
The constituents of the ruling relations: understanding relational experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and their support workers through Institutional Ethnography

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Abstract

This presentation draws on the findings from a PhD study about support work relationships (Lutz, 2020), conducted from August 2014 to March 2019 in Germany and Australia. The study explored the following two questions: How do people with intellectual disabilities using a personal budget (PB) and their support workers experience their relationships with each other? How are their relational experiences influenced by the way support work is organised through PB policies? Adding to an understanding about support work relationships by exploring these questions was important as support work can support budget holders to live a meaningful and more independent life, as envisaged by Article 19 of the UN Convention (Fisher et al., 2019; Shakespeare, 2014).

This study was grounded in the qualitative methodology of Institutional Ethnography (IE), a social theory and empirical method (e.g. Smith, 1996, 2001; 2005, 2006) that states that people's everyday experiences are influenced by the 'ruling relations', which are policy processes and people's practices that organise social settings. The researcher used IE to explore the experiences of support work relationships under the influence of the ruling relations. 5 budget holders and their support workers from each country took part in interviews and participant observations during a 12-month period of ethnographic fieldwork. Additionally, the researcher conducted interviews with 10 service professionals in each country and analysed disability policy documents. The in-depth analysis was guided by the research questions and based in the analytical framework of IE which suggests to explore the experiences of each person in relation to the other first and connect them to the concept of the ruling relations.

The study's core findings were the constituents of the ruling relations. These were people's views and expectations about the support work relationship, the support work context and the policies of PBs. The researcher found that PB policies are only one constituent of the ruling relations that operate within a wider social policy context which influence support work relationships. The interconnection of the constituents affected how budget holders and their support workers experience their relationships.

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