

## Professionals' views of the sense of home in nursing homes: Findings from LEGO SERIOUS PLAY workshops

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**Introduction** Moving to a nursing home is a significant life event that requires a large set of adaptation skills from older people. Apart from providing care, nursing homes should be a place where residents feel at home. This sense of home is a complex phenomenon comprising aspects of security and autonomy. **Purpose** This study aims at mapping the experience of the professional stakeholders working in nursing homes of the sense of home. **Method** A qualitative methodology, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY, was used to represent the sense of home by 70 professionals working in the context of nursing homes, and subsequently, to describe these feelings. **Results** The themes that were identified are privacy, perspective, freedom (including mobility), relationships, being acknowledged as a person, and nature. **Discussion and conclusion** These results from professional stakeholders confirm findings from previous studies conducted among residents themselves, and may help improve the sense of home in the nursing home environment.

**Keywords:** sense of home, nursing home, aged-care facility, homelike, dementia, LEGO SERIOUS PLAY

In general, nursing homes provide a place of residence where 24-hour care and assistance are offered by professional caregivers when people can no longer reside in their own home environment<sup>1,2</sup>. Admission to a nursing home is a major life-event, as most individuals do not wish to leave the home they have been living in for a long time<sup>3</sup>. Nursing homes have a dual nature: as a care institution and as a home. Therefore, it is important to create a sense of home for the residents. The dual character poses challenges to the creation of a sense of home, as the built environment should also serve the work of the care professionals. Having to work according to the protocols can pose limitations to the way residents are being treated as 'a guest' in their own nursing home<sup>4</sup>. However, nowadays, patient-centred models of care, which emphasise strengthening residents' autonomy and overall well-being are prominent. Older people should be enabled to continue their lifestyle as it was before admission to a nursing home<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, many health care organizations try to provide living arrangements that focus on 'the good life' and the creation of an environment that is like a home to its residents, instead of being a health care facility in which they reside<sup>6</sup>. Delivering both good (clinical) care and a homelike environment is challenging. For

instance, nursing homes are expected to adhere to safety and health regulations, and this could create risk-averse environments that act against the quality of life<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, there is also evidence that shows that living in an institution can be perceived as a home<sup>8</sup>.

The sense of home is a multifactorial phenomenon, which is highly influenced by social and personal characteristics, as well as the built environment or architecture of the facility. A sense of home is related to personal experiences and emotions, and does not come into existence over night, but is gradually developed by the person in whom independence, security and the source of own identity, choice and controls, as well as memories are essential<sup>9,11</sup>. According to Duyvendak<sup>12</sup>, one needs to feel safe and secure (labelled haven), and have a space where people can live the life one wants to live surrounded by like-minded people (labelled heaven). Rijnaard et al.<sup>10</sup> systematically reviewed the factors influencing the sense of home of older adults residing in the nursing home. Their review showed that the sense of home of nursing home residents is influenced by as much as 15 factors, which are divided into three themes. The first theme consists of psychological factors, including the

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sense of acknowledgement, preservation of one's habits and values, autonomy and control, and coping. The second theme consists of social factors, which include interaction and relationship with staff, residents, family and friends, as well as pets, and by performing activities. The third theme is the built environment, which includes the private space and the (quasi-) public space, personal belongings, technology, the look and feel, the outdoors and location. Van Hoof et al.<sup>13</sup> conducted a photo production study, and re-evaluated the construct of the sense of home from three perspectives, namely that of the residents, of the relatives and of care professionals, in four nursing homes in the Netherlands. This study tried to identify differences and similarities among the perceptions of the sense of home of these three groups. All three groups of stakeholders acknowledge the role of factors as the building and the interior design, food and drinks, autonomy and control, involvement of relatives, relationships with others and activities, as well as the quality of healthcare. Residents and family carers stressed the need of being able to be in contact with nature and the outdoor life, and also focused on coping strategies. Family carers and care professionals talked about the organizational context of care, and making the residents feel that they still 'matter'. There are subtle differences in how the three groups of stakeholders interpret and experience the sense of home in nursing homes, and what they find important.

Because professionals who work in the nursing home environment play an important role in the

creation of a sense of home, there is a need for the consideration of their views and experiences in more depth and from a personal perspective. For instance, by investigating what professionals themselves need to feel at home in this environment. Therefore, the present study aims at mapping the own sense of home of professionals in the nursing home context.

