

THE ROLE OF PLACE IN ASSISTED LIVING

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RACHEL M. MOLNAR

DR. BENYAMIN SCHWARZ, THESIS SUPERVISOR

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled:

THE ROLE OF PLACE IN ASSISTED LIVING

presented by Rachel M. Molnar,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Science,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Benyamin Schwarz, Ph.D.

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Professor Ruth Tofle, Ph.D.

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Professor Jacquelyn J. Benson, Ph.D.

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# THE ROLE OF PLACE IN ASSISTED LIVING

Rachel M. Molnar

Dr. Benyamin Schwarz, Thesis Supervisor

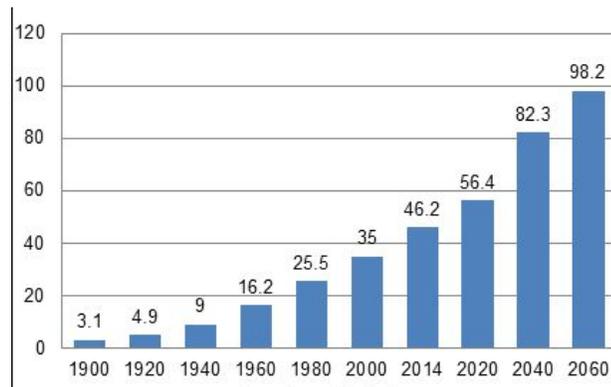
## ABSTRACT

The qualitative inquiry explored what physical attributes and tangible items that assisted living residents at one facility determined to be personally meaningful and emblematic of their concept of 'home.' Using grounded theory methods, in-depth interviews and participant-captured photographs were employed to investigate the research questions. Through the coding and analysis process, interview transcripts and photographic data 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.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

As the “baby boom” generation approaches traditional retirement age, the number of older adults in the United States continues to increase exponentially (see Figure 1). According to the Administration on Aging (2016), the number of Americans sixty-five and older reached 46.2 million in 2014, equating to 14.5% of the national population. Projections anticipate further growth in this age division to 82.3 million by 2040, meaning older adults would comprise over a fifth of the populace at 21.7%.



*Figure 1.* Number of Persons 65+: 1900-2060. This figure illustrates past and projected population growth of persons sixty-five and older in the United States. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates and Projections (2014).

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; about 10% of adults over the age of eighty-five, for example, live in nursing homes rather than in a single-family dwelling. 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.

### **American Institutions**

Nursing homes acted as the standard form of long-term care during the second half of the twentieth century. Derived historically from the medical precedence of hospitals, modern facilities were constructed with the central intent of resident health and security, translating, perhaps unintentionally, into complete dependence on staff members in practice. Resident autonomy became obsolete, even for those who were able to manage some instances of self-care.

The concept of assisted living was developed in the 1980s as a response to discouraging interactions with traditional nursing homes. Two individual family experiences, encountered by Paul and Teresa Klaassen in Virginia and Keren Brown Wilson in Oregon, prompted each to pursue an alternative long-term care environment that prioritized “resident independence, choice, and privacy” (Eckert et al., 2009, p. 5). The residential, “normalized setting” was “tailored to individual needs” (Schwarz & Tofle, 1999, p. xviii) through provision of private spaces, inclusion of decor items brought from previous residences, and a limited community of peers. Assisted living, at its core, helps to “recreate a semblance of the home and community experience” while providing services for an older adult’s “functional, health, and social needs” (Cutchin, Chang, & Owen, 2005, p. 7). It is currently one of the most prominent models of long-term care in the United States.

Although assisted living communities are highly prevalent, nationally recognized standards that outline a clear definition of the model's characteristics remain absent. In part due to the number of rigid restrictions emphatic within nursing homes, many perceive similar regulations in assisted living as a threat to the heart of its philosophy. Spatial and program prerequisites, administrative input, and disparate state directives also obscure the potential for general requirements or guidelines, including conditions outlined by the original design. Consequently, facilities have the ability to self-categorize themselves within the sphere of assisted living whether or not the community truly exhibits the goals set forth by Wilson and the Klaassens, further adding to the disarray. Regardless of how this challenge is pursued by lawmakers and practitioners in the future, it is evident that ambiguous interpretation of the model's essence remains a critical obstacle to the future sustenance of its core values (Golant & Hyde, 2008).

## **Purposes**

Eckert et al. (2009) describe assisted living communities as “complex places, made so by the intersection of individual lives, political and economic factors, social and cultural beliefs, and conflicting expectations” (p. 2). My primary intention while executing this research, therefore, was to further understand how residents of one assisted living facility perceived some of these diverse connections within their own community. I was also interested in learning what type of role, if any, the physical environment would contribute to residents' viewpoints and opinions.

## Chapter Two

### Conceptual Context

Maxwell (1996) defined a conceptual framework as the “system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports or informs your research” (p. 25). As the researcher and main instrument of this qualitative study, my personal presumptions, life experiences, and acquired knowledge constantly shaped the form and conclusions of the investigation. Acknowledging my individual positioning will indicate how my personal perspective potentially influenced the final product.

### **Personal Assumptions: Epistemology & Theoretical Perspective**

My epistemological positioning as the researcher, or what an individual “believes about the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge,” significantly impacted the design of the research study and interpretation of data (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). I identified myself in line with constructivist epistemology that “assumes reality to be socially constructed” by individuals, acknowledging and anticipating multiple interpretations of singular events (Merriam, 2009, p. 8).

Based upon the theoretical perspectives that stem from constructivism, I consider myself within interpretivism, defined by Crotty (1998) as the search “for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (p. 67). According to one founder of this perspective, Max Weber, the underlying goal as an interpretivist investigator is to *understand* rather than *explain* a situational context (Crotty, 1998). In this particular endeavor, I hoped to *understand* what individual older

adults found meaningful in one assisted living facility. I did not, however, attempt to *explain* a causal relationship or generalize my findings to every older adult who resides in any care community. As a true interpretivist, I prioritized comprehending distinctive characteristics over the search for consistencies (Crotty, 1998).

### **Experiential Knowledge**

When I was growing up in the 1990s, my relatives owned two local ‘personal care homes,’ a type of long-term care facility often considered within the sphere of assisted living. Many of our family members contributed to routine operations and upkeep; I myself assisted my grandmother with gathering weekly groceries during the summer months. When we were finished storing each item away, my grandmother would insist that we spend the afternoon visiting with residents and checking in with staff members. I spent many warm afternoons in the common spaces on the main level, building relationships with residents and listening to the staff gossip or complain. Many of the specific details of these conversations have escaped my memory, but I do remember there being a significant presence of negativity among the staff and sadness or disappointment among the residents; many expressed that they rarely were in contact with their families, even when relatives lived locally. There were times when I felt guilty about departing at the end of the day, so much so that I accompanied my grandmother on several overnight visits due to my concern and curiosity about residents I had grown close to. Unhappiness and melancholia seemed to be the common theme among community members.

I remember walking through the dark and narrow hallways, tripping on the uneven staircases and wondering when the peeling laminate flooring would be repaired. I can picture the uncomfortable floral furniture in the living room, too cramped to fit every resident interested in watching the evening news, and the crowded front stoop where residents and staff smoked cigarettes. The bland, generic meals and the regimented activity schedule remain familiar, too. To a child, these facilities felt like entirely different worlds, closed off from other people, the local community, and from the simple joys often taken for granted. I felt it was cold and cruel to force human beings into such an environment, and merely for growing old.

