Title
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Aging in Place: Smith, Media Texts and the Invisible Gendered Caregiver

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a hidden variable underlying the recent phenomena of “aging in place.” That variable is the degree to which aging in place relies on women’s caregiving. Seeking to understand the connection between aging in place and gendered caregiving, and to explore the effects of aging in place on the social condition of women caregivers, this paper utilizes a feminist theoretical perspective presented by Dorothy E. Smith to examine popular texts on aging in place. Smith suggested that texts are means by which the male dominated relations of ruling exercise power over women by patterning the actual daily existence of women’s lives (Smith 1990). Adopting this foundation, this paper considers texts on aging in place with the objective of learning how the texts pattern the aging in place process and how the process creates and reproduces power over women and maintains gender inequality. Popular texts on aging in place describe the process as one that both provides independence and can be independently achieved. By ignoring and devaluing the work of caregivers involved in the aging in place process, these texts ultimately work to reproduce women’s financial disadvantages and limit women’s participation in positions of power.
As the U.S. population ages, there has been an increased focus on living arrangements for older adults. Nationwide surveys have revealed that a majority of Americans want to remain in their homes as they age (AARP 1993; AARP 2000), a phenomenon called *aging in place* (Paslatan 1990). However, there is a significant issue that complicates the aging in place approach—the issue of care. Research suggests that an estimated 95% of older adults aging in place rely fully or in part on care provided by family and friends, with the bulk of this informal¹ caregiving being provided by women (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Uhlenberg and Cheuk 2008). Caring for elderly aging in place has social and economic costs, and the gendered nature of caregiving makes these outcomes especially detrimental for women (Calasanti and Slevin 2001).

Despite the negative consequences for caregivers, individual and political support for aging in place continues to grow (AARP 1993; Golant 2008). Dorothy E. Smith suggests that the ruling apparatuses of society, such as government, finance, etc. lead and organize day to day social existence through the various *texts* they create (1990). These texts are based on patriarchal ideologies and thus organize society in ways that often *do not account for the experiences of women*. This paper uses Smith’s critical insight to demonstrate that depictions of aging in place in newspaper texts fail to account for the experiences of women caregivers, and instead pattern aging in place through male dominated experiences and ideologies. It concludes with a discussion of how these texts reproduce women’s social and financial disadvantages.

**Relations of Ruling and Gender Inequality**

Over the past twenty years Dorothy E. Smith has developed a powerful feminist theory based on the premise that women are excluded from the ruling apparatus of society. She labels this the *relations of ruling* and contrasts it with the *local or lived actuality* of the daily world (1974), adding that the

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¹ Formal caregiving, or paid home care, is also important, but its exclusive use is much less common. For example, a recent study found that only 7.8 percent of Medicare beneficiaries use only formal care for their home care needs (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2008).
relations of ruling pattern the local world through the varied texts (print, film, etc.) it produces. The gendered division between the *relations of ruling* and the *lived actuality* means that forces organizing society and its knowledge are not gender neutral and often do not account for the experiences of women (Smith 2005; 1990).

Aging in place occurs in the local world of daily existence, however, according to Smith’s framework, its social structure is patterned by the relations of ruling and mediated through texts. If the texts demonstrate tendencies regarding their presentation of aging in place, including its relationship to caregiving, then these tendencies are theoretically relevant to an understanding of how society views aging in place.

**Background**

Though recent policy initiatives\(^2\) have pushed states to assist older adults in aging in place (Shirk 2006; Golant 2008), those aging in place still receive comparatively less services than elderly in institutions (Doyle and Timonen 2007; AARP 2008). Government programs that provide insufficient funds or services necessary for aging in place transfer the responsibility for, and costs of aging in place to families, especially to the women who provide care (Harrington Meyer 2005).

Women comprise nearly three quarters of all informal elderly caregivers and 80 percent of those that provide constant care—40 hours or more per week (Calassanti and Slevin 2001; Pruchno 2000). The burden of care forces many employed women to reduce their hours (Stone 2006) or drop out of the labor force entirely (Johnson and Lo Sasso 2006). In such cases, women lose income (Cancian and Oliker 2000) and may have reduced Social Security benefits making them particularly vulnerable in their own old age (Harrington Meyer 2005). Inequalities in caregiving responsibilities have limited women’s economic independence, resulting in women’s lower economic status and higher rates of poverty (Hooyman and Gonyea 1995).

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\(^2\) For example, the Older Americans Act of 2006, the Medicaid Home and Community-Based waiver program and the Real Choice Systems Change Grants.
Concern for the costs of care has been a cornerstone of feminist caregiving literature (Cancian and Oliker 2000; Hooyman and Gonyea 1995), however that concern is largely absent from the gerontological literature on aging in place. A thorough review found no direct references to gendered caregiving and only one reference to family caregiving, which noted that aging in place can have adverse effects on the health of family members providing care (Horner and Boldy 2008). Failure to address the issue of women’s labor in aging in place perpetuates the invisibility of their work and may lead policymakers to underestimate the amount of social and financial support necessary for aging in place.

**Methods**

To provide an analysis of the way Smith’s theory of texts and gender inequality applies to aging in place, newspaper articles discussing aging in place were collected and subjected to qualitative content analysis. The sample of 91 newspaper articles was derived by first typing the phrase “aging in place” into the Lexis Nexis newspaper database and limiting results to articles in U.S. newspapers between 1999 and 2008. A random ten percent sample was selected from the original set of articles.

A priori codes were developed using Smith’s theory as a framework. The codebook recorded who was discussing aging in place; how it was described (main themes and ideas); and any discussions of care and caregiving. The main findings are presented here beginning with an analysis of the missing element of care.

