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Feature Article

Is the experience of meaningful activities understood in nursing homes? A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Lack of occupation can lead to boredom, apathy, social exclusion and solitude. Occupation should incorporate meaningful activities. The aim of this study is to describe how Spanish Nursing Home residents experienced and made sense of meaningful activities. A qualitative phenomenological approach was followed. Data were collected over an 18-month period between 2012 and 2014. Purposeful sampling was conducted with Spanish residents in nursing homes in Madrid. Data were collected using unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using the Giorgi proposal. Thirty-eight residents (20 female and 18 male) participated. Three main themes describing the significance of meaningful activity in nursing homes emerged from the data: Feeling the passage of time, Seeking an occupation, and Living with restrictions. Nursing homes should strive to develop diverse and meaningful activity programs for residents in order to occupy their time and provide them with a greater sense of purpose.

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Introduction

The nursing home (NH) is the residents' home and place to live as well as being their social environment and the place where they receive necessary care.¹ The recognition of the diversity of the residents' needs, such as their activities and how they spend their time within the NH, adds complexity to the issue of their care.

Occupation has been described as "involvement in life in a way that is personally significant" and "that which we seize for our own personal possession, and which engages our time, attention and environment."² Occupation should incorporate meaningful activities; these can be defined as enjoyable activities that engage the resident to the extent that they improve either their emotional

wellbeing, cognitive status, or their physical function.³ The presence of meaningful activities is a quality indicator for NHs.^{4,5}

Lack of occupation can lead to boredom, apathy, disruptive behavior, lack of confidence, social exclusion and solitude.² However, previous studies have demonstrated that residents spend less than 13% of their time performing meaningful activities,^{5,6} and are inactive,⁷ bored and alone for a large part of the time.⁸ Nursing homes are characterized by a rapid and long-standing reduction in choices regarding meaningful occupational as well as decreased autonomy. Residents tend to find meaning in activities that address psychological and social needs, whereas the staff tends to give importance to activities that exercise physical abilities.³

Published research examining the meaning of activities in NH residents has commonly focused on residents with dementia.² However, there is far less qualitative research examining meaningful activities in residents without dementia. The aim of the present study was to describe how Nursing Home residents experienced and made sense of meaningful activities.

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Material and methods

Design

A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted,⁹ in order to analyze the experience of NH residents regarding meaningful activities. Qualitative phenomenological research is designed to explore the meaning of a phenomena, through the specific human experience, via rich descriptions in order to understand what it means to be in that life-world.¹⁰ The lived experience is based on exploring the subjective reflection of human beings when taking part in events in a specific geographical, social and cultural environment.¹¹

Setting/sample

The researchers accessed the list of NHs for dependent people published by the Community of Madrid (<http://goo.gl/z9d0q5>), and contacted the 22 NHs present in the municipalities of the Southern Madrid area (Mostoles, Alcorcon, Fuenlabrada, Getafe, Parla, Leganes), offering them the possibility of taking part in the study. Of these, only 7 NHs accepted to participate. We included purposeful sampling to gather information from the residents themselves.¹² Contact was made with 51 residents, however only 45 residents accepted to participate in the study. The reasons for not participating were either health-related (2 residents) or due to a lack of interest in the study (4 residents). Sampling was pursued until the researcher achieved information redundancy, at which point no new information emerged from the data analysis.¹³

Inclusion criteria

The study included nursing home residents from Madrid (Spain), age 60 or older, having a functional impairment (Barthel index <90), with no cognitive impairments, and who were able to verbally communicate in Spanish.

Exclusion criteria

Residents who only attended the NH during the day (i.e. those who slept in their homes), residents without functional decline (Barthel index >90), residents with cognitive decline or psychiatric disorders producing disorders of consciousness and/or of cognitive capacity, and those who were unable to verbally communicate in Spanish.

Once the NH accepted to participate in the study, the manager of the home elaborated a list of potential residents without cognitive decline for recruitment. Thereafter, the researchers confirmed that these participants met the inclusion criteria for the study. Finally, the Nurse Manager of each NH facilitated the initial contact between researchers and residents. During the first face-to-face contact, researchers explained the purpose of the study. Afterward, a 2-week period was granted for residents to decide whether or not they wished to participate. During the second face-to-face contact, those who wished to participate in the study were asked to provide informed consent and permission to tape the interviews. Thereafter, data were collected and the interview was completed.

In Spain, NHs are one of the main social care resources available for older people.¹⁴ Admissions are usually related to a need for long-term care, caregiver burnout and/or the limitation or absence of financial resources.¹⁵ The typical NH staff includes physicians, nurses, nursing assistants, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, nursing managers, and kitchen, laundry and cleaning services.¹⁴ Among other objectives, NHs in Spain aim to provide a pleasant environment and a safe place to live, enhance the capabilities of the residents, prevent disability and loneliness, and promote an environment where the resident is able

to live a life with respect, dignity and autonomy.¹⁶ The Spanish Society of Geriatrics and Gerontology Nursing has included “the application of nursing care oriented to stimulate the autonomy of the residents” within the competencies assigned to nurses present in NHs.¹⁷ The number of beds at each institution varied from 110 to 200. The stay in the NH could be either on a permanent or temporary basis, with temporary stays generally lasting for 3 months. Of the 38 residents who participated in the study, 34 were permanent residents.

Data collection

Data were collected over an 18 month period between 2012 and 2014.

The first stage of data collection consisted of unstructured interviews, using the open question¹⁸: “What is your experience with meaningful activity in Nursing Homes?” After the performance of unstructured interviews, new areas of interest appeared, which required further study. Thus, it was necessary to include a second stage of data collection. The researchers decided to include new residents in order to avoid conditioning or influencing the interviews. The second stage consisted of semi-structured interviews based on a questions guide, in order to obtain information regarding specific topics of interest.¹⁹ The questions guide was developed based on accounts obtained from residents. The questions were direct, yet general enough to allow residents to share their own experience (Table 1 presents the semi-structured interview guide used in the study).

During both stages, researcher field notes and personal letters provided by participants were collected.¹⁰ All residents participating in the study were asked to write personal letters, which were part of the analyzed data. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim and were limited to 30–60 min to avoid residents becoming fatigued. A total of 48 interviews were undertaken. The interviews produced recordings amounting to 43.52 h. All interviews were held at the nursing home in the resident's room. Thirteen of the residents were interviewed twice. For 8 of these cases, a repeat interview was necessary because of interruptions by visiting relatives, for another 3, the first interview

Table 1
Semistructured interview guide.

Research topics	Questions asked
Rules	How do rules affect your performance of meaningful activities in the nursing home?
Daily nurse routines	Regarding timetable, activities, etc. How do the nurse's activities affect your meaningful activities? And their work routines?
Use of time	How do you organize your day-to-day life within the nursing home? What do you consider to be the most relevant aspect?
Meaningful activities associated with functional limitations.	Do you think that having difficulties or needing help to perform Activities of Daily Living can somehow become a barrier to having meaningful activities?
Relation with the nurses and nursing home staff.	Do you think that having a greater relation with the nurses can be influential in being able to have or develop a significant occupation for yourself?
Orientation of the activities within the nursing home	Do you think that the activities programmed by the nurses cover the needs of all the residents?

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