These experiences are what ultimately prompted me to select environmental gerontology as the focus of my graduate studies and anticipated research. I wanted to contribute to the conversation of creating more positive, fulfilling environments for older adults to thrive in, no matter their level of physical or cognitive impairment. With this goal, however, accompanies the assumption that long-term care facilities are in significant need of improvement and growth in order to address the present and future needs of their individual residents.

## **Theoretical Literature**

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*, its significance to the

human race, and its relevance to the lives of assisted living residents is a critical foundation to understanding their true experiences.

**The Concept of Home.** The meaning of home has been investigated for decades by researchers of a diverse range of fields, including sociologists, environmental psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers (Leith, 2006). The concept is undoubtedly intricate and multi-layered, but also deeply personal, “dynamic, and context-bound” (Leith, 2006, p. 318). Its significance to individuals “cannot be assumed wholesale because [the meaning they associate with home] inevitably intersect[s] with particular experiences and social relationships” uniquely connected to that person (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226). An individual’s perception of home also evolves throughout the life course; “as people’s circumstances change, the ways in which they experience and conceptualize home change as well” (Leith, 2006, p. 318). Recent studies have continued to explore its construction within specific cultural, societal, or theoretical circumstances (Moore, 2000).

Despite past attempts to clarify or synthesize its core attributes, the concept of home has been notoriously challenging to describe in a single, practical definition due to its “wide set of associations and meanings” (Moore, 2000, p. 208). Moore (2000) captures the struggle when she notes:

In this way, the concept of *home* has to be examined in the terms of its parts as well as a whole, mindful that to focus strongly on one part, it is possible to lose sight of the whole concept itself (p. 208, emphasis in original).

A contributor to the dubiety is use of the word *house* interchangeably with *home* although the two do not always share identical characteristics, further adding to the “conceptual confusion” (Rapoport, 1995, p. 32). Some researchers have attempted to explicate the pair as unique entities, though others, such as Rapoport (1995), have highlighted significant flaws in these undertakings.

***The Essence of Home.*** At the simplest level of recognition, home represents the barrier between the “public sphere” of the outside world and the “private one” belonging to the individual, an area that provides:

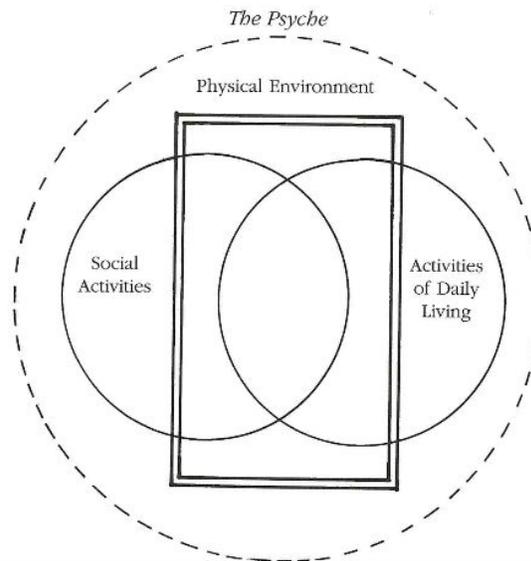
A place of safety in which to reflect, to take shelter; a place to be left in search of sustenance, or in case of need, and then returned to ... A place of relaxation and freedom, of detachment from the community, from the ‘Other.’ It gives a sense of security and protection, especially [for] elderly people, who tend to feel vulnerable in public spaces (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226).

Building upon this foundation, a number of past studies have attempted to further characterize and understand its quintessence in more detail. Chaudhury & Rowles (2005), for example, describe the concept as deeply embedded “in our experience, recollections, imagination, and aspirations” (p. 3). The authors assert its:

... Multiple levels of salience ... in our lives; from its role in facilitating physical and emotional well-being, through its contribution to maintaining the continuity of our self-identity, to resonance in a higher level of self-awareness and comfort that stems from having sought and found our place in the cosmos (Chaudhury & Rowles, 2005, p. 9).

Furthermore, Oswald & Wahl (2005) note that the notion of home, for older adults in particular, is “related to aspects of *physical, social, and personal* bonding, on *behavioral, cognitive* and *emotional* levels” (p. 30, emphasis in original). Home, therefore, is essentially “both an abstraction in people’s minds and a concrete place where they live” (Dobbs, 2003, p. 57).

***Understanding An Individual’s Recognition of Home.*** A person’s perception of home is established upon a foundation of three related concepts in continuous engagement (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Brummett’s (1997) Context of Home Model. This figure exhibits the four underlying concepts of home and how they are positioned against one another.

Brummett (1997) articulates the core of the interconnected phenomena:

A simplified model suggests the concepts of “home” are embodied and realized in an interaction of activities of daily living, social activities, the physical environment, and the psyche, in a relationship where the physical environment

acts as a supportive and interactive stagelike vessel, and all is interpreted according to the state of the psyche (p. 34).

Home, then, is approached as not merely physical space, but also action in “an environment of behavior and activity” (Brummett, 1997, p. 34). While individuals may form their own meanings of home, each composes their perception in the same manner. This conceptual premise fosters the variety of symbolism and affiliations related to home.

Brummett (1997) further supplements three categories of associations or definitions that address the primary symbolic meanings evident throughout the literature: identification, orientation, and qualification. *Identification* considers home as “a symbol of the self,” where one can freely showcase individual characteristics (Brummett, 1997, p. 35). As follows, it designates the ‘message’ individuals wish to convey to others and themselves, which “may increase in agency with age” (Rubenstein & de Medeiros, 2005, p. 59). *Orientation*, on the other hand, perceives home as “a symbol of one’s relationship to the world” and acts as the central location from which to engage with the surrounding environment (Brummett, 1997, p. 35). In this sense, home is the familiar ‘safe space’ where one can retreat from environmental stressors for rest, solitude, and privacy. The third, *qualification*, classifies home as “a symbol of one’s condition” and among more traditional views of safety, security, and shelter (Brummett, 1997, p. 35). Home is a place where an individual can exercise some level of environmental controls, as well as select and maintain their unique lifestyle.

***Meaningful Objects.*** Gubrium (1993) also identifies “personal possessions” as a main contributor to “what home means to people” (p. 55-56). For older adults, the

concept of home is especially “tied to memories and to things” (Doyle, 1992, p. 796). Their belongings represent notable moments from their pasts, shape their individual interpretations of home (Oswald & Wahl, 2005), and contribute to their overall well-being (Sherman & Dacher, 2005). Items may “serve as bridges among life-phases” (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226) and assist with “summing up their lives, linking them to the person they once were” (Twigg, 2006, p. 125).

An individual’s meaningful belongings also exhibit “expressions of the self” (Rubenstein & de Medeiros, 2005, p. 52), therefore classified within Brummett’s (1997) *identification* distinction. Rubenstein & de Medeiros (2005) note:

Through personalization (the projection of one’s self and identity into objects), extension (the conscious use of objects to represent important aspects of the self), and embodiment (a degree of merging between self-representation and object), the individual acts inseparably from objects (p. 57).

