

# Deconstructing Death

– Changing Cultures of Death, Dying,  
Bereavement and Care in the Nordic Countries



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and Care in the Nordic Countries

Edited by

*Michael Hviid Jacobsen*

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It is the aspiration and *raison d'être* of the NNT continuously to support Nordic attempts to publish and to proliferate e.g. sociological and humanistic knowledge and research regarding death, dying, bereavement and care and through conferences, seminars and international collaborations to stimulate further research within the fields of thanatology and palliative care. The NNT has decided on a strategy for its activities, which can be summarized as the following set of initiatives:

- Uniting and creating synergies between scholars and practitioners working within a variety of disciplines, traditions and fields of study in relation to death, dying and bereavement in the Nordic countries.
- Rendering visible the many forms of research and other initiatives within the field of thanatology in the Nordic countries.
- Providing a platform and forum for interdisciplinary discussion, exchange and collaboration within the Nordic countries.
- Strengthening existing bonds and building new bonds between individuals and institutions working within the field of thanatology in the Nordic countries.
- Promoting awareness in the academic community – nationally, regionally and internationally – as well as outside of academia of the importance of studies of death, dying and bereavement as a legitimate field of research.

Financial support for the first official NNT conference in Aalborg and thus indirectly for the publication of this book has been generously provided by the following institutions and organisations: *The Danish Cancer Society*, Denmark, *The Department of Sociology & Social Work*, Aalborg University, Denmark, *The Faculty of Social Science*, Aalborg University, Denmark, *C. W. Obels Familiefond*, Aal-

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Aalborg University, spring 2013  
*Michael Hviid Jacobsen*

## Introduction

# The Cultural Construction and Deconstruction of Death

– Changing Cultures of Death, Dying, Bereavement and Care in the Nordic Countries

*Michael Hviid Jacobsen*

### Constructing and Deconstructing Death

Man's concern with death is perhaps the most ancient and enduring of human concerns. According to the great German enlightenment philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, world history can be seen as the unending and meticulous recoding of what man does with death. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman stated that death stands for the ultimate emptiness, void and non-existence, which paradoxically and absurdly remains one of the major sources of meaning in humans' being-in-the world, while Belgian playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck went as far as suggesting that the most important thing in life is death. Indeed, throughout the history of humankind, humans have laboriously worked against their own destiny – the destiny of having to die. Through ever more specialized medical interventions, religious beliefs in immortality and a paradisiacal afterlife or more mundane sublimations aimed at keeping death – and especially the knowledge and awareness of death – at bay, mankind has tried to live life as free from death as possible. The ambition to cheat death is as intense as ever before in human history (Cetron & Davies 1998) and thus the catalogue of man's inventiveness and ingenuity when it comes to attempting to counter the fact and inevitability of death is endless and is constantly being extended (Wilkins 1990). British historian Arnold Toynbee once listed some of the main ways in which humans have aspired for immortality – from godly beliefs via biological procreation to vulgar hedonism – and he insisted that all of these attempts, with changing emphasis and intensity, to wrestle with and confront death have constituted life's continu-

ous and intimate doppelgänger since the dawn of times (Toynbee 1980). Add to this cornucopia constant breakthroughs and inventions within medical science aimed at prolonging life to its utmost limit, the plastic surgical and pharmacological industry's support of the impression that the body never really ages and dies, adventures in cryonics or other equally spectacular feats and flights of fancy. Man's ingenuity seems to know no limitation when it comes to death and to securing as death-free a life as possible.

However, it seems as if these endeavours have – at least to some extent – proved to be in vain and that we instead of nearing ourselves to learning to live with death or accepting the inevitability of death move further and further away from it in our desperate efforts to avoid it. Whereas in the Middle Ages people – at least according to most available historical documentation – were reconciled with and even seemed to find comfort and consolation in the fact that death lured at the end of a life poignantly described by philosopher Thomas Hobbes as “poor, nasty, brutish and short”, today in advanced modern, late modern or postmodern society the dread of death permeates every nook and cranny of our increasingly extended lives. We are obsessed with death (because we are obsessed with life) but especially with eradicating and eliminating it from our direct field of experience. We have continuously and with the advent of modernity increasingly invented ever new systems and new sources of knowledge and control in place of the role previously fulfilled by religion in order to give meaning to the apparently meaningless death. As Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen stated on this situation:

[Death] stands as a challenge to all our systems of meaning, order, governance and civilization. Any given cultural construct – from religion, and poetry to psychoanalysis and medical technology – may be construed as a response to the disordering force of death (Goodwin & Bronfen 1993:4).

