



Mapping the ruling relations of work in rural eldercare intersections of gender, digitalization and the centre–periphery divide



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There is strong gender differentiation in the Swedish labour market, and particularly so when it comes to eldercare (Kullberg, 2012). Women are in the majority in almost all positions in eldercare, and thus women are in charge of planning within and the day-to-day running of the sector. In addition, we also know that the sectors where women predominate are often those with lower status and pay than those where men are in the majority (Andersson, 2007), and that the local authority managers' work environments differ according to whether they are in standard male-dominated services or female-dominated social care (Forsberg Kankkunen, 2006). Several studies have shown that council managers responsible for services and community care have similar tasks and responsibilities, but face very different working conditions and work environments. The fact that eldercare managers are responsible for more employees per manager than is standard in all other council services is often explained away with the arguments that there is a lack of resources and, in a clear reference to gender, that female managers tend not to speak out against it. Forsberg Kankkunen (2006) has shown that when examined in terms of gender regimes, it is immediately apparent that the position of eldercare manager provides little opportunity to make successful demands for resources and organization. This also makes it even less likely that managers will renegotiate their roles with their superiors and politicians, and so prevent, or at least resolve, health and safety problems. To talk of the organization, planning and sociopolitical reform of eldercare is just as much to talk about women's working conditions. Several researchers have

argued that the neo-liberal restructuring of Western welfare states, following the rise of new public management (NPM), has brought about a broader change in the management of all forms of care, thus renegotiating the care ethic of the Nordic welfare model *in toto* (Andersson and Kvist, 2015; Dahl, 2012; Henriksson and Wrede, 2008; Thörnquist, 2013). The implementation of NPM in elderly care has increased the focus on measuring, evaluating and auditing, promoting Llan management as the core method for making the public sector more 'effective'; emphasizing economic efficiency and cost-cutting through competition (Thörnquist, 2013). This has also led to the implementation of so called 'quasi markets' which means that the work in public sector has transformed into having features originating from the private sector, where each unit should carry their own costs (Bode et al., 2011; Thörnquist, 2013; Des los Reyes et al., 2015). The restructuring has therefore had a direct impact on women's working conditions, not because they are women per se, but because they are part of a society-wide gender order that permits occupational segregation to continue.

In a recently completed research project on the organization and planning of local authority housing and eldercare in remote rural areas of Sweden, it was striking just how many of the managers we interviewed that described their sector as 'a drain on the public purse'. This was not only because of obsolete descriptions of private and public funding, but also because of other power structures, such as the dichotomy of centre and periphery, the position of eldercare in relation to other council services and the relationship between client and contractor in the same sector. Using a feminist analysis of the transformation of the public sector, which means that we will investigate how issues of gender are intertwined in these transformation, we will illustrate how a general restructuring at the local authority level can have specific and gendered consequences for working conditions in rural areas. We would argue that any study of work environments and working conditions in eldercare should proceed from a theoretical perspective that allows for an analysis of working conditions in individual workplaces, viewed in relation to other societal power constructs (see Mulinari and Selberg, 2013). We also want to demonstrate how this perceived notion of being a burden on society is related to other power structures, and the consequences it can have for work environments.

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In this article, our aim is to shed light on the managers' working conditions, where the financial vulnerability that characterizes most rural councils in Sweden is very much a factor in their everyday work. The interviews show how the uncertainty specific to rural areas—enormous financial pressures—often means that responsibility for care work and occupational health and safety is not compatible with the council's internal organization. In the following, we will present the institutional changes and examine how they intersect with gender and working conditions. We will map out both social and governance ruling relations by focusing on the managers' descriptions of their everyday work planning and implementing eldercare in rural areas, following the principles set out by Dorothy Smith (2005). We do this by focusing on the way people, institutions and practices exist in relation to one another.

1. Gender, institutional change and working conditions in eldercare – mapping ruling relations

The neo-liberal restructuring of welfare work, in conjunction with the introduction of what several researchers call quasi-markets, has meant that working in the public sector now resembles working in the private sector (Bode et al., 2011; Thörnquist, 2013; see also Des los Reyes et al., 2015). This has led to an increased focus on measuring, evaluating and monitoring public eldercare, to the point where NPM is sufficiently entrenched to be evident in the technical monitoring support systems and evaluation tools that determine care work on the ground (Nyhlén and Giritli Nygren, 2015). Another consequence of the organizational changes are the implementation of the purchaser – provider model where the elderly care has been divided into a demand (needs assessors) and supply (caregivers and managers) side. A number of scholars have pointed out that this new form of governance is turning the once 'universal' understanding of social care into a market-oriented figuration that defines what care is and can be in particular ways. Care becomes differentiated, counted, and exercised as procedures that do not require any professional judgement, since all tasks are named, specified, and timed. These extensive organizational changes in Swedish eldercare have also affected employees' working conditions (see, for example, Fläckman et al., 2009; Olsson and Ingvad, 2006; Sörensdotter, 2008; Szebehely and Trydegård, 2012).