**Aging in Place and Care**

Only 12 articles from the sample mention caregiving; of these, only two discuss the informal care needs of elderly who are aging in place, and only one article specifically mentions care provided by a woman. Of these 12, half mention care only in the context of home building or home remodeling, such as: “the continued interest in greater accessibility [in home remodeling] is being driven by
baby boomers … who are caring for aging parents or relatives (Heavens 2007). Though these texts mention caregiving, their focus is on the need for home design or remodeling rather than on the need for care.

What seemed to emerge from the textual discussions of caregiving is that informal care is a ‘given’ within the system of care and does not need to be addressed or compensated. For example, when discussing the process of an elderly care-needs assessments one article states “if the person is unable to do the laundry or vacuuming, but an adult child or other person comes and takes the laundry ever week and does the cleaning, those are problems that no longer have a need.” ‘Problem solved’ statements such as this one hide the work involved in caregiving, as well as the social and economic consequences of providing such care.

**Aging in Place and Home Construction**

Instead of caregiving, the focus of most articles is on the home building or remodeling needed for aging in place. Many articles went so far as to present aging in place as synonymous with home redesign, such as “the whole concept of aging in place is that you would build...or remodel a home so that it could work for you and your family in time” (Cogswell 2007). By depicting aging in place simply as home modification, these texts present aging in placed as a one-time process that can be done with just the help of a contractor.

A key concept that emerged from the discussions of home modifications was CAPS, which refers to Certified Aging in Place Specialist and is a designation created by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) in conjunction with AARP. According to the CAPS brochure, and echoed in many of the articles, “aging in place means remaining in one’s home safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income or ability level” (NAHB 2008). The idea is that regardless of care needs, with enough home modifications anyone can age in place safely and comfortably.
These same discussions often stressed the economic savings gained from home modifications. For example, one article argued: “for the price of a few months in an assisted living facility, [older adults] can hire a contractor to swap out their door knobs...or widen their doorways so a wheelchair can pass through” (Jarvik and Collins 2008). Yet, both in this example and in others, there is no mention of who will provide the care that is otherwise available in an assisted living facility, nor of the costs of attaining that care through private services. In these examples, aging in place is simply a tool for marketing home modification services, and some articles even addressed it as so stating that “aging in place is obviously a growing market,” (Logue 2005).

Descriptions of aging in place as a market demonstrate that the texts are not accounting for the daily lived experience of aging in place, but instead for its role in the macroeconomic complex—it’s role in the relations of ruling.

**Aging in Place and Independence**

Aging in place was frequently described as the most important means for maintaining personal independence, with many texts including ‘independence’ as the cornerstone of their definition of aging in place. The articles also present aging in place as a way to maintain economic independence, emphasizing the personal savings when compared to institutional care. Yet presenting aging in place as a means to independence hides the reality that most older adults will have care needs in which they must in fact *depend* on others regardless of where they are aging.

Furthermore, aging in place is presented as a means of increasing older American’s independence from the government and was frequently praised for reducing health care costs associated with assisted-living facilities and nursing homes. Yet aging in place is not an inherently cost-saving mechanism. As mentioned earlier, elderly aging in place receive significantly fewer services than those in institutional care. Aging in place is less costly simply because governments pay for fewer services and transfer the remaining burden to caregivers.
Discussion

Overall, texts on aging in place demonstrate a heavy emphasis on the home construction and remodeling market and much less on care or caregiving. As the largest group involved in discussions of aging in place, men in the home construction and remodeling industries are shaping popular understandings of aging in place based on their own experiences of the process. They paint a picture of aging in place where with the help of a CAPS remodeling expert, any older person can achieve and maintain complete independence as they age simply through home modifications. By implying that home modifications are all that is needed for aging in place the texts ignore the caregiving needs of those aging in place, and in so doing devalue the work of the women providing this care.

Furthermore, describing aging in place as the best way to maintain personal and financial independence—while ignoring the costs incurred by informal caregivers and / or the costs of paying for formal in-home care—leads to an irrational and romanticized view of aging in place. This idealized view promotes a system of elderly-care that retains women as caregivers and limiting their ability to advance outside of the home; essentially promoting aging in place maintains women in the local actuality and limits their ability to participate in the relations of ruling. Limited access to the ruling apparatuses of society maintains women’s lower status and perpetuates gender inequality.

Lastly, discussions of aging in place as a cost-effective government care solution did not consider the uncompensated care of informal caregivers. By not including the costs of women’s care work in the total costs of aging in place, the texts devalue care work and present women’s labor as not worthy of compensation. As U.S. caregivers are not financially compensated for their labor, women who must leave paid employment or reduce their hours in order to provide care will suffer long-term financial consequences. The care work women provide for those aging in place
will negatively affect their financial future and contribute to women’s continuing financial disadvantage.

**Conclusion**

Although not an inherently negative process, aging in place, as described by newspaper texts, perpetuates gender inequality. By ignoring and devaluing the work of women caregivers, the aging in place process effectively limits women’s participation in positions of power and reproduces financial disadvantages. Acknowledging both the gendered nature of caregiving for those aging in place, as well as the enormous financial contributions of caregivers, could have important policy implications as policymakers consider the kinds and amount of societal support necessary for aging in place. As evidence suggests aging in place is beneficial for elderly individuals (Erickson and Krout 2004; Holmes et al. 2003), it is important that researchers and policymakers work together to ensure aging in place is not only beneficial to elderly, but for all those involved in the process.
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### Appendix

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