

A caring and living environment that supports the spirituality of older people with dementia: A hermeneutic phenomenological study



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Meeting spiritual needs is an important part of the quality of nursing for older people living with dementia. The spirituality-supportive caring and living environment has rarely been studied, even though the environment plays an important role in supporting the well-being of older people with dementia.

Aim: To further understanding about the spirituality-supportive elements of a caring and living environment from the perspective of older people with dementia and their family members.

Design, setting and participants: We adapted hermeneutic phenomenology as a philosophical background and methodological approach in this study. After receiving the approval of the researcher's University Ethics Committee, a purposive sample of ten older people with dementia and their nine family members, in home care and long-term care settings in Southern Finland were recruited for interviews.

Methods: An interview-based study was conducted using photography to collect the data. The in-depth interviews were conducted in dyads between September 2017 and March 2020 and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.

Results: Spirituality was seen as a continuum within human life, manifested through the environment even if older people with dementia were unable to express themselves. The spirituality experiences of the participants within the caring and living environment were summarized into three themes: "Where do I belong?", "What remains of me in the world?" and "Where am I going?" The older people, their family members and other people involved in their care provided a caring and living environment that supported spirituality with opportunities to seek answers to these questions through to the meaning of their life.

Discussion and conclusions: This hermeneutic phenomenological study provides a new insight into the environment that supports the spirituality of older people with dementia. The elements of caring and living environment can remind older people with dementia of what supports their own way of thinking about spirituality and brings meaning to their life. Therefore, spirituality is worth of considering when planning a caring and living environment that supports what is important to the personhood of older people with dementia.

Tweetable abstract: Spirituality is worth of considering when planning a caring and living environment that supports what is important to the personhood of older people with dementia.

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What is already known

- Supporting spirituality benefits the care of older people with dementia by increasing well-being and improving the quality of life.
- Older people with dementia are more likely to experience stress due to environmental factors than those without cognitive decline.

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What this paper adds

- We have demonstrated in this study that the caring and living environment that supports spirituality helps older people with dementia in their search for the meaning of life.
- An increased understanding of the significance of the caring and living environment in the comprehensive care of older people with dementia.
- This understanding can be used to plan for spiritually based care within a caring and living environment providing opportunities for older people with dementia to seek answers to spirituality-based questions.

1. Introduction

Spirituality is an aspect of humanity (Daly et al., 2019; Murgia et al., 2020) and therefore, meeting spiritual needs is an important part of quality nursing (Yeşilçınar et al., 2018; Connolly and Moss, 2021). Consideration of spiritual needs is a fundamental human right (Brady et al., 2021) and part of holistic nursing care. Spirituality often plays a greater role in the lives of people who are aging (Daly et al., 2019; Carr et al., 2011; Vitorino et al., 2019).

Dementia is a condition that impairs cognitive abilities and can cause dependency. The incidence of dementia increases with age and it is estimated that by 2030, around 75 million older people will be living with dementia (World Health Organization, 2017). This rise in the number of older people with dementia increases the need to find ways to support their health and wellbeing. One way to do this is to facilitate spirituality care in caring and living environments. The caring and living environments are nursing environments that include physical, social and symbolic elements (Kim, 2010) and where older people with dementia live their everyday life and are cared for.

Supporting spirituality has been found to be beneficial in the care of older people with dementia (Daly et al., 2019; Connolly and Moss, 2021). To maintain their self-esteem (Hirakawa et al., 2020) and help them to cope with a life-threatening illness like dementia (Daly et al., 2019; Dalby et al., 2012). Supporting spirituality can also reduce stress (Daly et al., 2019), anxiety and depression (Vitorino et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2021) and it can comfort older people (Daly et al., 2019). Overall, supporting spirituality is associated with a better quality of life (Vitorino et al., 2019). However, spirituality support needs to be individually based (Toivonen et al., 2018) and consider cultural and religious specificities (McGee et al., 2018). This makes the concept of spirituality multidimensional having varying meanings for people in different cultures (Yeşilçınar et al., 2018; Connolly and Moss, 2021; Memaryan et al., 2016). Often, the concept of spirituality is associated with religion (Memaryan et al., 2016). However, spirituality is a broader concept which includes religion so the boundaries of spirituality encompass non-religious people (Yeşilçınar et al., 2018). Concept analyzes of spirituality have been conducted in nursing science, but there is no consensus on the definition of the concept (Murgia et al., 2020). In this study, spirituality is broadly understood as the search for the meaning of life and sense of the sacred also outside of religions (Murgia et al., 2020).