Even though we may – to some extent – be able to objectively explain, predict and seek to control death and dying, we are as estranged as ever before from understanding death. Although many previously deadly diseases are today medically curable and despite the fact that we live longer than any other generation in the history of the world (in fact our average life expectancy has doubled within the last two centuries and for every decade we today seem capable of adding approximately 2-2.5 years to the average life-span of people, see Brown 2008), as a phenomenon of medical, technological and social intervention, death – instead of decreasing – seems to have grown in scope, intensity and strength, becoming nowadays almost omnipotent and omnipresent. Hardly a day passes by without headlines and newsflashes of disasters, diseases and destruction killing either identifiable individuals or numerous anonymous people. As Don DeLillo insightfully observed in his award-winning novel *White Noise*:

“This is the nature of modern death”, Murray said. “It has a life independent of us. It is growing in prestige and dimension. It has a sweep it never had before. We study it objectively. We can predict its appearance, trace its path in the body. We’ve never been so close to it, so familiar with its habits and attitudes. We know it intimately. But it continues to grow, to acquire breadth and scope, new outlets, new passages and means. The more we learn, the more it grows. Is this some law of physics? Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death” (DeLillo in Kaufman 2005:vii).

To most of us, death is primarily seen as something – physical, biological and natural – that happens to people at some point in time and in our advanced modern cultures primarily in old age. Death has to do with disease, the cessation of bodily functions and with gradual biological deterioration of the human body. Death is thus a medical or clinical matter – something best left to nurses and doctors, or, if all hope is gone, to priests and palliative care workers.

Although death is indeed a natural phenomenon – natural in the sense of being embedded in the human body already from the beginning of life and also natural in the sense that Nature is premised on the necessity that humans, as everything else, die – it is also, and perhaps to most people even more so, a social and cultural phenomenon or what is sometimes within the social sciences termed a ‘social construction’. By social construction is meant that even the apparently most natural, biological, unchanging or inevitable phenomenon – in this case death – is firmly embedded within, shaped by and constructed in concrete historical, social and cultural contexts. As the ‘father’ of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida (1967) observed that everything is a matter of human interpretation and context. As he wrote of the process of deconstruction:

One of the definitions of what is called deconstruction would be the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualization. The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (‘there is nothing outside the text’ [*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context (Derrida 1967:163).

This also goes for death and its deconstruction. However, death is not merely constructed once and for all, as a one-off event – it is continuously laboured on and deconstructed by the very human beings who seek to learn to live (or learn to deny or forget to live) with the inevitability of death and dying. Therefore, throughout history and across geographical borders and cultural boundaries death is constructed differently (see, e.g., Ariès 1981; Choron 1964; Dollimore 1998; Morgan & Laungani 2003-2009). Despite death’s omnipresence, the actual

way one culture or historical epoch constructs, understands and deals with death is often quite unique and characteristic to that particular social, cultural and temporal situation. In itself, death is and means nothing – it is therefore only when contextualized and recontextualized that death as construction and deconstruction requires specification and meaning. As Danish doctor Oscar Bloch began his classic yet generally overlooked book from 1914 entitled *Om døden – en almenfattelig fremstilling* [*On Death – A Generally Comprehensible Presentation*]:

Death! What is death? What does it mean to die? No one has ever been able to provide a definition of the phenomenon: death! As long as the world has existed, it has been known, that all everything alive will and must die; every day witnesses many people of all ages die – there has been more than enough material for investigations and reflection, and yet no one is able to tell what the nature of death is (Bloch 1914:1).

Even though death is indeed universal (meaning that everything living must and will die), the experience of death thus varies considerably from culture to culture, from historical era to era, from human being to human being. There is thus no single or exclusive way to die and the way we die – and the concrete circumstances surrounding our deaths – is continuously but imperceptibly changing. In the universality of death lies its natural meaning – in the fact that we all die, but die differently, lies its social and cultural meaning. What death does to Man is perhaps not, at least from a sociological and cultural perspective, so interesting, but what Man does to death seems so very important. So despite its universality, death is constructed and deconstructed in a multitude of ways by human beings in order to make the meaningless meaningful. As two notable anthropologists once rightly observed:

What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming or pickling; they are eaten – raw, cooked or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered or treated in a variety of ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive (Huntington & Metcalf 1979:1).

