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Monica Andersson Bäck:

*Conceptions, Conflicts and Contradictions in the
Introduction of a Swedish Health Call Centre*

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This book marks an important addition to studies of work – and workers – in Sweden.¹ It deserves, moreover, to be read by a wider international audience, and the book has been written very much with this further constituency in mind. Quite apart from the fact that it is written in a form very accessible to those who are not expert in Swedish employment, and in fluent English (no mean feat for a book which is the culmination of doctoral studies on the part of a native Swedish speaker), the thesis in this book is one which draws from a rich academic model, informed by historical, cultural, socio-economic and political/legal perspectives. It is work with a genuine international significance and appeal, and will be of real interest to participants in a number of contemporary academic and policy debates in a number of countries. This short review attempts to give

a flavour of the breadth and depth of an important contribution, but the interested reader will certainly want to explore further for themselves the enjoyable parameters of this work.

The book engages with a relatively new form of work – the health call centre (HCC) – staffed, in this instance, by nurses.

It does this by means of a case study of a single HCC in western Sweden over the period 2002-06, drawing on over 80 interviews with key actors, as well as 400 interviews with care seekers, first-hand observations, written documents and

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¹ The reviewer had the privilege of being one of the first to read this book as the officially-appointed discussant – ‘fakultetsopponent’ – at the doctoral examination.

other sources. Through these methods, it attempts an ambitious project: that of uncovering the social relations at play in the formulation and reformulation of HCC work, shaped and influenced by institutions and social actors.

Monica Andersson Bäck, the author, is immediately concerned to explore the unusual *congruence* of a form of work (call centres) commonly associated with the industrialisation of the service sector, and monotonous, routinised and controlled Taylorist procedures, with a type of work (nursing) often viewed as a 'profession' and associated with caring and emotional labour. The exploration is then extended to locate this in its situational context, namely the dilemmas facing the Swedish – and international – health care sector. Here, it is argued that the attempt to address simultaneously different policy objectives (equality, quality, efficiency/cost control and freedom of choice) presents distinct problems. These problems are experienced within, and evidenced by, the detailed operation of HCCs and are reflected in a process of engendered tensions, conflict and resistance for all the social actors.

The structure of the book requires (correctly, in this reviewer's opinion) that the reader, for best advantage, commences at the beginning of the book and reads through to the end. The style in this respect is reminiscent of an older and better literary tradition: concepts and empirics are layered up *throughout* the book, appealing to the deliberative appetite rather than to someone in a hurry looking for quickly digested (and no doubt quickly forgotten) morsels. After a concise and clear introduction, the book provides, in Part I, a contextual overview and evaluation of Swedish healthcare and HCCs, followed by the particular formation and development of the case-study HCC. The book then moves on to review previous research in the area and to outline the research methodology and process. In Part II, the book engages with conceptions around HCCs and their related institutions, developing further the theoretical basis for the overall thesis and exploring what the author terms 'political, administrative, professional and care-seekers' domains', before considering the 'battlefield' these represent when taken collectively. Part III then moves on to focus in depth on the employment relations and working conditions in the case-study HCC, once again advancing the theoretical and empirical components of the study – and providing some of the most fascinating material for the reader.

Any patience required of the reader is undoubtedly rewarded by material which holds some considerable depth and interest in many places, and by a conclusion in Part IV which pulls together the theoretical and empirical strands in a rich and powerful way.

Some of these strands deserve closer inspection. It may be an occasional curiosity to non-social scientists as to why a researcher would, as in this instance, choose to write a book of almost 300 pages about what must seem like a small

number of (overwhelmingly female) workers – in the HCC under study; there were originally just 19 telenurses at the outset, rising to just under 50 over the course of the study. In a touching acknowledgement to her mother, the author speaks of ‘the power of boundless love’. And this must really also be seen as a sub-theme of the book. Just as the years of study and the passion for the subject matter underpin the book, so too do those of us who spend many decades researching public sector work, and healthcare in particular, become ever more aware that the term ‘public service ethos’ conveys so much more in reality than can be subsumed under concepts of ‘professionalism’, ‘emotional labour’ (as commonly discussed in academic circles) or ‘commitment’. We here deal with types of labour which sit poorly with orthodox or neoclassical conceptions of work, and which frequently call into question pre-conceptions about the nature of paid labour and of ‘worth’ or ‘social valuation’ in capitalist economies. The value of the ‘study in depth’ hinges in no small part on how clearly the deeps are uncovered.

