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IN THE TRENCHES: A FINANCIAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE ON THE PERSISTENT LEGACY OF POVERTY IN THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Widespread socio-economic challenges such as high levels of poverty and unemployment continue to plague South Africa. Owing to the nature of social work service delivery, social workers often serve the most vulnerable populations. However, it seems that social workers remain metaphorically in the trenches in the war on poverty, meaning that tangible evidence on the progress of poverty alleviation due to the direct involvement of social workers is meagre in social development. This article argues for the integration of a financial social work practice perspective into South African social work service delivery as a potential means of facilitating more efficient social development. The article is conceptual in nature and draws on the principles of theoretical adaptation. It posits social developmental theory as the dominant theoretical paradigm, and financial social work as the practice perspective. Analysis will highlight the current gaps in social developmental practice, and the appropriateness of financial social work to address it. The discussion aims to activate scholarly discourse on financial social work in South Africa and beyond, and to firmly position this practice perspective within sustainable social development.

Keywords: financial capability; financial literacy; financial social work; practice perspective; poverty; social development; unemployment

INTRODUCTION

South Africa continues to be metaphorically in the trenches facing the double scourges of poverty and unemployment three decades after a change in welfare policy to be focused on greater social development (Jordaan, 2023). This is despite the intention expressed in the South African White Paper for Social Development (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997, Chapter

2, No. 27) to wage a "war on poverty". Unfortunately, social workers in South Africa remain relatively unprepared and ill-equipped to assist service users with challenges of a financial nature (Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b; Jordaan, 2023). They often struggle to facilitate sustainable social developmental practice, which in turn may generate a form of dependence by service users on social work service delivery. This is in fact, the opposite of what social work as a profession strives for (International Federation of Social Workers & International Association of Schools of Social Work [IFSW & IASSW], 2014) and should therefore be viewed as a significant challenge which needs to be addressed. In response, this article will introduce financial social work as a practice perspective for social work service delivery, explore the global growth in its utilisation, and discuss its potential applicability within the South African social developmental paradigm.

Financial social work will be unpacked by providing a brief overview of its history and ethos, and important operational concepts, namely financial literacy education and financial capability development. Financial social work's transnational growth since its inception and some key findings which highlight its effectiveness across varying global socio-economic contexts will also be presented. Thereafter, the focus will be narrowed to the South African context, with specific emphasis on the paradigm of social development and its uneasy relationship with the persistent socio-economic challenges of poverty and unemployment.

Emphasis will be placed on the neoliberal discourse within welfare service delivery, the lack of financial literacy education in social work, resulting in financially illiterate social workers, and corruption in the social welfare domain. Therefore, this article argues for the need for financial literacy education and financial capability to help operationalise financial social work in striving toward more effective social developmental practice, all within the South African social work context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is conceptual in nature. As a point of departure, the authors will present arguments to follow a structure of a focal theory, where inadequacies in current understanding and implementation are resulting in observable gaps in research (Jaakkola, 2020). This article will scrutinise the theory of social development and explore how the theory of financial social work can help to make its utilisation more effective. It will draw from the conceptual framework associated with theory adaptation (MacInnes, 2011). The dominant concept of interest will be the theory of social development that embodies the South African social work paradigm. Financial social work will be proposed as a practice perspective (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014) to refine the scope of the implementation of social developmental theory in South Africa. To this end, the change in focus and the suitability of financial social work as a significant practice perspective will be explained. Structuring the article in this way serves to clarify the conceptual guidelines associated with theoretical adaptation (Jaakkola, 2020; MacInnes, 2011), thereby aiding a greater analytical application.

