

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

The Digital Turn in Welfare: Data, Technologies and Emerging Social Challenges

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Artificial Intelligence in Care Work in Italy: Social Representations across Strategic Governance and Healthcare Professions

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The introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) into healthcare services involves technological, organisational and professional dimensions, raising questions about the organisation of care work, professional relationships and the criteria through which expertise is legitimised.

This paper analyses the social representations of AI amongst healthcare professionals and strategic governance figures within the Italian public health system, adopting a conception of AI as a socio-technical configuration whose meaning is shaped by specific organisational and professional contexts. The perspective adopted integrates social representation theory and professional boundary work to understand how actors attribute meaning to innovation and how, through these representations, professional boundaries, competences and responsibilities are negotiated.

The study adopts an exploratory-interpretative design based on a survey in which 114 respondents, including healthcare professionals and those in managerial or strategic roles within the Italian healthcare sector, took part. The results paint a picture of AI characterised by a mix of positive expectations and caution. Expectations of improvements in the quality of work, organisational efficiency and access to services are accompanied by concerns regarding the transparency of automated decision-making processes and the redefinition of professional responsibilities.

Among those who report direct experience of using AI, some of these concerns are less widespread, whereas more limited practical familiarity with AI is associated with more critical views. The reaffirmation of the centrality of professional experience and judgement over algorithmic capabilities can be interpreted as an expression of boundary work: AI is predominantly positioned within a framework of support and complementarity, which preserves the specificity of professional knowledge.

Within this framework, training goes beyond the role of technical updating and takes the form of a space for negotiating competences, responsibilities and the meanings of innovation. The study thus highlights the need to consider the professional perceptions accompanying the introduction of AI as a significant dimension of innovation processes and the quality of care.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; healthcare work; professional expertise; healthcare governance.

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