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FINAL DRAFT

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## **Living on a Knife's Edge – Temporal Conflicts in Welfare Service Work**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the temporal variations of social and health care workers' agency from the point of view of the social structures and practices of the contemporary Finnish public service sector. It finds that the contemporary Finnish public sector increasingly operates according to market principles and economic framing of time, contrary to the relational understanding of time in care practices. To maintain their sense of self as skilled professionals, workers actively reassess and adjust their identities according to the exigencies of the contemporary working life, but not without difficulties. The results of the interview study reflect the intuitive, habitual and innovative nature of temporality of care practices, but also the constraints that the contemporary, economic-rationalistic temporal frame in working life poses on welfare service work. The results suggest that the question of time management is therefore central not only from the point of view of the efficiency of service production but from the point of view of welfare service workers' exercise of their professional agency.

### **Introduction**

Time has a central but also complex role in the practice of welfare service work. The work is characterized by the workers' shared understanding of the responsibility for another human being, demands for flexibility, emotion work, constant availability, and repetitive routines (Waerness 1984, Davies, 2001: 138; Deery 2008). As paid labour, it is also conformed to fixed schedules according to clock time. Previous research has assessed that the predominant understanding of time in the labour market as physically measured units of clock time does not account for the psychological and sociological

aspect of time as it is experienced by workers and service users in the structural confines of welfare service provision (Davies 1989 & 2001, Deery 2008).

In terms of good care, the balance between the societal and institutional temporal frames and workers' and clients' experiences of time is crucial, as they together shape and define the practice of care (Jones 2010). Recently, the neoliberal reforms of the welfare states and the scarcity of public resources have actualized the challenges of temporal management of welfare service work by increasingly compressing it to be measured by the units of clock time. Studies suggest that the demands for results, efficiency and competitiveness have made it difficult for care personnel to act in accordance with their ethical dispositions (Henriksson & Wrede, 2008; Blomgren & Sahlin, 2007; Bryson & Deery, 2010: 190; Power, 2003: 93). According to Bryson (2007), the contemporary economic-rationalist framing of public services leaves little slack for employees to set their own pace of work according to the task in hand or their own biological and social needs. As a consequence, individual workers' experiences of time, their personal time management as well as the institutional framing of time in welfare services are a question of social political relevance.

Chances for choice and reflection on the temporality of actions are a key feature of agency in welfare service work. Referring to the temporal basis of agency, Flaherty (2011:7) notes that temporal experience is not entirely defined by one's circumstances, but individuals can anticipate events and adjust to the forth-coming. Using the concept of "time work", he further explains that individuals purposefully construct lines of activity

or social situations in order to create particular kinds of temporal experience (ibid.). Therefore the temporal experience does not just happen to us, but we can and will manipulate the construction of situations in order to bring about particular types of temporal experiences and agency. In this article, we address the question of the temporality of individual action within social structures. More specifically, we look at how agency is exerted within the practices of welfare service work in the confines of the contemporary Finnish welfare state by analysing thematic interviews (n=24) concerning the time work that welfare service workers<sup>i</sup> engage with. How do individuals experience time, interpret, adjust to, or defy the contemporary requests for efficient time use? How do temporal orientations define welfare service workers' agency in the contemporary labour market where time is measured and defined as a scarce resource? The structure of the paper is as follows. We first discuss the context of the study, Finland. We then discuss the sociological theories on time and introduce the concepts relevant to studying the subjective experience of time in the context of welfare service work. We then introduce the data and our methodological approach. Finally, we present the results and conclusions based on the findings.

### **Context: Finland**

In Finland, social, health care and early education services are predominantly organized through public sector and executed by professional welfare service workers. As publicly organized services, the services remain one of the central signifiers of the Nordic welfare state model. Historically, the Nordic welfare state model has had a central role in shaping

gendered professional power in the labour market in Finland. Expanding the provision of public services to citizens in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has played a key role in offering labour market opportunities particularly to women as educated (semi-)professionals. Describing the shared mentality of welfare service professionals in the Nordic context, Waerness (1984) uses the concept of the rationality of caring. It highlights the special nature of care as paid work that requires continuity and a temporal orientation not determined by the clock but by the needs of the service users. Davies (1989, 1996) famously introduced the concept of process time in her studies on to the temporal complexity of care work.

