

Care robots all along: the increasingly mislabeled role of therapists and caregivers in tailoring robots to disabled and aged people's needs.

The dissemination of care robots, conceived as an innovative answer to address increasing care staff shortage and the burden of older adults' relatives in aging societies, remains limited so far, despite a strikingly growing number of experiments conducted with various subgroups of people 'with special needs', and ambitious political plans and programs to foster their development and implementation. A growing body of ethnographic literature related this slow pace to an enduring contrast between promises of robots' autonomy and adaptiveness, and their enduring 'functional limitations and social awkwardness' (Jeon et al., 2020), especially when their users are care recipients suffering from various kinds and levels of impairment.

Conversely, the refining and updating of mainstream, often non-professional historical accounts of care robotics still lags behind. Drawing on a threefold comparative analysis of projects led in the US, Japan and France, this contribution pursues a double objective : first, showing that embedding robotic systems in care institutions, practices and the daily routines of frail people is as old a concrete endeavor as automating factories (1960s), and implied close collaboration between engineers, orthotists, rehabilitation medicine doctors and occupational therapists, and 'traditional' industrial robots' suppliers.

Secondly, it contends that the multifaceted contribution of aforementioned therapists in the design and fine-tuning of care robots, as well as the unwavering support provided by caregivers to users at front-line (during tests in ecological conditions), have been gradually neglected, 'mislabeled' (Laveaga, 2023), then overshadowed by project managers and their sponsors. I suggest this process partially stems from a reconfiguration of human-robot intimacy, as the main focus of interest in care robotics shifted from physically assistive devices for disabled users to 'socially' assistive 'companions' for older adults.

Finally, on the basis of a selection of old and recent projects fully appreciative of final users, therapists and caregivers' expertise and competences (Staros and Rubin, 1978; Lacey and MacNamara, 2000 ; Azenkot, Feng and Cakmak, 2016), it advocates for a renewed 'radical participatory approach', re-actualizing former practices and reforming hierarchical structures in care robots' making.

References:

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