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Relational working under pressure: managing tensions in disability support work

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment for the requirement of a Master of Arts Degree by research in Business and Social Sciences, May 2015.

by

Elaine M. Haverty

Supervisor

Majella Mulkeen

Institute of Technology Sligo

Declaration

I confirm that this research is the result of my own investigations. Where other sources are used, they are fully referenced within the text and in the appended bibliography. This work has not been previously submitted for assessment by any other institute. I have adhered to the regulations set out by IT Sligo protocols.

Signed: _____

Elaine Haverty

Abstract

Title: Relational working under pressure: managing tensions in disability support work

Author: Elaine Haverty

The purpose of this study is to make visible a field of social care practice that is largely invisible, lonely and private in nature. It will examine the situation and experience of staff supporting adults with disabilities both in their own homes and congregated settings in the west of Ireland. Historically in Ireland, services for adults with an intellectual disability have changed beyond recognition from the asylum of old to the current emphasis on independence and social inclusion. Standards of housing and the quality of life of service users are increasingly under the microscope with recent attention and inspections from the Health Inspection and Quality Authority (HIQA). However, a largely unexplored area is the experience of the staff in these environments. The role of a disability support worker is multifaceted and complex. Daily duties include personal care, cooking, cleaning, administering medication, supporting social inclusion, teaching independent living skills, managing challenging behaviour, administration and engaging in continuous professional development.

This study addresses the relational dynamic within which their responsibilities are carried out. Semi structured interviews were carried out with 26 staff and 8 of their managers. Fieldwork findings suggest that disability support work is nuanced within a complex interweaving of bodywork and emotional labour. The work is fraught with tensions between the desire to act in a caring, nurturing role with a sensitivity to the needs of the service user and pressure caused by time and resource constraints to complete tasks quickly, cheaply and efficiently. This impinges on their capacity to form meaningful service user staff relationships and is further augmented by a disconnect from management and the wider context. Improving our understanding of the experience of staff can contribute to a positive culture of person centredness, enhance the visibility of such practice and contribute to the creation of a strong professional identity in this sector.

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And finally, thank you to my family and friends for your support and encouragement along the way.

Glossary of key terms

DSW – Disability Support Worker

HIQA – Health Information and Quality Authority

CORU – Regulatory body of social care professionals

Social Care Work Registration Board – Registration board for social care workers

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