Death – as a concrete, natural and highly individual process and event in life – is to most of us something quite unfathomable, incomprehensible and unfamiliar. However, death does not stand still, as cultural historians have shown in their

magisterial delineations and depictions of the temporal transformations of our understanding of death, dying and bereavement (see e.g. Ariès 1974; Choron 1964; Kellehear 2007; Morin 1970; Tamm 1992; Whaley 1981). After decades of death taboo, death denial and hidden death, French historian Philippe Ariès insisted that “death is once again something one can talk about” (Ariès 1974:103). Increasingly, historians, philosophers and sociologists have been preoccupied with showing how the deconstruction of death in recent decades – with a focus on openness, dialogue and therapeutic relief from existential anxiety – have heralded new ways of dealing with, understanding, performing and living with death (see, e.g., Bartalos 2008; Brown 2008; Jacobsen 2009; Noys 2005; Schumacher 2010; Seale 1998; Walter 1994; Woodthorpe 2007). Contrary to the direct encounter with death that people would experience e.g. in the Middle Ages, these new ways of dealing with, understanding and deconstructing death is heavily inspired by mass media images and also mediated and negotiated by the interpretations, studies and analyses of death, dying and bereavement provided by social thinkers and social researchers often labelled ‘thanatologists’.

The title of this book was initially inspired by the title of an article picked up entirely by happenstance. In this article, the author – Gregory D. Gross – provides an enticing and incisive diagnosis of the contemporary state of affairs regarding the deconstruction of death in advanced modern society with the following statement:

Modernist citizens turn increasingly to social science and the popular press for answers about what once was the unfathomable nature of death and dying. Contemporary people have received a homogenized version of death and grief, replete with neatness, predictability and control, which in the end rob the grieving of meaning-making (Gross 2003:71).

What Gross, and with him a host of other social thinkers and cultural analysts, have pinpointed is that death is never free-floating – it is always firmly anchored in concrete social, cultural and historical circumstances. Society is thus not just a society of or for the living, but also a society of and for the dying and the dead. American sociologist Peter L. Berger once insisted that society can be defined as humans banded together in the face of death (Berger 1969:52). Following this lead, Zygmunt Bauman in his breath-taking and thought-provoking book *Mortality, Immortality and Other life Strategies* insisted that society, social organization, culture and the like are all inventions made in order to live meaningfully with the knowledge of human mortality:

The fact of human mortality, and the necessity to live with the constant awareness of that fact, go a long way towards accounting for many a crucial aspect of social and

cultural organization of all known societies; and that most, perhaps all, known cultures can be better understood (or at least understood differently, in a novel way) if conceived of as alternative ways in which that primary trait of human existence – *the fact of mortality and the knowledge of it* – is dealt with and processed, so that it may turn from the condition of impossibility of meaningful life into the major source of life's meaning (Bauman 1992:9).

This book is, as mentioned, not about death as a natural scientific or medical phenomenon – the cessation of heart function, the medical and clinical practices associated with the human body or technical aspects of death, dying and care – but about death as a thoroughly socially and culturally constructed and deconstructed phenomenon – a phenomenon that although it seems blatantly impervious to human intervention ('death is just there') is continuously challenged and changed by the meaning-seeking, meaning-making and meaning-negotiating human beings living – and living towards death – in specific historical, social and cultural circumstances.

## **Structure and Content**

"Yes, I want to live, I want to die in the North" (*Ja, jag vill leva, jag vill dö i Norden*), as the chorus of the Swedish national anthem beautifully goes. This also sets the scene for the content of this book that concerns itself with the cultures of death in the Nordic countries. This book is thus about some important and observable changes in our cultural understanding and managing of death, dying, bereavement and care in contemporary Nordic countries. By stressing the term 'cultures' in the plural instead of the singular in its subtitle, this book first of all recognizes that despite certain common cultural histories and traits, the Nordic countries also exhibit different cultures when it comes to dealing with death, dying, bereavement and care, and second, that 'cultures' refer to various aspects of human activity such as institutionalized practices, collective rituals and individual meaning-making as well as its sedimentation in cultural and physical artefacts (such as gravestones, architecture, literature, and so on).

Despite their substantial historical, cultural and national differences, the Nordic countries are also characterised by all being advanced welfare states, relatively homogenous when it comes to the composition of the population as well as belonging to the most prosperous, socially and politically stable and secularized part of the world. American political scientist Ronald Inglehart thus classified the Nordic countries among the value-cluster of so-called 'secular-rational' societies (Inglehart 1997). The Nordic countries also share a rather similar conception of the welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). Moreover, the overall way of life and living standards across the borders of the Nordic countries is not all



that different if compared to other neighbouring regions of the world. Despite such similarities in overall ways of life and cultural mentalities, the ways of death in the Nordic countries vary quite considerably, as religious, institutional and quotidian practices are nationally, regionally and locally diverse and evolving in not always synchronic patterns. Unfortunately, we still lack comprehensive and in-depth research on comparative aspects of death, dying and bereavement between the Nordic countries – and even in the otherwise voluminous scrutinizing of geographically and culturally different ways of death, dying and bereavement around the world (see, e.g., Morgan & Laungani 2003-2009), with the exception of a single chapter on Swedish experiences (Wretmark 2004), the Nordic death cultures were and remain conspicuously absent – but the contributions collected in this present book all point to some of key tendencies that show certain signs of convergence and cultural contagion between the Nordic countries as well as highlight and testify to the existence and persistence of cultural differences and idiosyncrasies.

In recent years, an increasing number of Nordic scholars working within sociological, folkloristic, anthropological and related disciplines have reported on significant shifts and changes within rituals, attitudes and institutional arrangements regarding the management of death and dying and the development within mourning practices (see, e.g., Alver & Skjelbred 1994; Birkelund 2011; Dalgaard & Jacobsen 2011; Gustavsson 2009, 2011; Jacobsen 2001; Jacobsen & Haakonsen 2008; Söderpalm 1994). These studies all, in varying ways, support the idea that death, dying and bereavement is currently in the process of being culturally and socially deconstructed in contemporary society, whether it be labelled 'late modern', 'postmodern', 'liquid modern' or otherwise. These changes, for example, have to do with accelerated and intensified processes of individualization, informalization, re-ritualization, commercialization, professionalization, anesthetization and the complex criss-crossing of these processes that fundamentally impact and alter our encounter with and experience of death, dying and bereavement.

This book aspires to provide a broad yet selective overview of research on some of the most recent changes in the cultures of death, dying, bereavement and care in the Nordic countries. The book is divided into three overall sections each covering and focusing on specific topics in relation to death, dying, bereavement and care. The contributions in the first part are concerned with showing changes within cultural, social, professional and intellectual contexts more generally in the Nordic countries.

In chapter 1 by *Vibeke Poulsen Graven, Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Louise Lund* the much popularized and publicized thesis on the 'revival of death' is unfolded, exemplified and discussed. The purpose of the chapter is to point to and illustrate some of the most recent changes in contemporary death culture in a Dan-

ish context and to trace the background for the so-called 'revival of death' in contemporary Western societies. The authors show how the 'death awareness movement' has been a prime mover together with thanatological literature, palliative care and the hospice movement in putting death back on the agenda after decades of denial and taboo.

Chapter 2 by *Anna Whitaker* is concerned with providing a subjective interpretation of the development and state of research on death and dying in the Nordic countries based on self-reflection and a survey of literature. The author structures the story around 'three personal images' that convey something about how she personally encountered the topic of death and dying but also more generally can inform us about how the topics of death and dying are treated in existing research literature. The first image is constituted by the author's own academic journey through and encounter with the topic of death and dying while studying dying among old people. The second image consists of a thematic overview of the research literature on dying in the Nordic countries. The third image continues along this line focusing on the research on death in the Nordic countries. The author concludes the chapter by arguing that while death and dying research is by now well-established within a Nordic context, we also need to change and expand on the research agenda in order to cover new ground.

In chapter 3 by *Michael Hviid Jacobsen* and *Michael C. Kearl* the topic is the – at least in the Nordic countries – curious and still rather absent phenomenon of 'death education'. The chapter outlines the background for the establishment of 'death education' on the North American continent and the gradually spreading of the idea that people – professionals as well as non-professionals – can be educated to deal with and relate to death as part of either specialist training or school/college curricula. The chapter shows how the idea of 'death education' is now gradually beginning to inspire academics and professionals also in a Danish/Nordic context and argues for the implementation of 'death education' more broadly as a way to come to terms with human mortality.

*Kirsi Kanerva* in chapter 4 presents a more historical and literary exposition that takes us back to the time of the medieval Icelandic sagas and traces how they depicted death and immortality. Based on a thorough investigation of Icelandic sagas, we are presented with restless ghosts, benevolent as well as malevolent dead who rise from their graves and harass or help the living. The chapter particularly deals with those individuals who are responsible for banishing the malevolent ghosts or encounter the benevolent or non-harmful living dead such as Christian women or men with goodwill. Based on a thorough reading and elegant interpretation of Icelandic sagas, the author in the chapter convincingly argues for the crucial role played by the dead – and those who handled the living dead – in medieval Iceland in resolving conflict, negotiating status and maintaining social order.

Chapter 5 by *Anne Kjærsgaard Markussen* deals with a more recent phenomenon, namely organ transplantation discussions, which has increasingly come to the attention of political, ethical and public debates in recent years. Throughout the chapter the author makes clear and shows how Protestant countries in Western Europe relatively speaking have the highest cremation rates but the lowest organ donation rates, while Roman Catholic countries have the lowest cremation rates but the highest organ donation rates. These surprisingly inverse rates provide ample reason to take a new, closer and critical look at the relationship between religious culture and organ donation in Protestant and Catholic contexts, because the varying rates are normally explained as a result of different legislative systems, while the data in this chapter are highly indicative of a decisive influence of religious cultural background.

Contributions in part two of the book concentrate on changes in commemorative ceremonies and ritualistic practices in connection to the memorialization and mourning processes on a general social scale as well as represented in concrete local settings.

Chapter 6 by *Anna Petersson* investigates the increasingly publicized and popular phenomenon of so-called 'spontaneous memorialization'. Spontaneous memorialization is a public way of expressing mourning and participation that builds on but, importantly, also extends conventional memorial rites and ceremonies. In the chapter, we are presented with theoretical ideas as well as empirical examples particularly from Sweden to illustrate the potency of the notion of spontaneous memorialization. The author shows how e.g. roadside memorials or roadside crosses have become increasingly popular ways to mourn the dead – and often tragic and dramatic deaths – in public also in a Nordic context. Moreover, she illustrates and discusses the material culture involved in spontaneous memorialization as well as the communication and ritualization related to spontaneous memorials as opposed to that of official memorials.

*Anders Gustavsson* in chapter 7 explores the way in which the internet is used for communicating with the deceased as well as the way mourning and memorialization is expressed on internet sites. In the chapter, the author documents and discusses the various ways in which mourners express their emotions, experiences and concepts of belief regarding the deceased person. This can be done verbally, by publishing written descriptions and poems, or illustratively, by using pictures such as photographs or pictorial symbols. The communication with the deceased also points to more widespread cultural conceptions of the existence of Heaven, spiritual connections, beliefs in angels, etc. The chapter through a variety of empirical examples shows how mourning and memorialization practices via the internet perform an important role for those left behind when someone dies.

In chapter 8 by *Olaf Aagedal* the topic is also memorial practices but this time relating to the lighting of candles when marking a death and mourning at the grave. The chapter starts out by examining the historical background for the increasingly popular practice of lighting candles and by determining what knowledge we already have on this phenomenon. Then the author looks into what the numbers tell us and examine in more detail who actually lights candles, their backgrounds and relation to religion, and how this group has changed during the last few decades. The author thus provides us with an important insight into a trend in commemorating the dead which has a solid historical background and grounding, but its recent revival bears witness to changes in contemporary memorial and ritual practices.

In chapter 9 by *Ida Marie Høeg*, we continue to look at contemporary ceremonial practices from Norway, in this chapter however specifically in relation to the memorialization of deaths as commemorated through collective ritualization practices in school contexts. The author investigates rituals and ceremonials that are created when tragic and untimely deaths happen to children and when schools decide to commemorate this death. As the author shows, child death in a contemporary Western cultural context is regarded as an unjustified and unnatural anomaly which spawns the need for collective rituals. The chapter thus explores death in a school context by examining the various strategies that are utilised in dealing with death through rituals and analyses the influence that contingency plans have on the development and performance of death rituals in a situation that the people involved often find to be emotional, intense and psychologically chaotic. The focus in the chapter is primarily on the staff's approach to rituals and how they perform and interpret death rituals within the framework of the school.

In part three contributions deal with various aspects of end-of-life decisions, caring for the elderly, the ill, the weak and the marginalized as well as dying alone and lonely in contemporary Nordic societies. By looking, e.g. at the development of palliative care programmes, nursing homes for the socially vulnerable and at the so-called 'death found' and their social circumstances, we get a glimpse of the cultural climate of care and compassion in our Nordic societies.

In chapter 10, *Leila Jylhänkangas* focuses on the way in which doctors narrate end-of-life issues. Since death is in modern society increasingly a medical matter, the way doctors approach and understand death is important. Based on interviews with Finnish physicians, the author shows how they talk about issues relating to care, treatment, sedation, euthanasia and death. Interestingly, in the interviews the physicians emphasize the need for good palliative care and the importance of pain alleviation, and in their narratives they rely on knowledge gained from their experiences in the field of dying and the ethics of their own profession. Besides the profession-specific representations, the study also shows that

there are also the interviewees' personal life experiences, which regulate the way they understand and represent death, dying and good care at the end of life.

Chapter 11 by *Kirsten Halskov Madsen, Anette Meldgaard* and *Jette Henriksen* deals with the development of palliative care programmes aimed at the basic level of palliative care practice. The need to develop educational opportunities at particularly this level – described as 'the basic inter-professional level of palliative care' – has been increasing for many years where palliative care has conventionally and primarily been associated with specialist training. As the authors show – based on a mapping out of existing educational initiatives in a region of Denmark, a reading of the curriculum and a description of the organization of palliative care – there is a need for such inter-professional palliative care that raises the level of competences at the basic level and the sharing of knowledge as well as securing the continuous qualifying of healthcare staff working with palliative care.

In chapter 12 by *Aya Mortag Freund* we are presented with a view into the death that takes place in so-called 'alternative nursing homes' for people with problems relating to, for example, alcohol abuse, homelessness or psychiatric diagnoses. Many of the users of alternative nursing homes belong to the segment of society with the highest premature mortality rate due to their lifestyle and abuse and thus require care and palliative care at an earlier stage than the rest of the population. In the chapter the author, based on a research project on alternative nursing homes, provides an insight into the death and the life until death of some of the most socially vulnerable groups in society who live and die in these settings and who have a variety of special needs.

Chapter 13 by *Michael Hviid Jacobsen* and *Ida Holst* we take a closer look at the so-called 'Eleanor Rigby'-syndrome that, according to the authors, is a defining trait of those who die alone or lonely in contemporary society or what is sometimes referred to as 'social death'. This syndrome – named after a famous song by The Beatles – pinpoints how social death (that people die socially before physically) occurs to a group of people who, for various reasons, find themselves dissociated from social life and end up being 'dead found'. The authors discuss the possible reasons, processes and consequences involved in so-called 'social death' and end the chapter arguing for increased attention to and research on this phenomenon.

The last chapter of the book, chapter 14 by *Michael Hviid Jacobsen* and *Karen Marie Dalgaard*, explores the notion of the 'good death' so defining for palliative care practice. Ever since its establishment decades ago, the field of palliative care has associated itself strongly with the 'good death' and has argued that palliative care needs to cater for good deaths, however defined. However, as the authors of the chapter argue, with the privileged focus on the 'good death', palliative care has neglected or overlooked the equally important phenomenon of 'bad death'.

In the chapter it is argued that palliative care practitioners and researchers necessarily need to address 'the bad death' as a topic of importance and an experience of relevance for securing 'good deaths' or deaths that are as minimally bad as possible.

As shown by these varied contributions, the topics of death, dying, bereavement and care are very much alive and kicking within contemporary Nordic sociological and cultural analysis. Although this book does not aspire to provide an exhaustive account of the many changes and transformations taking place within contemporary Nordic death culture, we – the other authors and myself – hope this volume may stimulate and inspire further research within the topics of death, dying, bereavement and care so that we may scientifically document, record and track developments in humans' continuous deconstruction of death.

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