FINANCIAL SOCIAL WORK: OVERVIEW AND ETHOS

Financial social work, as a practice perspective created by Wolfson in 2003, aims to improve service users' relationships, attitudes, knowledge and behaviour towards finances (Wolfson & Michaeli, 2014). Embedded in its core, therefore, is equipping successive generations with the financial skills required to survive in an increasingly financialised world (Aalbers, 2019; Birkenmaier *et al.,* 2019; Sherraden *et al.,* 2015). Consequently, financial social work places a clear focus on financial literacy, which at its core, entails individuals' ability to work with money (Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b). Enshrined in this focus is naturally a dedication to assist service users gain an understanding of the relationships between themselves, and how they think and act around their finances, with the aim of bringing about sustainable, positive change. In this way, financial social work aims to inspire service users to overcome their finance-related fears – to attain a sense of worth, and understand their thoughts and behaviour which may ultimately translate into acceptable habits. This exploration of the service users' sense of self, in tandem with equipping them with the knowledge, skills and behaviours in practical applications of financial social work (for example, through financial literacy education) is what highlights the core value of financial social work – its dualistic applicability. It may allow for personal exploration and healing through its emphasis on self-discovery, while also providing service users with valuable financial knowledge and skills applicable in the "real world". This emphasises another enshrined benefit of financial social work – the value it holds for the social workers' themselves. Such considerations are encouraging when considering the findings of local South African studies which highlight that South African social workers continue to feel ill-equipped, uninformed and unprepared for aspects of practice pertaining to finances (Bambeni, 2021; Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b; Jordaan, 2020; 2023). Therefore, it could be argued that should social workers be effectively financially "upskilled", they may become more effective agents of social development. Thus, by increasing social workers' own financial health through financial literacy education or financial capability development, they will be able to assist service users in navigating their own challenging financial situations.

Financial literacy education

Financial literacy education generates the financial themes encapsulated in financial social work practice. It can in essence be regarded as guiding service users to effectively translate financial knowledge into skills, and ultimately sustainable financial behaviours (Björklund, 2019; Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008c; Jordaan, 2023; Karger, 2015; Neuberger *et al.,* 2022). There are varying forms of definitions and applications of financial literacy education (Jordaan, 2023) to equip service users with financial knowledge and skills, and the subsequent translation into sustainable financial behaviour to enhance financial wellbeing (Birkenmaier *et al.,* 2022; Birkenmaier & Curley, 2009; Sherraden, 2022; Sherraden *et al.,* 2022). According to Engelbrecht and Ornellas (2019), consumer education, which includes basic economic education, knowledge of rights and responsibilities of the consumer and a proactive, rather than a reactive, money management style, is relevant within a South African context. Furthermore, a holistic focus is embedded in such an education. This is especially relevant when considering the myriads of studies which concluded that financial social work interventions would need to be holistic to be effective (cf. Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b; Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2019;

Jordaan, 2020; 2023; Lein *et al.,* 2016; Peeters *et al.,* 2018; Sherraden, 2017; Sherraden, Birkenmaier, Sherraden & Curley 2013; Wolfson & Michaeli, 2014).

Financial capability development

An overview of the nature of financial capability is needed to understand the development of financial capability. According to Sherraden *et al.* (2013), financial capability is the ability to act in one's own best economic interest, i.e., taking actions that bolster the economic wellbeing of the actors. Financial capability therefore includes the concept of financial literacy education and also acknowledging the institutional barriers to opportunity (Sherraden, 2010). Financial capability is concerned with cultivating individual attributes as well as identifying the opportunity and developing the ability to act (Kim & Sherraden, 2014). While the opportunity to act is shaped by available financial institutions and existing policies, the ability to act stems from initiatives that increase individuals' skills (Bambeni, 2021; Bent-Goodley *et al.,* 2016; Birkenmaier *et al.,* 2022). Therefore, there is room for financial capability development within the framework of financial social work practice. Specifically, in the South African social developmental context, improving the financial capability of financially vulnerable service users may reduce financial vulnerability and contribute to attaining the goals of social developmental. Following this overview of the concepts associated with financial social work, the discussion will shift to the global state of financial social work to highlight its transnational growth and potential effectiveness across varying global socio-economic contexts.

The international nature of financial social work: A reason for hope?

