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Doing the Unknown: Spa Activities in Nursing Homes

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Abstract An ethnomethodological point of departure is that people rely on shared knowledge when mutually accomplishing everyday situations. Whereas most residents in a nursing home have a reasonable previous knowledge of events such as bingo or Christmas dinners, other activities such as pub evenings and spa activities are unfamiliar. Using ethnographic data from a Swedish nursing home with a “sport and spa” profile, this article investigates the challenges of arranging spa activities, an activity often unknown among residents. The findings show how residents’ lack of spa knowledge was found to cause problems, especially when they did not interpret the indexical expressions as intended. Where Garfinkel’s indexicality is predicated on actors being able to use shared knowledge, this study demonstrates that a lack of shared knowledge enables some actors to reshape the activity they wish to accomplish.

Keywords Indexicality; Nursing Home; Eldercare; Spa; Leisure Activity; Ethnomethodology

An ethnomethodological (Garfinkel 1967) point of departure is that people rely on shared knowledge when mutually accomplishing everyday situations: people in a workplace have a shared

understanding of what it means to hold a meeting; a couple in a bar have a shared understanding of what it means to be on a date. This article investigates situations of the opposite kind, that is, when some of the involved actors may lack a shared understanding of the situations that others try to accomplish.

In nursing homes, the residents’ social events do not happen by themselves, and generally need to be actively arranged by staff. Staff rely on residents’ ability to “make out what is meant” when they use presumably shared knowledge to accomplish activities and events. Staff members initiate excursions, bingo, quiz nights, and holiday celebrations, and it

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is the staff who decide what form they should take. While some activities are well-known to residents, others are less familiar or even unknown. For example, most residents of Swedish nursing homes know very well what to expect of an afternoon of bingo or a Christmas dinner, but they have far less experience with activities such as pub evenings and spa treatments.

Even though many people in Sweden have been to a spa or have tried spa treatments, spas are far less familiar to people who were born in the twenties and thirties. The mean age at which people move into a nursing home is 85 (National Board of Health and Welfare 2016), meaning that when they grew up it was unusual to visit spas, or indeed to socialize in pubs (another relatively recent phenomenon in Sweden). By arranging spa treatments and pub nights, nursing home staff are thus introducing activities that are potentially unknown to residents. It is to the obvious challenges in this that the present paper responds.

As part of the care provided for their increasingly frail residents, Swedish nursing homes are obliged to arrange a variety of leisure activities (National Board of Health and Welfare and SKL 2013). While the value of leisure activities in nursing homes is well-established (Cheung 1999; Phinney, Chaudhury, and O'Connor 2007), less is known about how they are collaboratively accomplished in practice. In recent years, Sweden has seen an emphasis on leisure activities for nursing home residents, marked by a growing fashion for thematic nursing homes, with profiles such as "gardening," "the arts," "culture and entertainment," or, as in the present ex-

ample, "sport and spa." At the same time, the general thresholds for obtaining a place in a Swedish nursing home have been raised, and as a result only those with significant care needs and/or dementia are admitted (National Board of Health and Welfare 2016). Researchers have concluded that residents in Swedish nursing homes can be regarded as being in "an early palliative phase" (Franklin, Ternstedt, and Nordenfelt 2006) and about one-third die within a year of admission (National Board of Health and Welfare 2016).

The manner in which leisure activities are accomplished in residential settings is of particular interest because staff members have to adjust their ethnomethods (Garfinkel 1967) to meet a number of challenges. A gym session in a nursing home bears only a passing resemblance to one in a real gym; a pub evening cannot be set up as if it were being held in a real pub; spa activities cannot be arranged as if they were in a real spa. There are several obstacles to the accomplishment of leisure activities in nursing homes: nursing homes are often strongly institutional in character; all types of activities usually have to be arranged in the same locale, such as in a communal dining room; residents are very frail and often require assistance with mobility; the main focus of staff members' expertise is to provide care, not to arrange bingo and spa treatments (Thorsell et al. 2010; Custers et al. 2011); and residents may have little or no knowledge of the activities accomplished, although this last might be considered more an opportunity than a challenge.

In spite of the challenges, nursing homes offer a wide range of leisure activities, with everything

from baking, traditional crayfish parties, and sing-a-longs to church services, gym sessions, and pub evenings. It is common to all these activities that they are arranged on the staff members' initiative, and when an activity is familiar to all those involved, the staff can rely on shared knowledge and thus can follow an established script (Goffman 1959). For instance, when staff bring out a bingo cage with its balls and cards, residents share their understanding of what is going to happen. The same is true when a priest appears in the communal dining room to set it up for a church service, or when staff lay the table for Christmas dinner or a crayfish party. In arranging such events, staff and residents alike can rely on the fact that it is common knowledge that there will be pickled herring and a ham for Christmas dinner, or that at a crayfish party they will eat crayfish and cheese, drink spirits, wear paper hats, and sing drinking songs. This can be contrasted with less familiar activities, when the lack of shared knowledge permits staff to arrange events that are "anything and everything." Spa activities are unfamiliar to many residents, at the same time as a growing number of Swedish nursing homes have an explicit sport and spa profile (Nilsson et al. 2018).

