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Who cares? An ethnographic research on the workforce integration of first-generation immigrants in geriatric care in the Netherlands and Germany

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SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the social processes affecting the workforce integration of first-generation immigrant care workers in geriatric care and the enactment of good care in two residential homes, in the Netherlands and in Germany. The aim of this ethnographic research was to gain a deeper understanding of interactions between first-generation immigrant care workers and established care providers in their care for ageing residents. In response to the shortage of nursing staff and the 2015 refugee crisis, both residential homes invited newcomers with a refugee background to participate in a project for nursing education and internships. Between 2015 and 2018, a group of ten immigrants with a refugee background started working in a Dutch residential home, a group of seventeen immigrants with a refugee background started in the German residential home. This dissertation investigates the social processes when these newcomers start working with the established staff, as well as the extent to which their mutual interactions and values of good care influence the enactment of care in daily practice. Using ethnographic observations and participatory tools, the established care workers and newcomers were followed when they were working together and enacted geriatric care. The notions of 'established and outsiders' of sociologist Elias and Scotson (1965), 'habitus' and 'feel for the game' of sociologist Bourdieu (1990), and 'tinkering' of philosopher Mol (2010) were used as sensitizing concepts to get a general sense of guidance to the data. Based on the empirical outcomes, we noticed that social processes and institutional constraints, such as shortage of staff, the imposition of professional norms, gossip used as a 'weapon of the weak', mutual suspicions of indifference, and collective images of 'us' versus 'them' affected the enactment of care. The established and newcomers conceived each other as the source of their discomfort. However, both groups shared the feeling that they were ignored by management, a pain of not mattering. The interaction between established staff and newcomers was influenced by institutional norms, rules and regulations, while in daily practice their professional habitus stimulated them to tinker among each other as well as with different, sometimes conflicting, values of good care. The findings underline that what counts as good care is situational, relational and contextual. However, the findings also show that the workload sometimes gets so high that it becomes impossible to perform all tasks properly. As a consequence, staff can become demotivated and indifferent to the point that they are numbed, act thoughtlessly and thereby harm their clients. This dissertation thus shows

how various social processes and institutional constraints not only have a serious impact on the individual well-being of care workers and their older clients, but also a significance impact on the workforce integration of new immigrant workers, and the enactment of good care for older residents.