The Finnish welfare state faced a forceful reorganization in consequence of a severe depression in the 1990s. Since then, the institutional terms for welfare service work have been under reconstruction. The professional, bureaucratic and state-lead governance model of welfare services has been altered according to management principles adopted from private sector and market action (Julkunen, 2006; Heiskala & Hämäläinen, 2007), making efficient allocation of time a key question for the resilience of the welfare state. As the most rapidly aging nation in Europe, Finland is currently seeking new, innovative and economically sustainable ways to organise its public services. Today, the field of welfare services encompasses for-profit service providers, civil society and purchaser-provider arrangements, while the citizens as service users have been assigned the role of a consumer.

Henriksson and Wrede (2008: 124) summarise that the situation in Finland resembles that of many other welfare states who face simultaneous pressures towards producing well-targeted, efficient and client-centered services (see also Teperi 2009). To welfare service workers, the changes have manifested in increasing quality and efficiency control and in the implementation of audit and reporting systems that aim at better revealing and visualizing care processes and their outcomes. The recent changes in the social structures of welfare service work have also affected the management of time in welfare services. Along with the ideological and institutional transformation, the experiences of physical and mental burden among care personnel have increased in recent years<sup>ii</sup>. Despite these tendencies, few studies have addressed in detail the question of time from the workers' point of view.

### **Contemporary temporal framing of welfare service work**

To fulfill the professional, ethical obligations of welfare service work, sufficient allocation of time is crucial (Jones 2010). Andersson (2008: 342) suggests that the question of the temporal requirements of care has been largely neglected in current welfare service research that takes a moral standpoint and idealised focus on closeness and reciprocity, while trivializing the actual, temporal constraints of care in the execution of tasks. Critics suggest that the contemporary economic-rationalistic framing of time as a commodity in working life is not altogether suitable for welfare service work. Instead, it requires a frame that captures the processual nature of care practices and their situational requirements (Davies, 2001; Twigg, 2000: 97, Bryson 2007: 31). Imposing economic

rationality and cost-effectiveness on the often slow, intangible practices of care work may therefore lead to reduction of workers' job satisfaction and - eventually - a lower quality of care. In sum, previous studies suggest that the contemporary conditions of welfare service work are challenging in terms of the front-line workers' agency.

Social theorists have criticized the predominant economic-rationalist framing of time for undermining the significance of the processual nature of time as a requirement for realizing caring rationality in welfare service work (Held, 2006: 10; Waerness, 1984; 2005; Twigg, 2000). Providing a broader perspective, feminist sociologists describe the timespace of care as one that is difficult to pack, schedule, or consistently commoditize (Davies, 2001: 141; Deery 2008; 345; Adkins 2009). Feeding, washing and over-all attention to the other in care relationships can be time-consuming work that is sometimes impossible to subjugate to fixed temporal patterns (Sabelis, 2001; Twigg, 2000). Davies (2001) suggests that rather than the standard understanding of linear time<sup>iii</sup>, care work is better understood in the confines of process time that sees past, present and future as intertwined. This relational understanding of time is characterized by simultaneity of actions and thoughts, waiting and fluidity<sup>iv</sup>.

The relational temporal frame expands the predominant, commoditizing understanding of time by recognizing the exigencies of human service work. While the relational temporal framework is clearly different from the economic-rationalistic framework, the point is not to dichotomise these two. Rather, our aim is to show how they co-exist in the practices of

care work. The parallel, if not competing frames of time are telling of the seminal nature of time in welfare service work.

### **Temporal variations of human agency**

To further link the idea of the parallel temporal frames to an investigation of agency, we have looked for a definition of agency that is sensitive to the relational nature of time in welfare service work. Our starting point is in Flaherty (2003: 30) concept of 'time work'. It refers to how people anticipate events and adjust to the forth-coming, extending the temporal horizon of human agency from the here-and-now to both past and future events. Individuals shift their time horizons based on the problems that emerge within situated interaction. The temporal frames of contemporary society thereby engage welfare service workers with time work. Individuals actively reflect upon and rework their actions in order to accommodate to the societal and organizational, temporal exigencies of the job. To manage the fluid, sometimes unscheduled events in welfare service work requires active efforts from the individual. Because of the nature of human service work, the workers' exert their agency acknowledging the needs and the time horizons of the cared for, while remaining dependent on the constraints of the objectively measured clock time in working-life.

