

Agency in shaping social work service concept

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The purpose of the research is to study human and non-human agency in the adaptation process of a new social work service concept. The case study is located in a city where adult social work offices were merged into two service centers and to open-plan offices which is a new concept in the Finnish social sector. The research is based on Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The research question is how the different actors participate in the shaping of social work practices in the open-plan office? In ANT, the translations the idea undergoes in others' hands are followed. Therefore, the research starts before the transformation with the analysis of political decision making (public documents) and seven employees' group discussions concerning the ongoing process. The data collected after the reform, consists in the first case of three employees' group interviews and eight service-users interviews. In the second case, the data consists of two employees' group interviews six months apart and interviews of ten service-users. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with content analysis. The idea of the new service concept, generated by the management and supported by the local politicians, was reasoned to reach the criteria of better and cost-effective social work practice. The social work professionals objected the idea as they considered the stakeholders not understanding the practice. The sense of their exclusion weakened the idea. In the first office, the space and technology had also agency in translating the idea by making the adaptation and reaching the goals of the reform hard. The knowledge gained was, however, utilized in the second office which turned out more functional. The main outcome of the study is that in developing better practice, the different actors cannot be overlooked as they are participating in translating the idea.

Key concepts: Social welfare office, agency, network, space.