

# “Voluntary social work: operating beyond the rules?”

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<b>ARTICLE INFO</b>	Anders la Cour (2009). Voluntary social work: operating beyond the rules?. <i>Problems and Perspectives in Management</i> , 7(1)
<b>RELEASED ON</b>	Friday, 13 February 2009
<b>JOURNAL</b>	"Problems and Perspectives in Management"
<b>FOUNDER</b>	LLC "Consulting Publishing Company "Business Perspectives"



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

0



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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## Voluntary social work: operating beyond the rules?

### Abstract

Over the past two decades, voluntary social work has become an integral part of the social services sector of European welfare societies. Despite this, there has been little research on what the concrete content of this special kind of social work is. In order to focus on one of the prominent examples of cooperation between the public sector and voluntary social work, this study investigates how the dynamic relationship between the voluntary visiting friend and the visiting host results in different kinds of definitions of what meaningful help can be. The article will confront these findings with the political perceptions of the very same social work, stating that the current social policy does not distinguish between the formal settings of the help provided, and the dynamic process of the voluntary social work. The article takes its point of departure in a paper by Jeanette Henderson and Liz Forbat, which identifies the discrepancy between the importance of the relational component in informal care and their scant mention in national policy (Henderson & Forbat, 2002). The article will be in line with this study arguing that the lack of acknowledgement of the complex nature of the voluntary social work within the contemporary social policy, represents a huge challenge for the further development of the welfare society. The study is based on thirty-five interviews with volunteers, their leaders, and the people they provide care for within three large Danish voluntary organizations. It offers a picture of the range of ways that can help turn out due to the complex dynamics of the relational component within this special kind of social work. Although the findings only represent one kind of voluntary social work, it indicates an important challenge for a political system that wants to develop a "coherent welfare system", where the public and voluntary welfare work complement each other perfectly.

**Keywords:** befrienders, public home care, qualitative interviews, social policy.

**JEL Classification:** I38, L30, L33, L38.

### Introduction

In the European welfare societies, the state no longer structures and delivers social welfare in a hegemonic manner. There has been a shift from government to governance (Jessop, 2002; Clarke, 2004) and voluntary organizations are playing a significant role in this shift. Enthusiasm has been growing especially in Britain for the delivery of social welfare by voluntary organizations (Entwistle and Martin, 2005). But there has also been an increased interest in the role of voluntary organizations in countries like France (Bode, 2006; Ullmann, 1998) and Germany (Kaufmann, 2001; Anheier and Seibel, 2001; Bode, 2003, Plowden). Despite their differences, countries like Britain, France and Germany, have seen a common development towards governance regimes that exhibit a tight coupling of voluntary organizations and the welfare state (Bode, 2006). The extensive literature in this area identifies the increasing reliance of public social welfare on voluntary service providers.

As in Britain, France and Germany, the Scandinavian countries have an active civil society (Ronby, 1996; Keränen, 1997, pp. 6-7), but in contrast to these countries only a small percentage of them act in the field of social welfare (Nylund, 2000, p. 69, 115). Compared to Britain, France and Germany the social welfare produced by voluntary welfare agents in Scandinavia is generally small (Lin, 2004, p. 147; Bergmark, Parker and Thorslund, 2000, p. 313). But even though the scale and the scope of the voluntary

organizations' contribution to the social welfare in the Scandinavian welfare societies are relatively limited, the growing enthusiasm of welfare governments to incorporate voluntary social work into existing public welfare production is very much the same. As a consequence, many of the same challenges for the voluntary organizations, are being widely discussed among researchers in Scandinavian countries (Bundesen et al., 1998, 2001; Henriksen et al., 2001; Ibsen, 1996, 1997; Repstad, 1998; Selle, 1998, 2001a; Cour, 2002, 2005; Eikås, 2001). But despite this intensive research, there has been little research on the concrete content of the help that occurs within this special kind of social work.

