

Understanding Social Workers' Well-Being through Their Valued Aspirations

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Abstract

Recent studies across various contexts have shown that social workers' well-being or lack thereof affects their ability to advance social well-being. This is even more marked in a context such as South Africa in which social workers often function with very few resources and in contexts of extreme poverty. Using the capability approach, this qualitative study deals with the question of social workers' well-being. It focuses on social workers' aspirations, the ideals to which they aspire as a window to understanding their well-being as professionals. Drawing from interviews with practising social workers and social work students from a South African university, the study (a) examines social workers' understanding of professional well-being, (b) identifies social workers' aspirations and their connection to well-being achievement, and (c) outlines the necessary opportunities for the achievement of social workers' valued aspirations. By paying particular attention to social workers' aspirations, this article proposes a much broader understanding of social workers' well-being than is possible when we focus on individual aspects of professionals' well-being such as physical health or positive psychological functioning. The findings suggest that, apart from physical and emotional wellness, social workers understand their well-being in terms of achieving their valued aspirations, namely, effective helping, professional growth, personal growth, and material achievements. The study identifies several capabilities necessary for social workers' professional well-being.

Keywords: aspirations, capabilities, functionings, social workers, well-being

Introduction

This article focuses on social workers' (SWs) aspirations and the way in which they relate to their well-being as professionals. Aspirations, the ideals to which one aspires, are crucial to understanding SWs' conception of professional well-being. They tell us what they value in life. This broad conception of professional well-being departs from the way in which scholars have largely approached this issue. When scholars examine professional well-being, they often focus on SWs' emotional health. They highlight the challenges faced by SWs and the way in which they adversely affect their emotional or mental health (Coyle et al. 2005; Gilbar 1998; Kim, Ji, and Kao 2011). These studies point to the nexus between the health of individual professionals and their ability to provide care to their clients. A significant number of these studies suggest that secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and burnout are signs of psychological ill-being (Bride 2007; Hesse 2002; McCann and Pearlman 1990). This mostly reflects the nature of the social work profession. As helping professionals and emotional labourers, SWs often work with traumatised clients and are therefore exposed to secondary or vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue (Adams, Boscarino, and Figley 2006; Sprang, Clark, and Whitt-Woosley 2007). The focus on SWs' emotional health is important, but also leaves us with a very narrow understanding of their well-being as helping professionals. This study sought to reconstruct and widen the world view that individuals primarily have on what constitutes the well-being of SWs by focusing on SWs' aspirations.

The study objectives are to:

- explore SWs' understanding of their professional well-being;
- identify SWs' aspirations and their connection to achieving well-being; and
- identify the necessary opportunities for the achievement of SWs' valued aspirations.

Aspirations and Well-Being

Aspirations, as Conradie (2013) states, evoke the idea of a person's life dreams; how individuals, including professionals such as SWs could have a "good life" with the resources of health, material benefits, creativity and agency they have. They speak to ideals, ambitions, preferences, wants, choices, calculations and longings (Appadurai 2004; Copestake and Camfield 2010). Aspirations are multidimensional and contextually formed (Ray 2006). They are never individual (Hart 2016; Ray 2006). Mkwanzani (2017) identifies four forms: resigned, powerful, persistent and frustrated aspirations. Resigned aspirations speak of the opportunities which are not taken up owing to both internal and external factors. Powerful aspirations are the ones that are taken up. Persistent aspirations are those that persevere against negative forces.

Frustrated aspirations are the ones that are given up (Genicot and Ray 2017; Mkwanzani 2017).

Individuals' experiences and the social environment influence the nature and formation of aspirations (Genicot and Ray 2017). The community or people who are mostly similar to us therefore determine what we put on our life goals list. This also applies to the context of social work practice. Practitioners look at people around them and those people's experiences and achievements shape their desires and future goals. Ray (2006) vividly captures this idea when he talks about the aspiration window. The aspiration window, he states, "is formed from an individual's cognitive world, her zone of 'similar', 'attainable' individuals" (Ray 2006, 409). In this regard, individuals including SWs, draw their life goals from the lives, achievements, or ideals of those who occupy their aspiration window. For Ray, this scenario has to do with information flow or the fact that individuals use their peers or those close to them to make comparisons or life targets. For instance, the longing for good life qualities such as being happy and healthy prevail in every society. These tend to be collapsed into more densely local ideas about work, respectability, recognition and dignity among other things (Appadurai 2004; Ray 2006). Depending on one's place in the socio-economic hierarchy, different aspirations may complement each other (Ray 2006).

