

Imagining Care Robots at a Dementia Station Or: Wishing for a Unicorn

Abstract

Whereas innovative technologies are mostly imagined in factories, or other large industries, professions described as being “people oriented” are often not associated with “high-end technologies”. However, recently more and more robots are getting designed and used for social purposes or as companions in the care sector. STS scholars hereby highlight, how care and technology are not distinct, but deeply intertwined. This includes caring with and for technologies, such as robotic bathtubs, tele care devices, and care robots such as PARO. Following a technofeminist framework, I aim to steer a path between techno-optimist and techno-pessimist accounts and thereby offering a nuanced perspective, while looking for emancipatory potentials, especially with respect to working conditions. These potentials are approached by taking into account the nurses’ *situated knowledges* and their experiences. Based on the nurses’ experiences with care, the robotic harp seal PARO, and further technologies they encounter in their private and working lives, I raise the question: ***How do nurses in a care centre imagine potential fields of activity or application areas of robots in their working environment (in the future)?*** The nurses interviewed for this thesis work at a dementia station in a modern care center. This is also where the interviews took place during their working time. The interviews were semi structured and oriented towards the ethnographic interview style. All interviews were transcribed and coded with the open source program RQDA, following a thematic coding and grounded theory approach. In my thesis, I demonstrate how the nurses’ manifold experiences shape their imaginaries about and wishes of care robots in their work environment. With respect to the nurses’ conceptualization of care, I found that they deem it as crucial that the resident’s autonomy can be maintained and that their individuality can be accounted for. The application of a robot is seen as useful, if it is time-saving for the nurses and/or improving the quality of caregiving in relation to what they see as good care, as is the case with PARO. It has also been noted, that slowness is a crucial characteristic for good care. Further, the nurses emphasize that robots performing mundane tasks should not withdraw social interaction from the residents. As an overview of my results, I compiled a *wish list*, which consists of the nurses’ wishes regarding robots at their workspace. This list comprises robots such as cleaning robots, transportation robots, medicine dispenser robots, “robotic clerks”, and entertainment robots. Hereby it does not matter to them, if the technology is in fact a robot. In line with the roots of participatory design, namely the active role of trade unions, I argue that nurses’ considerations and wishes need to be taken into account when designing care devices, such as care robots. Further, I emphasize that robots should be actively shaped by the ones affected by them, especially the ones working *with* them.