As a consequence, we need to reflect upon a fundamental distinction between voluntary social work and voluntary organizations. Such an investigation will make it possible to discuss the relation between the two and, more importantly, the possible political consequences of such relationships. In this sense it is remarkable that most of the extensive literature on voluntary organizations fails to make this fundamental distinction between social work itself and its organization. As late as 1972, Smith and Freedman, in their valuable survey of the literature on voluntary organizations, made this general criticism of work in this field (Smith/Freeman, 1972). In 1985, Hugh W. Mellan repeated the criticism in his survey of the literature (Mellan, 1985). Now, more than twenty years later, it is still very common to conflate the content of voluntary social work with the formal structures of the voluntary organization.

The macro-fallacy of equating organizational aspects with behavioral ones draws heavily on comprehensive quantitative data on this class of organizations, including data on employment, volunteers, expenditures and revenues<sup>1</sup>, but without much interest in investigating empirically on the concrete content of the voluntary social work. This ignorance also pervades the specialized journals on voluntary organizations such as *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Voluntas* and *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*.

In contrast to a focus on the formal structures and the management diversities between voluntary and public welfare organizations, however, some researchers have focused on the qualitative distinctions between volunteering and formal voluntary organizations as a difference in rationality or logic of behavior. Eugene Litwalk has stated that, while voluntary organizations can commit themselves on a long-term basis, the volunteer workers cannot do the same because they do not feel that they are bound by the voluntary organizations' decisions and formal structures. The workers, Litwalk says, follow their own logic of behavior. There is a very loose connection between voluntary work as praxis and the organizational setting behind the voluntary work. This creates a series of dilemmas inside the voluntary organizations (Litwalk, 1985).

Jonel Pearce, in another analysis, calls attention to the fact that volunteers work within a formal organization but without being paid and therefore do not fit into our normal categories of work separated from leisure activities. They represent an uneasy blend of the two that confuses observers (Pearce, 1993, p. 182). Manzall Mitchel states the same problem clearly when she describes voluntary social work as something that exists between our familiar categories:

*The volunteer becomes the person in the middle, whose focus is on the client but whose behavior, unlike the embedded informal network member, is bound by institutional policy and expectation, but to a lesser degree than the professional (Mitchel, 1986).*

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam draws on evidence including nearly 500,000 interviews over the last quarter century to show that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. We're even bowling alone. More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. Putnam shows how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles and other factors have contributed to this decline. Lester Salomons is the leader of "The Comparative Non-profit Sector Project" that investigates the voluntary sector in until now 46 different countries. You can read more about the project on: <http://www.jhu.edu/cnp/>

Other researchers have reached the same conclusion. In an analysis of assisting friendships Andrews and colleagues have empirically shown that volunteers in many occasions go beyond the rules of the voluntary organization (Andrews et al., 2003).

To bring these discussions a step further, the article will not focus on the volunteer alone, but instead investigate how the relationship between the volunteer and the cared-for has a decisive impact on what actually the content of the help turns out. This approach is inspired in part by a paper by Jeanette Henderson and Liz Forbat (2002) about the relational component in informal care. They emphasize the importance of focusing not only on the carers role but on the dynamics of the relationship between the carer and the cared-for, and make the following observation:

*"We argue that care as emotional labor and the relational component of informal care are invisible in the National Strategy. They are, however, highly salient in the constructed accounts of both care givers and care receivers" (Henderson & Forbat, 2002, p. 670).*

Henderson and Forbat here raise an important point. The interpersonal dynamics of informal care, while obviously important, are virtually absent from contemporary social policy. They show how the pervasive and important aspects of care relationships are systematically overlooked in the making of social policy. Now, voluntary social work does not represent informal care in a strict sense because the volunteer and the cared-for are not (at least from the outset) intimate partners. But Henderson and Forbat's insight can be usefully extended to show that the same tension between the "salience" of relations and their "invisibility" in social policy can be found in the area of voluntary social work. While it is not sufficiently clear what consequences the relational component has for help in the informal settings that Henderson and Forbat are studying, this study wants to be specific about how the relational component results in different constructions of what meaningful help can be.

