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Governmentality – or how is poverty arranged in computerized work sites within social work?

Aim of this presentation is to point out that information technology (IT) is changing the role, responsibilities, practices (like work patterns) and categories of social workers and therefore it is important to deal with the impact - and perhaps the governance - of IT on social work. (cp. Harlow/Webb 2003 as well the discussion about governmentality ■ 2007) Two general and continuous assumptions run like a thread through this paper: IT is shaping the professional base of knowledge on the one hand and the relation between organisation and profession on the other hand.

Considering social work as a discipline and profession, a critical review of - mostly externally designed - software systems and their integrated knowledge bases is needed. Due to this, the reconstruction of subjective interpretative schemes and frames of the professional social workers who are working with software is a general aim of my doctor thesis. This qualitative research project discusses the point of principle, how the professional character of social work in youth welfare departments under the influence of computers in general and the implemented software in particular is shaped and as the case may be determined. Consequentially, how is the custom software integrated in professional action and how is the ambivalence of organisational, professional and from now on technical rationalities constituted?

To relate my ongoing doctoral research to the general topic of the Distance Learning Unit "Employability & Poverty", this paper is concerning with three basic questions: *Do Artefacts have politics? Do Politics have artefacts? Do Classifications have politics?*

Focussing on the topic of classification - or rather formalization - several authors are arguing that a new managerialism is shaping social work in its foundations: it is characterized by a tickbox culture, the dominance of standardized assessment tools (in contradiction to a traditional, holistic face-to-face communication), and last but not least the technological fix on software tools. (Webb 2006, Garrett 2004, Garrett 2005, Parton 2006) Concurrent with the increasing distribution of Case-Management-Systems in the last years one can denote a distinct spread of psycho-social diagnosis in the practice of German social work. If we follow this reasoning, the bundle of these "technologies of care" will lead to a de-professionalization of social work. (Webb 2006 141ff)

Stephen Webb defines current developments like risk assessment, evaluation, evidence-based practice, decision pathway models, and moreover the networked communication technologies as "an emerging constellation of techniques, methods and apparatus in social work that combine to de-skill

practitioners and reduce their professional autonomy. Technologies of care typically entail processes whereby local skills are expropriated into abstract systems and re-organised in light of technical methods and knowledge. As top-down instruments they impose on social work the character of a function, with practitioners as low-level administrators dealing largely with assessment.” (Webb 2006 pp 21-22) Finally ”they are concerned with the governance of uncertainty – they are rational schemas for organising social work and developing procedures for how it is carried out and delivered.” (p 142) That means the software represents the case in a specific way, in which the client is reduced to (standardized) risk factors; this again enforces strategies of profiling which are confronted with a holistic view onto to the client. (See as well the ambivalence of subsumtion vs. reconstruction in theories of profession, Oevermann 1996)

In the end I want to point out how poverty or rather categories of poverty are arranged in computerized work sites within social work. Because “we have a moral and ethical agenda in our querying of these [classification, T.L.] systems. Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous, not bad, but dangerous.” (Bowker/Star 1999, pp5-6)

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