In explaining what determines the nature of one's choice when investing in a particular life goal, Ray (2006) introduces the concept of the aspiration gap. An aspiration gap is the difference between one's aspired standard of living and the one they already have. It is a measure of how far one wants to go. This gap determines the amount of effort one puts into achieving certain aspirations. For instance, an individual feels encouraged to invest in or pursue an aspiration if their life goals are moderately above the current standard of living. Contrary to that, a bigger or much smaller aspiration gap can lead to frustration (Genicot and Ray 2017). Both a large and a small aspiration gap "may be inimical to investment effort to better one's own conditions" (Ray 2006, 409; see also Bernard, Taffesse, and Dercon 2008; Flechtner 2014).

Aspirations: A Capabilities Perspective

Aspirations, as Hart (2016) notes, widen our understanding of what individuals' valued states of being and doing are. As Conradie and Robeyns (2013) observe, it is during the process of voicing and reflecting upon aspirations that individuals indicate the opportunities and freedoms that are valuable and relevant for their well-being. Aspirations are the precursors of the various important opportunities which support human flourishing. In fact, expressed life dreams tell us which capabilities and functionings are valued by individuals for their well-being achievement. Capabilities are the substantive freedoms that people ought to have in order to achieve their valued functionings (beings and doings) (Alkire 2008a; Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2005, 2016). These, according to Sen (1999), are the real opportunities available to a person and should not be thought of as concrete skills, such as the SW's ability to type in case notes,

but as more general personal abilities (opportunities), such as the capacity to reflexively intervene with clients. Sen's concept of capabilities speaks of options concerning action, whereas functionings refer to the corresponding achievements (Crocker 1995; Robeyns 2016; Sen 1999). Functionings are also understood as the individuals' various patterns of activity or ways of being and doing. They reflect one's mental or physical state of existence (see Ransome 2010; Sen 1999). Aspirations, then, are key to our understanding of SWs' well-being.

Research Methodology

This article draws from a broad qualitative research which sought to critically examine the well-being of SWs and the way in which it can be advanced in and through social work education. The study followed a constructivist epistemology (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). It sought to understand SWs' conception of their well-being in South Africa. I elicited and refined the information I used in this study through my extensive interactions with the participants. Of the many research designs that fall under qualitative enquiry – ethnography, phenomenology, case studies and participatory action research (Creswell et al. 2007; Denzin and Lincoln 2005) – I used the case study approach. This allowed for extensive exploration of personal interpretations of the issues under study from the research participants.

Research Participants and Sampling

The broader study to which this article is a part sought to understand SWs' professional well-being and the role of higher education in its promotion. Consequently, I interviewed 10 fourth- or final-year students and seven social work lecturers at one South African university and eight practising SWs in a selected city.¹ Among the practising SWs were graduates from that particular university, although a few were graduates from other universities. The total number of participants was 25. Drawing on students and practising SWs' conceptualisation of well-being had important benefits. Since this was not a longitudinal study with practising SWs, conducting interviews with individuals at two different professional stages captures the progression of ideas of professional well-being at particular periods. For the purposes of this article, I present practising SWs' and social work students' (SWSs) views only.

This research was both explorative and descriptive. It sought to obtain as much relevant information as possible. I, therefore, did purposive sampling in recruiting the participants. The selection of informants was based on their qualities and significance

1 For the broader study, see Mseba 2019.

to the study (see Tongco 2007). I used snowball and convenience sampling procedures to recruit the participants. Noy (2008, 330) states, a sampling technique is considered snowball, “when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants.” I used this technique to recruit practising SWs because they were hard to locate unless directed by fellow SWs. Convenience sampling was employed in recruiting social work lecturers and fourth-year SWSs because their selection was subject to their availability and willingness to participate (Kothari 2004).