When social voluntary work represents a direct contact between the volunteer and the cared-for, such as is the case among befrienders, adult friends, hospital volunteers, self-help groups, drop-in centers, and so on, on-site flexibility becomes an important feature of the care provided. In these forms of care, the interpersonal dynamics dominate and have consequences for how and what kind of care is to be given. Though the Danish government tries to incorporate this kind of voluntary social work in closer collaboration with existent public welfare programs, it does not reflect upon the relational component that this special kind of social work has. Before focusing on this important aspect of the Danish Social Policy, the article will introduce the specific development of the Danish Government politics on voluntary social work.

## 1. The case of Denmark

Over the last thirty years, the Danish government expectations of the voluntary organizations have obviously evolved. As in the above mentioned countries, there has been a rise in the Danish government attempts to both define and formalize voluntary social work. The process begins with an expression of interest in this area and an acknowledgement of its importance (Bjerregaard, 1980); this is followed by a request for wider cooperation between the voluntary and public sectors and its appearance on the political agenda as such (the Ministry of Finance, 1983). We next see increased demands for quality in voluntary social work (Ministry of Social Affairs, 1997) and, in 2001, a plan for the education of volunteers was proposed (Center of Social Voluntary Work, 2002; Ministry of Social Affairs, 2003a). The question the development of more integrated forms of cooperation between the voluntary sector and the public sector was soon raised in a variety of policy forums (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2003b; Center of Social Voluntary Work, 2003, 2004; Monday Morning, 2004). Most recently, new ways of documenting the performance of voluntary work has been suggested and implemented through a variety of policy instruments (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2006; Rambøll Management, 2006).

Every new political initiative extends a series that can be traced to the same point of origin: the desire for closer cooperation between the voluntary and public sectors as formulated by the committee for privatization in 1983 (Ministry of Finance, 1983, p. 214). Every new initiative seems to be motivated by the defects of the former initiative.

This welfare policy has been most conspicuous in Denmark in fostering cooperation between the public home help service and voluntary visiting friends. Public home help is delivered to elderly people that live in their own homes but need various forms of care to be able to tackle their life circumstances. The help is delivered to ensure that the elderly people remain in their own homes as long as possible before having to move to a residential home.

Public home care has traditionally been the form of public welfare work that has distinguished the Scandinavian countries from the rest of the Western world due to its very comprehensive size (Kröger, 2005). Some critics of the Scandinavian model have even argued that Nordic governments have developed services that render the informal care of the family superfluous (Wolfe, 1989). Within the last 20 years, the nature of elderly care, however, has changed in the Scandinavian countries. Especially in Sweden and Finland, the size and scope of the public home care have been dramatically limited (Kautto, 2000). But in Denmark, too, home care has

gradually changed, experiencing severe reductions of services. In the 1970s, the public home help service endeavored to meet the overall care needs of the housebound elderly, ranging from personal hygiene and personal care, to practical assistance both inside and outside the home, reassurance visits and social care. Efforts were made to ensure that the different categories were weighted equally (la Cour & Højlund, 2002). In practice this relied on how the home helper and the client together defined what was needed to be done. Today, however, an attempt is made to define the help in advance by means of a 'common language' and 'appointment forms' (la Cour & Højlund, 2003). Public home help services thus try to organize help by making formal decisions in advance: Who needs help? What type of help can be provided? How much help can be provided? The work is subject to a series of formal rules and programs that determine who does what, how and when. These decisions are made on the basis of what is known as the Principle of Universalism concerning "equality before the law and equal political status for all citizens" (la Cour & Højlund, 2002). In achieving this equality, higher priority is given to personal hygiene and personal care than to house work, shopping, and social interaction (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, 1995). Within this strict division of tasks, lower priority seems to have been given to social care in particular.

To make up for the difference, the Danish government turned to the voluntary organizations, arguing that they could take the responsibility of providing social lives for otherwise lonely elderly people (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, 1997). Voluntary organizations had several years of experience with befrienders, who would visit elderly people on a voluntary basis to enhance their quality of life and alleviate social isolation by fulfilling emotional needs. This was achieved by giving the client undivided attention in dedicated home visits with an emphasis on listening skills. The government recommended that the local authorities create partnerships with the local voluntary organization to develop or invite the existing groups of befrienders to find ways in which the professional home help and the voluntary befrienders could cooperate in fulfilling the needs of the elderly people.

