

“Older people want to live at home”, an analysis of a representation coalition around a dominant image of older people

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The development of (care) technologies for elders is often accompanied by a specific discourse, which consists of several related statements like populations are ageing, the cost of care is increasing and there is a shortage of staff to care for elders. A central claim in this discourse is that elders prefer to live in their own homes as long as possible. Elders living at home is also seen as a more cost effective way to care for elders and as a way of combating the growing shortage of places in retirement and care homes. Elders living at home is thus positioned as a win-win situation which can be made possible with the help of specific technologies.

This paper analyzes the role of the ‘elders want to live at home’ user representation in the development, introduction and use of an ambient intelligent monitoring system for elders with dementia or other severe illnesses. This monitoring system was designed with the specific intention to allow elders to live in their homes safely despite their illnesses. This paper will show that the actors involved in the design and use of the monitoring system – such as the designers, the care institution, the care workers, the elders themselves and their children – all attached different meanings and goals to the monitoring system. Despite these multiple interpretations, all actors agreed on the idea that elders want to live at home and that this wish can be fulfilled by introducing new technologies. Thus the actors formed what can be called a representation coalition around the idea of elders wanting to live at home. This coalition was further strengthened by the ideographical properties of the representation of elders as wanting to live at home. This representation is easily recognized as a good thing and it is hard to argue against it.

However, even though all actors are united around this representation of elders, it does not follow that the introduction of the technology leaves the everyday live practices of elders unchanged. This paper will thus proceed to analyze how the practices of elders changed when the system was introduced. It will be shown that what the home actually *is*, is reconfigured on a physical, virtual and emotional level as a result of the introduction of the system. The elders did get to stay at home, but it was not the same home. However, such reconfigurations do not receive much attention. The representation coalition and the ideographical connotations of elders living at home combine to present elders living at home as the ideal situation which is not up for discussion.

In conclusion, it will be argued that it is important to consider these reconfigurations because they have an influence on how the home and the use of technology is experienced. This will become increasingly important as in the future the homes of elders will likely be equipped with more and more technology and as living at home until death might no longer be the preferred option, but the only option.