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The life of the elderly in residential care facilities- A study of autonomy and life situation of elderly people in the context of the political organisation of the facilities

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Aim: To examine how the political organisation of the residential care facilities in Denmark can be perceived in the practice of these facilities and furthermore an examination of which consequences this organisation has for the autonomy and life situation of the elderly.

Methods: Based on a practical-philosophical approach in which theory and practice are inextricably linked as well as mutually informing each other. The autonomy of the elderly can be determined in relation to lived lives of the elderly people in their encounter with the political framework of the residential care facilities, and is therefore anthropological present in the form of practical concept(s). Empirical material is therefore generated by participant observation on wards and by interviewing elderly, relatives and employees in residential care facilities, as well as policy documents, concerning the arrangement of public help to elderly people in need of long-term care, are analysed.

Results: Analysis of the empirical material and of pertinent policy documents reveal that elderly people are politically valued, when they manage to avoid drawing on the public services that are available to them.

A current dominant political standardised concept of autonomy is throughout the analysis rendered visible. In its generalised form this concept turns out to be contradictory to the life situation of impaired individual elderly people living in residential care facilities.

The cynicism of the past appears to be a way to implement rational and efficient problem-solving as a replacement for the welfare in which experts set the agenda for production and distribution of treatment and care based on moral responsibility.

The consequences of the present organisational controlling ideology become clear in the empirical data material, when some members of the staff fail to provide political standardised help and dare to make situated judgements that meet the impaired elderly with a situated and open concept of autonomy valuing the life situation of the elderly.

Biography

Ulla Skjodt has a professional background in nursing and management. She has completed a Master of Ethics and Values in Organisation (MEVO) and her Ph.D. at Aarhus University, Philosophical Institute. She is now Associate Professor at University College Zealand in Denmark (University of applied science) doing research in the area of elderly care.

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