According to Hitlin and Elder (2007) the temporal nature of the self has been theorized, but not systematically linked to macro-sociological concerns about the nature of agency. Agency stems both from individual and external circumstances that direct our attentional

focus and, as a consequence, our choices that reproduce and rework social structures (ibid.). Extending Flaherty's idea of time work, they suggest a more nuanced view on the temporal conceptualization of human agency. To analytically study the temporal dimensions of human agency, Hitlin and Elder elaborate that the actual problems we face in our action orient our attention toward immediate, routine or long-range goals, while highlighting the influence of social structures on our *capacities to time work within bounded situations* (ibid. 185).

Summarizing existing sociological theory and research on temporality of human agency, Hitlin and Elder have compiled a typology that identifies four temporal variants in human agency. We use this typology as a methodological tool in the initial analysis of our data. The most general type of agency in the typology is called existential agency. It is agency inherent in social action, and as such represents a universal human potentiality, much on the lines with Flaherty's (2003) idea of time work. It is free within constraints of physical reality, and very common among the abstract discussions concerning temporality. Our analysis, however, concentrates on the three other types of agency (see table 1) in Hitlin and Elder's typology – pragmatic agency, identity agency, and life course agency – which represent the variety in the temporal orientations of human life.

(Table 1: Temporal orientations on agency TO BE PLACED HERE)

With pragmatic agency, Hitlin and Elder (2007) refer to circumstances that require heightened attention and concentration to one's immediate surroundings. Actors engaged

in pragmatic practice have their temporal focus squarely on themselves and their interactional goals in the present moment. The second type, identity agency, represents the habitual, routine patterning of social behavior in day-to-day events. While pragmatic agency and identity agency focus primarily on the present, the third variant, life course agency, has an extended temporal horizon. Life course agency involves past experiences and memories, and orientations toward potential capacities for constructing and engaging in long-term plans. Although the characteristics of the three agency types are somewhat overlapping and their boundaries fluid, the typology provides a valuable starting point for our empirical study on temporality and agency.

### **Analysing the temporal orientations in the practice of care**

Defining the temporal orientations regarding welfare service workers agency is a question for situated, empirical study. We use thematic interviews for the purpose of grasping the processual and relational dimensions of welfare service work. We collected the data in Central and Southern Finland between 2007 and 2009. Total number of the interviews was 24 (see appendix 1). The sample of care workers was established through personal contacts and by posting an advert in public care facilities. The interviewees were nurses and social service workers. Their current workplaces were units in public hospitals and clinics, municipal geriatric care units, daycare centers and home care service teams. The interviewees were between 25-62 years old. Some of them had more than 25 years of working experience, whereas some had only few years of experience as temporary workers. The interviews were based on a thematic core and lasted approximately one and a half hours each. Questions focused on the nature of participants' jobs (duties, most/least

liked elements), and their relationship with co-workers and patients/clients. The interviews aimed at mapping how care workers constituted themselves and their work in the public service sector. The qualitative data was collected not for its statistical representativeness but primarily for its ability to highlight the complexity and richness of experiences.

We have initially analysed the data to identify the temporal nuances of pragmatic agency, identity agency and life course agency in the data, as presented in Hitlin and Elder's (2007) typology. The results implicate different aspects of the self within the situated practices of welfare service work. To extend the analysis from the level of individual experience and organisation to that of the temporal framing of welfare service work in the contemporary society, we further discuss the results in light of the economic-rationalistic and relational temporal frames introduced in contemporary sociological discussions on temporal management of work. The analysis thereby moves between the levels of the individual experiences, organisation practices and the societal frames in mapping the modes of welfare service workers' agency in the contemporary welfare state.