Since its inception in 2003 (Wolfson & Michaeli, 2014) financial social work has been steadily receiving attention in various global social work arenas. As it originated in the United States, much of the early literature was localised in the American social work domain. In time, however, financial social work has crossed national borders as more social work academics and practitioners came to realise the importance of its increasing utilisation. Most notably, academics such as Wolfson and Michaeli (2014) have been at the forefront of championing the expansion of financial social work with the establishment of the Centre for Financial Social Work in North Carolina – dedicated to extending the reach of financial social work. Proponents such as Sherraden (2010; 2022) and Birkenmaier, Maynard and Kim (2022; 2019) have been prominent voices on themes dealing with operational issues such as financial literacy education and financial capability development.

On a global scale, various studies have indicated the efficacy that financial objectives may promote in social work practice, across varying contexts. Consider the findings of Banerjee (2016) and Kagotho *et al.* (2018) in India and Kenya respectively, which indicated financial literacy initiatives to be effective in generating savings and in cultivating more responsible economic behaviour (Jordaan, 2020). The Indian study showed that 97% of the participants in the study managed to save money to meet their daily needs (Banerjee, 2016), while the Kenyan study (Kagotho *et al.,* 2018) reported that approximately 58% of the sample made contingency plans to use and save their money, illustrating the effectiveness that financial literacy education initiatives may have across differing global arenas. These countries grapple with similar socio-economic and social development challenges as South Africa does, which may prompt similar initiatives locally (Jordaan, 2020). As saving is a money-management tool taught in the financial literacy education (Kagotho, *et al.,* 2018) included in the practice framework of financial social work, there is evidently room for financial social work to be useful as a social work intervention in a context of social development practice.

When considering the aforementioned Indian and Kenyan findings, it has to be emphasized that there is no "one-solution-fits-all" for financial social work interventions (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014; Wang *et al.,* 2022) as service users' financial challenges are often characterised by an interwoven web of interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and societal factors (Cupák *et al.,* 2021; Dinç Aydemir & Aren, 2017; Silva *et al.,* 2022). As such, the value that structured financial social work intervention holds for service delivery is not centred on the idea of solving financial challenges as fast as possible, as tends to be the approach in the neoliberal discourse that is being entrenched in contemporary social work service delivery (cf. Feldman, 2019; Pratt, 2006; Spolander *et al.,* 2014). Rather, the value is rooted in assisting service users on a journey of self-discovery, to establish and nurture a healthy relationship with finances informing the development of sustainable financial behaviour. This value can transcend various socio-economic contexts to meet specific challenges. For example, in cases where service users are inundated by debt, the focus can be placed equally on practical aspects, such as debt repayment strategies, alongside the facilitation of therapeutic interventions aimed at exploring the intra/interpersonal impact of trauma linked to over-indebtedness.

A potential hindrance to effective social work intervention is the vulnerability of the social work service user to a perceived intrusive approach by the social worker. Though it may be argued that such barriers may be easily navigable with appropriate social work intervention techniques used in service delivery (Jordaan, 2023), it is to be noted that financial social work, as with other practice perspectives in social work, ultimately relies on the social worker's implementation, which may be problematic in contexts where social workers themselves are financially illiterate (Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008c; Jordaan, 2020; 2023).

Such challenges do not only pertain to the South African context and a number of social work scholars are continually investigating how financial social work can be improved and adapted to differing socio-economic contexts. Consider, for example, the research conducted by Deepa *et al.* (2023), aimed at conceptualising a financial curriculum to be used in social work education and training in Singapore, which affirms that financial social work has transcended international social work borders and continues to remain a prominent consideration across various contemporary social work conversations and liberating actions. Evidently, financial social work is gaining ever more traction internationally, which serves as a definite beacon of hope. However, it remains largely understudied and under-implemented within the South African social development context (Jordaan, 2023).

GUIDING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa follows a social development approach to welfare (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2016; RSA, 1997), which is a macro-focused welfare approach stemming from the post-apartheid government's White Paper for Social Welfare (DSD, 2016; Gray, 2006; Jordaan, 2023; RSA, 1997). This welfare approach, according to Midgley (1999:25), is "a process of planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development". It is thus evident that social development rests on two distinct pillars – human development and economic development (Jordaan, 2023).