Participants in previous exploratory studies have identified several items as personally valuable, such as those associated with hobbies, religious beliefs, and important individuals or events, with photographs being the most commonly mentioned (Sherman & Dacher, 2005). Nevertheless, the type of residence, such as a single-family dwelling or an assisted living facility, influences the “number, types, and the significance of objects reported” (Sherman & Dacher, 2005, p. 63). Jackson’s (1996) work found that disabled older adults recognized cherished items as “symbols of a meaningful life” (Sherman & Dacher, 2005, p. 71). It is now considered “best practice in long-term care”

for residents to bring meaningful objects from their original residences (Sherman & Dacher, 2005, p. 73).

**Theoretical Framework.** Oswald & Wahl (2005) progress further by compiling the work of a number of researchers into a heuristic framework of what home signifies in later life (see Figure 3).

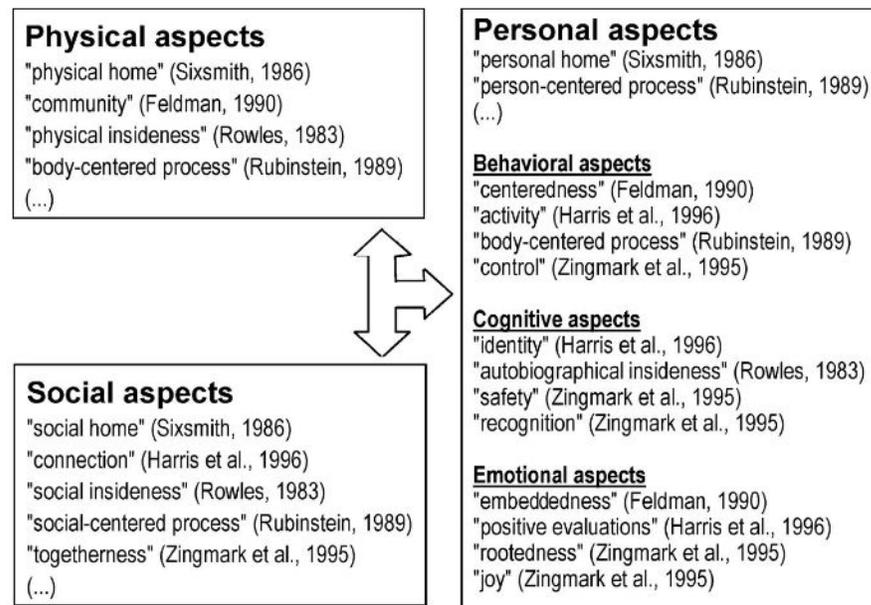


Figure 3. Oswald & Wahl's (2005) Heuristic Framework on Domains of Meaning in Old Age. This figure exhibits the three components of home in later life.

The model was created to “reduce existing conceptual diversity to a useful minimum” for operationalization (Oswald & Wahl, 2005, p. 30) and provide the necessary scaffolding “to better understand older adults’ housing experiences” (Bigonnesse et al., 2014, p. 358). The framework illustrates three critical aspects of home in later life, including physical, social, and individual facets. Physical aspects deal with the somatic, tangible components of the living space, such as the individual’s body-centered processes, the structural

dwelling, and the surrounding community, while social aspects illustrate home as a central space for connection and socialization. Individual aspects encompass what a person introduces to the environment, containing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Due to its comprehensive nature, Oswald & Wahl's (2005) framework was ultimately selected to shape the course of the inquiry.

***Place Attachment.*** Several theories have emerged from previous studies that attempt to provide a basis for further understanding the concept of home. One of the most significant is the Theory of Place Attachment, that examines how relationships form between individuals and physical locations (Moore, 2000). Attachments develop when one experiences an interaction within a space that is “accompanied by significant meaning” (Moore, 2000, p. 318). That space “is [then] transformed from a simple container to a home-place, subjectively lived and imbued with meanings” (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226). The attachment is fostered by the “*use* of an environment, [the] pattern of behavior within a setting,” ultimately providing the appropriate foundation for the development of personal “centering, security, ownership, control, territoriality, comfort, display, and identity” (Bernard & Rowles, 2013, p. 9, emphasis in original).

The personal construction of ‘place’ is an ongoing process, “intrinsically tied to the continuous re-definition and re-construction of space and its meaning” (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226). The more time one spends within a particular location with the continued “accumulation of layer upon layer of experiences” (Rowles, 1983, p. 305), “the stronger the connectedness to that place and the richer the [associated] meaning” (Groger, 1995, p. 141). A place gradually begins to “embody the self” over the course of time as it

becomes associated with the individual's life events and memories (Bernard & Rowles, 2013, p. 10). Rubinstein & Parmelee (1992) argue that attachment bonds are particularly beneficial for the older adult population for three central reasons:

[First,] attachment to key former places is one way of keeping the past alive and thus relates to the later-life tasks of maintaining a sense of continuity, fostering identity, and protecting the self against deleterious changes. Second, attachment to a current place may be a way of strengthening the self ... [and] may act as a buffer, a means of retaining a positive self-image. Third, attachment to a current place may be a way of enacting or representing independence and continued competence (p. 139-140).

Naturally, an individual's residence is a likely candidate for attachment development. For older adults who have lived in the same residence for an extended period, place attachment bonds are well rooted. "Cognitive and emotional aspects of the meaning of home" are now strongly connected to the individual (Oswald & Wahl, 2005, p. 30), with the strength of the attachment "directly proportional to the level of importance that these meanings have in a person's life" (Cristoforetti et al., 2011, p. 226). 'Home' has become what Seamon (1979) describes as a place of subconscious comfort and "taken-for-granted" (p. 70) familiarity (Cutchin et al., 2003, p. S235), a feeling that can be difficult to willingly abandon. Residential attachment is among the motivations that prompt older adults to remain in their original residences as they face the inevitable functional declines of old age, a concept regularly referred to as *aging in place* (Leith, 2006). Needless to say, when individuals must relocate to an assisted living facility,

personal acknowledgement of the new space as 'home' is a strong indicator of individual adjustment (Cutchin et al., 2003).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methods**

The research project was conducted to fulfill university requirements for a graduate degree, though I ultimately selected the focus of the work. Due to my previous exposure to and interest in residents within long-term care communities, I wanted to utilize this opportunity to learn more about how residents perceived an institutionalized environment and what they considered to be valuable within that setting. My background in interior architecture and design further heightened my curiosities, shaping my inquiries to focus on the physical sphere of assisted living in addition to the social context.

### **Research Questions**

This research endeavor was guided by the following research questions:

1. What physical characteristics and/or tangible items are meaningful to assisted living residents?
2. What physical characteristics of the facility contribute to a resident feeling ‘at home?’