The ideal was that the partnership should develop ways to ensure that the different care services supplement each other and create a coherent welfare system. The stated goal of this voluntary specialization exercise is the avoidance of service duplication and the more efficient use of resources (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, 1997, 2002, 2003). According to the social policy, the quality of voluntary social work depends on the ability of this work to limit itself to what the local municipalities and the

voluntary organization agree upon (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, 2003, 2006).

Within the last twenty years we have likewise witnessed the emergence of several partnerships between the local authorities and the voluntary organizations. The major national organizations in particular, such as Dansk Røde Kors (Danish Red Cross), De Samvirkende Menighedsplejer (Union of Parish Charities) and Ældre Sagen (Dane Age Association), have developed partnership with the local public home care services to find concrete ways to establish collaborative arrangements in which the public home carers do what they do best and the volunteers do what they do best, as idealized by the Ministry of Social Affairs. These voluntary organizations are attempting to establish a formal framework for their voluntary social work, which is to be accomplished partly by means of a thorough employment interview with the new volunteer. It is designed to ensure that the individual possesses the necessary resources and the required motivation for the work in question, and that the volunteer visitor is informed that he or she may not perform work for which others are paid, accept money or gifts, and that he or she is subject to professional standards of confidentiality. In addition, a control visit is made after 1-3 months during which the visit organizer ensures that the visiting relationship remains intact.

All three voluntary organizations also offer their volunteers courses in how to be a befriender. The courses are about how to develop one's listening skills and other social capacities. Moreover they also include instructions not to undertake household tasks or assist with personal care-giving. It is made clear that the voluntary work should not overlap with the existent public home care services.

But what opportunities exist for this kind of formalized collaboration to ensure that both the state and voluntary organizations are allowed to do what they do best? In other words, how do these two different service-providers fit together? What is interesting about any attempt to create this kind of formalized collaboration between public and voluntary organizations in the area of care is that the two sectors that are seeking to cooperate have very different ways of organizing the provision of social work.

## 2. The study

The results reported here are based on thirty-five interviews of thirty people that were conducted from August 2002 to April 2007. The interview subjects consisted of voluntary visiting friends ( $n = 21$ ), voluntary leaders ( $n = 5$ ), professional leaders ( $n = 4$ ). One of the voluntary leaders was interviewed a second time, another was interviewed three times. Two of the professional leaders were interviewed twice.

The subjects were selected from three of the largest Danish voluntary organizations, namely Dane Age, the Danish Red Cross and the Union of Parish Charities. To be included, the volunteers had to have more than one year's experience within the field and their visiting host had to be the recipient of public home help services. The voluntary and professional leaders had at least two years' experience as leaders of this specific kind of voluntary work. This time component was important, because the study assumed that every relational component need some time before it can develop. In the beginning the two people are like foreigners for each other, but it makes some sense to believe that after some while the persons would get to know each other better, what seems to be a condition for the relational component to work. Another criterion was that the visiting host also received public home care, in order to be able to investigate how the voluntary and public welfare services relate to each other, and to test the political assumptions about this.

While ethnographic techniques like participant observation, with its main strength on the close day-to-day interaction, represent an excellent opportunity to get as close as possible to the subject of study (Wintereik, Bont and Berg, 2002), this was not possible for this study. The intimate nature of the relationship between visiting friends and visiting hosts was too likely to be disturbed by the presence of an external observer. Instead Semi-structured interviews with the volunteers and their professional and voluntary leaders, proved useful as a way of generating accounts of the concrete practices in the visiting relation and established a unique site of knowledge construction (Kvale, 1999).

Individual, confidential, semi-structured interviews were conducted and tape-recorded. The quotations in what follows have been drawn from this empirical work and translated from Danish to English. They are intended to illustrate the richness of accounts of care and importantly, how they bring to light and challenge the assumptions of the current social policy in Denmark. An interest in the expression of care and an emphasis on gaining narratives from both members of the care relationships and leaders with several years of experiences within the field motivated all the interviews.