That these are issues not just for workers but also the consumers of their work runs as a theme throughout this book for those who are sensitive to it. For example, the book touches on the development of telenursing as being in itself a potential ‘ideological legitimisation tool’ for the *rationing* of services, not least through the exhortations to ‘self help’ contained within the concept and practice which run alongside a shortage of physicians. At the same time, however, we are shown how telenurses themselves attempt to escape the confines of procedures, not just to alleviate their own isolation, routinisation and high work pace as workers, but also to deal sensitively with the problems of callers, and to ‘nurse’ *in their own sense* of the term, for example in going ‘off the record’ to provide experiential advice, and to deal with loneliness of callers.

The content of nursing has, of course, long been an issue – and an issue which goes way beyond the ‘control/mass production’ versus ‘autonomy/professionalisation’ debate so well outlined in this book. Detailed investigations of nursing ‘content’ also tend to lead researchers to re-evaluate the very gendered concepts of ‘skill’ more generally employed in society, including ‘soft’ versus ‘technical’ skills. It may be that the author could possibly have gone further here, with a more intensive investigation of the history of nursing and its formation as an occupation (with important roles played by unions and professional associations), as well as with the implications of gender for the undervaluation of telenursing (as well as other nursing), and with the tensions created by this kind of stressful work and the antisocial hours involved for domestic domains. But it is perhaps in the nature of a social scientist reader always to want more.

However, there is little doubt but that we are taken on an in-depth tour of the workplace tensions and conflicts arising from different conceptions and per-

spectives of the work itself. Chapter 14 on 'Working Conditions' stands out as an exceptionally good insight into working lives, highlighting tensions between telenurses and managers, careseekers, and other providers, as well as on the issues around control versus professional autonomy and professional consciousness/nursing identity. The detailed discussions of the technical-organisational outline of the HCC, logging of calls and times, standardised processes and individual strategies and autonomy lead into a very interesting discussion of the use of automated breaks and manual adjustment. Telenurses are shown to suffer from stresses arising from queues, the pace of work, and the skills needed, and use a variety of 'coping strategies'. Here we also have a very interesting discussion of 'emotion management'. The problems with allocating some patients, with physicians (and relations with physicians), and with lack of time for development and training are also discussed, along with the crucial issues of alienation and liability.

The book also offers a rare addition to the literature, via the form of its underpinning institutional analysis. Here, the author provides a particularly good chapter on the 'care-seekers domain' and a very interesting and critical discussion of the profile and perceptions of callers. The tensions between a 'gate keeper' role for telenurses and provision of face to face care are a particularly interesting aspect of the study. The chapter headed 'All Domains Together – A Battlefield' is also an excellent read, and takes the issues around 'gate keeping' (rationing of services) further, in discussions which cover the concepts of promoting the 'responsible care seeker' and self-care. In exploring whether HCCs can best be viewed as providing an ideological legitimisation tool for rationing or as allowing an 'empowerment of citizens', the author also asks whether consumers fight back by becoming 'proto-professionals' themselves. The problem of 'responsibility without authority' is also highlighted for telenursing, along with the incompatible goals for HCCs – restricted healthcare supply alongside 'free access'.

The concluding discussion (in Chapter 16) is clear and succinct, and the author here takes us into some space which leaves the reader looking forward to some further research by Monica Andersson Bäck in this area. The chapter was probably always going to be a difficult one to write, given the articulated and textually layered progress of the book. However, the conclusion succeeds fully in pulling diverse and complex strands together and also gives some hints of some powerful debates to come, to follow up on this first major work. In this concluding part, the author deals explicitly with issues of power and the 'kaleidoscope of conceptions' (and tensions) visible in this case study. The state-driven nature of this project and a new division of labour, along with new degrees of cost containment, are noted. In a subtle conclusion on the labour processes involved, it is concluded that work here manages to be 'controlled and regimented' at the

same time as it is 'borderless and autonomous': the author develops this seeming paradox via a contract between 'control' and 'fragile autonomy', involving both upskilling and deskilling. In a conclusion the reader would like to see further developed, the author also takes the debate out into territory which seeks to compare what is specifically 'Swedish' – a divergent experience – with what are international points of convergence.

In sum, this book has much to recommend it. By defying any crude typology of its content and coverage, the book succeeds in being of genuine interest to those who share a passion for social scientific adventure while at the same time appealing to a broader and undoubtedly international audience outside the narrow(er) circles of 'work science'.