

## **Special issue:**

# **ENERGY AND AGING IN THE DANISH WELFARE STATE: ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATIONS OF AN OMNIPRESENT BUT FORGOTTEN CONCEPT**

*Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen, Nete Schwennesen & Aske Juul Lassen (eds.)*

In the last twenty years, we have seen an increase in the state's attempts to activate and rehabilitate older citizens in the Western hemisphere through healthy and active ageing policy programs (WHO 1999, OECD 1999). While this has led to a plethora of initiatives and policies focused on empowerment and independency, it has also reinforced new understandings of aging and old age (Lassen & Andersen 2016). Amongst these, old age is no longer understood solely as a period of life of fading energy but a period with potential energy, which can (and should) be activated through government interventions. Meanwhile, critics have argued that we are currently witnessing a neo-liberalisation of old age, which extends ideals of productivity into old age (Minkler & Holstein 2008) and a simultaneous pathologisation of passivity and stagnation. In this special issue we want to go beyond these dualistic images of old age, by way of using energy as an analytic lens, to explore the relationship between the state and older people.

Within the social sciences, the concept of energy is greatly under-theorized. Yet, energy extends far beyond the realm of physics and may be found in descriptions not only of elementary molecule relationships, but also of the structure of the cosmos, therapeutic concepts of the body and cultural concepts of the soul. By energy we refer to a metaphysics of movement between interacting entities. We suggest that states, like heat or waves, can be considered as processes that transfer energy through processes of transformation. Hence, we cannot measure how much energy are present in a particular object, but rather explore how energy is transferred among entities during the occurrence of a given process. By using energy as our analytical lens, we become able to shift attention from static and discrete entities such as 'ageing bodies' or 'the state' towards the ongoing and shifting flow of movement and interactions that transforms ageing bodies in governmental interventions.

The contributions derive from research conducted in the Danish research institution Center for Healthy Aging. As such, the closely-knit Danish welfare state is the broader frame of the ageing lives and the interventions explored. This state form is particular in terms of the close relations and trust between citizen and state and the public funding used to form processes of ageing. But the insights generated from this specific national context, tells a more general tale about the ‘new old age’ as a period of life with immense moral, political and economic interests attached to it and how ‘energizing old age’ is both a political ambition and a subjective endeavor of the older citizens.

We want to explore the concept of energy in old age, both as an emic concept we draw from various ethnographic fieldworks in Denmark and as an analytical toolset consisting of various figures and models of energy used to dissect interventions attempting to energize old age. Indeed, judging from the multitudes of situations in which the concept of energy emerges, it appears as if energy saturates every aspect of old age and the aging process. It is this omnipresence that the special issue analyses empirically, theoretically and historically; thereby providing an alternative and novel conceptual framework for a new old age in the realm of 21<sup>st</sup> century welfare states.

#### **Literature**

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## Abstracts

### **Bodies in-motion and the concerted action of converging energy in digital rehabilitation**

*Nete Schwennesen*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

While energy involves a metaphysics of movement between various entities, governmental programmes of physical rehabilitation can be considered as processes that are intended for the movement and transformation of bodies. The term rehabilitation enacts a specific progressive vision of bodily transformation, going from a present stage of bodily dis-order towards an imaginary future stage of bodily restoration. New digital technologies are introduced in processes of physical rehabilitation by the Danish Welfare State as a potential cost-effective solution to the ‘problem’ of demographic ageing, and a vehicle for providing more cost-efficient processes of rehabilitation. With outset in an ongoing ethnography of the installation and use of a digital remote monitoring system for home-training in a municipality in Denmark, the paper interrogates the linear image of progressive transformation, which is embedded in the vision of rehabilitation. By using energy as an analytical lens, I understand physical rehabilitation as a circuit that transfer energy among a collective of human and non-human actors (health professionals, bodies, algorithms, devices, exercise programs etc) through a highly contingent and shifting flow of movement and interactions. I illustrate that bodily transformation emerge as an effect of extrinsic and collective action, rather than an effect of intrinsic individualized agency (motivation). As bodies move and transform through un-linear processes, the collective of human and non-human agencies involved in processes of physical rehabilitation, may create friction involving a waste of energy and bodily de-generation. I argue that in order to convert potential energy to kinetic energy in processes of bodily restoration, the concerted action of physical rehabilitation, have to be continuously adjusted in order to become respons-able to particular bodies and simultaneously allow processes of bodily progression and regression.

