

Ageing in communal place: Ethnographic studies of social interaction in senior housing communities

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In this paper we adopt the position that design of social media for the elderly and virtual senior communities may be informed by studying ‘real’ senior communities. Since current research efforts target the role of social media and virtual communities for supporting seniors ageing in place, i.e. in their homes, housing communities seem a natural place to begin this enquiry. We conducted observations and informal interviews in six different senior dwellings. In this paper we present the key findings from these visits related to social interaction and the formation of communities and explicate how these findings apply to designers of social media technologies.

1 Introduction

Ageing in place refers to the ability for people to stay in their homes as they get older. It is seen as a solution to the rapid growth of the elder population and is

also the wish of many senior citizens who are too healthy to stay in nursing homes and prefer to stay longer and more autonomous in their home. However, some senior citizens experience that their social network is reduced with age as spouse and friends pass away and they risk isolation and lack of support. A rapidly growing body of research is investigating the role of assistive technologies for supporting ageing in place (for an overview, see Daniel et al 2009). The majority of these studies focus on cognitive, physical or sensory aspects where the issues of social isolation are less documented. However, attention has also recently been given to how virtual communities and social media can support the social networks of the elderly (Blit-Cohen & Litwin 2004, Fokkema & Knipscheer 2007, Karividas et al 2005, Wright 2000).

We follow this recent line of research by investigating social communities of senior citizens, who have chosen to face the challenge of growing old in their home while sustaining a social network by moving into senior housing communities. They move from their old home while they are still relatively young and in possession of personal resources, in time to create a new home where they can age in place with the company of other senior citizens.

This paper explores the work and collaboration between senior housing residents in creating a social community. As such, the paper contributes to the field of CSCW by exploring collaboration between non-professional senior residents and the non-professional work they engage in to create and sustain a social community. Within CSCW focus has traditionally been on professional work settings and the actors within them (Bjerknes et al 1987, Greenbaum & Kyng 1992). CSCW studies aimed at senior citizens in their homes therefore most often put attention to the collaboration between the elderly and their various caregivers in different settings, including the home (Brown et al 2004, Consolvo et al 2004, Nilsson & Hertzum 2005, Pinelle & Gutwin 2003). This paper takes on a broader understanding of work and includes the work involved in collaboration between non-professionals in a non-work setting.

As we will discuss in the paper, seniors actively engage in creating a social community. We point to an interrelationship between being part of a senior housing community and creating a social community. As we explore further, however, the social community is not given because of the physical proximity, but demands continuous work and collaboration between participants. Residents constitute a heterogeneous group, but they still have to agree on the normative rules of engaging in a social community. Additionally, they have to reach a balance between individual rights and collective obligations and hence the nature of the contribution to the community, which may be a challenge and the cause of conflicts.

The aim of the paper is to let the study of social network among seniors who live close to each other inform the discussion on the design of social media for elderly people. We argue that the design of social media can benefit from

mimicking physical social networks and that studying how senior citizens engage in a physical, social network will point to aspects, which are important for digital social networks as well.

Before unfolding how senior citizens engage in a social community we will give a brief introduction to the home visits of senior dwellings on which this paper is based.

2 Home visits

As part of a project on assistive technology for senior citizens living at home, we conducted a short field study focusing on senior citizens and senior dwellings. The purpose was to achieve knowledge on seniors' challenges of growing older in their homes and their reasons for choosing a senior dwelling whether the community was self-organised or institutional. Together with an expert on senior dwellings from the DaneAge Association¹ we selected six different types of senior dwellings to ensure diversity: one nursing home, one combined nursing home and senior housing community, one apartment complex for senior citizens, two senior housing communities, and one housing community for both young and senior citizens (see table I). Our paper is thus based on senior citizens who have already moved to a senior housing community and not on people who still live in their own house or apartment and who may or may not consider moving to a housing community which could have been another interesting approach.

We visited the senior dwellings in the summer of 2008. The visits were largely unstructured, but all began with a joint introduction to the senior dwelling followed by an observational guided tour to common facilities and in total 15 individual homes. We made unstructured interviews with groups of people both in connection to the joint introduction and the tour and documented the visits through comprehensive field notes and photos.

This paper is partly based on the outcome of a collaborative analysis workshop held with project partners ensuing the home visits. The aim of the workshop was to identify and thematise problem areas in regard to senior citizens and senior dwellings and to discuss future work. In the following we have, based on the original data material, explored a selection of themes from the workshop further.

¹ DaneAge Association is a non-governmental organisation primarily concerned with issues in regard to being elderly.

