

R. Pieper. Paradigm lost: the social perspective in gerontechnology. Gerontechnology 2008:7(2):165 Gerontechnology (GT) may be characterised as a paradigm with a specific perspective and “philosophy”¹. Since the Helsinki conference in 1996, when GT achieved a first stage of conceptual, methodological and practical integration, the field has broadened its scope of issues and approaches, established itself as an interdisciplinary R&D program, and developed its scientific infrastructure documented in an own scientific journal². This development may be interpreted as a “paradigm lost”, but a broader “R&D program gained”. **Methods** The presentation will review the development of GT as reflected in the journal of the ISG, and compare especially early characterisations on the conferences in Eindhoven (1991) and Helsinki (1996) with the perspective of the latest review². The focus will be on the changing role of the social dimension in the shift from the early paradigm to the current R&D program. **Results and discussion** A social dimension in GT can be identified on a theoretical, methodological, and practical level. Social factors are typically specified in social gerontology and will appear in different roles: (a) Treating technology and gerontology as different “worlds”, social aspects are incorporated on an empirical level as background variables or input to the technological process (e.g. social context, user preferences), as aspects of use (e.g. acceptance, usability), or outcome variables (e.g. enhanced life quality, social change). (b) Social factors can be integrated into a multidisciplinary framework, system or model where the integration is on the level of the R&D design practices. (c) Social aspects can be elements of a (more or less) unified, interdisciplinary or basic theory (e.g. system theory, semiotic theory, activity theory, anthropology). (d) Social features may be introduced as normative aspects (values, ethical orientations). The early paradigm addresses all four aspects and is centred on a specific integration of (a) a normative, ethical “spirit”, (b) environmental psychology (e.g. LAWTON), (c) socio-gerontological background knowledge, (d) socio-technical systems approach, (e) participative design methods, and (f) a general social shaping approach with “systems” as the bridging concept. The current field is normatively uncommitted, diverse in theoretical and methodological approaches, and emphasising a perspective on “business management” rather than social policy. There is little concern for a unified theoretical foundation. The field is structured by an eclectic matrix of approaches and technologies¹ treating ethical and political issues (if at all) as professional ethics. One exception is a “movement” in ethnographic design, Human Computer Interaction (HCI), computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), and “experience engineering”, which introduces basic social theory into the centre of design processes^{3,4}. A new interest for emotion and “fun” in design, interactive “ambient living”, multimedia and e-learning, and a critique of “systems” sets the stage for a new framework inspired by activity theory, semiotics and communication and media theory. This approach is promising and strengthening the role of the social dimension (not only) in GT. But considering theory and practice of GT on different levels (e.g. individuals and their environment; interactions and personal relations; networks, organisations and services; regional systems of production or provision; society and global interdependence) we also argue that the approach has to be combined with other organisational, cultural, political, economical, and ethical frameworks to cover the field of GT including concrete models of user participation in different settings and ethical issues (e.g. social justice) beyond the well-being of individual users.

References

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