Whereas Garfinkel (1967) emphasized actors' ability to use common-sense knowledge, this article explores how a lack of such knowledge enables the "speaker" to broaden the description of the phenomenon. Drawing on ethnographic data from Seaview Lodge, a nursing home with a sport and spa profile, the aim of this article is to investigate how activities are accomplished that are potentially unknown to some of those involved.

Leisure Activities in Nursing Home Settings

The previous research on leisure activities in nursing homes has largely focused on the kinds of activities that are offered and the outcomes in terms of improved health and well-being. Standard leisure activities include bingo, card games, embroidery, and watching television (Gubrium 1975; Svidén, Wikström, and Hjortsjö-Norberg 2002; Kracker et al. 2011; Michel et al. 2012), which are often described as favoring the preferences of female residents (Kracker et al. 2011). Several researchers have emphasized the need to individualize activities in order to increase residents' participation (Smith et al. 2009; Duffin 2012) and in recent years gardening—both outdoors (Nilsson 2009) and indoors (Tse 2010)—has received increased attention. Bingo and television have primarily been related to leisure, while gardening has often been framed as a form of therapeutic care (Tse 2010). Similarly, research on "cultural" activities, such as amateur dramatics or sing-a-longs, tends to focus on their therapeutic effect (Palo-Bengtsson, Winblad, and Ekman 1998; Kulturrådet 2013).

Research on the outcomes of such leisure activities has linked participation to increased happiness (Schreiner, Yamamoto, and Shiotani 2005), improved health and well-being (Subaşı and Hayran 2005; Thomas, O'Connell, and Gaskin 2013), and feelings of agency and identity (Saarnio et al. 2016), while other activities, such as dancing or playing mahjong, are associated with a reduction in depressive symptoms (Cheng et al. 2012; Vankova et al. 2014). Although there is a considerable literature on

a large variety of leisure activities and their benefits, little is known about how they are accomplished in practice, given the challenging setting of a nursing home. Previous research tends to treat leisure activities as a given—as “simply there”—and not something that requires thought and effort.

Theoretical Approach

Inspired by Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodological approach, the present paper looks at ethnomethods for accomplishing social phenomena. One such method is the use of indexical expressions (Garfinkel 1967:11). Garfinkel described indexical expressions as “an ongoing achievement of the organized activities of everyday matter,” and argued that the “intelligibility of what is said rests upon the hearer’s ability to make out what is meant from what is said according to methods which are tacitly relied on by both speaker and hearer” (Heritage 1984:144).

In a nursing home, a residents’ limited ability to “make out what is meant” may manifest itself as residents’ incomprehension of what staff members mean when they use scented candles and relaxing music to create a spa atmosphere. Yet an ethnomethodological approach does not mean that residents and staff are dismissed as “judgmental dopes” (Garfinkel 1967:68-69); they are not seen as governed by structures and expressions, but instead as using them as common knowledge, locally available and locally reproduced. The present paper thus focuses on the manner in which staff use indexical expressions—language, objects, and actions—in order to accomplish spa activities. While the residents’ lack of spa knowledge might be problematic, it can

also be an opportunity, for it allows staff to be innovative, devising their own creative versions of spa activities. One issue that falls outside the scope of the paper is whether there is a point at which such creativity becomes unethical. Given that some residents lack knowledge of an activity or phenomenon, can others exploit that to make it into whatever they want?

Setting

The analysis draws on a wide range of data (described in detail in the next section) from a Swedish nursing home called Seaview Lodge. Seaview Lodge has a sport and spa profile, but in all other respects is an ordinary nursing home: a collective setting where very frail older people spend the last period of their lives. In international terms, Swedish nursing homes are of a high standard. Residents live in their own private one-bedroom flats with ensuite bathrooms and kitchenettes (National Board of Health and Welfare 2016), and they have extensive rights to self-determination, meaning that they can have visitors at any time, they can own pets, and they can smoke in their rooms if they wish.

Seaview Lodge is located in a large Swedish city and comprises a three-storey building with a total of fifty-three small flats off long corridors. The third floor is a dementia unit, excluded from the present study for ethical reasons. The first floor has eleven flats and a communal dining room, while the second floor has twenty flats, two dining rooms, and a “spa bathroom.” Also on the second floor is a large room that serves as a combined gym and pub, with a stationary bike at one end of the

room and a bar counter, television, and a seating area at the other.

