The Discontents Of Integration: Boundary Work And Welfare Stigma At Reformed Elder Homes In China

Dai, Haijing

Background and Purpose: The welfare reforms in the 1990s, highlighting decentralization and budgetary cuts, changed the provision of institutional eldercare in China (Croll, 1999; Zhan et al., 2006). Public welfare homes started to recruit self-financed elders, and meanwhile, some local governments, in order to strategize their public spending, sent the elders on public assistance to the emerging non-governmental elder homes after the closure of public institutions. The integrated elder homes, in the collaboration of the government and the society, now serve two types of clients: the “Three Nos” (no children, no income, and no relatives) elders eligible for state subsidies and the private customers paying for their own fees. This study examines how boundary work (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) between the two types and welfare stigma are constructed, contested, reinforced, and resisted at the reformed elder institutions in Taizhou, a city in south China, and how the struggles over status and distinction evince social and cultural changes in the post-socialist nation.

Methods: Ten-week ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in 23 public and non-governmental elder homes in Taizhou in 2011 and 2012. Qualitative data of the social interactions at the elder institutions were gathered through three ways: participant observation; 67 in-depth interviews with elders and their families, service providers, and local officials; and local archives of elder homes. The data were synthesized to explore how service users and providers at the reformed elder homes participate in the boundary work between the two types of clients and scrutinize the mechanisms of social distinction and stigmatization.

Results: Despite their everyday face-to-face encounter with the “Three Nos” elders, the paying customers construct and maintain physical, social, and cultural boundaries against them. The two types of clients live in segregated areas at the same institution; the social and entertainment activities usually exclude the “Three Nos” elders; and the self-financed clients perceive the welfare recipients as incompetent, irresponsible, and dependent individuals of low quality, and contemn their incompatibility with the regional prosperity of market economy. The staff members at the institutions have ambivalent attitudes about serving the two types of elders, but in practice, they often echo the boundaries and reinforce the cultural inferiority of the welfare recipients. The “Three Nos” elders fully reject the label of welfare dependency and attribute their situations to uncontrollable life misfortunes. They adopt the ideals of collectivity, equality, and reciprocity under state socialism as their firm yet weak resistance, and fantasize purely public institutions as their eventual escape from marginalization and oppression. The “false integration” after the welfare reforms produces explicit and rigid boundary work between the two types of elder clients, and the contested meaning of public welfare demonstrates the value conflicts of socialist legacy and market competition in contemporary China.

Conclusions and Implications: While previous research hails the welfare reforms for introducing and encouraging diverse funding mechanisms, collaboration of the public and the private sector, innovative service models, and a more energetic civil society in China (Shang, 2001), this study calls for reflection on the class hierarchy and social inequality that have appeared in the post-reform era. Welfare policies and social service programs need to recognize and address the discrimination and stigmatization at the reformed institutions so as to empower the truly disadvantaged. Examination and discussion of the discontents and human costs in the reform and social change can facilitate the building a Chinese third sector oriented towards equality, social inclusion, and human rights.

References: