Autonomy in Assisted Living: Employees’ Perspectives

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This focused ethnography explores how employees in assisted living facilities give meaning to the term autonomy, a core value in the mission of assisted living facilities. In-depth interviews were conducted with managerial and front line staff in two assisted living facilities to understand their interpretation of the concept of autonomy and how they felt they enhance the autonomy of the residents. Four interrelated themes capturing the meaning of autonomy emerged from analysis of the interview data: (1) autonomy is synonymous with functional independence, (2) expectations of residents of assisted living are different from residents of nursing homes, (3) rehabilitation is a goal of assisted living, and (4) a tendency to intervene in the best interests of the residents. The implications of the findings are discussed in terms of their potential effect on residents.

KEYWORDS assisted living, autonomy, employee, philosophy of care, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Since it first emerged in the 1980s, assisted living has been a popular residential care option for elders. Although the rate of growth in the assisted living industry has slowed somewhat from the highest rates observed in the late 1990s (Stevenson & Grabowski, 2010), many older adults and their families continue to see assisted living as an appealing alternative to nursing home care (Wilson, 1990). The philosophy of assisted living emphasizes the