provides employees with power over others, albeit to different degrees depending on the job. In the context of PWDs, sustainable economic empowerment would thus provide opportunities for them to generate money and exercise discretion in spending money on an ongoing basis. Access to an income would enable PWDs to fulfill their basic needs and access services such as transport, education and health, thus providing a means for them to break the cycle of poverty and disability.

Economical empowerment through work means being able to participate and contribute in the labour market. Oliver¹⁶ argued that PWDs should be made more employable by changing the social organisation of work through the removal of architectural barriers, non-discrimination and affirmative action programs. He supports the idea of changing the work environment to accommodate a PWD, rather than molding the PWD to fit into the work environment, thus ensuring greater sustainability of the person's economic empowerment.

The literature review has identified the factors influencing the economic empowerment of disabled people, with particular focus on poverty and unemployment. The methodology of the study will now be described.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of people with disabilities entering and leaving the open labour market and the reasons behind their experiences.

A *qualitative research approach* was followed, to demonstrate the assumption that someone's subjective experiences are real and should be taken seriously²². A *collective case study* design allowed the researcher to do an in-depth analysis of cases where participants had entered and left employment.

The study population consisted of PWDs who were previously employed by the company, and those who were employed by the company at the time of the study. Purposive sampling was used to select five study participants: three of which were current employees at the time, and two ex-employees of the company. The

latter participants were, at the time of the study, unemployed, after having left the company when their contracts ended.

The employing company

The vision and mission of the company that participated in the study reflects its commitment to the economic empowerment of PWDs²³. This company strives towards enabling PWDs to succeed in the open labour market, while their desired outcome is for their employees to become economically productive and independent through their employment at the company.

The company has been employing PWDs since 1997. Currently, 69% (435) of persons employed by the company have disabilities²⁴. The company operates within a specific sector of industry in South Africa, namely, the Temporary Employment Service (TES) industry, and provides contract labour to a variety of industries.

The first author gathered the data using in-depth individual interviews and reflective journaling. The interviews were conducted in English and Afrikaans, recorded on audio-tape and transcribed as the first step of analysis. After each transcription, or part thereof, the content was reflected on as well as the process of transcribing. After reading the data a further two or three times, codes and categories that emerged from each interview were identified. Substantiating comments or evidence from interviews were noted next to categories to serve as a reference to the particular interview where the category presented, as well as to contextualise the comment. All categories were summarised and grouped together to look for emerging themes. Afrikaans interview data was translated into English for the purpose of reporting the findings. To enhance research rigour, the strategies as proposed by Krefting²⁵ were used. Member checking and reflexivity ensured the credibility of the findings. To enhance transferability rich, descriptive data of the circumstances and context of the participants and study were provided, and ensured dependability through the keeping of meticulous records of the study process. Confirmability was ensured by carefully documenting the checking and re-checking of data, as well as through reflective discussions with an expert practitioner with a shared interest in the study data and methodology.

Ethical approval was obtained for the study from the Research Ethic Committee at the University of Cape Town.

Findings

For the purpose of this paper, reference will be made to two of the four themes that emerged from the data, to illustrate issues around economic empowerment of PWDs in particular.

Theme I: "I can say I got a home, it's a home to me"

This theme reported on the participants' experiences of factors in the workplace that enabled them to successfully enter into and perform in the open labour market. They identified aspects of the company itself and its operations which contributed to their success. Earning an income was perceived as an enabler in employment.

Earning money as an enabler in employment

One participant mentioned repeatedly how receiving an income enabled him to become independent, self-sufficient and to contribute to society, at his household level. From the following quote, it is clear that earning a salary had changed his life for the better, and that remuneration received for his work had motivated him to be productive in the open labour market.

Yes, miss, here I can at least buy myself clothes, miss, I can at least look after myself, miss. I've never done this before, miss, but I can at least, how do they say, pay the board, miss ...now that is nice for me, miss, to be able to give something at home, miss ... (N, 19 April 2006)

Another participant commented on the positive impact of the salary on her motivation, by referring to the company's policy of payment based on production. She thereby demonstrated her understanding of the parallels between her level of productivity and her income.

I feel good because as you work hard, you gonna earn more ... (G, 5 April 2006)

Theme II: Disability in the workplace: a double-edged sword

A further theme emerged describing factors that enabled participants to enter into and retain employment, factors that hindered them from entering into and retaining employment, as well as their reactions and perceptions in response to enablers and hindrances. This theme considered dualities in some of the aspects that participants have already identified as either positive or negative influences in their work experiences. Included in this theme was the aspect of money as a stressor.

Earning money as a stressor

One participant commented on the pressures that earning a salary, and the subsequent loss of his disability grant, brings into his life.

Well, you see now that I've lost my disability it's an important role [that money plays], because I've got to work, and I don't get a disability to help me pay my way anymore, I gotta pay my own way. I've got to work for my living. You know I'm not relying on the government anymore, I rely on myself. (K, 8 May 2006)

Linked to the anxieties brought by earning an income and losing a grant, is the strong need for permanency and security in a job. Participants expressed this need against the backdrop of the company's business model, which only offers contract-based work.

First of all in my view, if you can put us in a permanent job. (G, 3 May 2006)

My aim, miss, is to get in deeper, to work here permanently, miss. That is what I would like, my only desire, miss. (N, 10 March 2006)

Here, participants offered evidence of contrary views to those expressed in the first theme, when they acknowledged the fact that an active income can hamper their experience of employment in the open labour market. In the discussion that follows, these contradictions will be considered together with the influence of a disability grant on the experiences of PWDs who work in the open labour market.