### **Research Design**

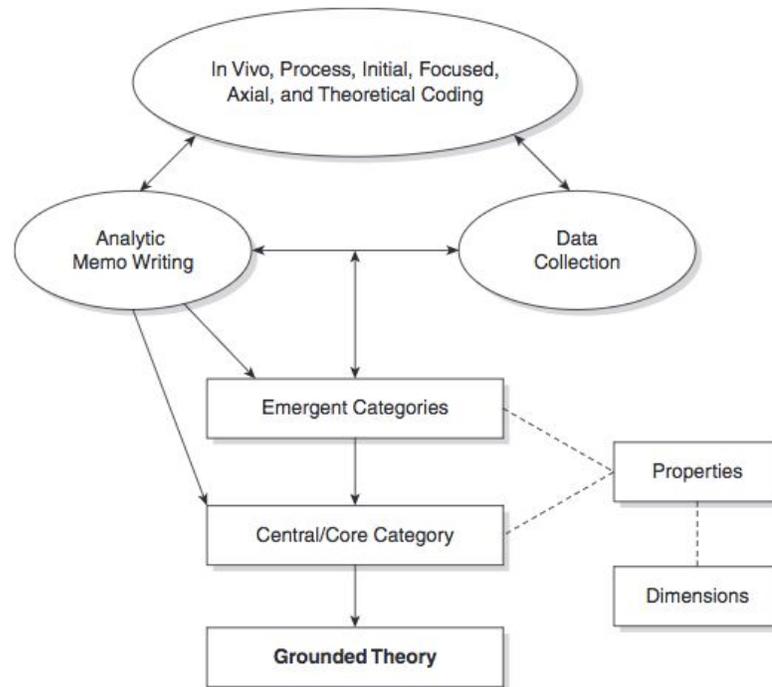
Among the array of research designs commonly implemented in qualitative inquiries, grounded theory was selected for this line of investigation. Established in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory methods outline “systematic, yet flexible guidelines” for qualitative data collection and analysis in order to “construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). Corbin and Strauss (2007)

note “substantive” theory construction as the main goal, meaning that the concepts extracted are related to “specific, everyday world situations” and more useful to professionals in practice (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). Grounded theory methods essentially “strive to derive meaning” (Merriam, 2009, p. 29) so that “we [as investigators] might learn about our research participant’s lives” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). I ultimately elected to adopt these methods because I felt that their core objectives best complemented my own intentions of further understanding what residents considered meaningful.

In this approach, data is obtained through “observations, interactions, and materials that we gather about the topic or setting” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). The information is then examined and organized via the qualitative coding process that uses labels to identify “segments of data that depict what each segment is about” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). Coding provides the necessary groundwork for “making comparisons” between data entities through memo writing, or the recording of “preliminary analytic notes” and impressions (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). The execution of coding and memos generate initial concepts that interpret and sort the data into “tentative analytical categories,” revealing knowledge gaps and additional questions that can be used to guide the next phase of field work (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). Figure 4 exhibits how analytical memos and coding are positioned in the conventional formation of grounded theory.

Additional data is collected, coded, and incorporated into memos, further developing and shaping the previous analytical categories. Incomplete information and queries harvested from this set influence what is pursued in the next data collection juncture. This process, where new data is compared with previously collected sets after

each exposure to the field, is known as the ‘constant comparative method’ and is considered a critical component of grounded theory.



*Figure 4.* Saldana’s (2009) “Classic” Model of Grounded Theory Development. This figure illustrates the process of traditional grounded theory.

It prompts the categories to “become more theoretical” as the cycle goes on “because we engage in successive levels of analysis” until the data is exhausted (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4).

The final result “culminates in a ‘grounded theory,’ or an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4).

## Research Setting

The research was conducted at a Midwestern, faith-oriented assisted living facility that is located in a town significantly influenced by the presence of a public university.

The two-story building is erected within a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) that offers a variety of other housing types, including independent living, short-term rehabilitation stays, and skilled nursing, on the same campus. Assisted living units consist of one or two bedroom apartments within a ‘household block’ of twelve to fourteen residents. Dining options, health care, spiritual services, and a number of social activities are available onsite, along with scheduled trips to local destinations. This community was chosen primarily based upon its proximity to my geographical residence.

**Researcher Challenges.** With the exception of facility staff and visitors, all potential research participants were older adults. Due to my current age, I lack personal experience with late-life aging and relationships with local senior communities; my knowledge was limited to what I had learned through graduate-level coursework and interactions with family members. According to Berger (2015), I approached the situation as an outsider. Without prior understanding of the “unfamiliar,” it could have impacted my ability to develop relevant inquiries, earn the trust of community “gatekeepers,” or identify subdued themes during the coding and analysis phase (Berger, 2015, p. 227-228).

## **Data Collection**

In-depth interviews with six assisted living residents and participant-captured photographs served as the two data collection methods.

Upon receiving approval from the university review board, I contacted the Director of Activities and scheduled an introductory meeting onsite to discuss the general components of the study, address administrative concerns, and tour the facility in person.

The director felt confident that several residents would be interested in participating, even before initial communication with them had occurred. At her suggestion, I wrote a short message ‘advertising’ the study to be printed in the weekly newsletter distributed to all assisted living residents. Curious residents were instructed to contact the director to communicate their interest.

Once the announcement had been published and shared with the community, I arranged a meeting with the director to introduce me to the first pair of interested residents at their personal apartment unit within the facility. During initial contact, I planned to present an overview of the study, review consent forms, and ask the participant to photograph physical items he or she considered meaningful with my digital camera. The photographs would be used as a catalyst for discussion during the interview conducted at the following meeting. However, the first pair of participants preferred to complete all tasks in one session rather than scheduling an additional encounter. I adopted this format for all interviews in order to conform to resident expectations and ensure consistency within the study. As a result of the new design, some participants felt it was unnecessary to take photographs since each item they identified was thoroughly discussed in conversation. Therefore, not all participants are associated with the photographic data.

Interviews transpired in residents’ personal living quarters and were open-ended, as intended. Conducting the conversation within the individual's residence provided the opportunity for me to physically view and, in some cases, touch objects he or she recognized as significant, adding richness to the field data. Participants were asked to

verbally describe their general background, interests, relationships, etc. to further provide context to items they identified as meaningful. With participant permission, conversations were recorded and later transcribed; detailed, handwritten notes were taken during interviews with participants who did not approve audio recording. I am the only individual that collected and transcribed the data present in the study.

Within a period of two months, the process described was completed with five individual participants and one married couple in five visits to the research site. Six in-depth interviews produced thirty-four pages of transcripts and handwritten notes, and eight item photographs. The entire data set was utilized for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

Immediately following each visit to the site, I transcribed the relative interviews into individual Microsoft Word documents to begin the coding process. Digital copies of participant-captured photographs were added to the corresponding interview file to ensure that all data obtained from the same individual would be analyzed concurrently.

**First Cycle Coding.** Saldana (2009) recommends six types of codes when working with grounded theory, divided into first and second cycle methods. I began working with first cycle methods that “fracture or split the data into individually coded segments” to build the groundwork for more advanced categorization (Saldana, 2009, p. 42). Initial coding was primarily utilized, described by Emerson et al. (2011) as line-by-line coding “to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate” (p. 143). Process codes, that apply gerunds,

and in vivo codes, that use the “participant’s own language,” were also integrated into this stage (Saldana, 2009, p. 66).

I reviewed each piece of data carefully on my computer, jotting handwritten notes of potential codes and connecting concepts back to the research questions through memo-writing. I reviewed the data again and compared my momental thoughts to my notes, tweaking the code names until I felt that they were more appropriate for the data set. I assigned each a unique color in Microsoft Word so that I could highlight and color-code specific excerpts. I read the data once again, marking specific sections in the appropriate hue. For photographic data, I listed the assigned codes beneath the image and highlighted them in the corresponding color.