As in all Swedish nursing homes, residents can, in theory, come and go as they wish, but in practice, very few of them are able to leave without assistance. Consequently, Seaview Lodge's residents spend much of their time indoors, either in their flats or in the communal living spaces. In good weather, they sometimes sit outside on the large balcony or in the courtyard. Twice a week there is a two-hour excursion in a handicap-friendly minibus which can carry up to six residents, and once a week or so residents can go for individual walks accompanied by staff members. Going for a walk generally means a staff member pushing a resident in a wheelchair, but sometimes they can go out on a specialized tandem bicycle with a staff member pedaling. Though Seaview Lodge bears similarities to one of Goffman's (1961) total institutions in the way that residents eat, sleep, and socialize in the same place, it is more like a "permeable institution" (Quirk, Lelliott, and Seale 2006) in the way that visitors and residents can come and go at any time.

At first glance, Seaview Lodge's sport and spa profile is not much in evidence. True, it is explicitly articulated on the nursing home's website, and on every floor there is a notice board with schedules for "spa activities" and the like, but despite these and other explicit expressions (such as spa signs on doors), a majority of the residents, when asked, were unaware of their nursing home's chosen profile. When asked to elaborate on their views of the profile, they often explained that they did not know about it, and that they did not know what a spa was.

Method and Data

The data comprise ethnographic observations, interviews with residents and staff members, and fieldwork photographs, complemented with images downloaded from Seaview Lodge's official Instagram account. During observations and interviews, I relied on techniques developed in previous fieldwork in nursing home contexts (Harnett 2010; 2014; Harnett and Jönson 2016; 2017). For example, I often took the role of institutional "novice" (Wästerfors 2011) and was therefore presented with explanatory accounts ("We do this because..."). Accounts of this kind provide a rich material on the accomplishment of spa activities. Some Seaview Lodge staff members initially treated me as if I was evaluating their work, but this misconception gradually faded, and staff and residents seemed to have little interest in my note-taking, or at least seemed to ignore it.

I conducted observations on twenty occasions, each lasting between two and four hours (sixty hours in total), on different days of the week and at different times of day. I also conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews, 20 to 60 minutes in length (six shorter interviews with residents, seven longer interviews with staff), designed to discuss everyday life and gauge their indexical expressions and opinions on the nursing home's sport and spa profile. In addition, I conducted a number of brief "active interviews" in the field (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), when staff and residents were able to articulate what they were doing at that particular moment.

The observations took place between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. on weekdays, with the exception of one

Saturday afternoon. The choice of time and day for the fieldwork was determined by my interest in Seaview Lodge's spa-related activities, none of which were scheduled for in the evening. I was the only researcher in the field except for four occasions when I was joined by two co-researchers, allowing me to discuss my interpretations of situations that we had jointly observed. During fieldwork, I mostly sat in one of the communal areas, which also served as a dining room, and since I did not have any "backstage region" (Goffman 1959) to withdraw to, I spent a lot of time chatting with residents or watching television with them. I soon found that while it was easy to identify the "sport" element of Seaview Lodge's sport and spa profile, the "spa" element was more difficult to pinpoint. Thus, I concentrated on noting down sequences of everyday life, being particularly alert to situations when the sport and spa profile was in evidence, such as when the schedule explicitly stated that a spa activity would take place. When the staff organized formal activities, I sometimes joined in, and thus I took part in a range of activities, including zumba sentao (seated zumba) and other workout classes, bus excursions, balloon tennis, "Friday dancing," sewing sessions, and a crayfish party. I also observed more mundane activities such as bingo, quizzes, manicures, hand massages, relaxation sessions, and television-watching.

When writing my field notes, I sought to follow Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's advice (2011) by capturing "scenes" of people interacting and doing things in their everyday lives in Seaview Lodge, with a special eye to the collaborative accomplish-

ment of spa activities. This meant that I did not set out to observe and document everything that went on in the nursing home, but rather I focused on shorter interactions with indexical expressions related to the spa theme. In addition to my field notes, I also took photos and downloaded publicly available images posted on Seaview Lodge's Instagram account. The Instagram photos, being published on a platform controlled by the staff, were interpreted as confirmative tools (Carlstedt forthcoming)—a means by which staff gave activities a frame (Goffman 1959) and shaped how their audience would interpret different activities, as when they posted photos of residents in face packs and explicitly described it as a spa activity.

Ethical Considerations

All residents and staff were provided with written and verbal information about the purpose of the project. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that data would be coded for anonymity and stored in a secure manner. Written or verbal consent was obtained from all participants. The two nursing home units included in the study are not dementia units, but nevertheless some of the residents might have had cognitive limitations. The project was approved by the regional ethics review board in Lund (Dnr 2015/864). Names and places have been omitted or changed.

