

Enabling Environments

Support belonging and personhood across diverse home environments

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Introduction

Home is more than a physical space; it is a place where individuals feel a sense of identity, security and autonomy. Living at home, connected to family and friends, and participating in meaningful activity is seen by most older people as critical for quality of life. Different home environments — including private residences, community housing, residential care facilities, and supported living arrangements — present unique challenges for older people and carers. Personhood is particularly relevant for people living with dementia as highlighted in Irelands National Dementia Strategy which is based on the principles of personhood and citizenship. These principles seek to enable people with dementia to maintain their identity, resilience and dignity and to recognise that they remain valued, independent citizens who, along with their carers, have the right to be fully included as active citizens in society. We propose that enhancing quality of life, defending autonomy and dignity and enriching social connections should be prioritised for all older people to ensure that we feel a sense of belonging and personhood as we age – no matter where we live.

Enhancing Quality of Life

For over 35 years Age & Opportunity have promoted personhood by creating opportunities for older people to engage with both the physical self and the creative self across different home environments. Our capacity building initiatives - Creative Exchanges, CarePALS and Artists Residencies - seek to provide care workers with an understanding of the value of

creative and physical activity and the practical skills to deliver these activities in day and residential care settings. During the Covid-19 pandemic we delivered Art Making at Home, Movement Minutes and Resilience courses directly to people isolating in their own homes and residential care settings. This work has taught us that belonging and personhood is not just about diverse home environments, it is also about recognising diversity in older age. The provision of a wide range of opportunities that take our needs, capacities and preferences into account become ever more important for us as we become more dependent in our home environments. This matters especially if we belong to structurally vulnerable groups - ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, those with unique cultural or religious needs, those who are homeless or those living with dementia and other disabilities.

Age & Opportunity research carried out in 2003 highlighted many small ways in which quality of life in care settings could be improved. Finding areas where residents can exercise more choice - for example, in terms of the newspapers that are bought, or the food that is served. Building in time for conversations which do not involve giving personal or nursing care. Ensuring that those who need dentures, hearing aids or spectacles can get them in a timely fashion and strengthening links between home and community. Small things like this are essential for promoting personhood and belonging in any home environment. When programming is being considered we believe that participation in meaningful cultural activities is a human right and that its intrinsic value, as well as its health benefits, should be recognised. This requires building capacity and supports that enable care providers to discern what is meaningful for each individual and to create opportunities to engage in activities.

Defending autonomy and dignity

Whether we live in our own homes or in communal or residential care settings, we should be able to make choices about our daily lives, activities, and personal care. This autonomy is essential to preserving dignity and maintaining a sense of self. To promote belonging and

personhood it is essential that we are allowed as much self-determination as possible and that our preferences are respected and facilitated. While universal design and assistive technology in home environments can help to maintain autonomy for those with physical or sensory impairments, carers have a huge role to play and should be educated and enabled to defend the autonomy and dignity of everyone according to needs, capacities and preferences.

Personhood and Dementia

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland report that there are 64,000 people with dementia in Ireland and the number of people with the condition will more than double in the next 25 years to over 150,000 by 2045. Two thirds of people with dementia live at home with family and other supports. In residential care, over two thirds of residents are living with dementia. Dementia poses particular challenges to autonomy and dignity and, therefore, to belonging and personhood in these different home environments. In its submission to the National Dementia Strategy, the Alzheimer Society of Ireland referenced the need to ‘reclaim dementia’ through the emergence of a new social and community model that focuses on abilities, possibilities and personhood and one where dementia is viewed as a social issue requiring a community response. Age & Opportunity’s work on dementia friendly initiatives promotes such a community response in different home environments and we believe that this narrative has the potential for influencing the development of policy in multiple aspects of personhood for people living with dementia and other structurally vulnerable groups.

Enriching Social Connections

Belonging can mean being a member of a group, having an affinity for a specific place or person, or being rightly assigned to a particular group or category. When we feel that we are a good fit for where we live and who we live or spend time with, then we are more likely to feel that we belong. But personal identity and social connectedness are dynamic concepts that evolve over a lifetime and are different for everyone. Each home environment should

be designed to meet the social preferences of all those who live there and to foster the opportunities for social engagement - or privacy - that enhance feelings of personhood and belonging for everyone. In residential care and supported living environments this includes design of the space to feel more like home, with private spaces, personalised rooms, communal areas that promote social interaction, and outdoor spaces that encourage physical activity and engagement with nature. It also includes creating opportunities for social connectedness and enabling carers to facilitate the different preferences of all residents in any home environment. For those living in their own homes it includes access to information, public transport and personal assistance if needed to access local opportunities for social interaction and participation in community activities.

Age & Opportunity is working to support belonging and personhood across diverse home environments by:

- Highlighting the diversity of older people and challenging ageist narratives that can impact negatively on personhood and belonging as we age.
- Highlighting economic, social and cultural human rights among all older people and service providers who participate in our initiatives.
- Promoting a greater understanding about the importance of these rights and our own initiatives for enhancing personhood, not just for improving health.
- Delivering capacity building training courses to care staff in day and residential care settings to challenge ageism and create more opportunities for choice, control and meaningful participation.
- Recommending that policies on long-term care should include recommendations for staff to promote quality of life, including access to both creative activities and appropriate forms of physical activity. Training and resources should be provided for care staff to facilitate this.
- Recommending a national organisation for activity providers across Ireland tasked with supporting care services to promote meaningful participation.
- Initiating and supporting initiatives that enhance personhood and belonging among members of structurally vulnerable groups.
- Supporting calls for increased options for ageing in place including implementation of the statutory home care scheme, increased aid for home adaptations and increased housing and continuum of care options.
- Advocating a social model of disability in older age that enhances autonomy, personhood and belonging in all care settings and extends eligibility for personal assistance services to those aged 65 and over who have aged with, or into, disability.

References

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