All twenty-four initial, in vivo, and process codes generated in the first cycle are listed in Figure 5. Initial codes are identified in white, in vivo codes in orange, and process codes in purple.

| <b>COMPLETE LIST OF INITIAL CODES</b>     |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Activities Offered at Facility & Routines | Original Residence & “Farm”         |
| Apartment “Architectural” Characteristics | Other Residents                     |
| Concept of Feeling ‘At Home’              | Photographs or “Pictures”           |
| Facility Characteristics (Generic)        | Plants & Greenery Inside Apartments |
| Family & “Relationships with Others”      | Privacy                             |
| Gifts From/Items Associated With Family   | “Spirit of Helping Each Other”      |
| Historic American Events                  | Spirituality                        |
| “Learnin”                                 | Supportive Facility Staff           |
| Making Things For Yourself & Others       | Traveling                           |

|                                    |                                 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Moving Closer to Adult Child       | Using Computer                  |
| Observing Others Outside (Ability) | Volksmarching/Formal Activities |
| “Old Age,” Decline, & Injury       | Watching Television             |

Figure 5. Initial codes formed during the first cycle for photographic data and Interview Sets A, B, and C.

Compiling the full list of initial codes into one table allowed me to better visualize the ‘big picture’ and think more critically about the data set as I engaged in memo writing. Minor tweaks, which are reflected in Figure 5, were made to be more inclusive of information I felt should be considered during the next phase of coding and analysis.

**Second Cycle Coding.** I continued with second cycle methods that compile codes “into categories, prioritize them to develop ‘axis’ categories around which others revolve, and synthesize them to formulate a central or core category” that ultimately leads to the development of grounded theory (Saldana, 2009, p. 42). Focused coding, that groups codes “based on thematic or conceptual similarity,” was initially completed, followed by a hybrid of axial and theoretical coding (Saldana, 2009, p. 151). Axial coding examines how “categories and subcategories relate” to one another, while theoretical coding works to identify the “central/core category” that indicates the “theme of the research” (Saldana, 2009, p. 151).

Keeping the research questions in mind, I initiated focused coding to organize the existing codes into five broader, conceptual categories (see Figures 6, 7, 8, 9, & 10): facility characteristics, individual characteristics, individual values, memories, and personal hobbies that were not coordinated by the facility. Furthermore, I created individual documents for each category in Microsoft Word and copied the corresponding

data into the appropriate digital file. Reorganizing the material in this way simplified the process of making comparisons across categories during the next coding phase and paralleled analytical memo production.

| <b>CATEGORY A: FACILITY CHARACTERISTICS</b> |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Activities Offered At Facility & Routines   | Plants & Greenery Inside Apartments |
| Apartment Architectural Characteristics     | Privacy                             |
| Facility Characteristics (Generic)          | “Spirit of Helping Each Other”      |
| Observing Others Outside (Ability)          | Supportive Facility Staff           |
| Other Residents                             |                                     |

Figure 6. Category A: Facility Characteristics.

| <b>CATEGORY B: INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS</b> |                              |
|---|------------------------------|
| Concept of Feeling ‘At Home’                  | “Old Age,” Decline, & Injury |
| Moving Closer to Adult Child                  |                              |

Figure 7. Category B: Individual Characteristics.

| <b>CATEGORY C: INDIVIDUAL VALUES</b>    |              |
|---|--------------|
| Family & “Relationships with Others”    | “Learnin”    |
| Gifts From/Items Associated With Family | Spirituality |

Figure 8. Category C: Individual Values.

| <b>CATEGORY D: MEMORIES</b> |                           |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Former Activities           | Photographs or “Pictures” |
| Historic American Events    | Traveling                 |

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Original Residence & “Farm” |  |
|-----------------------------|--|

Figure 9. Category D: Memories.

| <b>CATEGORY E: PERSONAL HOBBIES (NOT COORDINATED BY FACILITY)</b> |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| Making Things For Yourself & Others                               | Watching Television |
| Using Computer  |                     |

Figure 10. Category E: Personal Hobbies (Not Coordinated by Facility).

I then pursued a combination of axial and theoretical coding using the previously constructed group of excerpts. Through consideration of ideas in memo writing, I found that several of the categories that previously emerged in focused coding seemed interconnected. I began rearranging and condensing the existing categories through axial concept mapping, recognizing these categories as initial themes. I also recorded my initial impressions of how each theme related to its counterparts in a separate analytical memo.

The group of excerpts were reviewed a second time and simultaneously compared to the diagram. Supplementary details were added that I felt were important inclusions, such as additional subcategories, minor diction changes, and a clearer representation of described relationships. After multiple iterations, I felt that the concept map illustrated the nature of the relationships present between themes, revealing a preliminary theory. Chapter four explores the finalized themes and resulting theory in detail.

## Validity

Tracy (2010) defines eight ‘big tent’ criteria for determining quality qualitative research: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical concerns, and meaningful coherence. When pursuing the research endeavor, I regarded these standards as guidelines for execution to ensure a valid result.

As the number of older adults in the United States continues to climb and represent a higher percentage of the general population, the gerontological focus of the study is a relevant and *worthy topic*. Longer overall life expectancies provide further opportunity for institutionalized living arrangements since the likelihood of entering such a community increases with age (Administration on Aging, 2016). Older adults also engage most often with their residential environment (Oswald & Wahl, 2005), making their living quarters a prime location for developing attachment and meaning. The residential nature of the research setting, therefore, provides the opportunity for the study to be classified as a *significant contribution*.

*Rich rigor* was pursued by showing cited evidence of the theoretical underpinnings and positioning of the research (see Chapter 2), as well as the influence of works written by peer-reviewed authors on the study design, data collection, and analysis techniques (Merriam, 2009, Saldana, 2009). The self-reflexivity and transparency evident in the second chapter also provides the criteria to meet *sincerity* by acknowledging the individual convictions that I introduced to the inquiry as the sole researcher.

*Ethical concerns* were introduced in tandem with data collection methods.

Potential risks of participation in the study included personal discomfort, embarrassment,

or impact on reputations within the community, but no physical threats. In order to actively protect privacy and confidentiality, I alone documented, transcribed, and organized, and analyzed interview recordings. As an additional precaution, participants were referred to by pseudonyms during data collection and by gender pronouns throughout this document. Audio recordings and photographs obtained from interviews will be stored for seven years on a password protected flash drive that only I may access; tangible records will either be shredded and destroyed or kept in a locked file cabinet to which I have the singular key.

The discussion of analysis in the third chapter and the findings manifested in the next illustrates *credibility* through detailed descriptions, participants' unique diction, and photography to showcase what concepts were uncovered throughout the course of interviews. *Resonance* was likewise achieved by means of highlighting relevant concepts that I felt may be transferrable, or have the "potential to be valuable across a variety of contexts or situations" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Finally, the inclusion of relevant literature excerpts throughout the fourth chapter demonstrated *meaningful coherence* by linking the themes of the study to what was outlined in the review of literature.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

Through the implementation of grounded theory methods, two overall themes emerged during the analysis of collected data: facility characteristics and individual characteristics. This chapter explores the two themes and their corresponding sub-themes in more detail, as well as their connections to one another and the existing literature.

#### **Theme: Facility Characteristics**

The ‘facility characteristics’ theme considers the research site’s definitive attributes and social climate, as described by participants and their idiosyncratic perspectives. It is comprised of a trio of sub-themes referred to in this report as ‘personal apartment,’ ‘facility culture and social interactions,’ and ‘scheduled activities.’

