Background In the 20th century, houseparent families represented a significant resource in the long-term care of people with mental illnesses and physical disabilities in diaconal care settings in Germany (1-5). In theory, such families could therefore be understood as a type of institutional family: groups which occasionally use familial patterns of reciprocity but are not themselves families. As there is very little empirical material on the function of the housemother, a qualitative study was launched to explore members’ memories of the function of the housemother between 1945 and 1995 and how communal life in the institutional families of the period was possible.

This study explores the experiences of people living and working in institutional, family-like care settings in Germany run by the Diaconate, the social welfare organization of the Protestant church (6,7).

Aim As little empirical material on life in institutional families existed, a qualitative study was undertaken to explore the experiences of contemporary witnesses, particularly those who had experienced the duties and responsibilities of housemothers in the second half of the 20th century.

Method The study is based on interviews with people who lived in these institutions and looks at their experiences of a place where carers and people with mental illness lived together. This paper has combined the experiences of residents (n=8) and biological children of houseparents (n=5) from a qualitative study (n=42). The qualitative study took a grounded theory approach according to Strauss and Corbin (8).

Results The results are organized around the two central categories of power and domination. Two main influencing factors were defined: ‘Living in the Institute’s House’ and ‘Personality and Competencies’.

The role of the housemother from the perspective of Bethel Residents

The analysis of the eight interviews with the male residents led to four categories being defined:

1. ‘Recognition through work and structure’
2. ‘At the mercy of the houseparents: eating as an arena of dependence’
3. ‘Being good and obeying’
4. ‘Longing for affection’

The housemother function from the perspective of biological Daughters

A total of five daughters agreed to talk about their memories.

1. ‘Helping to the best of your abilities – recognition of achievement’
2. ‘The housemother as a kind soul’
3. ‘Respect’
4. ‘Supporting each other’
5. ‘Obey the rules – or be punished’
6. ‘Sacrificing one’s private life’

Conclusion

The historical concept of housemothers helps us to understand the current discussion about new forms of residential care homes and psychiatric care.