

Researching the taboo of intimacy in nursing homes

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1 Introduction

Older adults are often perceived as ‘too old’ to be sexually active due to the dominant youthful image ingrained in Western societies (Simpson et al., 2017). As a result, intimacy and sexual expression are often ignored in nursing homes, failing to respect and protect the sexual health needs of older adults (70+). In addition, the acceptance of intimacy among residents in an organizational work environment depends on staff attitudes, knowledge, and policy guidelines.

This four-year research project aims to break down the taboo on intimacy and sexuality in nursing homes. The study is based on Participatory and Interventionist Design approaches, where design is not only used to understand the complexities of the taboo but also intends to work toward positive change together with residents and staff in nursing homes. Outcomes will result in a better understanding of intimacy in later life and facilitation tools or service approaches for residents and staff to overcome the taboo of intimacy and sexual expressions in nursing homes.

2 Conference theme: Life-Changing Design

This research project relates to the conference subtheme ‘Changing Communities’. Later-life sexuality cannot be ignored anymore, especially in nursing homes this needs to be addressed to change negative perceptions and attitudes towards intimacy (Gott, 2006). Despite this, most research on sexuality in later life is still based on white, heterosexual, middle-class, and younger age groups (<65), and lacks the diversity of voices living in care facilities. Furthermore, perceptions of intimacy and sexual expressions are changing between generations because of societal, geographical, and historical events (e.g., the sexual revolution, acceptance of same-sex marriage, or inclusion of sexual health education). The taboo of intimacy in nursing homes needs to be challenged by reframing and redefining intimacy in later life. Dialogues about current care practices, including intimacy, should happen now to better support the future ageing demographic in need of care.



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3 Motivation to participate in the doctoral consortium

The topic of intimacy in long-term care is complex, especially considering that people preferably wish to silence it. How can we talk about intimacy and sexuality when people never learned to talk about it? What kind of changes are set in motion when participating in such a delicate research project? Moreover, how can we design for the future ageing and changing generations with different care expectations? Is it what Prochner (2021) suggested that designing for taboos needs its own research framework? This is a topic worth exploring together with the design research community. Critical reflections and exchange of ideas will provide a better understanding of future considerations for PD practices, working on taboo topics and supporting peoples' quality of life.

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