A large proportion of older people with dementia live at home with a family member caring for them. In Finland, as in many other countries, it is common for professional home care to support those living at home with or without a caring family member (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). However, the role of family members remains, even when living at home is no longer possible (Chen et al., 2019). The caring and living environment, weather at home or in a nursing home, requires physical care (Borsson et al., 2020), but overall is a more multidimensional entity (Vitorino et al., 2019). The role of the physical environment in dementia has been studied to some extent (Borsson et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Sun and Fleming, 2021; Ying-Ling et al., 2021). It has been noted that older people with dementia are more likely to experience stress due to environmental factors than those without cognitive decline (Lee et al., 2021; Seetharaman et al., 2021). The environment can also support older people with impaired cognition (Gibson et al., 2007) reducing behavioral dysfunctions and increasing quality of life (Lee et al., 2021). However, very little research has been done on environments that supports spirituality (Vitorino et al., 2019). In their study, Vitorino et al. (2019) concluded that the physical environment supported the spirituality of older people.

Photography has been used to study the environment of older people living with dementia (Evans et al., 2016) and to elicit the

influence of the environment on older people (Mahmood et al., 2012). Photography has also been used in a variety of populations (Evans et al., 2016; Garner and Faucher, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2021) which includes people living with dementia (Borsson et al., 2020; Seetharaman et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2016; Ward et al., 2020; Dooley et al., 2021).

Even though older people with dementia have been studied, they are often excluded from research because of perceived communication challenges so limited research evidence about older people with dementia is available (Chen et al., 2019; Johnston et al., 2016). Although older people have the right to actively participate in research, dementia can pose challenges to participation in interview research such as finding words and discussing abstract issues (Dooley et al., 2021). The use of photographs facilitates discussions leading to an increase in understanding participants' personal experiences (Ward et al., 2020) even if verbal expression is impaired (Evans et al., 2016). There are advantages when research participants take photographs themselves (Dooley et al., 2021). However, in this study a professional photographer was used.

Even though research methods using photography have been found to be useful in spirituality research (Baigent et al., 2019) there is still a lack of knowledge about how older people and their family members experience a spirituality-supportive caring and living environment. As it has been found that support for spirituality increases overall wellbeing (Daly et al., 2019) and the environment has a strong impact on older people with dementia (Gibson et al., 2007), researching the two simultaneously could be a useful strategy for understanding how spirituality can be used to improve the life of older people with dementia.

2. Aim

To further understanding about the spirituality-supportive elements of a caring and living environment from the perspective of older people with dementia and their family members.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

This hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted using two data collection methods: in-depth dyadic interviews and photo-elicitation within the caring and living environment of older people with dementia.

3.2. Participants and research context

Participants were recruited purposively from both professional home care and long-term care settings in Southern Finland. The inclusion criteria were that the older people with dementia or their family members: 1. should be diagnosed with dementia; 2. have capacity to consent (assessed by the individual, their family members, nurses, and researchers); and 3. have an interest in sharing their experiences about their spirituality support. Nursing professionals gave information forms about the study to older people with dementia and their family members. They contacted the researcher by e-mail or phone.

Ten of the informants were older people with dementia and nine were their family members. The average age of the older people with dementia was 79 years, most having a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Most of the participants were Evangelical Lutherans. Some belonged to other Christian churches, and some were non-religious or atheist. Most of the older people with dementia were home care clients. The demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Characteristics of participants.