By concentrating on the practice of welfare service work, the analysis highlights the interrelations between these levels in defining welfare service workers' agency. Practical acts, or practices, Gherardi (2006: xiii) explains, constitute the terrain for research on which subjects and objects take shape, language becomes discourse, and knowledge is mobilized and maintained. Gherardi further explains how people engaged in working practices acknowledge a set of social positions which are interrelated, which make sense

and which are enacted (ibid., 36). Practices impart identities and selves that are displayed on appropriate occasions, in the case of our study, in the context of welfare service work. People's experiences within practices become incorporated into their identities, the social positions that they occupy, the status that they display while they enact the set of practices, and also when they do not perform it (ibid. 36). The field of (organizational/workplace) practices is therefore the context in which the temporalisation of welfare service work becomes observable. In the process of analysis, we focus on activities "which are situated, embodied and shaped by habitus without reflection" (Thévenot, 2001) and view care work as a situated social practice (Poggio, 2006: 225). The innovative and distinctive feature of the focus on practice is, therefore, that it recognizes the embodied nature of human activity, whether it is performed by saying or doing.

### **Analysis: three variations of temporal practice of welfare service work**

#### ***The pragmatic practice of care***

The process of restructuring social and health care services in Finland aims at answering to the needs of aging population and scarcity of public resources (Heikkilä, Kautto & Teperi 2005). According to our interviewees, the pressures on cost-effectiveness and streamlining of public care services are challenging in terms of allocation of time. When asked about their time pressures at work, many of the respondents explained how the need to focus on their immediate surroundings and the tasks at hand coincided with the

need to anticipate future events. One of our respondents, a nurse from a rehabilitation unit, emphasized how this was not always clear to those outside caring professions:

*You don't have time to answer your private cell phone during the day, I mean you can't answer or send text messages. Say, if I'm going on a trip with the boys and the others get off at 3 p.m., then that's a given. Here, it could take 'till half past five. And I have to stay, I can't leave.*

Situations that require this kind of pragmatic orientation are part of the job in welfare service work. When doing human service work, unexpected events can easily throw daily plans off course and cause workers to delay their scheduled activities. However, many of our respondents pondered if, in the course of rationalizing care work during the past few decades, the rhythm of the daily activities had accelerated too much and moved care personnel permanently on the "knife's edge", as Hitlin and Elder (2007: 177) describe the nature of pragmatic agency. By recounting the unexpected course her day had taken, another nurse gave a typical example of how pragmatic practice of care shaped her agency:

*Well, it was a creative chaos. I thought I'd be doing certain things when I got there at 8 a.m. And I started with those things and worked for about two hours, until my superior called. (...) So the rest of the day went into taking care of that. Everything I had planned was postponed, maybe 'till Monday, though I already know I cannot get all of those*

*things done then, because of other, fixed plans. So, yesterday was a very typical day at work.*

The previous quote well illustrates pragmatic agency in the practice of care: the work requires person's heightened concentration on the immediate surroundings, breaking down the habitual responses to patterned social actions and compromising taken-for-granted operations. Such an ability to innovate and come out of unexpected situations can lead to positive experiences that build professional growth. At the same time, our respondents admitted that situations of novelty and creativity often led them to neglect their own, personal needs. A nurse reflected on the consequences of the unexpected turn her previous workday in a geriatric unit had taken by explaining matter-of-factly how the proper execution of the task at hand outran her personal needs:

*I guess the hurriedness partly comes from unexpectedness. I guess if you measure hurriedness in whether one has time to eat, then yes, it was a busy day. I had coffee at nine o'clock, and the next time I entered the break room, it was half past three. But I don't know if the day really was...the priority that was set for the day, it was accomplished.*

Her account demonstrates the kind of "patterned spontaneity" that Hitlin and Elder (2007: 178) attribute to pragmatic agency. Over time, the creative, spontaneous aspect of self develops a habitual pattern with which to respond to interruptions to routines. The interviewee's response to the unexpected turn of her day is not random but based on her

dispositions, moral codes and professional ethics that direct her actions and choices. This habitual sense of self predisposes her to prioritization of the professional, ethical obligations.