Results

At Seaview Lodge, spa situations were shaped both by staff members' creativity and residents' spa

knowledge. Residents sometimes used their knowledge to challenge staff members' attempts to provide massages or face treatments by pointing out that "This is not how it's done at a real spa," while the residents' lack of knowledge enabled staff to be creative and do pretty much what they wanted and still call it a spa activity. There were also occasions when residents' lack of knowledge posed a challenge. This happened when they did not interpret indexical expressions as intended, for instance, by not reading scented candles and soft music as an indication that a spa activity was going to take place. Generally, such indexical expressions were characterized by fragility, and in response, some spa activities were excessively indexed, as if staff wanted to ensure that residents or some other audience would read the situation as a spa activity. The analysis revealed that spa activities were accomplished through three analytically distinguishable indexical expressions: 1) fragile indexations; 2) excessive indexations; and 3) creative indexations.

Fragile Indexations

Fragile indexations were characterized by uncertainty as to the kind of activity at hand. The way staff members dealt with this uncertainty included attempts to strengthen the indexation and anticipate potential disturbances.

One of the key challenges when arranging spa activities at Seaview Lodge was that the staff members' main task was to provide care, medication, and food, while the job of "real" spa staff is to provide customers with a spa experience. Another challenge was that many of Seaview Lodge's residents either

did not understand the purpose of the spa activities or were not interested in participating. In "real" spas, beauty therapists rarely have to struggle to persuade customers to undergo spa treatments, but in Seaview Lodge this scenario was common. Spa activities were scheduled every Tuesday morning (although they were held at other times too), hence the following excerpt from when Susanne, a staff member, was in charge of arranging spa activities for a rather reluctant group of residents:

It's Tuesday morning just after 10 a.m. and some residents are in their rooms, and some are sitting in the kitchen and have just had their breakfast. Susanne, a staff member, approaches Laura, a resident, and says:

— Laura, do you want us to do your nails? Kind of do them up?

Laura looks down at her nails, but does not seem keen on the idea. Her nails are perfectly done with shiny pink nail polish. Susanne seems to sense Laura's hesitation and asks:

— Or maybe that's not necessary? We can just do some hand massage.

Susanne goes to the corner of the room, turns off the television, switches on the stereo, and puts on some American Christmas carols. Then she says:

— Now, time to get titivating!

Susanne walks around the dining room using an electric lighter to light the candles on the tables. Then she goes down the corridor and comes back with a large plastic container filled with cotton-wool pads and manicure products. She turns to Inez, a resident who is sitting on the sofa:

— Inez, do you want to come now so we can have a cozy time?

Inez gets up from the sofa and walks to the table, where Karla and Laura are already sitting.

— Karla, would you like some juice? A little, perhaps? asks Susanne. Inez, should we begin with some relaxation?

— No, no need, replies Inez.

— Maybe the rest of us would like some, says Susanne.

At this point they are interrupted by a group of three people from another floor who enter the dining room with a large trolley loaded with rubbish and recycling. The group has to use the door just behind the table in order to get out to the back yard where the recycling station is located.

—There's no point in us trying to start before they're done. We know they'll be back, says Susanne, referring to the group with the recycling.

— Karla, don't you want some nail polish? Susanne asks.

— No, says Karla.

— But, you're sitting here with us.

— I have no choice, says Karla.

The staff-resident interactions in this excerpt illustrated how the accomplishment of a spa theme was indeed dependent on the success of a collaborative effort. Susanne continuously invited residents to work together to accomplish activities such as hand massages and painting their nails, but the residents expressed little interest. Before Susanne began her attempts to do residents' nails, she had used several indexations as she set the spa scene in the dining room. First, the notice board in the hallway announced that it was time for spa activities. Just before 10 a.m. Susanne turned off the television in the dining room, put

on some soft music, lit the candles on the tables, and brought out a large box of manicure products. However, the first obstacle arose when residents did not want to have their nails done (many already had perfectly painted nails). Susanne repeatedly reminded residents that they were going to "have a cozy time," and served them fruit juice while they waited around the table. When no one seemed interested in having their nails done, Susanne tried a new tack and offered them hand massages and relaxation while sitting together in the dining room. The situation was characterized by ambivalence about what was going on. Susanne and the little group of residents were sitting just outside the kitchen, so there was a great deal of noise and clatter from other staff members talking and doing dishes. The physical environment, the noise from the kitchen, and the people taking out the recycling tended to undermine the ongoing spa indexation and exposed its essential fragility. This fragility was only compounded by the fact that the room was very noisy and not especially relaxing, the residents were reluctant to participate, the member of staff was hesitant about what to attempt, and the session was disturbed by people carrying recycling through the room. Yet Susanne held the relaxation session regardless, issuing instructions such as "Breathe in, breathe out" and "Now your eyelids are growing heavy." After ten minutes the session was over and one resident had fallen asleep. Susanne turned to a resident and asked:

— You, then, Elisabeth. Did you relax?

— Not in the least, says Elisabeth.

— Yes, that was really nice, says Alice.

Whereas Elisabeth's statement highlighted the tenuousness of defining this as a relaxation session, Alice, another resident, strengthened it by saying it felt "really nice." Alice's comment served to evaluate and give credibility to the activity as a relaxation session, which was what the member of staff had strived to accomplish.

