



Becoming at home in residential homes for older people: a material culture perspective

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Background

Residential homes for older people invite potential residents to bring possessions from their previous home, so that their room will be familiar and comforting to them. Previous research has focused on how personal belongings can help residents make 'successful transitions' to residential accommodation, and help them 'maintain' a sense of home. I conducted ethnographic research in a residential home for older people to see how material culture influenced residents' sense of 'being at home'.

Becoming at home in their rooms

Residents developed a sense of home through interacting with their belongings in everyday practices. For instance through cleaning, tidying, decorating, and hosting visitors, residents turned the spaces of the room into places of home. Mundane items such as cleaning products were kept next to more cherished possessions such as photographs and ornaments.

Photograph 1: Polly's dust buster placed next to other personal belongings



Developing and maintaining relationships

Family photographs and other possessions brought from previous homes reflected the importance of existing relationships. However new relationships were also formed within the residential home. Residents exchanged gifts, and they also received presents from staff members. For instance, one care assistant contributed a fridge magnet to a resident's collection.

Photograph 2: Susan's fridge magnet collection



Loss and the limitations of personal belongings

For residents who felt loss through bereavement or the experience of leaving their home, personal possessions were not necessarily comforting, but reminded them of all they had lost. Irene resisted bringing things from her previous house because she rejected the residential accommodation as her home. Instead she used the residential home's own furniture.

Photograph 3: Irene's room with basic furniture



Conclusion

It is too simplistic to assume that residents can develop a sense of home just by taking in possessions from their previous home. Residents also 'become at home' through actively engaging with material culture in everyday practices and using objects to develop new relationships. For some residents possessions can be a comfort, but for others they are anachronistic and symbols of loss.