

Humanity at the Edge: The Moral Laboratory of Feeding Precarious lives

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Abstract:

This talk compares moral experimentation in a pig laboratory, a neonatal intensive unit (NICU), and a dementia nursing home in Denmark. Through ethnographic fieldwork we follow practices of feeding precarious lives lacking most markers of human personhood. Despite the absence of such markers, laboratory researchers and caregivers in these three sites do not abstain from engaging in questions about the moral status of the research piglets, premature infants, and people with dementia in their care. They continually negotiate how their charges belong to the human collectivity. Combining analytical approaches that do not operate with a fixed boundary between human and animal value and agency with approaches that focus on human experience and virtue ethics, we argue that ‘the human’ at stake in the moral laboratory of feeding precarious lives puts ‘the human’ in social science at disposal for moral experimentation. In traversing species and unlike, or dissimilar, spaces we are alerted us to the porosity of the category of the worthy human in time and collectivity.

Bios for presenters:

Mette N. Svendsen is associate professor and head of the Center for Medical Science and Technology Studies at the University of Copenhagen. She has carried out research on genetic testing, donations of embryos to human embryonic stem cell research, the use of human subjects in pharmacogenomics research, and the use of the pig and the monkey in experimental research. She is currently heading the research project “A life worth living: negotiating worth in human and animal” funded by the Danish Research Council. The project explores the many ways in which biomedical knowledge production and its translation to the clinic are embroiled in existential questions of life’s worth. Mette N. Svendsen has published widely in anthropological, sociological and STS journals. She has received several international prizes for her research.

Iben M. Gjødsbøl holds a Master of Science in Public Health and is a PhD Fellow at the Centre for Medical Science and Technology Studies, University of Copenhagen. Doing research in medical and nursing home care for people with dementia, she investigates practices and experiences of life’s worth in the 21st century Danish welfare state. She is part of Associate Professor Mette N. Svendsen’s research project *A Life Worth Living: Negotiating Worthiness in Human and Animal*.

Laura E. Navne holds a Master’s in Anthropology and is a PhD Fellow at the Centre for Medical Science and Technology Studies, University of Copenhagen. Her current research investigates practices and experiences of clinical decision-making around prematurely born infants at the fringes of life in a neonatal intensive care unit. Her work is part of Associate Professor Mette N. Svendsen’s research project *A Life Worth Living: Negotiating Worthiness in Human and Animal*. In her previous work she has focused on patient involvement and decision-making in the Danish Health Services.

Mie S. Dam holds a Master of Science in Public Health and is a PhD Fellow at Copenhagen University Hospital and the Centre for Medical Science and Technology Studies, University of Copenhagen. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in an animal laboratory and a neonatal intensive care unit, she investigates the moral reasoning and organizational frameworks conditioning the possibilities for translating biomedical knowledge between human and nonhuman research subjects in the field of neonatology. Her work is part of a social science work package in NEOMUNE, a translational research platform that aims to improve health and survival for preterm infants, and closely associated with Associate Professor Mette N. Svendsen’s research project *A Life Worth Living: Negotiating Worthiness in Human and Animal*.