On several occasions I observed situations when residents received manicures and hand massages without protests, and even though the link between beauty treatments and spas is well-known (Yaman, Alias, and Ishak 2012) staff were still at pains to point out why painting nails should be classified as a spa activity:

Kelly (staff member): A spa, we have that too, sometimes everyone together, sometimes just one floor, when we do manicures, pedicures, face packs and creams, and curl their hair; when they can really feel good, with candlelight and nice drinks and so on. And that is the spa bit. And a spa can also be, for example, in the afternoon or the evening, when it's quiet—the ladies think it's pleasant to sit around the table and paint their nails and such. That's also a sort of spa. We have the sensory room on the third floor too. We have a small spa room here on the second floor, with nail polish and face creams and nail files and such.

Kelly apparently perceived the fragility of using nail painting as a spa indexation, and sought to strengthen its indexation by stressing that it "is also a sort of spa." Her comments anticipated potential disputes about the spa component, which seems to be more evident when *the whole building*

were doing things together than when the staff painted a few residents' nails in the evening. When she talked about spa events, she emphasized that they were not only a time when residents had *a chance to feel beautiful* but also an occasion for candlelight and nice drinks. Kelly's remarks illustrate how staff often provided accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) for the spa connection as a method of anticipating and dealing with a sense of hesitation on the part of all involved. This hesitation was often implicit, but sometimes, when interviewed, residents explicitly challenged the credibility of the spa indexations. These challenges could take the form of residents pointing out how activities at Seaview Lodge differed from those at a real spa. At a real spa, treatments are given in special rooms by trained beauty professionals, but in Seaview Lodge treatments were given in the dining room by the nursing home staff. The residents' questions could cause disturbances, such as when Clary, a resident, described her most recent facial:

Tove (interviewer): What did you have done?

Clary (resident): A massage. A facial.

Tove: A facial too? Can you tell me about it?

Clary: They put a face pack on you.

Tove: Yes, they put a face pack on you.

Clary: And rubbed it in too.

Tove: Who did it?

Clary: One of the staff upstairs.

Tove: When you went for your facial, did it feel like you were in salon or...

Clary: [Laughs] Nope, not in the least.

Tove: Why not?

Clary: Well, it was staff from here.

Tove: It was staff, yes, but did it feel to you like you were at a spa of some sort?

Clary: I couldn't say.

Tove: So where were you? Were you upstairs in the bathroom on the second floor?

Clary: In the room on the second floor.

Tove: So, in the dining room?

Clary: Yes.

Clary began to laugh when I asked her if it felt as if she were at a beauty parlor when she had her face pack, and she explained that it had been done by "the staff from here" in the dining room, not by a trained beauty therapist. Even when activities were arranged in the so-called "spa bathroom," residents could invoke the nursing home context, which again threatened the indexation. This became evident when I talked to Betty, a resident, about the spa bathroom:

Tove (interviewer): Down the corridor on the right. Past the dining room. Then there's a spa, a bath...

Betty (resident): They call it a bathroom now. Have they put in a bathtub? Before you mostly sat and... they take a patient down there when someone has the time, and they get to relax completely and lie down. And then they sit there and fiddle about massaging and suchlike. But, you can't see when it's all dark.

Tove: What do you think of it?

Betty: Oh, it's not for me at my age...

Betty ridiculed the spa bathroom and the activities staged there. She explained that "They call it a bathroom now," as if it were not a real bathroom in her mind. She talks about massages in a similar way, by describing how staff "fiddle about massaging and suchlike."

While Betty's comments illustrated how spa indexations could be challenged by residents' spa knowledge, the opposite was also true, since their lack of knowledge constituted a challenge. This was plain from small talk with residents whenever I introduced the topic of my research. Rather than talk about the nursing home's sport and spa profile, residents invariably asked me questions, and especially whether I could explain what a spa was. This led to convoluted discussions, as when I found myself explaining to one resident why I was interested in the sport and spa theme:

Alice (resident): What does that word you just said mean?

Tove: Sport and spa?

Alice: Sport. That's soccer and stuff. Running.

Tove: And spa.

Alice: What's that? The people who win?

I sit down with Alice. She says that she has a dry throat and needs a drink. I turn to a member of staff who is standing off to one side and ask:

Tove: How should I explain the spa?

Member of staff: [Irritated] Well-being from the inside out.

The staff member was clearly irritated by my question and answered with one sentence: "Well-being from the inside out." This sequence illustrated how the lack of shared spa knowledge not only made the accomplishment of spa activities fragile but could also undermine the legitimacy of having a spa theme in the first place in such a setting. If the residents do not know what a spa is, there is a risk that a spa profile becomes little more than an act, or even a Potemkin village.

