



# Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

## DEBATE

### **Navigating Mediated Kinship and Care in Our Aging Futures**

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 45, No 2 (2024), pp. 96-100

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2024.549



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**DEBATE****Navigating Mediated Kinship and Care in Our Aging Futures**

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Nearly three decades after Marilyn Strathern suggested the implications of innovation at birth, today, we are also grappling with technology's impact on later life. A cornerstone of aging-in-place – the kinship of family, friends, and neighbours – has been further mediated by devices and systems that increasingly define care beyond its historical organisation and practices. As assemblages of technologies have become essential to how and to whom we care, within this debate, I agree with Marilyn's assertion of a future and imaginary seemingly trapped by artifice and present choice. In considering how new forms of kinship can serve us in realising "desirable" futures, I interconnect several dialogues that provide critical perspectives on our entrapment: how narratives of aging are being mirrored by artificial intelligence (AI), the subversion of preconceptions through friction, and a relational approach to the kinships of tomorrow. For each, I draw on a design anthropology perspective to question the dominant practice of care technology design and our understanding of the morality behind care work and reflect on the depth and aspirations so many have for aging-in-place. In negotiating the passive, convenient, and frictionless forms of care on offer, I consider how relations will form into the future, how we might gain foresight about the aging-in-place needs of different generations and hope to highlight how we could engage with new forms of agency in care relations that reflect the messy and mundane realities of aging in place.

Without a doubt, populations worldwide are changing and aging on a trajectory with increasing speed and consequences. Policy and cultural values have, across the West, seen the need for those in later life to remain at home, to age in place with independence and increased quality of life. As we continue to see the need and want for aging-in-place, making these desirable futures possible has come with a discourse of medically-framed and technology-driven care. While we increasingly realise how imagery of later life shapes the design of technologies for older adults, efforts to arrest stigmatisation, such as an over-emphasis on cognitive and physical aging, remain limited (Sheahan 2022). Current discourse is captured by dogma: images of robotically assisted and real-time monitored aging articulate transactional relationships between peoples and machines that appear inevitable. As highlighted before the millennium (Strathern 1995), technical innovation appeared to invite us to think innovatively – then about how persons are born and the relatives to whom they are born, and now about how they will live out their last days – yet potential imaginaries remain caught up in derivative discussion. Not only do I want to call attention to how we might get out of this snare, but also to the new ways stigmatising and determinist thinking are being reinforced.

On this latter point, I want to call attention to the notion that many of our narratives are now being constructed and reinforced by emergent technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence. In my own explorative work, we have examined the implications of AI-generated stories of later life and care

technologies. Collaborating with designers and older participants, 'Care Futures' told eight short stories that depicted a scenario of aging and care, of which the design team wrote four, and four more were generated using ChatGPT (Liu et al. 2023). Acting as provocations of potential interactions with technology that provides care, the stories offered insights into how AI acts as a mirror unto our world (Figure 1). In contrasting AI and designer-crafted narratives, we saw how generative technologies seek to humanise care systems, telling tales of robots pondering ethical dilemmas or developing keen empathy for those in their care. Meanwhile, the designers' stories focused more on cultural practices and sensitivities, expressing nuance but often paralleling the AI's perspective. Across each scenario, we further documented a sense of inevitability around technologies' central role in care within participants' lifetimes, that the scenes portrayed reflect expected, though perhaps unwanted, futures. The metaphor of AI as a mirror is essential here, as while looking into it, we believe we see a clear and accurate reflection; in truth, it is thinner, and we might ignore what it occludes and cannot capture (Vallor 2022). Mirrors struggle to embody human presence, can distort representations, and erase or soften what they portray at the edges. Acting as mirrors, the stories would reinforce the dogma participants held and elicit only specific care relations with robots and systems that spoke to the determinist view we seek to call out. Here, we can observe the growing role of artifice in reconfiguring our understanding of relationality and care. Such exploratory work highlights that we increasingly need to reconsider the forms of kinship available in later life or be beholden to technologically driven expressions of it.