Interview	Age	Gender: Man (M) or Woman (W)	Older person (OP) or Family member (FM)	Family member's relationship to older person	Diagnosis of older person	Nursing environment (LTC = long-term care; HC = home care)	Religion if known
1	92	W	OP		Alzheimer's disease	LTC	Adventist
1		M	FM	Other			Evangelical Lutheran
2	83	M	OP		Alzheimer's disease	HC	
2	66	W	FM	Spouse			
3	80	M	OP		Alzheimer's disease	HC	Irreligious
4	80	M	OP		Alzheimer's disease	HC	Evangelical Lutheran
4		W	FM	Spouse			Evangelical Lutheran
5	76	W	OP		Vascular dementia	HC	Evangelical Lutheran
5	45	W	FM	Daughter			Evangelical Lutheran
6	92	W	OP		Alzheimer's disease	HC	Evangelical Lutheran
6	66	W	FM	Daughter			
7	78	W	OP		Unspecified	HC	Evangelical Lutheran
7	80	M	FM	Spouse			Atheist
8	87	W	OP		Alzheimer's disease	LTC	Lestadian
8		W	FM	Other			Evangelical Lutheran
9	97	W	OP		Alzheimer's disease and Lewy Body Dementia	HC	Evangelical Lutheran
9		W	FM	Daughter			
10	89	W	OP		Unspecified	LTC	Evangelical Lutheran
10		W	FM	Daughter			

3.3. Data collection

The first author interviewed older people with dementia together with their family members, in dyads. We chose dyadic interviews because family members often play a big role in the lives of older people with dementia. In relationship-based dyadic interviews, the participants are allowed to co-construct a description of the phenomenon from their shared experiences (Morgan et al., 2013). One older person participated without a family member and was interviewed individually. One interview was conducted with each dyad or single participant. The interviewer was experienced in communicating with older people with dementia. Participants were asked to talk about the elements they experienced as supportive of spirituality in caring and living environment. The interviewer asked probing questions to encourage participants talk about their experiences. The interviews took place in the participant's own home or private room in the nursing home between September 2017 and March 2020.

A photo-elicitation method was utilized. A professional photographer took photographs of the elements within the environment the participants named. Photography facilitated a focus on the environment, and helped participants to express their experiences (Bergbom and Lepp, 2021). Photographs were also used to help researchers understand the symbolic meanings in the environment experienced by older people with dementia (Brorsson et al., 2020). The physical environment is visible, but spirituality being intangible, is often hidden in symbolism and its manifestation is personal (Adamson and Holloway, 2012). The photographs made it possible to see the elements that support spirituality through the eyes of participants when they told the photographer what they wanted to be photographed. The photographer was involved in the interviews from the beginning listening to the discussion. At the end of each interview, the photographer, who had listened to the interview, took pictures of the elements that the participants had mentioned. Simultaneously, the researcher continued to discuss the elements being photographed and the meanings involved.

During the photography, participants were asked questions such as "what does the photograph mean to you?" and "how does it support your spirituality?"

The interview was complete when the participants felt they had captured the essence of their lived experiences. The interviews lasted between 56 and 110 min, were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

3.4. Data analysis

Both older people with dementia and their family members were active participants in the study, and the views of both received equal weight in the interpretation. Inductive thematic content analysis was used to interpret the data as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). As the method is flexible, it was useful in analyzing extensive and versatile data, which included both interview texts and photographs (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the analysis, an in-depth interpretation was conducted through codes and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

First, the researcher listened to the recordings to gain an overall understanding of the phenomena. The interviews were then transcribed whilst simultaneously reviewing the photographs (Bergbom and Lepp, 2021). In this phase, the photos were reviewed on a general level, considering the similarities and differences that occurred in them. Secondly, all the pieces of text and photographs that were meaningful to the research purpose, were coded. Thirdly, the codes were organized into sub-themes and then themes. The themes were then reviewed by reading the transcripts again with the themes in mind. Next, the themes were defined in a way that matched the interpretation of the meaning of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Because spirituality is a very individual phenomenon and different elements were highlighted in the data, the level of abstraction was high. Finally, the thematic analysis was prepared literally. An example of thematic analysis is presented in Table 2.

