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# Chores and sense of self

## Gendered understandings of voices from older married women with dementia

*Jonas Sandberg, Associate professor, Jönköping University*

*Ingrid Hellström, Associate professor, Linköping University*

*Henrik Eriksson, Professor, The Red Cross University College*

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## *Background*

- In spite of the trajectory of the dementia the household needs to be kept going – Everyday work (Corbin & Strauss, 1988)
- Maintaining the involvement of the person with dementia by creating ways in which a sense of agency and self can be sustained (Keady, 1999)
- What one does is an important part of one's self (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Eriksson et al., 2012)
- Rituals and routines in chores make specific contributions to both creating and recreating self (Coltrane, 2000; Eriksson & Sandberg, 2008; Connell, 2009)

Despite this, no studies has focused solely on women with dementia who are living in a relationship, and their perspectives on their homes and household work from a gender perspective

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The aim was therefore to describe how older women with dementia express the importance of the home and their chores in everyday life

## *Participants*

<i>Informants (pseudonyms) N= 7</i>	<i>Age (baseline)</i>	<i>Married (years at baseline)</i>	<i>Living arrangements</i>	<i>Former occupation</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>MMSE Score (baseline)</i>
Alice	65	43	house	Accountant	4	27
Christa	71	24	apartment	Physiotherapist	3	21
Ida	84	60	apartment	Chef	3	22
Nelly	79	57	apartment	House wife	5	25
Olivia	72	47	house	Bank employee	5	23
Patricia	80	55	house	Entrepreneur	5	30
Rebecka	82	8	house	Matron	5	24

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## *Methods*

- Longitudinal design
- Qualitative interviews
- Mini Mental State Examination
- Telephone
- Secondary analysis

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## *Findings*

- Keeping the core of self through the home
- Keeping the self through polarising division of labour
- Keeping the self through (re-)negotiations

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## *Keeping the core of self through the home*

- The home had a great importance for the informants' sense of self
- When the social life diminishes, the home core remained
- The home is a safe place where everything is familiar

*Patricia: I use to walk around between the rooms [in the house] thinking how nice it is to be able to remain at home as long as it works.*

- After a move to a nursing home, the core of the home is lost (no possibilities to perform household tasks, the kitchen is unfamiliar, no laundry room)

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## *Keeping the self through polarising division of labour*

- Between the couples, there seem to be a clear division between the garden chores and the house chores
  - *Alice: My husband helps me a lot, but you understand that baking, you know, that's nothing for a man.*
- It is important to still be able to be in charge in the kitchen
- The division of labour has an impact on the role, and the role is important for the self-core
- Describing husbands as “handymen” reinforces the different responsibilities in the household



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## *Keeping the self through (re-)negotiations*

- Different household chores seemed to have diverging meanings and less important for the wives with dementia (driving, household finances, grocery shopping)
- Chores like cooking and baking were re-negotiated and somehow still upheld

*Alice: It can very well be this with baking that I'm a bit afraid of it, yes, and these recipes, yes, but now it is like this, that my daughter has a nice mother-in-law [...], and she has been here and helped me, and has been a couple of times.*

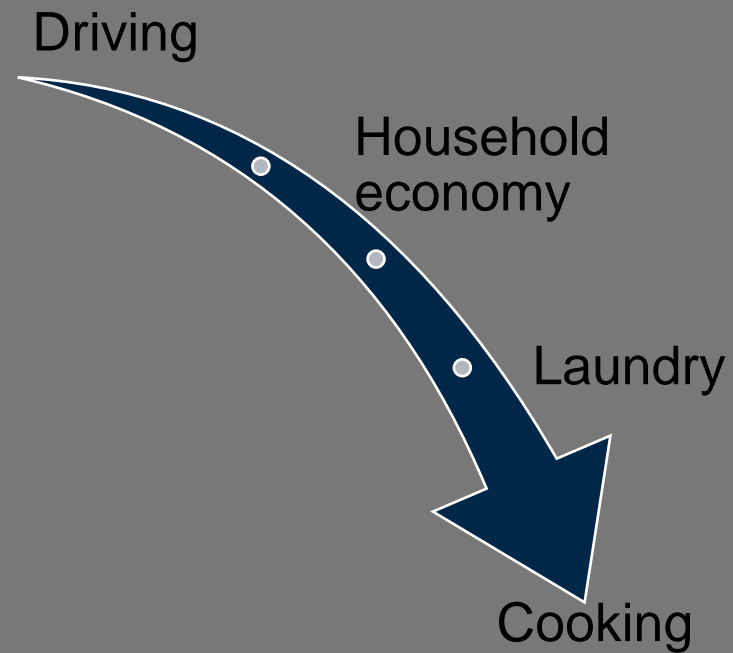
Even when help is needed - preparing coffee and warm up the store-bought buns and not being able to find or handle the microwave oven in the kitchen - Nelly presented herself as being competent in performing household chores!

# FROM THE VIEW OF WOMEN WITH DEMENTIA

Division



Handing over



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## *Discussion*

- The findings suggests that the home shrinks, with the stove as ‘the last bastion’
- The importance of maintaining a sense of self and a gender identity
- Sense of self and gender identity are upheld and supported by household chores
- Importance of gender sensitivity in nursing theory and nursing practice

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*What does this research add to existing knowledge?*

- Maintaining gender roles can be a means of enhancing the sense of self
- Maintaining involvement in everyday life is a way to stay connected to former social roles

*What are the implications of this knowledge for nursing care with older people?*

- Staff need insights into how gender may impact marital relationships in dementia
- Staff need to acknowledge that the experience of dementia is shared between spouses

*How could the findings be used to influence policy, practice, research or education?*

- Support needs to be responsive to different understandings of gender roles
- Interdependence is a key influence for developing more appropriate and sensitive forms of support
- Research needs to address the couplehood perspective through the lens of gender

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The feeling of the home and home-related chores  
are essential ways to express who one is, or more  
specifically;

*Still being a competent wife*