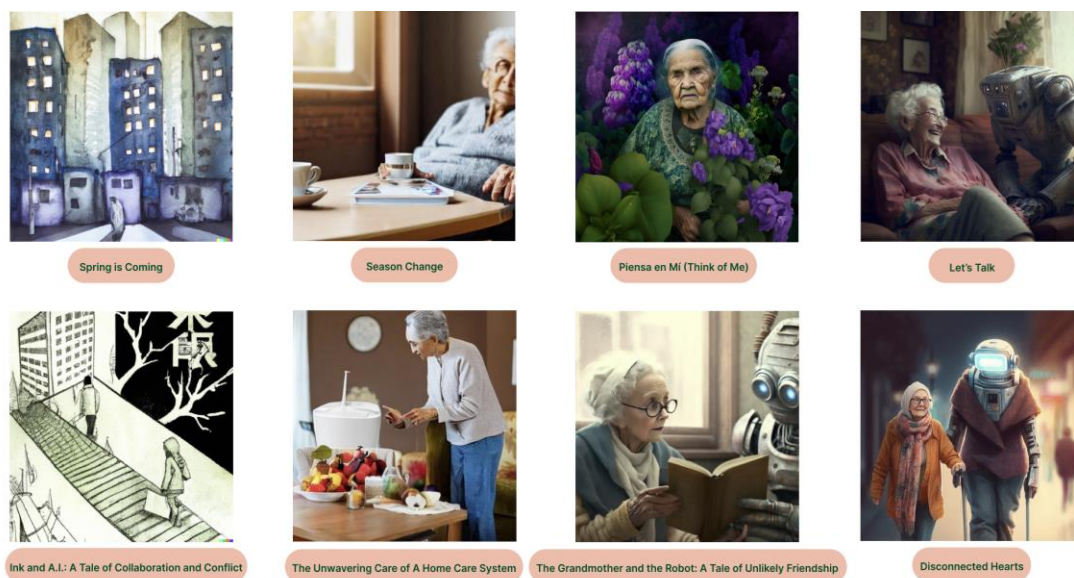


Figure 1: Generated aging and care stories (Liu et al. 2023)

Given an underlying effort to realise 'desirable' futures and the level to which emerging kinship is technologically mediated, realising ways to understand and shape how relations form becomes a central concern. For example, consider the plethora of monitoring and tracking systems that offer passive, convenient, and frictionless forms of caring. Driven by a concern for help in home and aged care settings, these systems realise absent and monitoring-based relations, providing effortless assistance for carers to check in or companionship through the surrogacy of robotic pets (Priday & Pedell 2020). Such interventions imagine aging-in-place as a space where disconnected and arms-length relations exist and are supported through the latest innovations. When built around this focus on illness and disease that has been a common framing for care within the aging-in-place context, care is broken into distinct problems of deficits, burden, and labour, entwined with the emotional, physical, and financial cost of caring. Much of the work of design technologists has been focused on limiting and reducing this burden,

seeking to reduce the complexity and increase the efficiency of care work (Vines et al. 2015). This has long been the bread and butter of interventions into later life, leading to dominant narratives around the inherent benefits of the digital and the importance of technology-driven change. Yet, within the context of care, reducing or eliminating interactions might not offer the care futures or kinship many of us aspire to and could instead reduce the quality and expertise necessary for the depth and intimacy of care we seek.

Understanding the implications and limitations of our care relations and, where necessary, subverting dominant practices and narratives of aging and care is an essential spanner in our 'futuring' toolbox. Within design circles, this can be seen in the troubling of our preconceptions around friction in the user experience (broadly, the things that keep someone from accomplishing a desired action on a website or app). Such 'inefficiencies' are being appreciated for their potential benefits; in contexts of security, automotive, and healthcare, a more balanced understanding can lead to more informed decision-making. Specifically, employing minimal obstacles intended to support user reflection or a less productive approach can enable more considered and memorable experiences (Cox et al. 2016; Mejtøft et al. 2019). Re-engaging, particularly in relation to kinship, the difficult, complicated, and thoughtful qualities of friction can pose potentially radical departures to our increasingly restrictive understandings of how we relate and connect with the technologies that populate our lives. Friction can be described as the sticky engagements that often foster and further kinship between peoples and the more-than-human, from the time spent together to the work of navigating difficult times. Here, I do note that while illustrating the potential to enable more mindful and conscious decision-making, these practices also walk a fine line between useful and restrictive forms. In truth, such subverting and troubling opens a new dialogue that explores the ethical and moral implications of the futures we envision and the unintended consequences of leaving speculation to others. Teasing out useful, considered forms of friction could stimulate new forms of agency in care relationships, now and into the future.