These principles are also enshrined in the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), which serves as the paramount guiding framework for social service delivery. However, a comprehensive report on the review of the White Paper for Social Welfare reflected that poverty, inequality and structural unemployment still persist and are exacerbated by external factors (DSD, 2016) such as global financial crises (Engelbrecht, 2011), the local political economy (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2019) or pandemics (Ornellas *et al.,* 2020). Since sustainable social development requires a continuous implementation of service delivery that stimulates human as well as economic development (Gray, 2006; Midgley, 1999), it is evident that the country's social development aspirations are still not being met (DSD, 2016) as widespread poverty and unemployment persist. Therefore, when considering the findings of the comprehensive report of the White Paper for Social Welfare (DSD, 2016) and the persistent socio-economic challenges encountered in the South African practice landscape, it is clear that more effort is required to achieve adequate levels of social development to effectively alleviate poverty and unemployment (Jordaan, 2023).

POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA: A PERSISTENT SCOURGE

Poverty is a multifaceted concept and can be described as not having enough money to cover basic needs. According to the World Bank (2020), the most recent international poverty line is \$2.15 or approximately R40 a day or R1,200 a month. Individuals earning below this threshold are in extreme poverty. Furthermore, the World Bank (2020) stated that approximately 55.5% of the South African population are living at the upper threshold of the poverty line, while approximately 25% experience food insecurity. This remains evident as in 2023 the upper threshold for South Africa's extreme poverty line was drawn at individuals who earn less than R1,058 a month, while the monthly food poverty line was around R760 (Statista, 2023). Poverty in South Africa is further fuelled by rife unemployment. Reports by Statistics South Africa (2024) indicate that the number of the unemployed increased to 7.9 million during the final quarter of 2023. Additionally, the number of individuals not economically active for reasons other than discouragement increased to 13.4 million (Statistics South Africa, 2024). The need for increased economic development to promote sustainable social development is evident. This notion is reaffirmed in the light of the fact that social workers in South Africa often work directly with financially vulnerable people (Bambeni, 2021). It can be argued, therefore, that neglecting the financial dimension in social work service delivery means not actively working towards attaining social developmental goals (Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b, 2011; Jordaan, 2023). Similar observations were made by the South African Minister of Social Development in a 2021 budget speech, when she indicated that most of the country's financially vulnerable people are users of social work services (Zulu, 2021). The observation that, two decades ago, social workers were feeling unprepared and ill-equipped to assist service users with challenges of a financial nature (cf. Bambeni, 2021; Engelbrecht, 2008a; Jordaan, 2020,

2023) remains true today. This emphasizes the dire need for increased measures to stimulate economic development in the social work sector. If this is not yet apparent, South Africa's socio-economic challenges present an appropriate arena for the incorporation of the ethos of financial social work and its applications into practice. This therefore begs the question: What is the current state of financial social work in South Africa?

FINANCIAL SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA: NOT QUITE THERE YET

Though financial social work is systematically gaining traction in international social work arenas, there is currently little or no focus on it within the South African social work context (Jordaan, 2023). Researchers Engelbrecht (2008a; 2008b) and Engelbrecht and Ornellas (2019) have been the most notable scholars to have consistently researched and published on this topic in the social work domain in South Africa. Recent scholarly works, such as those by Jordaan (2020; 2023) and Bambeni (2021), have contributed to the discourse. However, financial social work remains largely understudied and under-implemented in South Africa (Jordaan, 2023), which poses a large challenge to the country's social development aspirations. Of great concern is that findings by studies decades ago (Engelbrecht, 2008a) which indicated that social workers felt unprepared, ill-equipped and not responsible for assisting service users with challenges of a financial nature, have not been addressed years later (Jordaan, 2023). Jordaan (2023) found that social workers predominantly view financial service delivery as not part of their service delivery focus and responsibility, or feel so ill-equipped or overwhelmed by current practice contexts that they do not want to take on more responsibilities. Taking into account that a root cause of social workers' own financial illiteracy implies their lack of appropriate knowledge, it is understandable that progress in terms of advancing social developmental service delivery has been painstakingly slow. This lack of appropriate knowledge may be attributed to not receiving the necessary training during their undergraduate studies, inadequate "upskilling" or little to no on-the-job development (Jordaan, 2023).