Data Collection and Analysis

In conducting this research, I performed in-depth, face-to-face interviews with all the participants. I used a semi-structured interview guide. My data collection phase spanned nine months (November 2016–July 2017). I deliberately conducted my interviews in three phases, first with the students, then the practising SWs and finally with the lecturers. This arrangement allowed me to deliberate on and scrutinise the issues under study. It ensured trustworthiness of my findings. I also used a voice recorder to capture critical information such as emotions, intonation, laughter and silences (see Silverman 2013). For data analysis, I combined manual and computerised data coding. This involved working with hard copies of transcribed interviews, highlighting emerging codes in pencil and transferring them into an electronic file. I used the NVivo software to organise, manage and reconfigure my data. Before data collection, I was granted ethical clearance to undertake the research by the institution’s ethics committee and a research permit by the institution’s Department of Social Work and social service organisations. I also obtained the participants’ informed consent.

Findings

The findings of this research are presented in three main themes: students’ and practising SWs’ valued professional aspirations; students’ and practising SWs’ personal aspirations, and promoting professional well-being achievement.

Theme 1: Valued Professional Aspirations of Students and Practising Social Workers

Confirming Ray’s (2006) assertion that aspirations are multidimensional, SWs, both prospective and practising, envision themselves in various valued states of being and doing. Their aspirations can be grouped into two broad categories: professional and personal goals. It should, however, be pointed out that some of these aspirations or valued functionings complement each other. This theme discusses the professional aspirations that SWSs and practising SWs articulated. These encompass two major valued functionings, namely, helping and professional growth.

Subtheme 1.1: Helping

Helping emerged as the chief valued functioning for both prospective and practising SWs (14 out of 18 participants indicated its importance). For most of these participants, helping is about making positive changes in people's lives and being influential in a positive way. When talking about this, Georgina (SW) stated:

one way or another I should make a difference even if it's in only one person's life, for the better. I can't help everybody, and everybody won't be happy with me, but if only I can reach out to one or two people and make a difference in their lives, then I will be happy.

Similarly, Khauhelo (SWS) mentioned that "To say that now I am happy, I want to see myself being an influential person to the community. I want to be remembered with what I have done, to just make a difference in people's lives". Khauhelo noted that one of her goals is to be involved in the prevention of social challenges and in early intervention. "I want to see myself protecting the youths, specifically those in school," she explained. She asserts that, by intervening with the youth, she will be giving them the opportunity to improve their own lives. Likewise, Nyakallo (SWS) aspires to help diverse people to confront life challenges, consequently making their lives better.

Helping is also about empowering people. Prospective SWs expressed their hope to empower diverse populations in various ways. Tsepiso and Doreen (SWSs) want to run their own non-governmental organisations which empower young women and young children, respectively. According to Tsepiso, her organisation would promote independence among young women. She wants to see women being less dependent on men. On a similar note, Doreen wants to help young rural kids with writing skills. Her goal is to help poor children to publish their works until they reach the age of twenty-one. She said, "If we can have a thousand copies in ten years, that can make a difference in their lives."

None of these students aspires to minimal professional achievements. They envision themselves making a significant professional impact. That is, they want to make a difference on a larger scale. This reflects the influence of their models. As Ray (2006) suggests, people emulate, imitate and learn from those who are like-minded or who are around them. During field practicals, students learn from the works of practising SWs and field instructors. Nyakallo (SWS), pointed out that, through the practicum, she learned to accept people as they are, to relate to them and to understand what their needs are, so that she can be able to provide them with resources.

These lofty aspirations of prospective SWs also reflect their limited experience with the realities of the practice settings. As Thandolwethu (SW) stated, similar to the students, some SWs at one time dreamt of huge achievements. However, following their extended practice exposure, they adapted their aspirations as they came to terms with what was realistic in their context. She stated:

What I hoped to do and where I am, it's two different worlds. I thought I can change everyone and the sooner you accept that that is not possible the happier you are likely to be because you put unnecessary stress onto your shoulders.