## METHODOLOGY

### LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®

On April 7th, 2016 LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP) workshops were held. The LSP methodology is used as a creative method in order to engage with participants in a personal and authentic manner<sup>14,15</sup>. The LSP methodology is an innovative process designed to enhance innovation and business performance, which deepens the reflection process and supports an effective dialogue for all participants. The LSP methodology is applied through a wide range of research domains, in which idea generation and creative views play a role<sup>16-19</sup>. Research shows that this 'hands-on' approach (one first builds a scenario with bricks, and subsequently tells a story), provides a more profound and thorough understanding of the challenges and possibilities of the real-life world to the participants of a session<sup>14</sup>.

### Participants and procedure

A total of 70 participants engaged in the workshops. The participants of the sessions were care professionals, managers, suppliers of assistive devices and technologies, and architects who work for and with nursing home organizations. The



Figure 1. Impression of the LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® session

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participants were spread over tables of about 8 participants (Figure 1). Each session was guided by a trained facilitator. After a short introduction and trial of the supplied material, the participants were asked to express their sense of home in a LEGO® scale model. Participants were invited to reflect on the sense of home from their personal perspective in an imaginary situation when being admitted themselves when old and frail. After building their scale model of 'sense of home', participants recorded their main issues and topics on a sticky note. The scale models represented the personal stories of the participants, who subsequently shared the meaning of their scale model with the other group members ('story telling'<sup>20</sup>). This is a triangulation of methods within one session. During the first stage, there was no room for engaging in discussion with others. Participants and facilitators were allowed to ask questions in order to clarify the scale model. This way of working stimulates equality within a group. Thereafter, a second question was asked about what 'take home message' people had for themselves, in other words: "What would they try to change in their own nursing home organization the day after?"

## Data analyses

The stories of the different tables were summarized by the facilitators by taking notes. Photographs were taken of the scale models and



Figure 2. Keywords (safety, "one's own", 24-hour care, connection to limitations, possibilities) and a scale model of one of the participants of the session

sticky notes provided by the participants (Figure 2). The material was analyzed by the facilitators after the sessions. Factors related to the sense of home were distilled from these data. These factors were compared with one another and clustered, as in the process of axial coding<sup>21</sup>. From this axial coding, themes emerged.

## RESULTS

During the LSP workshops, various aspects that are related to the quality of living and the sense of home in the nursing home environment were discussed. The group conversations encompassed more than just the facilitation of care, but rather included the stay in a nursing home from a holistic perspective. The themes that were identified in this study can be summed up as follows: privacy, perspective, freedom (including mobility), relationships, being acknowledged as a person, and nature.

### Privacy

Privacy is considered to be important by all participants in one way or another. Without a sense of privacy, there cannot be a sense of home. Both physical and social aspects are shared by the participants. People have a need to be left alone, to have access to a private space, in which they can withdraw and feel familiar with being surrounded by personal belongings.

"I would really want my own room where I can retreat, without being bothered by whomever".

"To me, having a private place, with the things I like to have around me, is very important".

### Perspective

Perspective was discussed both literally and figuratively during the sessions. The focus is about having something to look forward to. Having a room with a view, for instance, a view of nature or a lively city scene was deemed important. But also having a prospect to future activities is important, as it gives people a link with the future, not just the past or a former life before residing in the nursing home.

"A room without windows and without a view – it should never happen to anyone."

### Freedom

The sense of freedom was described from multiple perspectives. To some, freedom meant a form of mobility, being able to go and stand wherever you wanted. An open-door policy was considered to be significant for having a sense of home. Finally, this theme shows some overlaps with the theme 'perspective': a sense of freedom was also connected to having a room with a nice view.

"There are locked cabinets that residents are not allowed to open. I would personally consider that as troublesome."

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## Relationships

In order to have a sense of home and a sense of belonging, participants stressed the need of engaging with others and having certain social relationships with other people in the nursing home. These other people could be co-residents, care professionals, and relatives. In order to feel at home, it is important that people can also withdraw from these relationships from time to time by being able to stay in their private room. This is related to the theme of privacy.

"I'd rather sit around a round than a rectangular table. It allows you to really engage with other people."

## Being acknowledged as a person

In all groups of the workshops, being acknowledged as a person was a returning theme. It was noted that the life history of residents, in particular, of those residents with dementia, should be known to professional carers working in the place where these people live. This knowledge does not only span the person as he or she is at the moment, but also the type of person someone used to be and his or her personality. Such knowledge includes the professional background, the life one led, and one's hobbies, and this knowledge should be applied in the way people are treated and engaged with. The personal character of residents can change due to the progression of the dementia process. The personal belongings someone has brought along from the old home can also tell the life story of a resident and his/her character.