Individuals develop habitual responses to situations that require for them to be on a knife's edge. But the capability to do so is not without limits. Our interviewees expressed a shared concern over their capabilities to manage their workload and anticipate the forthcoming in their everyday work. At the level of organisational management, the contemporary economic-rationalistic temporal framing of welfare service work generates practices that require efficiency and embrace an implicit demand for direct execution of overlapping tasks. We therefore want to underline the limits of time work within the contemporary practices that are increasingly pushing workers to the knife's edge in terms of their agency.

### ***Identity agency and the practice of care***

According to Hitlin and Elder (2007: 179), modifications to our behaviour happen in the axis of internal standards and external feedback. Previous studies suggest that public service workers share common rationality of care and values that constitute the basis for a public service habitus (McDonough, 2006; Hyde et al., 2009; Virkki, 2008). Public service habitus refers to the interrelational nature of care work and to the workers' shared idea of a responsibility for the care of another human being that shapes their identity agency. Identity agency consists of the habitual patterns of behaviour and the practical exigencies created by the organisational and societal temporal framings of working-life.

With time, workers' professional, personal and embodied knowledge and experiences accumulate into dispositions that enable them to be like fish in the water in their practical anticipation of the events in the field of welfare service work.

The workers' abilities to juggle unscheduled events through pragmatic agency is certainly part of welfare service work today, but in the long run the workers' inability to control the rhythm and flow of work can have negative consequences. In fact, one of the recurrent themes that surfaced in the interviews was the respondents' concern over their ability to follow the normative, ethical ideals of good care in the interrelationships with the service users. A nurse explained:

*It's stressful, like it's hard for me to juggle many things at the same time. I'd rather be systematic and deal with them one at the time. I get the feeling as if there's a beehive buzzing inside my head. I forget things and I try to move fast, and then the encounters with the people aren't so humane, like, I just focus on the fast, technical performance.*

Our data demonstrates that the demands of flexibility and adaptation to pragmatic practice of care are extensive to the point that they seriously disturb workers' concentration. The execution of overlapping tasks on a knife's edge, managing emotions and creating a trustful and caring atmosphere all at the same time, are heavy exigencies for any worker. Hochschild (2003: 215) describes care work as work that requires not only fulfilling given responsibilities, but doing it in the right spirit, with the appropriate feeling. The ethos of helping that requires prioritizing the needs of the other and

tolerating the situational heaviness of the work generates what Donna Baines (2006) calls “a culture of bravado”. The concept refers to the professional culture of downplaying the physical and mental heaviness of care work. To our respondents, the culture of bravado was closely connected to the time work they engaged in:

*No matter how busy you are, if the client asks about it you'll tell them you're only a little busy. The hurriedness, you cannot show it.*

The restructuring of public sector services over the past few decades have added to the pressures to downplay the heaviness of work and to bear the hurry and haste for the sake of the service users. Social and health care work is very ‘hands on’ and situated. At the same time, the work in day care centers, outpatient clinics, nursing homes and hospital wards increasingly relies on official guidelines, principles, and recommendations that are the key to harmonizing the standards of operation and ensuring their efficiency in the various locales of the public service sector. The interviewees explained that the audit, control and reporting technologies – characteristics of the economic-rationalist framing of time in contemporary working life – are reducing the workers’ autonomy. Typical of the data, a day care worker recounted her frustration towards the change in her work autonomy:

*We receive orders, or the world around us dictates to us how we should do the work and it kind of takes all the extra away from it, too.*

Other respondents explained how exhaustion and stress often followed from having their views and values ignored or annulled. The wide range of such examples indicates how the economic-rationalist temporal frame and the relational frame of caring time challenged the workers' identity agency with practices such as excessive record-keeping:

*I mean, like, everything needs to be reported in writing, and it takes an awful lot of time away from the children. And I've noticed that it has increased. And then my older colleagues, they're like completely lost, asking whether we really need to do all this. It feels like...we laugh at it sometimes, like, if I blow someone's nose, should I write and report that somewhere, too?*

Other studies have likewise pointed to how reporting and accounting practices increasingly frame care work (Bone, 2002: 142; Höpfl, 2003: 183). As Kirschner and Lachiotte (2001: 454) explain, the practices of performance auditing of welfare service work contradict with the workers' shared sense of good care. However, these studies neglect to deal with the aspect of temporality in addressing the question of the changing social structures and practices of welfare service work. The question of time in relation to identity agency, however, is crucial for pinpointing the challenges the contemporary practices give rise to at the level of individuals' chances for living up to their claimed identities as welfare service professionals.