Lesedi (SW) added:

Whatever I envisioned, I did not have a clear idea of what I was going to do. I envisioned myself not as an angel, but this person who is going to help everyone and bring peace to the families. It is not like that . . . you cannot make one hundred percent of a difference in everybody's life. That is not what I am experiencing now.

There is a clear shift in what SWs aspired to with regard to helping people or making a difference. Such a shift can be explained in terms of SWs' practice experience. Through experience, SWs began to appreciate the gap between their current circumstances and what they hoped to achieve (aspiration gap) when they were students. They began to appreciate the way in which the work environment determines what is achievable and what is not achievable. Lesedi (SW) explained this point as follows: "the reality is the caseload is much higher than whatever you imagined . . . you are faced with different problems. It's not just children and families . . . it is social problems, society." Work-related challenges such as heavy caseloads, combined with the fact that SWs deal with challenging issues, constrain their realisation of certain helping aspirations.

Several participants reiterated what Lesedi said about the work environment. They also explained the way in which the issues raised by Lesedi, together with working in resource-constrained environments, affect their physical and emotional wellness, which is integral to their helping capacity. For instance, Elna (SW) stated: "the work environment [is challenging], definitely heavy workloads and lack of resources . . . You [also] deal with very upsetting and disturbing situations . . . It is tough." Similarly, Bongsi and Lineo (SWS) stated:

The amount of work that we do . . . the type of people and the type of issues we deal with can be really exhausting. It takes a lot from you. . . . I end up being depressed . . . what type of services am I going to provide to the next person if myself I am depressed, if I myself am not happy? (Bongsi, SWS)

You cannot have a high caseload or be underpaid or not having necessary resources and still do good. Those are some of the things that affect me. At first, I might try my best but as time goes on with my caseload continuously going up, I get fed up and won't be able to [help] as I really want to do. (Lineo, SWS)

To realise their aspiration of helping others, SWs also aspire to having good working conditions. Good working conditions for some involve not being overworked and having adequate resources and proper supportive supervision. For instance, Doreen (SWS) mentioned:

I think what would make me feel like sure I am alive is resources . . . I know what I am supposed to be doing; I am not just supposed to be doing the things that look like I am working. I am supposed to be actually helping a human being. So, if the resources are there to actually help a human being, that for me would be perfect.

Lineo (SWS) buttressed this point, saying:

As a professional, the ideal would be working in an environment where I am not overloaded with casework. Having a good supervisor and getting to learn and progress. I should have my own office; have access to resources to help my clients.

Working under good conditions influences the extent to which SWs can live healthy lives and is a key aspiration for many of the prospective and practising SWs. The importance of being healthy emerged when the participants were talking about the physical and emotional impacts of their work environment and what these challenges mean for their ability to help others. They also talked about its importance when answering my question on what would constitute a good life for them as professionals. The following are some of the views that emerged: “I should be healthy. If [I am] healthy, I put more effort in my work. My heart will be in what I will be doing. But if not . . . I will do it tomorrow when I feel better or just put it somewhere else” (Georgina, SW). “You as a person need to be healthy, so [it’s about leading] a good lifestyle” (Elna, SW). As is clear, the participants felt that an environment that is conducive to work leads to better health and ultimately job fulfilment and effective helping.

Subtheme 1.2: Professional Growth

Both prospective and practising SWs aspire to grow professionally. Aspects of professional growth, as the findings suggest, include getting a social work job, attaining higher positions at work, working for international organisations, establishing non-governmental and private organisations and enrolling for postgraduate education. For instance, Lineo (SWS) aspires to do forensic social work, whereas Bongzi (SWS) wishes for an administrative or research job. She stated, “In terms of social work, I do not want to do direct practice with clients . . . but I am thinking more in terms of research or administration.” On the other hand, Elna (SW) aspires to be promoted to a supervisory role, and Nxobile (SW) wants to continue helping by providing suitable solutions to social problems. She thinks that working for an international organisation such as UNICEF would provide her with a strong platform to achieve this aspiration.

A larger pool of participants (from both prospective and practising SWs) anticipated establishing their own non-governmental organisations. Among the prospective SWs are Doreen, Tsepiso and Khauhelo, whose views I highlighted above. Practising SWs such as Pamela, for instance, stated that “I would like to have a private practice and equip parents to be better parents who can be better husbands and better wives too and have decent families”. Similarly, Mary (SW) mentioned, “during my studies . . . I wanted to own my private practice and I still want to achieve that . . . I see the need.”