However, these changes are not always reflected on when working conditions in eldercare are discussed. Instead, whenever the eldercare work environment is discussed, the focus is invariably on the high levels of sickness absence and stress leave among the largely female staff, and only then in terms of staff shortages, understaffing, no breaks, stress and so on (see, for example, SOU, 2014:30).

The segregation mechanisms that exist in the labour market thus have direct consequences for work environments, as they include the unequal pay and poor conditions that distinguish the prevailing gender order, and perhaps the social order in general. The gender order is here understood as the relationship between different gender regimes or 'the current state of play in the macro-politics of gender' while gender regimes refers to the state of play of gender relations in a given institution, for example state regulation or workplace organisations (Connell, 1987:20). The regime of the labour market both reflects and influences what happens in other spheres. The organisation of work and the demands made of workers will affect what happens in the organisation and distribution of elderly care and the principles and patterns of social relations found in the workplace are likely to have a certain congruence with those shown in other social spheres. As soon as a traditional gender order is taken for granted, all hope of a deeper problematization and analysis of the system and its interaction

with other power structures in society fades (see Mulinari and Selberg, 2013). Many researchers have therefore stressed the need to apply an intersectional perspective to better understand how social structures, normative processes and patterns of behaviour in the workplace create differences based on gender, class, ethnicity, age and other social categorizations (McCall, 2005; Des los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005; Acker, 2006, 2012). As Acker (2006) argues, workplaces—like society as a whole—are not only marked by gender regimes that are discriminatory and unequal, but also by several different 'inequality regimes'. The point of an intersectional perspective, in other words, is that it shifts the focus away from social categorizations per se to concentrate instead on the way in which those categorizations relate to one another, how they create and reinforce one another and how they are reproduced in an institutional and historical context (Des los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005; McCall, 2005).

What we present here is a conceptual framework that we believe provides both theoretical and methodological insights worth considering if we are to update the general view on eldercare work environments, and where we take our cue from the analytical and theoretical concepts that Dorothy Smith (2005) suggests. To illustrate how power, organization and regulation together speak directly to society's capitalist and patriarchal forms, Smith (1990) uses the concept of 'governance relationships'. This is a matter of recognizing that individual actions in socially situated practices are caught up in sequences of actions produced by people on other occasions and in other places (Smith, 2005:94). This perspective means that the construction of gender, and indeed other social categories, is then seen as part of people's social relations, which means that the categories take their meaning from the relationships of which they form part. Practice and structure should not be viewed as separable (see Smith, 2005: 160); rather, what people do, say, think and write (local practices, in other words) are interwoven in society's governance relationships. According to Smith (2005), a thorough temporal and spatial analysis of social relations, conducted to chart the relationships that link one place to another both in and around an organization, makes it possible transcend specific locations or situations. By using the chart analogy by Smith (2005) and tracing the relations that links one place to another in geographical-as well as in organisational terms we can draw a 'map'. This map gives us knowledge that goes beyond the specific empirical place or situation. By linking the everyday experiences, it is possible to discuss how people, institutions and practices are related to each other and societal power hierarchies.

The study is based on three rural local municipalities.¹ They were selected by targeted quota sampling, where Sweden's rural local municipalities were divided into groups according to their geographical location: northern, central or southern. Each of the three local municipalities included in the study has decided to organize itself in different ways; in two there is a social welfare board that provides the political oversight of eldercare, while in the third there is a social welfare committee of the council's executive. Inspired by Smith (2005) we want to trace the ruling relations of elderly care in rural areas in order to highlight how different power relations intersect and how this is connected to working environment.

The analysis draws on interviews with three care managers and four area managers in three local municipalities in Sweden. Each care manager is responsible for a care home or home-help area,

¹ Our definition of a remote rural area is based on the standard definition (kolada.se 2015), according to which a rural local authority has a degree of population density less than 70 per cent and fewer than 8 inhabitants per square kilometre.

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