Many of our interviewees described excessive reporting and record-keeping as time consuming tasks, while also doubting the relevance of these measures regarding the care

of their patients and clients. The excessive reporting duties and documenting are telling of the changing nature of professional accountability that challenges the workers' habitual, professional identity agency. At the level of organisational management, workers are forced to reassess their identities as human service workers, as one of the nurses explained:

*It's in the relationships with the patients where the hurriedness bothers me the most because I feel like I just don't have time. That's when I feel like I can't do the job as well as I would want to.*

The analysis suggests that the contemporary conditions of welfare service work are forcing workers to reformulate the standards and habits of their identity agency and to downplay their idea of the good practice of care. In terms of maintaining their sense of self as skilled professionals, our interviewees actively reassessed and adjusted their identities according to the exigencies of the economic-rationalistic temporal framing of welfare service work. Yet, people's social commitments are not only binding, but motivating, as Hitlin and Elder (2007: 181) point out. Our interviewees' criticism toward the contemporary temporal exigencies is telling of the importance of time as a relational and not only economic entity in welfare service work.

### ***Life course agency and the temporally shifting practice of care***

According to Andersson (2008: 356), the essence of providing 'good' care is in taking the time to show that one cares about the person in need of care. Small gestures and everyday

practices pass the workers' feeling of responsibility that can extend beyond set working hours and routines. As the analysis has shown so far, postponing one's personal plans, prioritizing others' needs and dealing with overlapping temporalities characterize care work. But the temporal scope of caring practices extends even further. Many of our interviewees recalled past experiences, memories and future expectations as part of their identity work in their interviews. They pondered the life situations and future of the cared for and expressed concern over them. Taking personal responsibility for the other human being therefore signifies a lived relationship and a way of being in the world for welfare service workers. Hitlin and Elder (2007: 184) refer to this mode of self as life course agency. It signifies the temporal accumulation of identities that are claimed at the level of identity agentic actions. In a manner that was typical of our data, a social worker explained:

*Occasionally, the worry about a person's future is enormous. The responsibility is so great, and you wonder how the children will survive in the future, and what kind of people they'll become.*

Mariella Pandolfi (1990: 261) has stated that people carry in their bodies more than just their personal experiences of joy and suffering. Hence, our bodies are the containers, bearers, reminders and crossroads of other people's actions and memories. As a nurse from a terminal care unit described, a worker can feel the pain of the cared for in their own body, and this feeling of responsibility sometimes extends beyond set working hours:

*I'd say it's the patients who are restless or those who are in a lot of pain. They kind of take you, to the extent that you can physically feel their pain yourself. Those are the ones that can also stay to haunt you in your free time.*

A focus on life course agency highlights the embodied nature, nurturing rationality and temporal fluidity of welfare service work. These characteristics also signify caring rationality as an attitude that explains the interviewees' agentic choices. All in all, the interviewees' descriptions of the practices of care show that welfare service workers agency stretches from the pragmatic focus on the unpredictable events in the here-and-now to the patterned and predictable everyday practices, extending to past and future events, the reminders of which are both physical and mental. These overlapping and parallel temporal orientations together define welfare service worker' identity work and contribute to both reworking and reinforcing their agency within the constraints of the contemporary welfare state.