The photographs, 75 in all, were analyzed in combination with the participants' explanations of them in the interviews, similar to [Borsson et al. \(2016\)](#). Firstly, the photographs were numbered to locate them with a specific interview and then carefully examined. During the examination, notes were written on the photographs and the images sorted by theme and subtheme ([Table 3](#)). The photographs complemented and enriched the interview data ([Bergbom and Lepp, 2021](#)) providing multiple views of spirituality-supportive caring and living environment. The focus was not on analyzing the content of the images, but rather they were used to expand the discussion with the participants ([Frith and Harcourt, 2007](#)).

3.5. Rigor and transparency

During this study, we were reflecting the interpretation and findings with the research team, nursing professionals, older people with dementia and their family members. With research team, we were discussing about how the results were generated based on this qualitative data. Interpretation was undertaken by KT with assistance by RS and AC by discussing the process regularly. KT coded the text collecting and grouping the meaning units. Final coding and categories were agreed by the research team.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The study design was approved by the university research ethics committee (37/2017) and, before recruiting participants, permission was gained from each organization. Potential participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary, all received written and oral information about the research, and were given opportunity to ask any questions. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

All participants were able to sign a consent form, and did so. The ability of older people with dementia to give informed consent can be difficult to assess ([Racine and Bracken, 2019](#)). The following steps

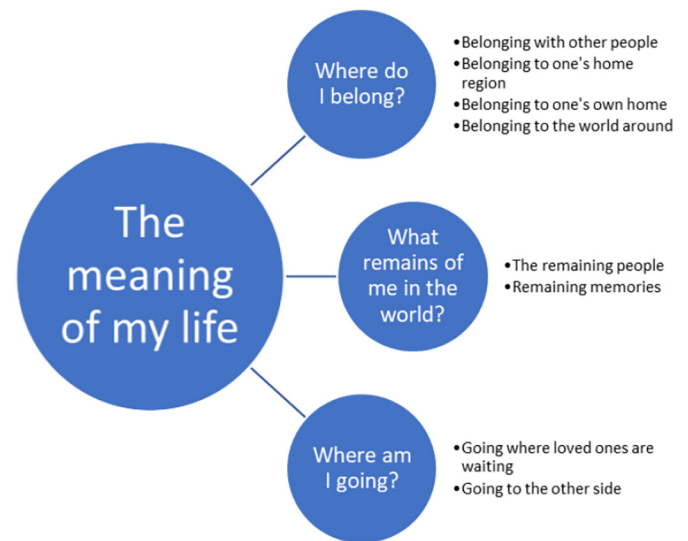


Fig. 1. Illustration of the findings.

were taken to assess their ability to consent: The nurses were asked to consider this in recruiting the participants relying on their knowledge on the impact of potential participants' disease on their ability to understand and evaluate participation in the study; the family members' opinion on older peoples' ability to consent were requested before each interview; the older person with dementia expressed a choice in participating orally and by signing a consent form; the researcher observed during the interview if there were any signs of discomfort. In addition to these, the family members confirmed their written consents. Participants were assured that photographs would not display identifiable people and so would protect their privacy ([Evans et al., 2016](#)).

Table 2
Example of thematic analysis.

Quotation	Interview number	Code	Sub-theme	Theme
<i>There are people nearby that I can trust, and I can expect some support and intimacy from them</i>	3	Reliable close people	Belonging with other people	Where do I belong?
<i>We are from the countryside, so we have paintings of our home churches on that bedroom wall.</i>	4	Paintings of home churches	Belonging to one's home region	
<i>My own sofa to stay on comfortably and safely.</i>	2	Comfort and safety of own home	Belonging to one's own home	
<i>The seafront can be a spiritual experience.</i>	5	Nature as spiritual experience	Belonging to the world around	
<i>Things that support spirituality in the environment are pictures of my children and grandchildren.</i>	2	Children and grandchildren	Remaining people	What remains of me in the world?
<i>The old rocking chair is my mother's, and it was in my childhood home in the 50s.</i>	5	Memories	Remaining memories	
<i>In the summer we go to the cemetery to remember those people who have already moved away from our time. They are waiting for me somewhere.</i>	6	Deceased people	Going where the loved ones are waiting	Where am I going?
<i>Spirituality is faith and trust, hope in this life and in the afterlife.</i>	10	After-life	Going to the other side	

Table 3
Themes and sub-themes shown in the photographs.