Mary's position supports the idea that even though some aspirations may not be realised, this does not necessarily mean that the person will adapt their aspirations. For some, unrealised aspirations remain persistent (see Mkwanzani 2017).

Finally, SWs aspire to furthering their education. For several participants, undertaking postgraduate studies enhances specialised knowledge and boosts professional knowledge. Doreen (SWS) states: "Next year, I want to do my Master's in African Studies. I want to understand how we can adapt the social work education and curriculum to fit our African countries, families and communities." Likewise, Mary (SW) states that "I was thinking that by this time, I will have my Master's, but I still want to pursue it . . . Going for Master's is about improving my knowledge and speciality". In addition to the professional aspirations of helping and professional growth, SWs also aspire to personal or private achievements.

Theme 2: Personal Aspirations of Students and Practising Social Workers

Goal attainment (personal or professional) is one of the benchmarks of well-being or meaning making (Emmons 2003). When asked to define what would make their lives valuable and meaningful, the SWs articulated their different personal life goals, wishes and preferences; those they regard as worthwhile for the future. These include getting a job, getting married, having a family, achieving financial stability, and realising material achievements such as owning some businesses, and having a car or a house. I clustered these personal goals into personal growth and material achievements.

Subtheme 2.1: Personal Growth

Personal growth concerns the growth or development of individuals and the realisation of their potentialities, such as getting a job, getting married, transitioning into parenthood and achieving financial stability or independence (Ryff 1989). Financial stability can also be understood as an aspect of material achievement (see the discussion below). As Ray (2006) points out, depending on one's place in the socio-economic hierarchy, these achievements can complement each other. Many students spoke about work or getting a job in relation to financial stability. Doreen (SWS), for example, spoke about entering academia as a way of getting a second source of income or achieving financial stability. She said, "I plan to go into academia because as a social worker I am not going to be able to pay for necessary [good] schools for my kids." Similarly, Khauhelo (SWS) talked about employment and financial earnings, saying, "I want to achieve personal goals such as graduating, being employed and making most out of my work." This can be taken to suggest a complementary relationship in the achievement of these functionings.

Correspondingly, when both prospective and practising SWs talked about their aspiration for financial stability as a valuable functioning, they mentioned it in relation to the achievement of other functionings. These functionings include meeting basic

needs such as healthcare or self-care, and food, and taking care of own kids or sending them to good schools. For instance, Lineo (SWS) stated:

I need money. If I have money I think I will be good . . . I want to have a comfortable home, food to put on the table, not having to run around and to make sure that my children can have education or to make sure that they eat something.

It is in the same vein that Pamela (SW) aspires to have sufficient money to meet basic needs such as having a house and food to support her family. Mary and Nxobile (SWs) aspire to have adequate money to take care of themselves and to go on holidays to release work pressure.

On the other hand, many students (80%) identified having a family or marriage, as a valuable personal achievement. Naleli (SWS) stated, “I want to have a family at some point. I want to get married and have kids.” Similarly, Doreen (SWS) said that she wanted to be married. “I respect marriage and children born under the cover of marriage,” she elaborated, noting, “In marriage, my husband can counsel me on how we can raise the kids together . . . a good life would be having children and being able to take care of them.” According to Naleli (SWS), such achievements are signs of personal growth.

Unlike the students who are still aspiring towards getting married and having families of their own, some practising SWs (in a different life stage, compared to the students) talked about these aspects as achieved goals. Nxobile (SW) stated, “There are things that I hoped to have, and I do have . . . some of them include independence and being married.” Similarly, Thandolwethu (SW) explained that “if you asked me this question [about my personal aspirations] four years ago my answer would have been very different because my situation changed tremendously. I got married to such a wonderful boy”.

These disparate aspirations between students’ and practising SWs’ responses can be attributed to their age and developmental stages. For instance, those students who spoke about marriage are still in their early twenties, but Nxobile (SW) is in her late twenties and Thandolwethu (SW) is over 40. Other than highlighting their aspirations for personal growth, the participants also expressed their ambitions for material achievements.