Another consistent challenge to South African social development aspirations is that although there are various initiatives in South Africa that offer financial literacy education, key role players are often situated outside the social work domain (DSD, 2016). As with other challenges in this domain, the lack of financial literacy education in social work remains a barrier to effective goal achievement in this field (DSD, 2016). Since the majority of initiatives that are aimed at facilitating financial literacy education or generating financial capability development are presented by role players not engaged in social service delivery, neoliberal tendencies may easily encroach upon and even undermine the purpose of the initiatives (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2019). This is known as "predatory practice" – a style of service solicitation which dupes service users into buying products or services which they do not understand and may be unnecessary or inappropriate for their actual needs (Sugata, 2019:1). To illustrate, a South African example as well as an international example of predatory practice will be described below.

In many African societies funerals are regarded as an important part of societal life and are seen as a sign of respect for the deceased and a means for the remaining family to maintain their social status (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013; Fletcher, 2022; Golomski, 2018). In South Africa the funeral industry is an integral facet of many communities (Jordaan, 2023), as 42%

of adults have a funeral insurance policy (Financial Sector Conduct Authority, 2022). The popularity of funeral insurance, however, comes with the scent of blood in the water. There are numerous instances where the funeral insurance industry has taken advantage of service users. For example, reports indicate that criminals are posing as reputable insurers, targeting grieving, vulnerable family members and then selling them fraudulent products, or offering to assist them with the claims process, only to steal their money (Financial Sector Conduct Authority, 2022). These allegations are also reflected in data presented by the Association for Savings and Investments South Africa (2021), which indicated that more than 80% of all fraudulent claims submitted were fraudulent funeral insurance claims. In the light of such revelations, it can be argued that, should service users' financial literacy be improved, they will be better able to evaluate and understand financial conversations, which in itself may act as a block on falling victim to predatory practices.

Similarly, in an Australian context, predatory financial practices in the financial insurance industry have been exposed; these were instances where financially vulnerable people were deliberately targeted with expensive and unsuitable products by financial institutions (Bainbridge & Selvaratnam, 2018). Such findings further affirm the need for social service delivery to start incorporating financial aspects to safeguard vulnerable service users against predatory financial practices, and actively assist in working towards, attaining and sustaining financial wellbeing. Financial wellbeing in this regard pertains to the access to, and subsequent culmination in financial literacy eventually becoming habitual through sustained behaviour. An opportunity to engage constructively with financial arenas, ultimately resulting in sustainable financial security and stability, would be another positive outcome (Gerrans *et al.,* 2014; Iramani & Lutfi, 2021; Jordaan, 2023; Oquaye *et al.,* 2022; Wolfson & Michaeli, 2014).

Neoliberal tenets in South African social welfare: A hindrance to financial social work implementation

As briefly noted earlier, neoliberalism in social welfare service delivery contributes to the persistent socio-economic challenges prevalent in South Africa. In the social work domain, it has contributed to social worker burnout resulting from high caseloads (Jordaan, 2023). Though not immediately apparent, social worker burnout can be linked to the encroachment of neoliberal tenets on welfare service delivery. This is often because the individual is seen as a numbered box to tick for service delivery (Ornellas *et al.* 2020). This box-checking tendency can also be in gross contradiction to the profession's guiding ethos by generating dependency on social work service delivery for the sake of funding (cf. IFSW & IASSW, 2014; Spolander *et al.,* 2014). Increasing pressure to reach numerical targets can eat away at social workers' psyche, often causing mental exhaustion and apathy (Jordaan, 2023).