Theme	Sub-theme	Interview no.	N/10
Where do I belong?	Belonging to one's own home	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8	7
	Belonging to one's home region	3, 4, 7, 9	4
	Belonging to the world around	1, 2, 3, 4,	4
	Belonging with other people	3, 4, 7, 8,	4
What remains of me in the world?	Remaining memories	3, 4, 5, 9,	4
	Remaining people	5, 10	2
	Going where loved ones are waiting	5, 6, 7, 8	4
Where am I going?	Going to the other side	1, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10	7

4. Results

Spirituality was seen as a continuum of human life, manifested through the physical environment and important even when the older person living with dementia was unable to express it adequately. The experiences of older people with dementia and their family members within the caring and living environment that supports spirituality were summarized into three ontological questions: “Where do I belong?”, “What remains of me in the world?” and “Where am I going?” Together with their family and nursing professionals, older people with dementia, seek answers to these questions. In the thematic analysis these three questions were seen as main themes that included some sub-themes. In turn, these questions belonged to a bigger theme, the meaning of life, which the participants thought was central to spirituality. The results are illustrated in Fig. 1.

4.1. Where do I belong?

Belonging with other people

The sense of belonging with other people, such as one's family or friends, was believed to support spirituality by bringing meaning to life. In the environment this was reflected in that there were friends and family around and, if not physically present, they appeared in photographs or in other memories of them.

“She has peers from there from the church, in the same situation, they always visit her from time to time.”¹

Belonging to one's home region

The participants thought that a sense of belonging to their home region and their personal roots supported the spirituality of older people with dementia. They believed that the roots of their own spirituality were nourished by the soil of their home region and their beliefs developed throughout their lives from childhood. In their caring and living environment this was shown in paintings from childhood and churches in their home region.

“Spirituality has been at home and at school since childhood.”¹

“We are from the countryside, and we have paintings of both of our home churches on that bedroom wall.”⁴



[Insert Photo 2. Painting of one's home region] ⁹

Belonging to one's own home

The participants believed that their own home provided a spirituality-supportive environment. The home was a safe and comfortable place to be surrounded by personal, familiar objects. The participants also described the atmosphere within the home as supporting spirituality and a model of the ultimate home to which this life was a journey. Spirituality was considered as individual as the participants' own home. This was illustrated by the participants who wanted photographs of their own comfortable armchair or sofa taken.

“Such a nice place at home to sit reading the Bible.”¹



[Insert Photo 1. Postcards from family and friends] ¹⁰



[Insert Photo 3. Own home] ⁵

Belonging to the world around

A sense of belonging, not only to the participants' own home, but also to the world around, was believed to support the spirituality of older people with dementia. The outside world included nature and other life outside the home. This spirituality-supportive vision of the outside world was represented in the photographs, for example, of a window that opened out to a landscape in the outside world. The connection to the outside world reduced the experience of loneliness.

"Nature is a spiritual calming element. In nature, one experiences a connection with the Creator."²



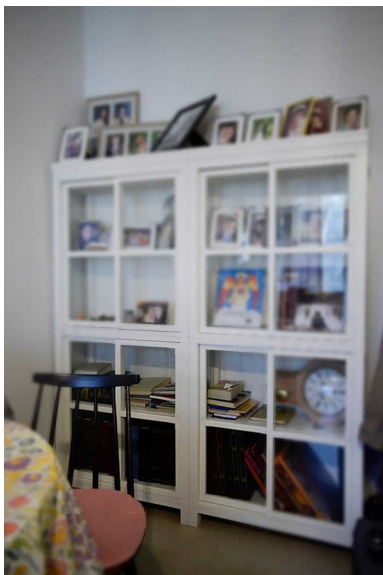
[Insert Photo 4. Nature in the window] ⁷

4.2. What remains of me in the world?

The remaining people

Participants felt that continuing of their own lives within the lives of other people and in their memories brought meaning to life and supported their spirituality. For example, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren had spiritual significance to the participants by bringing meaning to their lives. Many participants wanted photographs to be taken of the pictures they had of their children and grandchildren.