Subtheme 2.2: Material Achievements

Material achievements concern the attainment or ownership of physical property such as businesses, houses and cars. Related, although somewhat different, is also the ability to afford basic needs, such as food and good sanitation. The views on material achievements such as owning a business, nice cars and houses emerged mostly from the students. However, whereas prospective SWs aspire to relatively ambitious material achievements, practising SWs were adapting their aspirations to new, more attainable

goals. For instance, Mantso (SWS) indicated that she would want to have her own businesses after graduation. Naleli (SWS) stated that she wants “a nice house somewhere out of town and a car”. Another student, Bongi, explained that she understood that these were “basic things,” but that she needed “to have a nice car, a very nice car”.

In this regard, students’ personal aspirations for material achievements differ from those of practising SWs. Whereas students such as Nyakallo, Naleli and Bongi aspire to buy nice cars and houses, practising SWs such as Pamela have lowered their expectations. She said:

[I] used to say, I want to have a nice life, a nice car and a nice house on this side of the town, but it was a dream especially when you are working as a social worker . . . some of us have responsibilities, so just having the basic needs, such as a house, being able to take care of your children and feeding them will be [enough].

This difference is accounted for by the fact that Pamela has real-life experience of the realities of being a social worker. Pamela raises three important points. First, personal growth often comes with responsibilities. Second, she recognises that the gap between her current status and her aspirations (aspiration gap) is too wide and so she has adapted her preferences (see Ray 2006). Third, she reminds us that the social work profession is not well remunerated in personal–material terms. Understanding these valued aspirations provides a basis for identifying the opportunities (capabilities) that should be promoted for professional well-being achievement.

Theme 3: Promoting Professional Well-Being Achievement

To enable SWs to close their aspiration gaps – rather than to adapt to them – there is a need to promote certain opportunities. The capability approach stresses the importance of identifying and prioritising people’s valued opportunities or capabilities (see Alkire 2008b, 2013; Sen 2002). SWSs and SWs identified several professional well-being capabilities that can be promoted to enhance their welfare as helping professionals. These include affiliation, adaptation, self-care, work–life balance, and knowledge and skills. These findings are revisable based on context and additional voices, but nonetheless provide a starting point for dealing with professional well-being.

Subtheme 3.1: Capabilities for Professional Well-Being

The participants highlighted the importance of affiliation as an important opportunity for their well-being. Affiliation speaks of one’s ability to live with others and towards others; to recognise and show concern for other human beings (Nussbaum 1995, 2000; Walker and McLean 2013). Some features of affiliation which emerged from the participants in this study include having a strong support system, whether that system consists of friends or family. Social relationships, as suggested, can also enhance personal growth, for instance getting married and having healthy families.

Similarly, adaptation emerged as another valuable capability for professional well-being. The term refers to the active efforts by individuals to fit into their environment, so that they can survive, develop and succeed (Germain 2010). SWs spoke about the need to adapt in relation to their challenging work environments which have an impact on their physical and emotional wellness. Adaptation is an instrumental capability for the professionals' growth, health and helping functionings. Likewise, in order to meet personal goals such as getting married and having a family, SWs need to positively adapt to their social environment and its expectations. Work-related adaptation, as these SWs suggest, can be fostered in and through social work education, for instance by providing students with extended practicum exposure.

SWs highlighted self-care as one of the important capabilities for professional well-being. Self-care, as Mantso (SWS) understands it, "is about focusing on yourself. For instance, sometimes you have to relax or go out and not just focus on other people's problems." SWs stressed the importance of self-care in relation to the challenges they face in practice, such as heavy workloads and dealing with difficult service users. They highlighted the instrumental role of self-care in ensuring their (personal) wellness or health, growth and effective helping. Most of the SWs shared Mantso's view that "[one] needs to be well in order to promote other people's wellness". Mary (SW) explained that her supervisor always said, "you need to take care of yourself, so that you can be in a position to take care of your clients."