Excessive Indexations

Although most indexical expressions were fragile, there were also spa activities that were accomplished using excessive indexical expressions, which left little doubt about how to interpret the situation. In a real spa, such an abundance of spa indexations would probably appear comical and unnecessary, and a “Spa bathroom” sign would seem downright odd. In Seaview Lodge, however, spa signs provided guidance for how residents should understand a particular room. An example of an excessive indexical expression was when staff members arranged a table with an abundance of spa-related objects, such as face packs, chocolate, candles, nail polish, hair dye, potpourri, et cetera. Even though it is very unlikely such a collection would appear in a real spa, in the Seaview Lodge setting it was a tool for indexing “spa.”

Excessive spa indexations were observed during fieldwork, and also in photos taken by staff and published on the Seaview Lodge Instagram account. This account served as the nursing home’s front stage (Goffman 1967), where staff posted photos and text that anyone could see. When spa activities took place, they were often a bit “messy”: residents did not always seem to understand what was going on, and spa activities were occasionally disturbed by other activities going on simultaneously, such as someone vacuuming. When spa activities were displayed on the Instagram account, however, this messiness was gone. One example of how staff could realize the spa theme this way was a post about residents having face packs, posted together with a photo of snacks, candles, and an abundance of beauty products.

Figure 1. A Seaview Lodge Instagram post announcing “Today we celebrate our women on International Women’s Day by giving them some spa treatments!”



Four of the photos show women with face packs, the fifth a table with a candle, peeling gloves, hair curlers, a curling iron, bowls of crisps and chocolates, nail polish, cotton-wool pads, hair dye, and body lotion. To index spa solely with some hair spray or a bowl of crisps would be fragile in the extreme, but by putting a large number of objects together a more solid spa-ness is created. The excessive indexical expressions, in combination with an Instagram text that explicitly described them as spa treatments, spelt out what kind of situation was in mind.

In most situations when staff tried to accomplish spa activities, male residents were noticeable by their absence. This gendering was also plain in the Instagram account—only one male resident is visible in the example shown here, asleep in his wheelchair in the background. At Seaview Lodge, as in all Swedish nursing homes, the majority of residents are women, and in the

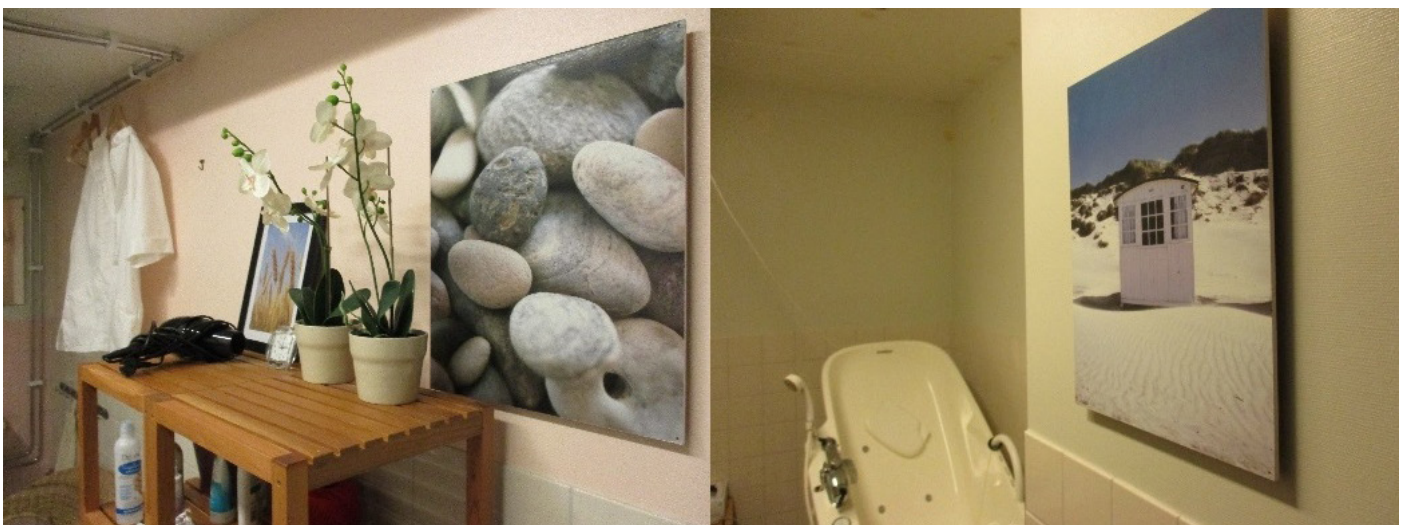
collaborative accomplishment of a spa theme, the male residents were at times disconcerting. Activities related to health and body maintenance are traditionally considered female (Little 2013), and the spa theme thus had two main drawbacks: the presence of men could hinder the accomplishment of a theme, which was in part accomplished with feminine-coded face packs and manicures; and the spa theme could cast doubt on the masculinity of the men living there (cf. Moss and Moss 2007). However, it is possible that the gendered aspect of the spa theme was cancelled out by the sport element in Seaview Lodge's profile.