"Here are pictures of all my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren."²



[Insert Photo 5. Remaining people] ⁸

Remaining memories

The participants thought that in terms of meaning in life, it was important to leave memories in this world for example, in old diaries, self-written poems and homemade crafts. These were thought to bring out something profound and intangible at the heart of spirituality.

"I'm kind of a person that likes practical work, so religion is a bit abstract to me."³



[Insert Photo 6. An old diary] ⁹

4.3. Where am I going?

Going where loved ones are waiting

An understanding that human life is a continuum was facilitated by the knowledge that many loved ones had died before. This reduced the fear of death for the participants and helped them, step by step, to give up this life as dementia progressed. Elements that supported spirituality, were pictures of their parents and even pets that were waiting for them. This idea was not religion-dependent. Non-religious participants might also have thought of meeting their loved ones after death.

"I don't know if it was a dream, but my aunt showed up to me after she had died and said she was fine."⁵



[Insert Photo 7. Photo of one's parents behind self-made angel figure] ⁸

Going to the other side

The participants believed that spirituality is something that extends beyond human understanding. Most often this was experienced through religion which brought security and meaning to life. In the caring and living environment, this was symbolized in the form of religious books, Bible Quotes, and angel figures. For some participants, it was important that the familiar Bible was on the bedside table, even though it was no longer possible to read due to the dementia progression. Similarly, many participants wanted to have their radio photographed since listening to religious services was so important for them.

"There are angels here. They are symbols of protection. Then the Bibles, of course."⁸



[Insert Photo 8. Angel figure on the radio] ₂

5. Discussion

This study aimed to understand how spirituality is supported in a caring and living environment from the perspective of older people with dementia and their family members.

In this study, the environment that supported the spirituality of older people with dementia was explained through three themes formulated as questions: "Where do I belong?", "What remains of me in the world?" and "Where am I going?". The elements of the environment that support spirituality overlapped and boundaries blurred as the participants searched for the answer to the question: "What is the meaning of my life?"

However, spiritual support is not about answering these questions outright, but about the journey as people search with others in the caring and living environment. Some search for answers in religion, but for others, religion is not relevant, and they search for answers, for example, in nature or relationships with other people. The spirituality support given in a caring and living environment can signpost older people with dementia along an understandable pathway using familiar tangible and intangible entities such as Bibles, and memories respectively. Nurse can act as a guide along this spiritual pathway, helping older people with dementia stay on their familiar path when they forget their way. The individual nature of this pathway was highlighted by the very personal findings in the results of the study. This indicates that to support spirituality, the environment must transcend the physical elements of care and bring out what is meaningful to each older person. This idea reinforces the current trend of moving from institutional care environments, which have a tendency to lose individuals within groups, to more home-like caring environments which can provide spiritual care led by older people with dementia (Dröes et al., 2006).

The results of the study show that spirituality, in addition to its multidimensionality, is a broad concept and the concrete symbolization in the environment is diverse and subjective (Connolly and Moss, 2021). McGee et al. (2018) have also stated that almost anything can be associated with a personal experience of spirituality. In this study, this is illustrated, when a family member suggested some religious objects to be photographed. The older person with dementia, however, chose a coffee grinder she had owned for decades and had used to make coffee for many loved ones. Additionally, the idea of continuity was an important aspect that supported older people with dementia as also noted by Dalby et al. (2012). In this study this idea was exemplified by ideas of spirituality originating in childhood and continuing into adult life, through the onset of dementia, the preparation for death and the possibility of life after death.