### ***Agency generated by temporal orientations and societal frames***

Our analysis shows how the contemporary tendencies of efficiency and the interrelated aspirations of performance monitoring and auditing in public service sector are based on a rather one-dimensional understanding of time. It fails to acknowledge the relational nature of care work that defines welfare service workers' agency. The range of temporalities in the practices of welfare service work that we have analysed in this article suggest that the timespace of care work is not to be grasped solely with an economic-

rationalist understanding of time as a measurable, commodifiable resource. When we asked what our interviewees thought distinguished their own jobs from those of others, a young nurse in a geriatric care unit answered by pondering the techniques used for measuring her work performance:

*There's the fact that you can't measure the results of your work every day. For example, we can measure the efficiency of rehabilitative work in a long term. But then again, whether we're measuring the effects or the result, the concepts and their definitions are kind of inadequate (...) furthermore; this is a job that's never finished. I sometimes say, as a joke, that this must be the most unrewarding job in the world.*

The temporal scale of practice in human service work extends beyond the abstract notion of the present and the exact units of clock time. According to Ballas and Tsoukas (2004: 678) the true paradox of the efforts to rationalise the practice of welfare service work lies in the impossibility of ever truly being able to measure the whole of human action (see also Strathern 2000). Our interviewees' identity work reveals temporal struggles, indicating that the question of time management is central not only to the efficiency of service production but to the workers' exercise of personal agency. As a consequence, it is of key importance to assessments of working conditions in the welfare service sector.

Talking about the things she wished could be improved at her workplace, a care worker explained how she thought her unit managers disregarded the nature of the day-to-day work in the geriatric unit:

*“It feels like those who decide on these things, they are terribly far from this all. Like, if they came and worked here even for a day, they might have a completely different perception on if and where they should cut the resources.”*

Barbara Adam (1995: 101) writes how artists, care, and service workers compete on unequal terms with occupational groups whose work can be translated into definitive clock-time units. She envisions that such inequality can turn into a major problem where the principle of commodified time has been politically imposed – without regard for the temporal complexity of human life – upon areas of work such as health services and education. The variations in the workers’ agentic actions reveal the intertwinement of past, present and future and the embodied nature of the experience of time in caring practices. Time has something to do not only with clocks and timing but also with sequential ordering according to priorities. We therefore suggest that assessments of welfare service work should acknowledge how the relational temporal frame shapes the workers’ agency. Taking such a view can help us better acknowledge the caring rationality at the heart of the workers’ professional identities, and the consequential social commitments that both bind and motivate them within the social structures of the contemporary labour market.

### **Conclusions: understanding time in welfare service work**

In this article, we have contextualized the complexities of time in welfare service work. In our analysis, we have applied Hitlin and Elder’s (2007) typology of the different forms

of agency within the temporal frames of the contemporary Finnish welfare state. The analysis shows how the temporalisation of the practices of care results from the intertwining of the workers' situated temporal orientations and the institutional and societal structures in the labour market. Welfare service work builds on the workers' accumulated knowledge and experience (identity agency), but also relies heavily on their ability to come out of unexpected situations (pragmatic agency). Their sense of responsibility for the care of another human being can also leave reminders and embodied traces that surpass the limits of fixed working hours (life course agency). All in all, the results reflect the intuitive, habitual and innovative nature of the time work they engage with in care practices, but also the constraints the contemporary, economic-rationalistic temporal frame in working life poses on welfare service work.

The results of the analysis suggest that the contemporary economic-rationalistic framing of time undermines the relational and incommensurable nature of reproductive work. But the results also emphasize the flexibility of human agency, because the question of how situations unwind is never predetermined – individuals are not victims of time, but active and able agents. Through practical agency, they make use of their professional habitus, their abilities to innovate, and to come out of unexpected situations. This can lead to positive experiences that build professional growth.

In terms of maintaining their sense of self as skilled professionals, our interviewees actively reassessed and adjusted their identities according to the exigencies of the contemporary working life, but not without difficulties. Our respondents' struggles for

meaningful agency under clashing temporal cultures indicate that the temporal aspect of professional agency in welfare service work is rather poorly understood in terms of how the work is managed and organized. The many remarks our interviewees' made on their experiences of increasingly having to work "on the knife's edge" point to the significance of time as a resource that shapes the practices of care and, as a consequence, the workers' agency. Yet, at least in the case of Finland, temporal agency is a seldom used viewpoint for assessing the contemporary challenges of welfare service sector and the causes for the increasing mental and physical strain of the public service workforce.