Concerning the overall facility, many interviewees preferred that the assisted living building was located within a campus community that provided “several options” for long-term care. One participant explained that “if you need more help, [typically] you have to leave” for another facility, prompting an additional transition to cope with during a health-related decline. The location of the site within a CCRC helped to limit her anxiety about a potential change of residence. The added level of security helped her to feel that “this [place] is home now.”

**Personal Apartment.** Participants frequently referred to somatic facets of their one or two-bedroom apartments, classified within the physical aspects of Oswald & Wahl’s (2005) framework. Several commented approvingly on the “open spaces”

provided in the typical floor plan design, combining the kitchen, dining, and living areas into one substantial entity. Another agreed, explaining that rooms needed to be “big enough [to accommodate] furniture” and sizable belongings that were brought from the previous residence, a common practice in assisted living that helps to “recreate a semblance of home” (Cutchin, Chang, & Owen, 2005, p. 7) and contributes to residents’ overall well-being (Sherman & Dacher, 2005). One female respondent actually preferred the “big” closet in her apartment to the unit at her original residence because she could “keep [more] clothes in it.” Others enjoyed having authority over their personal thermostat controls, another type of assisted living inclusion that encourages a residential, “normalized setting” (Schwarz & Tofle, 1999, p. xviii), and the deep window sill that allocated a specific “place for flowers” and plants to be displayed and easily tended.

Some also alluded to what could be observed from their apartment windows. One woman liked to see the “sunlight” and “what’s pretty” from the view in her living room. A second mentioned the seasonal foliage that she could see from her armchair and expressed concern about its potential removal, due to rumors in her ‘neighborhood block’ that the administration may erect an additional building on the site in question. Construction and renovation projects were prominent throughout the campus, with supplementary ventures already publicly announced. I specifically inquired how she felt about the sights and sounds of the constant construction. Below is an excerpt from the field notes that incorporates her response, with my initial thoughts in *italics*:

She said that she “enjoyed seeing and hearing” it, that it was fun to watch the process and “supervise” the progress the workers made. *I was surprised to hear*

*her say this. All the older adults in my life have always complained about the disruption under similar circumstances.* When I spoke with the Director of Activities in the weeks prior to this conversation, she confirmed how residents seemed to like watching and “supervising” the construction and/or remodeling of neighboring buildings on campus. She described residents lining seats and wheelchairs along the window facing the construction site and watching the crews work for hours in the afternoons. I do not know if [the participant I spoke with] was among those observed.

Though I anticipated an alternative reaction due to my past encounters with older adults, it seems that a number of residents took pleasure in observing the daily construction tasks and continued expansion. Perhaps the presence of construction provided further resemblance of a ‘normal’ environment (Schwarz & Tofle, 1999) and the typical “community experience” (Cutchin, Chang, & Owen, 2005, p. 7) that would likely occur in a residential setting outside of an institution. In this way, the construction is not only advantageous for future growth, but also because it provides an additional benefit for those currently residing at the facility.

**Facility Culture & Social Interactions.** Social exchanges and relationships within the communal environment, categorized under social aspects in Oswald & Wahl’s (2005) framework, were noted by nearly every participant during the interview phase. Interactions with staff members, for instance, were described by participants using positive and altruistic terminology. One participant expressed the following:

Having a strong “support system” of “pleasant and helpful staff” was important to her. She was especially happy to have “help with” monitoring her medications.

Her nurse took care of calling in prescription refills and making sure she was taking a particular pill that was small and, therefore, difficult for her to see. She also appreciated having “nice,” “knowledgeable,” and “caring” maintenance staff throughout the campus that were “wonderful” and always quick to respond when she needed help hanging artwork, photographs, etc.

Another woman recalled an evening meal where a worker volunteered to “grind up” the meat for her when he noticed she was having trouble chewing it. A third interviewee also described how “great” and accommodating the campus shuttle drivers were when she had forgotten to reserve herself a seat on the correct vehicle to attend a doctor’s appointment.

Respondents further discussed fellow assisted living residents using a variety of associations. While one participant seemed uninterested in connecting with others who he considered to be “a little weird,” several described a “spirit of helping each other” and community among their collective ‘household block.’

A resident who lives down the hall delivers the newspaper each morning, while another “delivers the mail to [the] door” twice per day. A couple on the floor below takes care of recycling in the entire building. Residents who pass on often donate their furniture to the facility, which is stored in the attic. Current residents who are in need of furniture can purchase items “for cheap” from this area to furnish their apartments.

Oswald & Wahl (2005) note that the concept of home for older adults is tied to social “bonding,” meaning that these instances of solidarity within the community likely contribute to residents’ recognition of the facility as home. In addition, positive

interactions with collective peers foster the opportunity for meaningful connections, a key ingredient in developing place attachment bonds (Bernard & Rowles, 2013).

Moreover, a male participant vocalized his personal feelings about living adjacent to residents who required more assistance from staff to execute their daily routines. The following is a relevant excerpt of our conversation from the field notes, with my initial thoughts illustrated in *italics*:

All but he and one of the residents in his 'household' have walkers or wheelchairs to get around the facility. Seeing them around the building "is a bit of a downer and a turn-off," especially at meal times. "Bless their hearts." *I hadn't really considered this scenario before, but it must feel very frustrating for him to be surrounded by people with mobility issues when he has none. Perhaps he is worried about becoming that way in the future and seeing his co-residents is a constant reminder of this?* He felt "lucky" that he was still "up and moving around" when so many of the other residents experienced mobility issues.

I had not previously encountered similar insights, neither in the literature or through engagement with other participants. While the excerpt above is the only one of its kind in the data set, it suggests that future research may be needed to better understand how relationships develop between assisted living residents with differing levels of impairment and ability.

**Scheduled Activities.** Nearly all six respondents touched on activities or social gatherings that were coordinated and rendered by the facility, organized within the personal aspects division of Oswald & Wahl's (2005) framework. One man looked forward to seasonal events, such as the Oktoberfest celebration, which "keeps me active

and gives me something to do.” Others were involved in weekly classes with instructors from the local community. A female respondent, for example, liked to “participate in all of ‘em’ [exercise classes]” that utilized elastic bands to stretch a variety of muscle groups. The following excerpt highlights another’s treasured activity:

Then we have a writing class, which I have been going to a few times a week for years. What I write about is my [original] home and stories from my childhood and growing up. *Staff members assembled all of her stories together in a ‘book’ for the facility’s library.* [My daughters] just encourage me to keep on [writing] because they like to read it. I wouldn’t know how to go about writing fiction.

Courses and gatherings offered within the community served as anchors for residents’ daily “patterns of behavior,” providing the opportunity for place attachment bonds to grow and develop within the institutional environment (Bernard & Rowles, 2013, p. 9).

Two participants also mentioned declining to attend scheduled events. One explained that while she was interested in a number of activities offered by the facility, she often “did not feel well enough to attend.” I had not previously connected a resident’s overall health status with their level of participation in scheduled activities on campus. I wondered how aware staff members were of this possibility and if there was anything additional that could be implemented to be more inclusive of residents in poorer health.