This study shows that an environment that supports the spirituality of older people with dementia, consisted of people, memories and symbolism that support an individual's spiritual integrity. A sense of belonging has been recognized as a part of spirituality and brings meaning to life (Shevellar et al., 2014). This has also been referred to as the concept of connectedness (Carr et al., 2011). People living with dementia might need help in connecting with what is sacred in their life (Carr et al., 2011). The environment can act as a mediator for this.

Facilitating a sense of belonging in older people with dementia is not about managing individual nursing tasks, but about a comprehensive communication and presence which raises the need for ethical holistic nursing care. In this study, interpersonal relationships were important in the matter of 'what remains of me in the world', but this was also about the significance of the participants' own life in the world; whether one had fulfilled personal duties and played his or her part. For what would a person be remembered? This was evident from objects and memories in the participants' environment which were clearly important to them. In matters of the afterlife, religion was important to many, but some emphasized contact with other people was more important.

Surprisingly, the esthetics of the environment were not emphasized, as reported in other research (Connolly and Moss, 2021). The older people with dementia and their family members focused on symbolism: small meaningful objects, safety, and comfort. Perhaps the esthetics of an environment is not perceived as spirituality-supportive *per se*, although it may be an important part of a pleasant environment (Connolly and Moss, 2021). The environment is more than just esthetics when it supports the fragmented personhood of older people with dementia through spirituality. This understanding can help nursing professionals use environmental aspects to support the spirituality of older people with dementia in a very deep and personally sensitive manner.

5.1. Implications for future research

In this study, we found that the photo-elicitation method can be applied to study the caring and living environment of older people with dementia. In the future, it would be interesting to know whether the elements expressed through the photographs would be different if the participants took the pictures themselves. This would presumably be possible for people in the earlier stages of dementia. It would also be necessary to study the environment that supports spirituality in different cultures.

5.2. Methodological considerations and limitations

The sample size was small ($n = 19$), typical of a qualitative study (Connolly and Moss, 2021). Further studies, with a different design will be needed to generalize findings. The participants came from a single country and culture and findings may be different elsewhere. The data saturation was reached at a thematic level, but the nuances within the participant group indicated that each participant was following their own spiritual pathway making thematic analysis challenging. Analysis moved beyond individuals to more abstract concepts.

Photography was used in addition to interviews because discussing a spirituality supportive environment in abstract terms can be challenging for older people with dementia (Toivonen et al., 2018). Photographs, chosen by the participants were found to help them find and discuss those elements that support their spirituality pathway in their personal caring and living environment. Reflecting on the use of the photographs, the participants discussed the phenomenon extensively. Using the photographs, something emerged from spirituality-supportive environment that would have been overlooked without them as reported by Ward et al. (2020). In this study, the use of photographs helped to deepen the interpretation by helping participants to perceive spirituality support within the environment and in the analysis phase by facilitating the discovery of the themes.

The older people with dementia involved in this study were at different stages of dementia. The data collection methods used did not cause difficulties for participants who actively participated in the discussions and shared their experiences openly. The participants chose the subjects to be photographed and reflected on them in discussions.

6. Conclusions

The environment is important in the support of the spirituality of older people with dementia as a part of their personhood requiring an ethically high standard of care. Planning and delivering an environment that is positively supportive of a person's spirituality requires an individual approach that facilitates that person's way of seeking answers to questions about meaning in their life. In many cases, nursing professionals are in the front line, helping older people in this search which requires a respect of individuals', often long, life history.

When planning the caring and living environment of older people with dementia, support for their own way of thinking should be considered. Caring is not just a question of safety and esthetics in the environment, for people with dementia, caring is also about facilitating the individual spirituality of a person, to be themselves. As the photographs taken in this study showed, nurses can find elements in the environment of older people with dementia to understand their spiritual care needs. At its best, the environment can support the spirituality of older people with dementia by reminding them about what is important to them and what brings meaning to their life.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kristiina Toivonen: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Andreas Charalambous:** Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review and editing. **Riitta Suhonen:** Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review and editing.

Data availability

The data is retained by the first author so that it can be returned to when needed. Queries about the data should be addressed to the first author.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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