## **Caloric or social energy?**

### **A study of the values and energies of food in Danish old-age institutions**

#### **Since 1892**

*Kamilla Nørtoft*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

*Tenna Jensen*, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, daily life in institutionalized old age homes in Denmark has been structured around four meals. The form and significance of these meals, however, have shifted in response to changing societal expectations and critiques of the institutionalization of old age. Responding to conditions of malnutrition and food scarcity, institution specific dietary regulations used in 19<sup>th</sup> century hospitals, work- and poor houses, prisons and orphanages coalesced around forms of care that prioritized administrative rationing. With the passing of the law on age related subsidy in 1892 (Alderdomsunderstøttelsesloven), this institutional structure transferred into the operation of public old age homes, as well. The standard of four meals a day in old age homes has persisted into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In this article we use historical archival and ethnographic material to show how the administering of “caloric energy” has become subsumed within a broader valuing of the “social meal.” As these meals became more central, everyday life within late 20<sup>th</sup> century old age homes, we suggest, has gravitated towards a focus on the promotion and generation of “social energy.” While food quality continues to be counted in calorific terms, its *qualities* are now expressed in social, aesthetic, and sensorial terms.

### **Active aging fuelled by grief: An ethnographic rendering of a widow’s seemingly excess level of energy**

*Bjarke Oxlund*, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen

While manifestations of energy are well established there are no positive descriptions or definitions to go by. In the social sciences we are also capable of identifying individuals or groups

characterized by energy or vitality, although we don't have a positive definition of what makes them energetic in the first place. In the end, we may therefore also have to zoom in on the very manifestations. In this short rendering of a widow's seemingly "excess energy" I am going to question the nexus of energy and active aging by pondering whether some manifestations of energy could be the response to ill health, loss and misfortune? By addressing how 63-year old Margaret has handled and managed a lifelong, chronic condition of her own as well as the recent passing of her husband to cancer, the article asks whether it is possible that active aging and healthy and energetic lifestyles can sometimes be fuelled by crisis and contingencies rather than by policies or health recommendations? The intuitive and spontaneous answer to this rhetorical question is simply "yes", while the elaborated answer is a multi-faceted account of how energy levels are deeply intertwined with what is at stake in the lives of the people we study. It follows from this that it can be helpful to ask what drives someone to be active or energetic rather than simply figuring out if they are or not.

### **Short-Circuiting the Welfare State:**

#### **Approaching the "passive citizen" in Denmark through Melville's *Bartleby***

*Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

This article explores the schism between energy and passivity as part of a public discourse on elderly health care and aging in Denmark. While passivity might commonly be seen as mere inactivity - a certain non-action beyond the unfolding of social life – the article argues that within the context of the welfare health system the opposite is the case. In fact, within the Danish welfare society various forms of "passivity" have become the object of concerted political and media attention. By examining the way health care professionals talk about "passive" senior citizens in terms of a lack of energy, the article shows how, in wider sense, passivity is framed as a particular problem that can be overcome through the right health care interference. By employing Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, a fictitious figure that may be considered the essence of passive refusal, the article reflects on what would be the conceptual inverse of passivity, namely potentiality. I offer the

argument that these strangely entangled concepts has become of key interest to the Danish welfare state in managing its aging population.

### **Worthwhile living?**

### **How elderly people spend their energy adapting to notions of senior citizenship and the energies they meet**

*Bodil Hedegaard Ludvigsen*, Research Assistant, University of Copenhagen

Danes have an intriguing relationship to the Danish welfare state. From cradle to grave the state plays an enormous role in the intimate lives of every Dane, and as such the binary categorization of the public and the private domain is not necessarily so meaningful. This is vividly brought to the fore in cases where elderly people receive home nursing in their own homes and other services.

Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork among elderly Danes aged around 86 years who receive home nursing, and recent interviews with elderly people attending a day care center, this paper presents findings pertaining to both a sense of inclusion and a sense of abandonment and exclusion due to old age, which forces them to actively live up to the expectations of home nurses and other state representatives. In reality, the aging Danes in the study simultaneously showed trust and distrust in state services. On the one hand people subscribed to the notion of the benevolent state, but on the other hand developments such as the Herlev Hospital scandal in 2011, where doctors used secret codes to label aging individuals not eligible for resuscitation, led to ambiguities over whether or not the state found their lives worth saving. Consequently they evaluate the support and services that are provided to them in a new light. Using energy as an analytical tool to look into elderly people's positive as well negative experiences this paper arrives at an understanding of how the accomplishment of senior citizenship is fraught by friction and conversions of private and public energies. On this basis the paper intends to show the analytical benefits of positioning energy at the core of a study of elderly people, their relationship with the state, and explicit and implicit expectations of active citizenship in old age.

## **The endless push**

### **Enacting energy in Danish co-creation initiatives targeting older people**

*Aske Juul Lassen*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

Old age is undergoing radical transformations and is being promoted as a phase of life bristling with health, activity and vigour. Key to this new old age is the concept of energy and how older people and local forms of governance draw on a plurality of ideas about energy. The paper centres on two co-creation and health promotion initiatives targeted at older people in two Danish municipalities: the (inter)national Cycling without Age and a local COPD-choir. The paper explores how the municipalities take on the assignment of reanimating old age through such initiatives. In order to do so, they challenge the boundaries of the municipality and the meanings of a health initiative. By using volunteers and civil society organisations as a transcending source of energy, the municipalities attempt to co-create self-sustainable initiatives but often experience friction. They need to endlessly push the initiatives to create oscillation. The paper discusses how the plurality of energies enacted in the initiatives both draws on the physical laws of energy, but also transcends them and create ideas of energy as a transformative flow that possesses the quality to reanimate old age.

## **Energy, Ageing and Neurasthenia**

### **A Historical Perspective**

*Michael Andersen*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

Based on an analysis of how lack of energy featured as a symptom of the 19<sup>th</sup> century disease of Neurasthenia, this article proposes to look at how ageing became related to disease through contemporaneous ideas about energy surplus and energy dissipation. By exploring a specific historical intersection between energy and ageing in medicine, the article thus approaches the question of how ageing and energy have become intrinsically tied to each other, and how this connection has antecedents in religious and moral economics.

## Editors bios

**Aske Juul Lassen** is a Danish ethnologist and ageing researcher currently engaged as post doc in the Center for Healthy Aging ([healthyaging.ku.dk](http://healthyaging.ku.dk)) and the CALM project ([calm.ku.dk](http://calm.ku.dk)) at the SAXO-Institute, University of Copenhagen. He attained his PhD in 2014 about international active ageing policies and the way active ageing forms contemporary old age and the everyday lives of older people. Since then he has published extensively in leading ageing and ethnological journals about active ageing and old age, received the Kirsten Avlund Prize given to promising ageing researchers in 2014, taken part in the public debate about the ageing society, edited the research journal *Tidsskriftet Gerontologi* and will in 2017 form part of a think tank about the organization of the ageing society organized by the Danish pension fund PFA Pension.

**Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen** is a post-doctoral researcher at the department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. He received his PhD in 2014 at the university of Aarhus, Denmark, and is currently affiliated with the Center for Healthy Aging. Through fieldwork among healthcare workers and solitary elderly men in the rural area of Southern Sealand, Mikkelsen attempts to lay out the shifts in approaches to health and aging within the welfare state. His work has been published in leading journals in social science (e.g. *Ethos*, *Hau*, *Ethnos* and *International Journal of Masculinity Studies*) and his first monograph, *Cutting Cosmos*, is to be published at Berghahn in 2017.

**Nete Schwennesen** is a post-doctoral researcher in the department of Anthropology and department of Public Health, Copenhagen University, where she studies the development and use of digital technologies in the context of ageing and rehabilitation. She received her PhD. at the Medical Center for Science and Technology Studies, Copenhagen University in 2012, and was a Marie Curie student at the Science and Technology Studies department at York University, UK. Her research is situated at the intersection of medical anthropology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) and she has published in high ranked social science journals and books (e.g. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, *Clinical Ethics*, SAGE) and was awarded the 2014 EASST Amsterdamska award for a creatively edited anthology in STS as a contributor.