As shown in the Instagram photos, objects were common parts in excessive spa indexations. Objects served to strengthen the spa connection in several ways at Seaview Lodge, both to emphasize the spanness of certain activities, but also to accentuate the overall spa-profile inside the facility. Spa signs and pictures with marine motives on the walls served to strengthen the spa connection, as described by Jennie, a member of staff:

Jennie: And then there are lots of nature photos. Well, that's the spa thing going on. And then, if you do have a spa room, there are so many classic spa pictures, with some seaweed and water droplets or whatever...I like this nature thing, there's a big ocean theme going. Seagulls on a jetty and a lighthouse and so on, and the photos were taken around here too.

Jennie used the term "classic spa pictures" when she went into the dining room to show me a picture of a seagull sitting on a jetty. The interpretation crucially depends on the viewer's knowledge of the context in which the picture of the seagull is situated. In a sailing club, it would be unlikely to serve as an indexical expression of a spa. At Seaview Lodge, however, pictures with marine themes were found in corridors, dining rooms, and in the spa bathroom. The spa bathroom was a large room with a bathtub designed for persons with disabilities, and a table with two plastic orchids. The walls were decorated with three photographs: one of reeds, one of pebbles, and one of a beach hut.

Figure 2. Fieldwork photos of the spa bathroom. A white robe hangs to the left of the table with the plastic orchids and the photos of reeds and pebbles, while over the bathtub hangs a photo of a beach hut.



In the corner of the spa bathroom hung a white robe for staff to wear during spa treatments. In spa settings, white clothing is associated with *professionalism, hygiene, health, and the “effect” of the treatment* (Klepp 2009), but in nursing homes, it represents something entirely different. As early as the seventies, American nursing homes were requiring staff to wear colored uniforms in order to achieve a more homely atmosphere (Gubrium 1975), and in Swedish nursing homes, staff also tend to wear colored work clothes (or even private clothes) as an indexical expression for “homeliness” (Stranz and Sörensdotter 2016), while white uniforms have become associated with hospitals and institutions. At Seaview Lodge, however, the white robe in the spa bathroom was used as an indexical spa expression, and it was worn when staff gave residents foot treatments, for example. It remains uncertain whether the residents had sufficient shared spa knowledge to make sense of this.

The spa bathroom at Seaview Lodge was very rarely used for treatments or baths, and staff sometimes used it for storage (on my first day of fieldwork, it contained a shopping trolley and some other bits and pieces crammed in next to the bathtub). Despite this, the excessive indexical expressions in the shape of the white robe, the spa sign on the door, the orchids, and the photos on the wall were a clear indication of how the room and its uses were to be understood.

The spa sign on the door included two tea lights in green candleholders and two white flowers resting on water. Unusually, though, the sign was placed on the *inside* of the door, as if to ensure

that residents inside the room knew that they were in a spa bathroom and not in an ordinary bathroom.

Figure 3. Fieldwork photo of the sign on the inside of the spa bathroom door that informs anyone using the room that it is a spa.



Tea lights and candles were commonly used as an indexical expression in Seaview Lodge, as the spa door sign showed. There were small battery-operated tea lights and wax candles in the dining rooms. Candles also featured on various signs, such as the spa bathroom sign and the staff toilet sign. Indeed, the staff toilet sign pictured not only a candle but also a white rolled-up towel, aromatherapy bottles, a white flower, and a text announcing it to be a “Toilet and Mini Spa.” Inside were a toilet, a washbasin, and a small shelf with cleaning products, toilet paper, and a bowl with potpourri. These indexical expressions were clearly not for residents, but an example of how staff accomplished the spa theme in areas only they accessed.

Figure 4. Fieldwork photos of the sign on the staff “Toilet and Mini Spa” and the layout of the room in question.



Whereas the use of the staff “mini spa” was reserved exclusively for staff and visitors, manicures were limited to residents only. For reasons of hygiene, staff were prohibited from wearing nail varnish, but it was common for residents to paint their nails, and some of the women had extravagantly decorated nails with glitter or rhinestones glued on. This too was sometimes part of the excessive indexical expressions, as shown by an Instagram post that announced: “Beautiful nails à la glitter and glamour at Seaview Lodge.” The photo shows the hands of five residents together with a photo of a variety of colored nail polishes, nail clippers, nail files, and a candle in a pink candle holder.

Figure 5. Seaview Lodge Instagram post announcing “Beautiful nails à la glitter and glamour at Seaview Lodge.” The photo on the bottom right shows the manicure products and candle.



