Public Abstract

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In 2014, nearly 1.5 million older adults lived in institutions (Administration on Aging, 2016), including nursing homes and assisted living facilities. While the total residing here reflects less than 5% of individuals sixty-five and older, the potentiality of moving to an institutional setting rises with age. In light of the swelling ratio of older adults, it is a distinct possibility that the number of individuals entering institutions will increase as well, making these types of environments a relevant focus for the coming years in the spheres of both research and practice. The residential environment is the "primary living space" of older adults, where the majority of time is spent and the most active engagement occurs (Oswald & Wahl, 2005, p. 24). Therefore, comprehending the concept of home and its relevance to the lives of assisted living residents is a critical foundation to understanding their true experiences. This research project explored what physical attributes and tangible items that assisted living residents at one facility determined to be emblematic of their concept of 'home' and personally meaningful. Following several in-depth interviews and review of photographs taken by participants, the analysis indicated two major themes of value. The first, facility characteristics, highlighted factors associated with the assisted living environment, including the general culture and level of social engagement with members of the community, group activities coordinated by the facility itself, and the resident's personal one or two bedroom apartment. The other, individual characteristics, focused on aspects that the resident introduced into the environment, such as personal values and priorities, memories, and hobbies. The data suggests that all six of the characteristics contributed meaning to a resident's experience in assisted living and shaped their perceptions of 'home,' although the individual's unique character may determine which attributes are the most influential to him or her. Though the scope of this study was minimal, the resulting preliminary theory could be employed in future lines of inquiry to further build the knowledge base and provide a deeper understanding of how residents in assisted living create meaning and construct their individual interpretations of 'home.'