Moreover, the ongoing challenge of financial corruption plagues the South African social work sector as well (Jordaan, 2023; Khan & Pillay, 2019; McDonald, 2021; Transparency International, 2021). South Africa's low score on the international Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2021) suggests that inefficient service delivery may be tied to instances of flagrant disregard for established governing legislation (Lisciandra, 2014; Popova & Podolyakina, 2014). Similar findings are reflected in a report by the Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG), which indicated that out of the 228,822 non-profit organisations

(NPOs) that were registered in South Africa, a shocking 58.44% were not compliant with the relevant financial legislation (Jordaan, 2023; McDonald, 2021). How, then, can South African social workers effectively work towards attaining social developmental goals if the sector meant to spearhead social change is poisoning the well?

Alongside the above should be the discussion on neoliberalism and its relationship with financial debt. Though debt inundation is not exclusively South African, it remains a key challenge within the South African context (Jordaan, 2023), as reflected by the country's household debt-to-income ratio of 77.1% in 2020 (Trading Economics, 2022). This indicates that, on average, individuals spend 77.1% of their take-home income on debt, effectively leaving only 23% to cover their other needs (Trading Economics, 2022). Such phenomena often result in the accrual of private debt for consumption spending, rather than the utilisation of debt for activities aimed at generating financial development through productive investments (Harker, 2017). Such behaviour often results in service users digging themselves into "debt traps" (Engelbrecht, 2008b; 2008c). A debt trap can be understood as a phenomenon that occurs when service users experience difficulties in repaying debts rooted in an inadequate understanding and navigation of debt landscapes, and then borrowing more money to pay off debts. In a social work context Engelbrecht (2008b) refers to this as a Bermuda Debt Triangle as social work service users plunges deeper into debt with each borrowing and repayment cycle (cf. Engelbrecht, 2008b; 2008c; Harker, 2017), which may be indicative that debt and neoliberalism often go hand-in-hand.

In neoliberalism, debt expansion is seen as integral in aspirations to upward economic mobility, especially amongst the working and middle classes, as debt can facilitate access to resources and social mobility that would otherwise be unattainable or too expensive (Webb, 2021). It is true that debt can be effective when navigated correctly, in facilitating upwards economic migration, and contributing to experiences of financial wellbeing. However, the expansion of debt also creates new forms of obligations and exclusion (Webb, 2021), which can be detrimental to the pursuit and attainment of financial wellbeing for financially vulnerable service users. Where service users are not financially literate enough to know how to effectively utilise and navigate debt landscapes, they run the risk of counteracting the potentially positive benefits and undermine the pursuit of the mobility which attracted them to debt initially (Harker, 2017; James, 2014). Furthermore, debt is often intertwined with service users' financial, social and political life in complex ways, which can increase the difficulty in effectively utilising and navigating it (James, 2014; Webb, 2021). Such outcomes reflect how the rising demand (or need) for debt can be traced back to socio-economic challenges, such as rising living costs, low salaries and experiences of financial illiteracy that often accompany debt (Harker, 2017; Krumer-Nevo *et al.,* 2017; Soederberg, 2014; Torkelson, 2020; Webb, 2021).

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH FINANCIAL SOCIAL WORK: WE NEED IT!

The socio-economic contextualisation of South Africa presented above clearly indicates the need for increased social development. Until now, there has been scant focus on the active employment of financial social work in service delivery in the country (Jordaan, 2023). However, it can be argued, as discussed above, that financial social work should and could be considered a pertinent perspective for social workers to adopt in practice. As previously stated, the positive, dualistic application of financial social work and its operationalisation through financial literacy education or financial capability development may hold promise in assisting social workers to become more effective agents of social development. Because of the holistic nature of financial social work, its relevance as a globally accepted practice perspective in the social work discipline is affirmed (Birkenmaier & Curley, 2009; Wolfson & Michaeli, 2014; Younger, 2020).