Discussion

Economic empowerment has been defined as the generation of money and the exercise of discretion in spending that money²¹. Participants of this study described the receipt of money for work, that is, a salary, as a liberating event, affording them independence, a feeling of self-sufficiency and enabling them to contribute towards their households as an active member. They have, therefore, been economically empowered by their entry into the labour market. However, participants described another effect of earning an income and the dynamics that this introduced into their lives. They referred in particular to the disability grant that forms part of the social security system in South Africa.

One of the participants explained how his grant was revoked when he started earning a salary. This event changed his outlook on his job, in that job security and permanency became much more important to him. He subsequently experienced anxiety on a monthly basis because the security that the grant provided was removed. This participant had experienced the empowering effect of earning an income, but also the weight of its responsibility.

In South Africa, it is illegal for someone to receive a disability grant while earning an income¹⁴. Howard²⁶, writing from an American perspective, shows the complexities that PWDs face because of this legality: in order to obtain a disability grant, a person has to prove his/her inability to work. Should the person be able to work though, but cannot find employment, the presence of an impairment entitles him or her to the grant. The reason for this contradiction in terms is the fact that disability grants in South Africa are allocated based on a medical practitioner's report¹⁴ and are steeped within a medical model of disability.

The report by the Department of Social Development¹⁵ conceded that social security grants may encourage household responses that impede job searching efforts. Howard²⁶ agrees that the "rules



and structure of incapacity benefits can create a disincentive to work, stemming largely from the need to maintain 'incapacity' as the basis for entitlement, generating considerable fear of losing [the] benefit". The participants of this study sought employment despite receiving a grant from the state, meaning that they were not dissuaded to do so by the restrictions of the law. Their failure, in some cases, to declare their worker status and waive their entitlement to a disability grant, caused them to defraud the social security system though. Their economic empowerment, as it is understood within the context of this study, was therefore incomplete. The question, therefore, arises about the impact of the social security system on the actual economic empowerment of PWDs.

Seemingly, a number of options exist for PWDs when an opportunity to enter employment presents itself. Engelbrecht²⁰ shows these options in the form of a flow diagram (Figure 2).

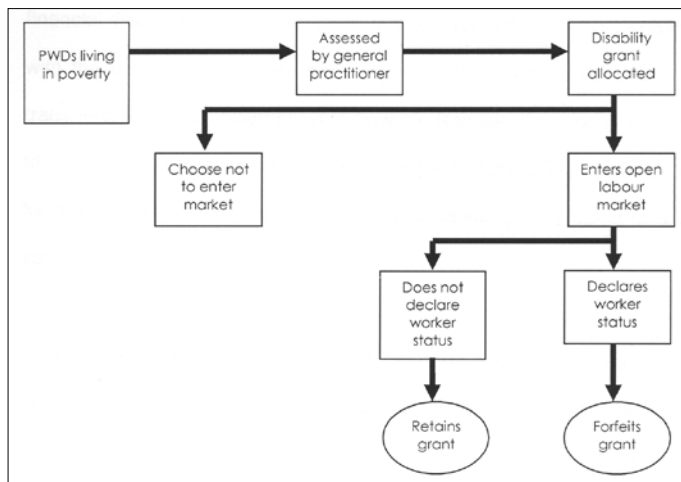


Figure 2: Options presented to PWDs who are eligible for a disability grant²⁰

A PWD who can work may choose not to enter into employment because of the risk of losing his/her disability grant. As a consequence this person remains economically unproductive because of the legalities and constraints of the social security system. A second scenario sees the PWD who receives a disability grant entering into employment but not declaring his/her change of employment status to the relevant parties, for fear of forfeiting the grant. This person, therefore, continues to receive a grant, as well as a monthly salary, and in so doing, defeats the purpose of the grant, namely, to provide a source of income for people who cannot work. In a third case, the PWD forfeits the disability grant as he/she enters into employment and becomes wholly dependent upon a monthly salary. The majority of participants in this study opted for the second scenario.

Turton²⁷ examined the financial implications for people with mental health problems as they moved from welfare to work. Considering the UK welfare benefit system, which proves to be more elaborate and extensive than its South African counterpart, Turton found that there are still few circumstances that make a move into paid work financially viable. He highlights financial disincentives, income insecurity and restrictive rules as common problems associated with the welfare system. He concludes that the disincentive effects created by this system, traps PWDs in unemployment and poverty. Roessler²⁸ supports this in his review of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of the USA. He found that the primary concern for many social security recipients is the perceived cost of going to work ("go to work and lose your cheque").

It would seem that the interchange between economic empowerment and social security systems is less than optimal. It could be argued that the social security system, in the form of the disability grant, provides a foundation for PWDs to seek work though, as it provides security and a base on which to build an income.

Conclusion and recommendations

Evidence from the findings of this study and supporting literature, showed that the level of economic empowerment facilitated by

entry into employment, is questionable. The positive effects of finding employment as a PWD in the open labour market, is negated by the dependence upon a social security grant that was cultivated over extended periods of time. The relationship between the South African social security system and economic empowerment for PWDs, therefore, needs to be revised if the latter is to be achieved through the implementation of the relevant legislative regulations and guidelines.

In the USA, an initiative called Ticket to Work was implemented to reduce the cost for PWDs to return to work²⁸. The ticket affords PWDs access to an approved network of service providers, including vocational rehabilitation agencies, career centres, public or private schools and employers. A study done in the UK recommended allowing PWDs to retain their benefits whilst in work, but paying 50% tax on their earnings. This recommendation was made against the backdrop of benefits that go beyond a monetary grant, for example, housing benefits²⁷. In South Africa, it would be worthwhile for different government departments (housing, education, transport) to collaborate on the non-monetary benefits for PWDs, with the explicit objective of facilitating them into open labour market employment thus enabling them to exercise their right to work.

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