## **Theme: Individual Characteristics**

The ‘individual characteristics’ theme addressed the unique components participants introduced into the institutional environment that they perceived as meaningful, including their personal ‘values,’ ‘memories,’ and ‘hobbies.’ All three sub-themes are indicative of personal aspects under Oswald & Wahl’s (2005) framework.

**Values.** Discussions associated with individual values were among the richest data collected, with kin being the most frequently pinpointed. As reflected in Sherman & Dacher’s (2005) work, many specifically referred to relatives as one of the most important parts of their lives, with some emphasizing their delight when family members came to visit at the facility. In turn, a female respondent appreciated that the campus community openly welcomed and accommodated visitors. The following excerpt from the field notes, with my initial impressions in *italics*, best illustrates her sentiments:

Friends and family were permitted to visit “whenever,” which “means a lot” to her. Each resident was permitted up to three guests at a time for an unlimited period. *I did not realize they had guest limits in assisted living, but I suppose that it makes sense. That would be frustrating for those who had a lot of family members, siblings, etc. that may want to visit as a group.* There were also “guest housing options,” where residents could reserve two of the empty houses/duplexes (classified in independent living) for family members to stay in. *Interesting idea; I have never heard of this practice before, but it makes so much sense. I wonder if family members have to pay to stay here or if it is included in the fee.* This was especially important to [the participant] because one of her adult children lived ten hours away; it was much more convenient for her daughter to visit when she could stay overnight within the same campus. [The participant]

further explained that having visitors stay in the same place [as her] rather than at a motel felt “so much more like home.”

Others breached the topic by introducing physical items that represented the significance of the familial relationship, also demonstrated in Sherman & Dacher’s (2005) findings. One participant, for example, shared her paternal Irish lineage while gesturing to her late father’s shrieve that hung on the living room wall. A second, pointing to a dresser and headboard, explained that her furniture was part of the same set “that my children grew up with.” Her adult children passed it between “all the grandchildren” throughout the years until “it came [back] to me.” Another showed a handmade doll, blanket, and two matching pillows that her daughter had sewn especially for her to cuddle with “when I nap.”

While the majority of participants largely considered moving to the facility based upon its geographic proximity to their previous residences, two of the respondents had migrated from other states to live closer to an adult child. One woman accepted the transition, explaining that her daughter had “waited and kept looking for a place for me here [in this area]” that they both could appreciate. The additional planning seemed to be worthwhile, for she has lived in the same assisted living community for more than eight years. Groger (1995) indicated that the more time spent within the same location, “the stronger” the attachment bond and the “richer the [associated] meaning” of the place (p. 141). Due to the length of her residency and her positive impression of the facility, it is therefore likely that this participant has already begun the continuous process of ‘place’ construction and has reached the understanding of the facility as ‘home.’

Another respondent, however, shared an alternative opinion, saying that he still missed his “old place” and had only moved to assisted living two years ago because his adult son “wanted me to.” Cutchin et al. (2003) explained that acknowledgement of the facility as ‘home’ was a strong indicator of individual adjustment to the institutional environment. Because the respondent referred to his previous residence as ‘home’ rather than the research site, it seems that he is not yet accustomed to institutional living and may not have developed substantial attachment bonds to his new place of residence.

Spirituality and religion were also valued as in Sherman & Dacher’s (2005) study, conveyed through both individual interviews and participant-captured photography. A male respondent, for instance, vocalized that the “Lord God Jesus Christ” was the most meaningful in his life, further emphasized by the artwork in his apartment (see Figure 11). Another liked the “lovely [community] pastor” and the proximity of church services to her apartment; she lived so close to the worship center that she could hear the choir singing and the piano playing by merely opening her front door. Others displayed traditional crosses or religious imagery throughout their apartments.



*Figure 11.* Religious artwork in one participant’s apartment.

Despite the research site's faith-oriented nature, less than half of participants mentioned religion during interview conversations. I had anticipated that faith would be an important component of selecting this particular assisted living facility for residence, since its religious affiliation was embedded within the communal mission statement. However, according to the majority of residents who participated in this study, it seems to be more of an additional benefit rather than a critical offering.

**Memories.** Physical items that recalled participants' definitive memories were referenced during conversation, representing cherished moments from their pasts and shaping their individual understandings of 'home' (Oswald & Wahl, 2005). 'Home' for older adults is especially "tied to memories and to things" (Doyle, 1992, p. 796), making personal belongings a pivotal contributor to "what home means" for them (Gubrium, 1993, p. 55-56).

The bulk of objects identified were framed photographs, which mirrors the findings in Sherman & Dacher's (2005) line of inquiry. Several respondents shared or called attention to images of their parents, siblings, spouses, children, and grandchildren, with many escorting me throughout their apartments to point out and describe each photograph displayed in more detail. A number of the images were also related to milestone events, such as graduations and marriages. One woman, for example, exhibited a large print of her and her departed husband on their fiftieth wedding anniversary directly above her bed. Another had grouped handwritten anniversary cards from her husband and birthday sentiments from her adult daughter into two separate oval frames.

A single participant specifically showcased photographs and paintings of her rural hometown and farm, where she had lived the majority of her life, raised her children, and likely developed a strong place attachment bond. She recalled it being divided into two sections of over two hundred acres each, split by a road that shared her surname. Since moving to assisted living, a “trusted” individual now “looks after” and maintains the land, though her adult children do “check up on it” frequently. Evident in the vast number of corresponding images, she vocalized how much she missed her farm and living in the countryside, especially since she has always lived in a rural location. Although the facility is not located directly within an agricultural community, I imagine that she may have partially preferred the research site to other assisted living facilities due to its close proximity to the country.

Additional respondents highlighted objects that represented pastimes they previously enjoyed, items that Jackson (1996) recognized as “symbols of a meaningful life” (Sherman & Dacher, 2005, p. 71). One woman revealed she had been an avid volksmarcher, participating in over 800 events in all fifty states. Despite the related certificates and maps that decorated her apartment walls, they remained unmentioned as she chose to focus on a white, zip up jacket that was decorated with “maps of the world” and international flags on the torso. In her interview, she divulged that the item was made from newspaper rather than fabric:

Well, anyway, when I was going to college here, we had a football team, and everybody that waited on the line to get in, they were cold. And so they put newspapers on them. And that’s the only thing. It didn’t matter how much wool they put on or anything. They were warmer just with newspaper . . . Anyway, and

so the manufacturer of, well anyway, this man decided to make clothing on it, out of newspapers. You know, make it into clothing. And he only made it for football, for the players to sit in and then they wouldn't be freezing outside because a lot of them never get in [on the field to play.] They just sit on the bench. But he happened to be a volksmarcher. And so, he made 'em for us and we're the only ones who had [that kind of] clothing, if you were a volksmarcher.

She further explained that it was the only item she needed be comfortable in cold temperatures, that the jacket “[was] that warm.”

Another interviewee discussed her passion for international travel, referring to a map with color-coded push pins that hung in her living room (see Figure 12) and miscellaneous items, such as a jewelry holder, that she had acquired overseas. After



*Figure 12.* A map of the world displayed in one participant's apartment.

her daughters had graduated from college and her husband passed away, she “decided that I was gonna see the world” and start “spending money on me.” She recalled her first experience abroad during our conversation:

Somebody came to [my] garden club and they wanted somebody to go overseas [to Thailand] and show the people, the women, that they can, there's other things. [That] you can have a business and everything, because over there, the men all sit and watch the women work. I mean, if you know anything about Thailand, it's the way it was. And it, [if] I hadn't just bought out here, I would be living in Thailand. I love it. It's the smile on the people's face because they know in the next life that they're gonna come back better. That's the way they believe.