In this regard, it is important to note that, though not only a South African concern, the conundrum of utilising social workers globally as effective agents of social development, when they themselves are financially illiterate, remains problematic (Jordaan, 2023). The quandary, however, is that financial social work can be truly valuable in shaping social development practice, specifically in the South African context, given the country's socio-economic challenges of high unemployment, poverty and debt. Not only can the enhancement of social worker financial literacy contribute more effectively to efficient and sustainable social development service delivery, but the social workers themselves may also benefit personally. Evidently, the value that financial social work may hold for the South African social work sector will be rooted in adequate knowledge and effective implementation. It needs to be practically implementable to aid the development of social workers into financially literate professionals who are effective agents of social development.

In a recent study Jordaan (2020) affirms these conceptions as social workers themselves indicated that financial literacy education can assist service users in creating and pursuing their own financial wellbeing. Through this pursuit, service users can be enabled to form healthier relationships with finance, resulting in practical gains, including reduced financial stress (Jordaan, 2020). This reduced stress may subsequently create the opportunity for service users to engage more effectively with other facets of the financial landscape, ultimately contributing to greater financial wellbeing for themselves. Haushofer and Fehr (2014) argue that financial wellbeing may serve as a powerful motivational tool in sustaining healthy financial behaviour, with extended financial benefits. These benefits may result in additional motivation for service users to actively improve their mental state (Jordaan, 2020). This is particularly relevant as research demonstrates the correlation between low-income levels and mental disorders (Hanandita & Tampubolon, 2014; Jordaan, 2020; Lund *et al.,* 2010). The pursuit and facilitation of financial literacy and capability in social work would therefore align with the South African developmental approach to social welfare.

Financial social work is centred on exploring an individual's relationship with finance, and the way that financial considerations influence and impact on other facets of existence holistically. This is appropriate in the South African context, in the light of the multitude of studies indicating that financial interventions would need to be holistic in nature to effectively assist service users in addressing their multidimensional needs (Bambeni, 2021; Gray, 2020; Jordaan, 2020; Lombard & Viviers, 2021; Sole, 2021). It may also be argued that when social workers deliberately target the financial wellbeing of service users caught in financial difficulties, peripheral benefits can arise, since studies have confirmed that emotional and material support can provide a crucial buffer against stress, while also serving as a major predictor of physical and emotional wellbeing (Ali *et al.,* 2010; Goodman *et al.,* 2013). Thus, the potentially positive impact that financial social work and its operationalisation may have in assisting financially vulnerable people navigate towards a sense of holistic financial wellbeing cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSION

South Africa continues to struggle in the trenches of the war on poverty to attain adequate levels of social development, three decades after a shift in welfare policy towards greater alignment with the realities of all citizens of the country (Jordaan, 2023). The main reason for this struggle is rooted in the inability to effectively address the persistent socio-economic challenges of poverty, unemployment and debt. This article argues that many social workers still remain financially illiterate themselves and are therefore unprepared and ill-equipped to effectively assist service users who face challenges of a financial nature (Jordaan, 2023; Engelbrecht, 2008a; 2008b). This article also introduced and argued for the implementation of financial social work interventions as a practice perspective to counteract the massive challenges of attaining social developmental goals. Core arguments that were presented pertain to the nature of financial social work as a perspective on holistic social work practice. Understanding the nature and purpose of financial social work and reflecting on its increasing use in diverse global social work contexts serves to elucidate not only its transferable nature to varying socio-economic contexts, but also the positive impact it can have on facilitating social development. Evidently, financial social work can be regarded as a pertinent perspective on social work practice to be considered in discourses regarding the attainment of effective, sustainable social development aspirations and practices. This highlights its appropriateness to the South African context.

Ultimately, this article reiterates a call to social workers in the same vein as Engelbrecht (2008a:172) did more than a decade ago as "social workers offer social support and access to social resources where available and, in this way, fight the war on poverty and contribute to uplifting the country's poor. Is this enough?" While social workers metaphorically remain in the trenches, it is essential to develop a financial social work practice perspective on the persistent legacy of poverty in the country's social development context.

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