

## Research Project

# Employment and Social Differences in the Health Sector: An Institutional Perspective on a Swiss Hospital

## Background

The health care labor market is highly structured along categories of difference, such as formal qualification, gender or age. To handle these differences represents a particular challenge for hospitals. On the one hand, hospitals are facing an increasing economization of health care attended by the tension between concerns like quality management, cost-effectiveness and a concurrent staff shortage. On the other hand, political debates and national as well as international regulations influence the recruitment and capabilities of personnel in the health care sector.

## Research goal

The interdisciplinary project aims to unveil social diversities in the health care labor market by contextualizing and localizing the institutional logics of personnel policy within hospitals. An institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) of a Swiss acute hospital was conducted to understand the institutional logic and ruling relations that shape personnel policies in this specific place. This perspective is combined with a multilevel intersectional lens (Winker & Degele 2009) to capture how personnel policies are structured by categories of social difference. With this perspective, we trace power geometries based on differences such as gender, age, education, position and origin.

## Method

We followed two strategies of data collection, one outside and one inside the hospital: Outside the hospital, we did expert interviews with stakeholders in the field and conducted open semi-structured interviews with a variety of healthcare professionals. In addition, we collected media articles, governmental documents and reports by different actors and organizations. Inside the hospital, we did an institutional ethnography that involved doing observations by shadowing nurses and physicians in their daily work in three different wards, collecting documents and conducting open semi-structured interviews with members of the middle and senior management.

## Purpose

The study seeks to contribute to the field of research on social inequality in the labor market using an institutional perspective. Combining the research strategies of an institutional ethnography and multilevel intersectionality constitutes a novel approach to the research questions. By structuring our study in this way, we aim at enriching the debate theoretically and methodologically. For practitioners, the results will have implications in terms of management strategies, hierarchies and power structures. By closely analyzing social diversity, practitioners will gain novel insights for their equal rights policies, for concepts on gaining as well as retaining health care staff and questions regarding personnel shortages, especially in relation to working conditions, job satisfaction and work-life balance.

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