Upon returning from her initial voyage, she vowed not to visit the same country again until she had experienced all seven continents. She reached her goal in less than five years when she began traveling at least three times annually for month-long intervals. Cruises that made stops in multiple countries then became her favorite mode of transportation, especially as she aged and began having challenges with mobility.

Among the participants I interviewed, I felt the most genuine connection to the respondent who identified traveling as meaningful. Although I have not visited nearly as many countries or continents as she, experiencing international cultures is one of the things that nourishes my heart and soul and shapes my perspective of the world. We were able to relate to one another on a higher level while sharing specific stories and laughing together about trying certain foods. I could not agree with her more when she said, "I'm a different person when I talk about this."

**Hobbies.** A number of individual hobbies and recreational activities that were not coordinated by the facility were determined relevant, also present in Sherman & Dacher's (2005) work. Several participants, for example, mentioned watching television "programs" or "good shows" in their apartment living rooms. In her interview, one

woman described why she continuously watched reports from multiple news outlets about the most recent presidential and congressional elections:

[People] asked me why did I watch it so much? And I said, “Well, I was learnin’.” [They would ask] “How could you learn on those programs about the senators?” I thought that there was [only] one state with several representatives.

She now understood how senators and representatives were elected to the federal legislature. The consistent media coverage of the elections provided an opportunity to learn more about the national government, which greatly interested her. Since she had been a child, she had “loved to go to school” and considered continued education as an important part of her life; she ultimately agreed to participate in this study because she liked that I was furthering my education in graduate school.

Another interviewee enjoyed making crafts that utilized both new supplies and items she found in her apartment. She demonstrated how she created bookmarks from the corners of envelopes that were sent along with unsolicited mail, sculpted her own jewelry, and described her method of folding plastic bags “up like a flag” to simplify storage and reuse. In addition, her daughter had given her a box of plastic frame key chains that she was in the process of embellishing for “each one of our family” to identify individual luggage pieces during future holiday gatherings and reunions (see Figure 13).

The project she discussed at length involved her making “stationary out of live flowers” and shelf paper using a technique she had been doing for almost twenty years (see Figure 13). She frequently preserved the flowers that she found growing in the front



*Figure 13.* A group of keychains and stationary crafted by one participant.

of her building or that she received in floral arrangements. She outlined the general phases of her routine during her interview:

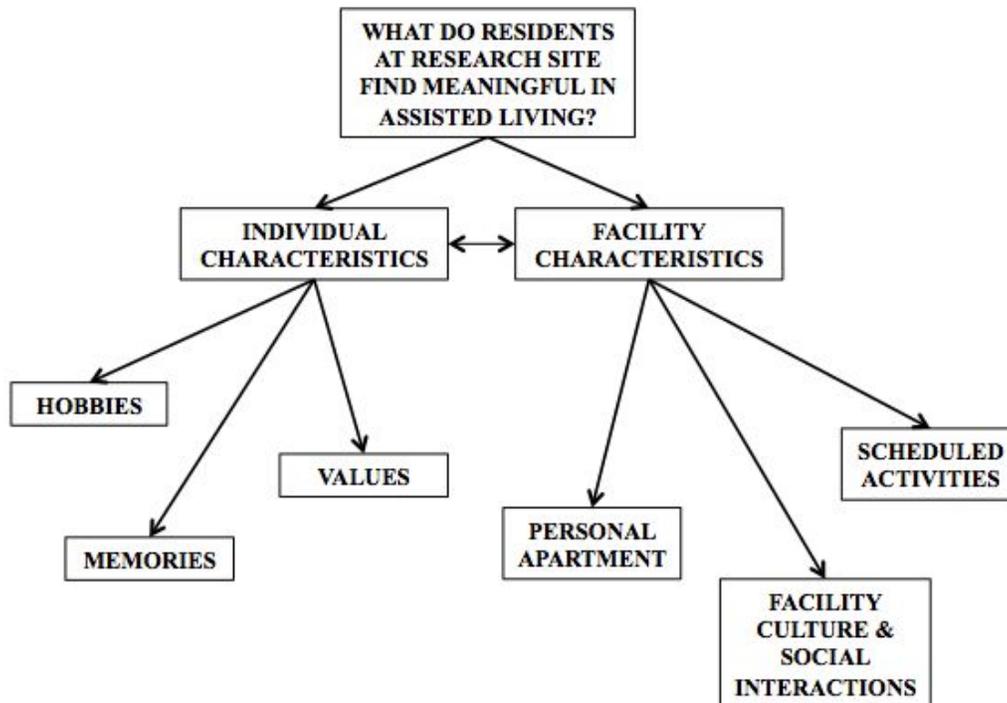
And see, all you do is lay [the flower] down with Elmer's glue. If you can, you take a pen and put it down [to flatten it] and then put it on [the paper] and go off to lunch. I'd fix about a dozen of them and then I'd come up to lunch. See these [heavier bulbs]? This doesn't work [because they don't smooth out], you better have 'em flat. I think that's kinda pretty.

She would then use the completed pieces as bookmarks or to adorn handmade greeting cards and gift wrap. I had learned a similar approach as a child from my maternal grandmother when we would make crafts together on my summer vacation. I shared

some of these memories with the participant, who relayed that she had also taught the children at her church and her own grandchildren how to execute her method.

### **Preliminary Theory**

Upon completion of the data collection and analysis phase, I created a concept map that visually illustrated the two themes and their subcomponents as part of the preliminary theory-building process (see Figure 14).



*Figure 14.* This figure illustrates the two themes that emerged from the study.

Utilizing the findings of the study as demonstrated by the concept map, I propose the following exploratory theory that answers the research questions:

Assisted living residents shape their individual perceptions of ‘home’ and find personal meaning in their understanding of:

1. *Facility Characteristics*: The definitive physical attributes and social sphere of their particular institutional environment, including, but not limited to, the design of their private living space, opportunities for authentic social engagement, and availability of scheduled activities.
2. *Individual Characteristics*: The physical representation of attributes that the resident introduces into their particular institutional environment, including, but not limited to, objects indicating their personal values, cherished memories, and hobbies (whether they continue to pursue them or not as an older adult.)

The theory correlates with Oswald & Wahl’s (2005) comprehensive framework of what ‘home’ signifies in later life, the guiding theoretical substrate of the study. *Facility characteristics* would fall among the the framework’s physical and social aspects, while *individual characteristics* are indicative of personal aspects.

Though the scope of this study was minimal, the resulting 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.’

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This endeavor explored what physical attributes and tangible items that assisted living residents at the research site determined to be personally meaningful and emblematic of their concept of ‘home.’ The interview transcripts and photographic data 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.

The resulting theoretical framework could ultimately be incorporated into future operationalization efforts of the concept of ‘home’ or additional research inquiries that strive for a deeper understanding of its unique construction in assisted living. In line with my intentions, either avenue would contribute to the dialogue of fostering positive, fulfilling environments that allow older adults to continue ‘writing their own life story,’ and “figure out how to sustain the connections and joys that most mattered to [them]” (Gawande, 2014, p. 126).

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