Our investigation of the temporal management of welfare service work signifies a more substantial institutional change and neoliberal strive toward accountability, transparency and efficiency of public services that shape welfare service workers professional identities. In many areas of employment, the control of time has become a focal question (Bryson, 2007: 175). With our analysis, we have wanted to extend the notion found in previous studies concerning the relational nature of time in care work by further assessing the temporality of agency in welfare service work. While the results reveal a variety of temporal nuances in welfare service work, we acknowledge the limitations of our study. An interview study can only give a limited access to respondents' experiences, while the context of the study, the Finnish welfare state, also limits us from drawing extensive conclusions from our results. What we can conclude from our exploration of the temporality of welfare service work is that it points to the possibilities the analysis of time has in terms of empirical treatment of the question of agency. Social structures and

practices are always temporal. Whether and how time binds and facilitates agency therefore remains a focal question for sociological research.

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Table 1: Temporal orientations on agency (place on page 8)

**Table 1 Temporal orientations on agency**

Agency "Type"	Analytical Scope	Temporal Scope	Characteristics
Pragmatic agency	Novel situations	"Knife's edge" Present moment	Ability to innovate and sail through when routines break down
Identity agency	Routine situations	Situationally oriented goal attainment	Capacity to act within socially prescribed role expectations; routines and repetition, professional identity
Life course agency	Life pathways	Past and future life plans	Memories, echoes, retrospective reflections and future orientation

Adapted from Hitlin and Elder (2007)

## Appendix 1: Table of respondents

1	Psychiatric nurse	psychiatric outpatient clinic	52, woman	30
2	Registered nurse	Home care unit	43, woman	20
3	Paramedic/ Emergency medical technician	Emergency ambulance service	27, man	2,5
4	Mental health nurse	psychiatric open ward	51, woman	30
5	Registered nurse	neurological rehabilitation ward	37, man	12
6	Care worker	Social care agency	52, woman	5
7	kindergarden teacher	Day nursery	44, woman	18
8	kindergarden teacher	Day nursery	45, woman	19
9	Registered nurse	Geriatric nursing home	53, woman	30
10	Public health nurse	Geriatric home care unit	58, woman	30
11	Head nurse, registered nurse	Geriatric nursing home	38, woman	10
12	Care worker, BA	Day nursery	27, woman	2
13	Registered nurse	Pediatric intensive care unit	45, woman	25
14	Registered nurse	Acute rehabilitation unit	29, woman	7
15	Care worker, BA	Day nursery	33, woman	8
16	Practical nurse	Geriatric nursing home / chronic care	30, woman	8
17	Care worker, BA	Geriatric home care unit	36, woman	8
18	Assistant head nurse	Acute rehabilitation unit	53, woman	30
19	Registered nurse	Home care agency	45, woman	12
20	Care worker	Home care agency	50, woman	1
21	Registered nurse	Geriatric care unit	27, woman	5
22	Registered & public health nurse	Home care unit	25, woman	2
23	kindergarden teacher	Day nursery	45, woman	20
24	kindergarden teacher	Day nursery	35, woman	10

<sup>i</sup> The concept of welfare service work refers to occupational social and health care occupations such as nursing, social work, geriatric care work and childcare work. The

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concept highlights the shared ethical and moral dispositions of the groups as well as their position as the state bound and state defined professions in the Nordic welfare states (see Wrede 2008).

<sup>ii</sup> Finnish Working Life Barometers (Ylöstalo et al. 2010) have found evidence of increasing mental and physical strain among public sector social and health care workers, indicating that 80 per cent of health care service personnel find their work physically fatiguing, and over half of them also report mental fatigue. A growing number of workers have reported a shortage of personnel in their workplace.

<sup>iii</sup> Process time is not a diametrical opposite to linear or clock time, and it can also be described as embodied time. Davies (1996: 583) explains that while the Newtonian notion of time allows individuals studied in scientific work to be abstracted from his/her context and to become subjects outside themselves, process time allows us to leave the scientific paradigm, and relocate subjects in their bodies which are in turn enmeshed in history, culture and space.

<sup>iv</sup> The relational temporal frame links paid care work to the idea of women's self-sacrifice and subordination to others' needs. However, it also refers to the mentality needed more generally in human service work, and should not be understood solely in terms of "women's time", the concept of which refers to the idea that women's biology gives rise to a distinct temporal consciousness (Kristeva, 1986).