

Contemporary Practices of Building Trust in Welfare Service Work: From Embodied Care to Disembodied Professionalism

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The question of trust toward welfare state institutions is important considering the transformation of welfare state structures and the reconstruction of intimate and public spheres (Power 2004). In Finland that represents one of the Nordic welfare states the social, health care and early childhood education and care services constitute a field of caring occupations whose history is closely bound to that of the welfare state itself. Contemporary demographic and fiscal pressures of the welfare state have resulted in its reconstruction according to market principles, terminology, and ideology. Importantly, this process also reconstructs the identities, hierarchies and the caring rationality at the heart of caring occupations (Evetts 2009).

My presentation discusses the reconstruction of the welfare state in terms of its consequences on the practices of building trust in welfare service work. The presentation is based on a qualitative interview study with Finnish care workers (n=25) in the field of nursing, care work and early childhood education and care work. Theoretically, I understand care as a situational, social and corporeal practice through which the shared cultural values of care work become visible, and professional identities are formed (Sevenhuijsen 1998, Gherardi 2006). Workers are subject to multiple accountabilities for the efficiency and quality of their work by their executives, by their peers and by the service users. The analysis shows that these demands of accountability affect the practices of building trust in welfare service work. Building of trust through the situational, social and corporeal practices of care is increasingly being supplemented with practices based on rational evaluation criteria, information gathering, and monitoring that demonstrate the rise of “disembodied professionalism” in caring occupations (Kuhlmann 2006).

The results suggest that the multiple accountabilities offer both opportunities and risks from the point of view of welfare service personnel. On the one hand, market principles and practices of information gathering have the potential to enhance the efficiency and transparency of public service delivery. On the other hand, the power of these practices leads to the subordination and neglect of the situational, social and corporeal nature of care work that is seminal to trust in care relationships. The conclusion is that while care practices may not be readily measurable, controllable and evaluable by rational criteria, they are central to the workers’ professional identities. Consequently, such practices need to be acknowledged in the process of welfare state reconstruction as elemental for welfare service work and for the service users’ trust in the welfare state.

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