The discourse of enablement in activation encounters: Enacting resistance through ”apparent conformity”

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Although governmentality research do acknowledge the possibility of resistance in welfare encounters, the analytic interest seldom lies in investigating how the specific techniques of bio-power are enacted and responded to in real-life encounters. But rather than assuming that welfare recipients are obeying the directions of pastoral agents, the issue of governance, subjectivity and resistance should be approached in a more empirical fashion, and one should examine to what extent the strategies of liberal government are successful. If the client does not cooperate (with authenticity) in the professional’s project in face-to-face encounters, one can hardly say that the ”pastor” has succeeded in producing the desired kind of subject.

In this paper, ethnomethodological conversation analysis (CA) is adopted to analyse five instances of governance/resistance. The analysis will shed light on, first, how the techniques of governmentality actually are conducted through the counsellor’s design of solution-eliciting questions, which relies on an ”enablement discourse” (“the active client”). But more importantly, the paper seeks to demonstrate in detail the very subtle ways of enacting resistance to the counsellor’s interactional project. Although the clients’ resistance-practices do not represent counter-claims that openly argue against the enablement discourse, they demonstrate how mundane talk provides a broad range of resources to comment and/or escape the prescriptiveness inherent in the counsellor’s practices.

The aim of the paper is thus to contribute to the knowledge of client resistance, but also to discuss what should be analytically acknowledged as doing resistance. It is here claimed that resistance might be enacted without openly challenging a culture’s natural truths, and these apolitical strategies might have powerful consequences (micro and macro). Hence, power and resistance should not merely be understood as having one’s position heard or making claims, but rather, as the ability to make things happen, or not.

Keywords: governance, resistance, Conversation analysis.