Another and perhaps related opportunity that emerged as crucial to professional well-being is work-life balance. Work-life balance "is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and . . . in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (Kalliath and Brough 2008, 326). It is about balancing work and other aspects of life such as family and leisure or the need to prevent work activities from excessively invading people's lives (see Fleetwood 2007; Lewis, Gambles, and Rapoport 2007). In their concerns about the more demanding nature and difficult work environments which result in working under pressure and emotional stress, some SWs highlighted the need for effective balance between private and work life. Such balance is instrumental in achieving health, personal and professional growth (see Hobson 2011; Hobson, Fahlén, and Takács 2011).

Lastly, SWs identified knowledge and skills as a necessary capability set for their valued professional functionings (see Walker and McLean 2013). In order to deal with the many complex challenges faced by diverse populations, SWs argued that they ought to have a strong knowledge and skills base. However, when building knowledge and skills to help effectively, Doreen (SWS) and Lesedi (SW) suggested that SWs be allowed to specialise in their final year of study. This will allow SWs to focus on one practice area, thereby attaining sufficient knowledge. In a similar vein, several SWs highlighted the need to undertake postgraduate studies as a way of enhancing their knowledge base or professional growth. Such views support Trevithick's (2011) assertion that the acquisition of a sound knowledge base enhances the SWs' abilities to understand people

and their different situations and to formulate and negotiate action plans appropriate to each circumstance.

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

The foregoing findings attest to the idea that well-being is multidimensional (Jongbloed and Andres 2015; La Placa, McNaught, and Knight 2013). Although the existing literature focuses on factors such as stress management and physical and emotional wellness as critical signs of SWs' well-being, the SWs interviewed in this study explained professional well-being with regard to the satisfaction or happiness that comes with their ability to help people, professional growth, personal growth and material achievements. These aspired functionings constitute the central features of their well-being as professionals² (see Alkire 2008a). However, various structural, organisational and personal factors interfere with the achievement of SWs' valued aspirations. These factors include working in contexts of extreme poverty and inequalities, poor working conditions with high caseloads, resource constraints and poor salaries.

This study suggests that the achievement of SWs' valued aspirations may be facilitated by promoting the following capabilities: affiliation, adaptation, self-care, work-life balance, knowledge, and skills. These capabilities are the real opportunities SWs ought to have to lead their valued lives. They are the necessary functioning vectors for their professional well-being.

Recommendations

To advance the well-being and aspirations of SWs, social work services organisations should focus on the following elements in the work life of SWs:

- Improve and provide environments that are conducive to work for SWs that reflect and respect their professional status and the services that they render.
- Ensure and provide adequate staffing and resources in order for SWs to adhere to service rendering standards and enable them to fulfil their mandate to cater for the needs of their client systems.
- Introduce, implement and safeguard effective work-life balance policies and practices so that SWs are able to be effective both in rendering professional services but also in achieving their personal goals and aspirations.

2 Physical and emotional health emerged as a fertile capability that would lead to effective helping and professional growth.

- Ensure appropriate and adequate supportive supervision for SWs so that they feel supported, respected, and confident to meet their responsibilities and to become resilient.
- Lobby for upgrading reward systems and salaries for SWs which would be commensurate with their qualifications and the professional status and services.

There are two additional recommendations that should work in tandem with the aforementioned suggestions. First, social work curricula should include and promote the identified well-being capabilities in and through social work education. Second, government policies on funding should ensure adequate funding and resources for social welfare services.

The way well-being is conceptualised in this work is contextual. It does not allow for an all-inclusive definition. I recommend future research on the conceptualisation of professional well-being in different contexts, particularly in the global north. I conducted interviews with three groups of SWs (see methodology section) who were at different professional levels. This allowed me to capture the progression of professional well-being in the social work domain. However, a longitudinal study might have yielded richer information.

Conclusion

This article focused on the question of SWs' well-being. It has shown that SWs understand their professional well-being with regard to achieving their valued aspirations. These aspirations are: effective helping, professional growth, personal growth, and material achievements. However, different structural, organisational and personal factors interfere with the accomplishment of these aspired goals. The study, therefore, identified several necessary opportunities (capabilities) for achieving SWs' professional well-being. They include affiliation, self-care, adaptation, work-life balance, and knowledge and skills.

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