All the interviews sought information about partly the concrete content of the services that are provided in the visit-relationship and partly to get information about the social dynamics that could explain the first findings. I attempted to make the relationship itself, how it emerges and how it develops different kinds of structures over time, the central topic of the interviews. Common for the interviews was an interest in the expression of care and an emphasis on narratives

about the content of care from both visiting friends and their leaders. The interviews were thus used as a way of gaining access to every day practices of the volunteers.

In the cases where the interview produce information about things the volunteers are doing that they are not formally allowed to do, I confronted the interviewed about this. In all cases the interviewed explained this by referring to the special dynamics of the specific relationships between the befriender and the visit host. The visit host is not only being described in various ways as individuals with distinct identities, with whom the befrienders interact, the same is the case with the befrienders. They don't describe themselves or by their leaders as someone that takes the part of a corps of befrienders, but as individuals with distinct identities. I have, with the help of the open form of the semistructured interviews, purchased what the interviewed meant with this, to be able as clear and precise as possible to describe the logic of the voluntary social work, that seems to appear from the information conducted through these interviews.

Not all the interviews represented examples of concrete practices that was in conflict with the formerly descriptions of this work. In these cases I also asked explicitly into why the specific relationship turned out to have the content it has, however also in these situations the interviewed didn't argue from a formal point of view, that this was due to the formal decisions that already exist within this specific area. Instead, again, the interviewed referred to dynamic of the relational component of this specific relationship, to explain why it turned out as it did. In the following I will give some examples of this.

### 3. The visiting relationship

The interviews give a very different picture of what a befriender does when he or she is doing social care than suggested in the rhetoric of the various political initiatives that frame this practice.

A volunteer visitor says:

*"In the beginning it was only something I did when Bent (the visiting host) lacked something, but now it has become a habit, that I just slip down to the supermarket to buy what he needs."*

Confronted with the fact that she actually isn't allowed to do that, the volunteer replies:

*"Who should tell me not to do that? I do want I think is right to do."*

Another volunteer visitor states:

*"The home helper doesn't always have the time for it...well then... I'll do the dishes, what should I do? Let her sit there in a dirty kitchen?"*

Another volunteer visitor says:

*"Well, we do a lot of things together...I don't think much about what I'm allowed to do or not, in the beginning, maybe, yes...I'm not even sure, but today we do what we want to do, without any hesitation."*

Here you get an idea that the befriender in the very beginning of the relationship was aware of the formal settings of the visit relationships, even though the person isn't sure, but it is also clear that during the time when the relationship had the chance to develop, it didn't give occasions to any considerations any longer.

Another voluntary visitor says:

*"Well, I'll wash her clothes every time I'm there...nobody else does it for her, and when I'm already there it would be stupid not to help her, with the things she needed to be done. I'm just glad to be able to help her."*

Not all the interviews give the evidence that the befrienders are doing things that from the perspective of the Danish government is the responsibility of the public home care. The interviews show that in some relationships it is meaningful that the befrienders do things on a regular basis that from the Danish government was meant to be the task of the public home help. But what is notable is that the reason why the befriender doesn't transgress the political defined border between the voluntary and the public social work, isn't due to the formal decisions that have been taken within this field, but is instead finding its point of reference in the dynamic of the relationship itself. The befrienders argue that they would find it odd to do things like cleaning, shopping or washing, because this is not how the relationship has developed. The dynamics of the relational component have unforeseeable consequences, that doesn't necessarily mean that it comes into conflict with the formal politics within the field, even though this often is the case. A professional visit organizer in the Dane Age Association:

*"Some of them fall in love with each other, and then they don't know what to say, but that's very simple, if they think that's a problem, they can just stop being befrienders, that's not a problem, we can't prevent people to fall in love, can we?"*

Other visiting relationships develop in ways where the voluntary organization finds it necessary to expel the befriender from the organization. A professional visit organizer in Dane Age Association:

*"There was a befriender that went all too long, she let the old lady (the visit host, ed.) move in to her house. The old lady was very confused, she was rather spoiled and had in the meantime quite*

*a lot of money (...) The family was very indignant about it, so I had to expel the befriender from the organization."*

To the question about what happened to the relationship further, the organizer responded:

