

Lucy Fisher

University of California, San Francisco

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*The Body/Work Nexus: The Work of Nursing Assistants in Nursing Homes*

Background and significance:

Certified nursing assistants (CNAs) provide the bulk of daily hands-on personal care to elderly and disabled persons living in nursing homes. Most of these workers are women and, in urban areas, immigrants and people of color. Aides receive less than the median wage and have one of the highest on-the-job injury rates. Considerations of bodywork are a missing dimension in research generally, and specifically vis-à-vis nursing assistants' performance of this work for others. The implications of ignoring this critical dimension of care are significant because it informs much of what is considered quality of care in nursing homes.

Objective/aims:

How do nursing assistants construct the bodies of nursing home residents? How do they find dignity in a "dirty work" (Hughes, 1971) job? How do these views shape the intimate care they provide?

Methods:

This qualitative study uses grounded theory and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) to analyze interviews and participant observations with 27 aides in three different types of nursing homes in northern California. In addition, a content review of aide textbooks, certification exams and job descriptions was undertaken.

Findings:

Nursing assistants constructed three distinct views of residents: resident as fictive kin, resident as commodity, and resident as autonomous person. Related discourses supported each construct and influenced the visible practice of care giving. These discourses served to dignify a stigmatized job, allowing CNAs to reinterpret meanings of dirty work. A sub-group of male aides challenged notions of hegemonic masculinities, offering "feminine" qualities of the ideal CNA. Some immigrant cultural beliefs of CNAs also entered their rhetorics of duty and caring.

Although aides voiced job satisfaction from emotional relationships with nursing home residents, their training, certification exam, and job descriptions instead privilege instrumental tasks.

Conclusions/Implications:

Understanding how perceptions of the CNA role emerge and influence care provides guidance for education, training, and supervision. In addition, meaning-making by these workers offer possible direction for nursing home policies that might enhance worker retention and satisfaction.

An area for future research is the interface between ethnic minority aides caring for the growing numbers of immigrant nursing home residents.