Social Roles and Role Expectations: Understanding Older Adults' Support Practices

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Abstract

With the increasing proportion of older adults, several concepts and strategies have been developed that address civic engagement (to release pressure from formal institutional care) in terms of providing and strengthening informal support within older adult's local communities. In a three-year research project, we aim at developing an online platform mediating the mutual organization of local informal care by empowering older adults to not only *receive* but also *provide* support. However, to inform the development of such platforms and designing for (social) interactions, we first need to better understand what it is actually about when providing ('give') and receiving ('take') support. From both perspectives, the identification of social roles is critical, as they are an essential part of our everyday life and used to accomplish goals within a community. Both 'sides' have (role) expectations, i.e., how to act towards one another. By applying interpretative role analyses, we extracted different social roles and their relating role expectations to facilitate an understanding of both sides to make their expectations fit best for sustainable and satisfying support exchange.

Author Keywords

Social roles; older adults; local support practices

Introduction & Motivation

Ageing in place [8] is a concept that is increasingly emphasized as a preferable alternative to formal institutional care. One possibility to prolong ageing in respective homes is to organize on-site support for older adults by strengthening informal care. We address ageing in place within a research project [5] that aims at developing an online platform to mediate informal care activities in local communities, thereby contributing to older adults' quality of life, autonomy and participation in social life.

Our work addresses older adults with mild impairments (e.g., restricted mobility), who could benefit from *receiving* support for certain daily activities (e.g., carrying shopping bags) and reciprocally *offer help* in other domains (e.g., do some ironing). Thereby, within our entire research activities, we emphasize that care is not only about helping with daily activities such as eating, moving etc. but *"… making life more than a vegetative process by communicating with others, maintaining human relationships, learning, working and playing, or recreating"* ([9], p.26). Mutual support exchange is already an important aspect of many older adults' daily lives and is, in most cases, embedded in different forms of offline communities. We want to better understand and learn from these agreed-upon practices and how they are situated within their respective local communities.

In our research, we engage in questions, such as, what kind of resources (e.g., time) are shared/exchanged, how older adults currently exchange support and thereof share resources within their local communities. We want to understand what it is actually about to give & take support, what roles older adults' take over when receiving and providing support, or what role expectations they have towards the execution of these practices. In the following, we will shortly describe the study, the identified social roles and the relating (theoretical & methodological) approach for extracting them.

Social Roles of Support Exchange in Local Communities

Our Study

One researcher visited three end user organizations (i.e., residential homes, a network for voluntary work, and a network empowering the older generation) in three different German speaking European countries for one week each. Situated interviews, on-site observations and user workshops were carried out with 15 older adults representing the generation 60+ (having mild impairments and receiving help).

Theoretical Framing

In order to investigate the above-mentioned questions, we grounded our research in the symbolic interactionist tradition of *social role theory* ([3], [10]), since its micro-perspective particularly reflects on role emergence through social interaction and negotiation as it is carried out in local support practices. Roles can be defined as cultural objects that are *"real insofar as they are recognized, accepted, and used to accomplish pragmatic interactive goals in a community"* ([3], p. 232). Role *expectations* are considered being the major generators of roles and learned by individuals through experiences [2]. For example, expectations of behavior and action are useful, as they imply knowledge about how to act towards others [7]. According to Dahrendorf [4], three main types can be distinguished 1) 'can', 2) 'shall', and 3) 'must' expectations, imposing different
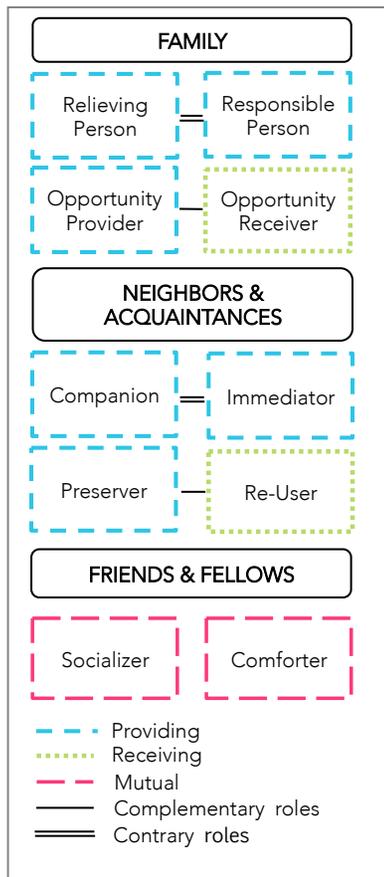
Figure 1. Identified social roles dependent on relevant social setting.

kinds of sanctions (i.e., positive, negative, or both) if (not) satisfactory accomplished [4].