*"I can expel the befriender, but I can't forbid her (the visit host, ed.) to live at the befriender's house."*

Not all the visit relationships transgress the border between what is the responsibility of the befriender and what is the responsibility of the public home care. But what is notable is that, what we see when we try to gain an insight into what happens within the visit-relationships bears no relation to structured assistance based on a formal basis for decisions. The visiting relationships involve a wealth of decisions, but these are made on an individual and personal levels which is not delimited by the decisions formally made by the current social policy. The interviews clearly show that the individual visiting relationships develop according to their own dynamics, determined solely by the individual volunteer visitor and recipient of care. How far they wish to go, what they want to do together, for how long and how often, is not something that can be decided outside the relationship but only by those present. As a result, no two visiting relationships are alike. This plurality would seem to indicate that it is impossible to make any binding decisions as to the content of the various visitor programs at the organizational level. The empirical data stemming from this study, show that the visiting relationships often cannot be contained by the framework and the rules established by the current social policy and the voluntary organization which sets up the relationship in the beginning.

An interview with the voluntary visit organizer who has been a voluntary leader of the Copenhagen branch of the Dane Age Association over the last ten years, confirms that it is not just difficult but impossible to enforce the rules:

*"I remember someone once said 'But then that means I'm not allowed to change a nappy', well, I'd never dreamed of changing a nappy if I visited someone, but she feels it's a natural thing to do, and she can't just sit and watch someone who's uncomfortable just because they need their nappy changing... I can only tell them to use their common sense and to set their own limits. I mean, once people have known each other for a while, what would you do as a good neighbor and what would you do as a family member? If you were visiting an old relative, well then you'd help, wouldn't you."*

She continues:

*"Many of the volunteer visitors are good housewives, and they think nothing of it. They can't bear to see what happens when things (public services ed.) don't work."*

Asked whether this undermines the sought-after balance between the public and voluntary social work, the visit organizer replies:

*"You can't expect a volunteer visitor to think about long-term local government policies every time she visits someone, and basically that's what you have to do, because if you do so and so, then the consequences will be such and such, and that wasn't really the point, was it?"*

A professional leader of the department of voluntary social work in the Danish Red Cross says:

*"We have guidelines for our volunteers, for example, that they don't do things that the home helper is supposed to do...but in reality there are lots of overlaps...shopping, cleaning...things like that...that happens. And if you ask them, why they do it, they say that well this is what needs to be done. It is obvious that a task that appears as unsolved in itself calls out for a solution, and the volunteers feel good about solving these tasks."*

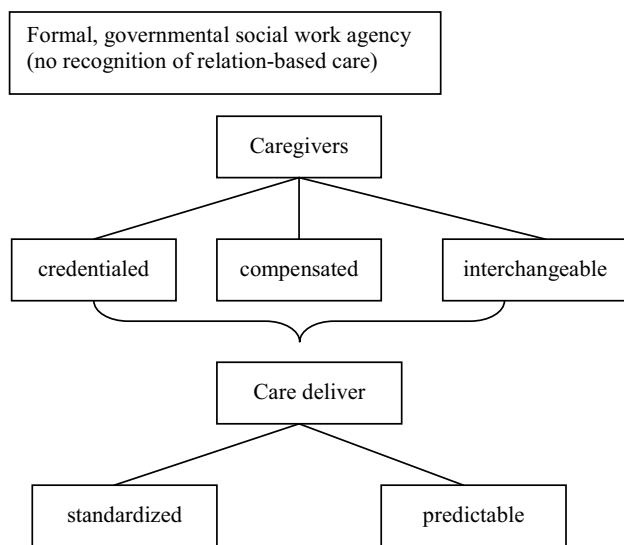
As can be seen from the above, the voluntary organizations are failing to standardize and structure the framework for the volunteer visitor programs. The way in which individual visiting relationships develop once established is determined by the participants themselves and not by the voluntary organization. The content of the visiting relationships cannot be determined at a formal level, but individually within the various visiting relationships.