"I need to be able to be myself and be appreciated just like that."

## Nature

The sixth theme is that of being in touch with nature, which was mentioned by all groups. Nature encompasses having access to a garden or a balcony with plants, as well as having plants and pets around in the ward. This theme has some overlaps with the theme of perspective, in which aspects of nature were also mentioned as having a relationship with a sense of home.

"I don't care as long as there is so greenery around me. Plants indoors or outside."

## DISCUSSION

Through the application of the LSP methodology, the workshop sessions provided insightful aspects that influence the sense of home according to the participants. The participants stressed that professionals should be aware of the importance for residents to maintain relationships with the others and to pay continuous attention to the quality of the relationship with the professional carers. The themes identified in this LSP study match those themes identified by Rijnaard et al.<sup>10</sup>

and van Hoof et al.<sup>13</sup>, therefore, they add further confirmations to the earlier findings, albeit from a wider professional perspective. The current group of participants also included a large number of other professionals, apart from nursing staff. The discussions held by the participants have some noteworthy omissions, such as the one-sided positive focus on future events, avoiding discussions on the inevitable end of life or progress of disease and impairment. Also, the right to self-determination was not clearly expressed by the current group of participants, which, in combination with autonomy and mastery, is mentioned frequently in the literature as being important for older adults<sup>22</sup>. Overall, the statements made by the participants related to being older and living in the nursing home. Only when discussing aspects of being acknowledged related to having dementia, participants had the feeling that needs and historical backgrounds were overlooked and people with dementia could not feel at home. These statements reflect the personal views of the participants (and potential biases and misrepresentations that occur when people have to put themselves in someone else's position or write a fictional character<sup>23</sup>), and are, thus, not necessarily a reflection of the actual needs of people residing in the nursing home.

This study has once more shown that measures to improve the sense of home of residents should not only be taken in relation to the provision of care, but also in the context of the built environment and the architectural design. Based on the actual needs of residents, relatives, volunteers and care professionals, one can start improving the sense of home in the nursing home. The knowledge can be used for writing mission statements for nursing home organizations that wish to focus on a broader sense of well-being for their residents. In addition, to discuss and improve the sense of home, the nursing home staff may use the LSP methodology and the other aspects that are relevant to good nursing home care.

In the current workshop, conversations were not recorded, only notes and photographs were taken. This was a limitation of the current study. These notes and photos were discussed and synthesized by the facilitators after the group sessions were completed. If researchers wish to further implement the LSP methodology for research, one might consider recording the conversations and the evolution thereof. When conducting multiple focus group studies<sup>24</sup>, data of each group are processed and analyzed separately, and a similar procedure can be followed for multiple LSP sessions. Just as in focus group and interview-based research, stories and discussions can be recorded, then analyzed verbatim in compliance with the

guidelines of qualitative research. Apart from the evaluation of the results and themes, the methodology itself was also discussed with the purpose of implementation of LSP in research and education. LSP offers a potential to facilitate a richer focus group session during which participants can also express themselves in non-verbal ways. In the domain of research, the LSP methodology can be an enrichment to the more classic focus group approaching to qualitative research. According to the facilitators, using LEGO® leads to a better self-reflection of the participants and the development and expression of individual insights of each of the participants. The quality of the told stories is considered better than those told during traditional focus group sessions, and the individual contributions are more equal. Subsequently, the discussion with the group that stems from sharing each other's stories is experienced to be of higher quality. At the same time, the length and the intensity of the sessions are limitations of the methodology. Our sessions

lasted for 90 minutes, which is a minimum for an LSP workshop, and in practice, longer sessions are recommended. Furthermore, purchasing the LEGO® bricks is more costly than having a traditional focus group.

## CONCLUSION

The themes that are important for the sense of home of nursing home residents according to professional stakeholders are privacy, perspective, freedom (including mobility), relationships, being acknowledged as a person, and nature. These themes confirm the findings from earlier studies, and add further evidence from the perspectives of a wide group of professional stakeholders and indicate those themes that matter most from their points of view. The experiences with the LSP methodology yielded insights that are not only valuable from a research perspective but also give the participants hands-on advice and practical instruction in order to improve the sense of home in the nursing homes.

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