

Being there: Integrating a new generation allied health workforce in publicly funded domiciliary aged care

Peter D Nixon June 2010

Abstract

Debate about a possible crisis in the aged care workforce raises questions about the sustainability of the industry and the contribution it can make to social sustainability more broadly. The strategic value for the future of the industry of employing young allied health practitioners focused the research which asks questions concerning their recruitment and retention. Appreciation of the explanatory potential of social mechanisms helps situate this inter-disciplinary social science research which takes place across generational boundaries. Engaged social research methodology was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data from five young allied health students selected because of their commitment to the project. The purpose was to increase understanding about individuals with some actual or potential for involvement in the industry. Job embeddedness (Holtom and O'Neill 2004) frames the description of fit and links between participants, industry and community, and sacrifices to be made on leaving the industry. Analysis is based on a sensitizing framework (James 2006) which is associated with the Arena group of social researchers. The process involves moving backwards and forwards between modes of practice, modes of social integration and ontological dimensions of space, time, ways of knowing and embodiment. Application of this method results in ever finer description.

The application of James' framework has enhanced understanding of the differing career preferences of individual participants and differences between participants as a group and their peers. Key findings relate to the ways participants inform their career-related decisions, relevance of generational theories, the fit between participants and the industry and what is required of industry to enhance social integration. Participants inform their career related decisions from an early age and largely through face to face contacts. Compared to their peers, participants in this research are less healthy and experience

more job-related stress. The findings provide qualified support for the theories of Strauss and Howe (1991). However, participants' views of different age cohorts are more influenced by life course theory than generational characteristics. The fit between participants and the industry can be influenced by the industry and by changes in community attitudes towards embodiment, social integration and cultural exchange. The embodied delivery of agency-extended social integration entails ontological tensions around the visibility of the worker. These tensions can be addressed through the public sector management approach of co-production. If the industry wants to enlist young allied health professionals then, through a co-production approach, it must enlist the capacities of the elderly so that the elderly, however isolated, can play their part in cultural exchange.

This project breaks new ground in four important ways. To the best of my knowledge this is the first time that the Arena group theoretical framework (James 2006) has been applied to industry problems concerning workforce shortages and the first time it has been applied in the aged care industry. The findings bring together workforce shortage problems, not covered by Alford, and co-production, the public sector management approach based on public values (Alford 2009). The role of public servant is particularly relevant to understanding the tensions between ways of knowing in the industry and ways of knowing experienced by participants. By considering the role of public servant the present work has moved qualitatively beyond the recommendations of the Australian National Health and Hospital Reform Commission (2009). Finally, the research has been able to bring a new approach to problems around social integration that have been publicly known since 1975.

Alford J (2009). *Engaging Public Sector Clients: From Service-Delivery to Co-production* Palgrave Macmillan. Hampshire UK; New York USA.

Holtom B and O'Neill B (2004). *Job embeddedness - A theoretical foundation for developing a comprehensive nurse retention plan*. *Journal of Nursing Administration* 34(5): 216-227.

James P (2006). *Globalism, Nationalism, Tribalism: Bringing Theory Back In*. Sage, London.

National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (2009). *A Healthier Future for all Australians* Final Report. Australian Government. Accessed 27-11-09.
<http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/nhhrc-report-toc>

Strauss W and Howe N (1991). *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York.