

Relational working under pressure: managing tensions in disability support work

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by

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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: _____

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Abstract

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

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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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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

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Glossary of key terms	v
Table of Contents	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Aims and objectives	1
1.2 Overview	2
Chapter 2: Towards an understanding of disability support approaches	3
Introduction	3
2.1 Historical overview	3
2.2 Exploring disability models in practice	11
2.3 Contemporary debates: care versus independence	14
2.4 The politics of language in disability	18
Conclusion	21
Chapter 3: Factors affecting disability support work	22
Introduction	22
3.1 Gender	22
3.2 Disability support work as a labour process	24
3.2.1 The role of managers	27
3.3 The body	27
3.4 Emotional labour	30
3.5 Supporting the worker	33
Conclusion	35

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology	36
Introduction	36
4.1 Statement of research questions	36
4.2 Research philosophy	36
4.3 Research approach	38
4.4 Methodology	40
4.4.1 Selection of sample	41
4.4.2 Research participants	42
4.5 Research site	44
4.5.1 Designing and carrying out interviews	44
4.6 Data analysis	46
4.7 Ethical considerations	47
4.8 Validity, reliability and credibility	49
4.8.1 My position in the research	50
4.9 Emerging Issues	51
4.9.1 Limitations	52
Conclusion	53
Chapter 5: Findings	54
Introduction	54
5.1 Interviews with staff: findings	54
5.1.1 Experience of social change	54
5.1.2 Labour process	55
5.1.3 Person centred approach	56
5.1.4 Relationship	59
5.1.5 Emotional labour	60
5.1.6 The body	62
5.2 Interviews with managers: findings	63
5.2.1 Understanding of the job for staff	63
5.2.2 Support	64
5.2.3 Resource management	65

4.2.4 Labour process/ bureaucracy	67
Conclusion	68
Chapter 6: Discussion	69
6.1 Professional relationships	69
6.2 Time	73
6.3 Professional identity	76
6.3.1 The body	81
6.4 Policy priorities	83
6.5 Managerialism	86
6.5.1 The impact of managerialism in disability support work	90
Conclusion	93
Chapter 7: Conclusion and recommendations	94
References	97
Appendices	
A: Staff Interview Topic Guide	
B: Managers Interview Topic Guide	
C: Staff Participant Information Sheet	
D: Managers Participant Information Sheet	
E: Consent Forms	
F: Exit Questionnaire	
Tables	
1: Profile of participating organisations	43
2: Profile of participating staff	44
3: Illustration of discussion themes synthesised from findings themes	47