## Discussion and conclusion

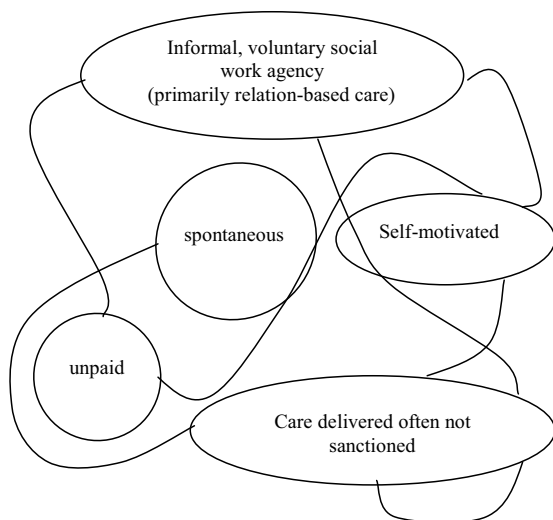
This analysis leads us to three main conclusions. Firstly, the study shows that the relational component of care is not salient only within the informal care that Henderson and Forbat (2002) have studied. It also emerges as an important aspect of "the work in the middle" of the volunteers. Secondly, it shows how the volunteers in the visiting services are doing a lot of different things that they are not formally allowed to do, both in regard to the social policy and in regard to the formal rules of the voluntary organization that has set up the relationship. This insight emphasized the need to separate the voluntary organization and the voluntary work, which is often not done in various macro-level studies of the voluntary organizations role in the development of the modern European welfare society. Thirdly, the study shows that the social policy doesn't reflect upon this important aspect of voluntary social work. This confirms existing research on social policy in gen-

eral, which shows that policy in this area lacks the ability to account for relational aspects of the work it governs (Sevenhuijsen, 2000).

This policy can be sketched out like this:



However, this study shows that what happens within the visit-relationships bears no relation to structured assistance based on a formal basis for decisions. The visiting relationships develop due to the dynamic of the relational component of these relationships, which make the figure below a more realistic picture of the care been given:



What conclusions should be drawn from these observations? Well, in a time when new demands on the quality of the voluntary organizations' delivery of social work increase, the search for new ways in which the voluntary organizations can make the content of their work visible for the public welfare administrations will intensify. The voluntary organizations run the risk of being put in a situation where they show their own lack of capacity to control what they set up themselves.

In doing so they find themselves in a situation where they are called to account for something that is out of their control.

But the spontaneity of voluntary social work is not only a problem for the voluntary organizations. When social tasks are transferred from the public sector to the voluntary sector, the group of elderly people becomes subject to unsystematic care, dependent on the preferences, even whims, of volunteers. With general cuts in home help, not only the social side of care but also practical help, shopping and attendance arrangements are given lower priority. This leads to a risk that volunteers are pushed into carrying out tasks that were not intended at the start. This is unfortunate for the volunteers because in reality they are not competent to carry out these tasks, but also worse for the elderly, who depend on this social work, and who become subject to the arbitrariness that characterizes voluntary social work in regard to how the individual visiting relationship develops.

This, however, is not only a problem for all the involved in the direct delivery of voluntary social work, it also becomes a challenge for the current Danish social policy, when it bases its policy on the voluntary social work as something you can define in advance. The fixed content of the voluntary visiting work constructed in policy does not reflect this complexity and mutuality of many visiting relationships.

Visiting services represent one particular form of voluntary social work, and one that has a number of special problems. It is an open empirical question to what extent it is possible to find the same interpersonal dynamics within other types of voluntary social work. But what stands out as peculiar to visiting schemes and as characteristics of voluntary social work is the ideal of this work as a form of flexible and personal treatment, based on trust, unlike the public sector ideal of equal and just treatment, based on inspection. In this case, the voluntary work's ability to live up to the ideal depends on its capacity to create interpersonal dynamics. Voluntary work is therefore not simply an extension of public sector welfare work; it deals with social needs under distinct conditions. The instant there is an attempt to integrate voluntary work within "seamless welfare provision", a number of aspects of voluntary work become problematic. This applies to individuality, spontaneity, intimacy, and chance; ironically, these are the very aspects of voluntary work that comprise its special quality.



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