As with the Instagram post about face packs, only residents' hands are visible in the photos. By describing the activity in terms of "glitter and glamour," life at Seaview Lodge is contrasted to traditional images of nursing homes, which are typically associated with boredom, decline, and death (Gubrium 1975; Hicks 2000; Whitaker 2004; Carlstedt forthcoming). The distance from such grey ordinariness was something that characterized indexical expressions for spa in general. Staff members' attempts to accomplish spa activities were perhaps their way of showing that "we are going that extra mile" and "you can go to a spa even when you are old and frail." Some residents certainly understood their efforts in this way, whereas others did not even notice them, or thought them unnecessary, irrelevant, or unsuitable for older persons.

Creative Indexations

Manicures, massages, and beauty treatments all have a strong affinity with standard spa treatments, but occasionally the staff at Seaview Lodge used indexical expressions with only vague spa connotations. The residents' lack of shared spa knowledge enabled staff to take things far beyond the general notion of what a spa is, so that activities such as drinking orange juice were explicitly linked to the spa theme. Plainly, actors *with* knowledge (the staff) were able to do almost anything and call it a spa activity.

One such example was the association of spas with the senses, especially touch, taste, and smell. During my observations at Seaview Lodge, food and drinks were often part of the spa indexations, and when staff mixed fruit juice with yoghurt, they

called it a "health drink." Linda, a member of staff, explained that many of her colleagues were health conscious and drew on their healthy lifestyles to accomplish the spa theme:

Linda: So we're now talking about buying a juicer, as I think the staff will be all for it, at least in my unit here, so, there's a real awareness today, many people are making their own juices and drinking their own detox mixes and stuff. There's a lot of it about, that's what health is today; that's how many people live. That can be a bit of a spa too.

Linda finished her remarks about juicing by clarifying that "that can be a bit of a spa." Such a statement indicates a fragile indexicality that needs to be strengthened by underlining the link between a juice press and a spa. As Linda continued, she emphasized the value of getting residents to touch and hold root vegetables:

Linda: And to get the older people to join in, just to sit and hold the root vegetables and such, ginger and old beetroots or whatever you're using. It's like they no longer get to do that anymore; their food arrives all ready to eat.

Tove: Yes.

Linda: And then to join in and make different juices, to taste them. That's when you involve really all the senses. Touch and scent and taste and pleasure, and I think that has a bit of a spa feel to it, when you engage the senses. So everything can have a sport and spa angle to it.

The fact that holding a beetroot can be an indexical expression of a spa illustrates how a concept can be

defined not by fixed attributes, but by reference to distant family resemblances (Heritage 1984). Beetroot-holding is described in terms of sensitivity, and enjoyment—sensations with a family resemblance to those invoked by a spa. A professional spa would probably not use beetroots in this way, and it is questionable whether any actors outside Seaview Lodge would consider beetroot-touching an indexical expression for a spa activity. Inside the nursing home, however, the absence of shared spa knowledge paved the way for this kind of creative indexicality. Garfinkel's original version of indexicality emphasized actors' ability to use common-sense knowledge, but here we see that Linda's claim confirms that a lack of such knowledge on the part of the "hearer" enables the "speaker" to broaden the description of the phenomenon.

Conclusions

The present paper uses spa activities as an example of how activities are accomplished when some of the involved actors may lack a shared understanding of what others try to accomplish. Nursing homes are places where residents are unable to undertake everyday activities on their own, and are therefore dependent on staff and *their* versions of activities. Members' actions at Seaview Lodge were simultaneously "context-shaping" and "context-shaped." The meaning of nail polish, a candle, or a beetroot relied wholly on its context, and the nursing home's sport and spa profile guided the interpretation of actions and objects alike.

The findings make a useful contribution to Garfinkel's theories of how people understand and produce

social order, by showing the course it takes when some lack the knowledge that most take for granted. Although relevant and important, the literature on nursing homes has treated their leisure activities as something that merely exists, not as something that actors can actively shape and accomplish.

The indexical expressions identified in the study offer a novel and fruitful method for studying nursing home activities. They are also shown to be fragile, excessive, or used in creative ways when some residents lacked shared knowledge of the activity at hand. The findings also contribute to a more specific understanding of spa activities in nursing homes. It was typical of indexical spa expressions that they were portrayed as something extra, in contrast to the usual boredom and decline of nursing home life. Spa activities were thus found to offer an ostensibly ideal mix of care activities and leisure activities. When staff provided massages, facials, and relaxation they were providing bodily care, but also leisure and luxury. What this study shows, though, is that there are both challenges and opportunities in accomplishing a theme about which residents know little. There is a risk that it becomes nothing more than a facade, leaving staff free to do whatever they like, such as getting residents to handle beetroot and calling it a spa experience. And yet the findings also show that the residents' lack of knowledge opens up for creative and locally adapted versions of a spa. Whereas Garfinkel's indexicality was predicated on actors' ability to use shared knowledge, the present study shows that a lack of such knowledge enables others to widen and reshape the phenomenon or activity to be accomplished.

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