Similar to drawing on the support of a daughter, brother, or neighbour, each act of care and relationship we involve machines in can have unintended consequences if left unattended. This positioning helps us recognise no intervening technology has benefits without cost, nor can the enhancement or improvement of care conditions be a straightforward endeavour. To understand if and how innovation can build trust and solidarity through kinship, we might consider a care ethics perspective that addresses the ethical and affective implications. Here, feminist scholars can help us orientate to how kinship forms through the attentiveness, responsibilities, competencies, and reciprocity of care it enables (Tronto 2015), or the labour/work, affect/affections, ethics/politics care engenders (de la Bellacasa 2017). As various wearables, home monitoring systems, and robotic assistants become acceptable members of care networks, concern for how these devices might improve attentiveness but reduce competencies needs to become a much more explicit consideration. Perhaps care is a context in which design friction appears promising because, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) suggests, caring for something is more complicated than just being concerned about it. Engaging in care kinship requires active engagement in everyday tasks alongside maintenance or improvement on a longer timescale. Matters of care continue to reflect the complexity integral to kinship, that of our co-existence with fauna, flora, and the things created by technology and cultures. While this complicates an ecology of care, it can release kinship from the limiting relations associated with intervening and monitoring. The prospect of examining the kinship that enables aging-in-place by looking into the morality and friction of everyday relations is that we can better frame our discourse around what desirable or successful care looks like.

In envisioning such aging and care futures, there is both a speculative and predictive drive to realise how relations will form into the future that needs to be balanced. To break away from the contemporary trappings of artifice, there is a need to inspire provocative thinking but also to recognise that our imaginaries often diverge greatly from the eventual realities, and are not evenly distributed, particularly in the face of everyday messiness (Bell and Dourish 2007). Anthropological future-making has often played in the space of radical reimagining, yet increasingly needs to connect the aspirations for tomorrow with the issues that arrest us today. Hopes for later life are not limited to those past retirement but affect each generation that has been and will come, with the ongoing need to creatively connect desires for our futures with the decisions we make on our care now. What design friction and care ethics provide are ways of deeply reconnecting with the realities of today – subverting seamless and morally ambiguous kinship – that can help individuals make decisions in the now for later. As we engage and build on rituals and traditions and learn from the past, so envisioning future kinships should be a process of forecasting and backcasting what aging-in-place can become.

Efforts to understand these new forms of kinship are essential to realising the implications of our future care relations and recognising the long-term change of mediated care beyond today's techno-cultural zeitgeist. As Strathern (1995) highlights in "Future Kinship and the Study of Culture," we now live in a world that makes the ability to subvert the boundaries between bodies and machines easier than ever, and understandably, we struggle with this reality as it relates to later life. Our culture sees technology as enabling; it is becoming essential within the realms of kinship in later life to question what it is enabling. As a designer, I am increasingly aware that the way in which we perceive and intervene in the life worlds of older people is built around distorted images and narratives, now fuelled by the generative powers of artificial intelligence. As societies continue to see the value in aging-in-place as a key tool for managing the complexities and costs of an aging population, efforts to elicit where and how kinship manifests through cultures and relations with technologies of care are needed to help us to probe the role of friction, morality, and ourselves in realising more "desirable" futures.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Legal & General Group (research grant to establish the independent Advanced Care Research Centre at University of Edinburgh). The funder had no role in conduct of the study, interpretation, or the decision to submit for publication. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Legal & General.

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