Methodological Grounding
A large part of HCI research on social roles focuses on structural aspects individuals possess due to their actions in *online* environments (e.g., [11], [1]). Most of these investigations neglect the social grounding of these interactions in the offline world what would be essential, as offline social networks have a significant impact on online role construction, enactment and vice versa [11]. By means of interpretative role analysis [7], we identified 10 social roles embedded within existing support exchange practices based on the role *expectations* older adults have towards each other in the *real world* (i.e., 'must', 'shall', and 'can' expectations) [4]. Our analytical process included three steps: (1) content analysis to identify local support practices, (2) the assignment of role expectations, and (3) grounding of clustered practices and expectations in relevant social settings.

Identified Roles
A compact summary of our investigation is provided in Figure 1, in terms of illustrating the identified social roles, their social grounding as well as the relations (i.e., complementary or contrary) we found between those role types. In the following we provide a brief description of each role:

- *Relieving Person:* provides support that is motivated by reducing stress on the family (e.g., babysit)
- *Responsible Person:* provides support as it is seen as an obligation towards the family (e.g., care of impaired relatives)
- *Opportunity Provider:* provides support to the family to foster social engagement

- *Opportunity Receiver:* receives 'on the fly' support from the family
- *Companion:* provides support to 'everyone' at any time
- *Immediator:* provides support in immediate and spontaneous situations (little time resources)
- *Preserver:* supports in sustaining materialistic resources
- *Re-User:* receives materialistic resources
- *Socializer:* supports social inclusion on a reciprocal basis (e.g., organizing events)
- *Comforter:* provides and receives emotional support on a reciprocal basis (e.g., consoling each other in difficult times)

On basis of our identified social roles, we were able to extract several implications that we consider critical for designing an online (support) community. First, we found the strength of expectations to be a central characteristic for support practices. When seeking mutual support, the strength of expectations has to be *equal* for both parties to facilitate satisfying support practices (i.e., a 'shall' expectation may not be satisfied with a 'can' support). A second critical aspect is the possibility to find or match people that complement each other in providing and receiving support (i.e., complementary roles). Third, it is critical for the emergence of relationships that they are reciprocally balanced. For example, our identified role of the Socializer incorporates the characteristic of balanced 'giving and taking'. Fourth, our research has shown the significance of time investments (i.e., frequency and duration of support) to organize and regulate time-resources needed for a balanced giving and taking. We assume that a successful mediation and matching of these specific role characteristics online, supports the creation of meaningful relationships in the offline world.

Conclusion

Our research contributes to a deeper understanding of offline social roles and their inherent characteristics by particularly analyzing role expectations (i.e., perception data) and, thereby, addresses the absence of such data in studying online communities that do *not overlap* with local communities [11]. Our interpretative approach to analyze the content and context of local informal care proved to be a valuable basis to discover offline practices of support exchange, which indicated older adults' role use and revealed role types in such practices. This approach is useful in understanding social roles and the social surroundings (e.g., local communities) in which these roles develop [6]. Our approach enabled us to model support exchange under the theoretical lens of social roles, what we believe can contribute to a broader discourse on exchange models in general.

We stress the importance of users' perceptions to study social roles, as they are needed to avoid disappointment or even negative sanctioning, when expectations are not met. Additionally, knowing the expectations of one's counterpart may also imply positive 'sanctions' [4], when successfully met in the local. On basis of our identified roles, we consider (1) the strength of expectations, (2) complementary role matching, (3) balanced relationships, and (4) the duration and frequency of support as key elements to be considered when developing an online (support) community for older adults.

We argue that social roles, as an analytical tool to identify roles, but also the concept of social roles and its theoretical and practical implications, have strong potential to contribute to the discourse on give & take, models of exchange and sustaining communities by making role expectations of both sides fit their needs.

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