	Betty Sørensen Parken	Lions Park	Bellevue Park	Munksøgaard	Holbæk Seniorlandsby	Lumbylung Seniorbofællesskab
Type of housing	Nursing home and senior apartments.	Nursing home and senior housing community, apartments.	Apartment complex for senior citizens.	Housing community: senior, family, youth, apartments.	Village for senior citizens, single-family house.	Senior housing community, single-family house.
No. of homes	36 + 38	42 + 110	374	Senior: 20	46	15
No. of inhabitants	Nursing home: 36	App. 150	n.a.	Senior group: 25	81	20
Min. & max age when moving in	Not relevant.	Senior housing community: min. 60	Min. 55	Senior: min. 50 and max. 65	Min. 50	Min. 50
Mean age at time of visit	n.a.	Senior: 82	n.a.	Senior: from 55-87	70	78
Philosophy	Selfdetermination and individuality. Integration of rehabilitation in everyday activities.	Possible to move from senior housing community to nursing home. Share resources.	Possible to buy services as needs arise.	Move from one housing group to another. Age groups help each other.	Future-proof. Provide a feeling of safety. Voluntary participation in activities.	Live individually in a community. Keep an eye on each other.
Common facilities (examples)	Gym, public restaurant.	Restaurant hairdresser, gym, activity centre, kiosk.	Swimming pool, gym, library, internet café, restaurant.	Vegetable garden, kiosk, common houses, laundry.	Gym, shop, common house, café, computer room.	Common house, garden, guest room.
Common activities (examples)	Talks, bingo, dinners.	Talks, tours, concerts.	Dancing, talks, billiards.	Dinner in common house if resources. Maintenance, gardening.	Maintenance and gardening, opera club, painting classes, computer classes.	Gardening and maintenance, Sunday coffees, bicycling.

Table I: An outline of the senior dwellings visited.

3 Creating and participating in social communities

Senior housing communities are often established on the assumption that they are inherently of the good. The majority of the residents have moved to the senior dwelling primarily because they wish to be in good company and not being lonely in particular when one's spouse passes away, and secondly because they wish to move to a smaller home that not only involves less maintenance, but also allows you to share the burden with others. However, as we will explore in the following the residents need to put much effort in obtaining these advantages.

Social communities within the senior dwellings

Being part of a social network is, as mentioned, one of the main reasons for moving to a senior dwelling or housing community. From our research before the home visits and the visits themselves, we found that a common underlying assumption in the housing communities is that there is an equation mark between participation in a physical and social community; that friendships automatically develop if people live next to each other. However, we discovered that the interrelation between physical closeness and social community is far more complex as we will show in this section. Rather, establishing and participating in a social community demands much work on behalf of the involved parties and may be influenced by the physical proximity as we will show in the following three paragraphs.

Digital technologies and face-to-face communication

At one dwelling, Munksøgård, we were struck by surprise of a redundancy in information sources, which were both digital and analogue. The choice to use either digital or analogue media was not related to the skill or computer literacy of the residents, rather it was tied to the physical placement of analogue media that supported residents in meeting face to face.

All homes at Munksøgård had Internet access and there was a functioning intranet, where all activities and initiatives were announced. Most residents would

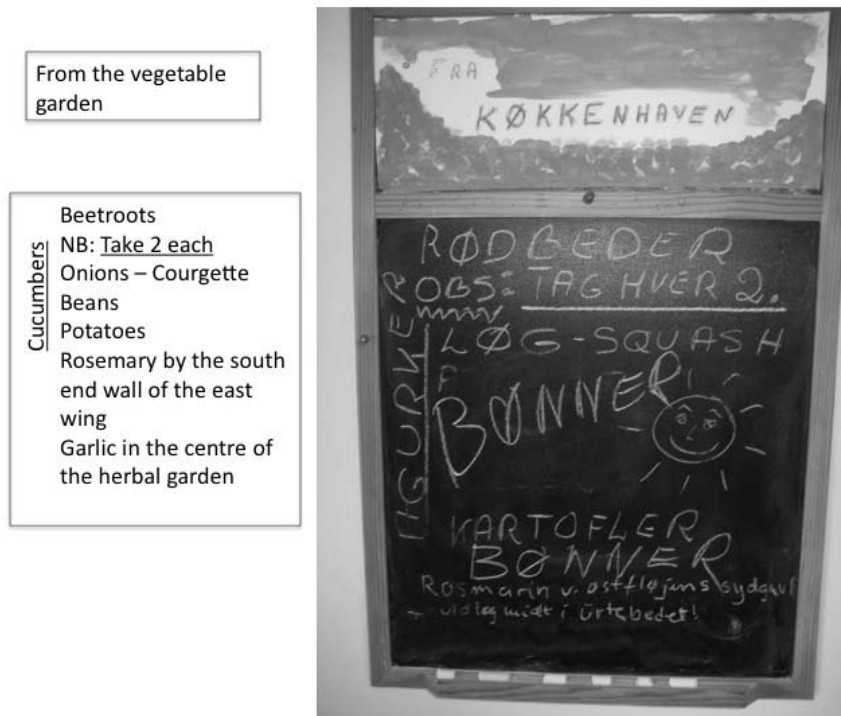


Figure 1: Blackboard in the communal space with a listing of crops available from the vegetable garden.

check the intranet several times weekly. The majority was capable of using a computer. One of the residents we spoke to, for instance, used the computer to email and send pictures to her daughter, who lives abroad. Despite the fact that all information would or could be made available and accessed via the intranet, most information was replicated and supplemented on written boards or printout posters in the communal spaces (see figure 1). Though this may seem like a redundant practice, the residents explained that they prefer to stop by the communal space on a daily basis for other reasons as well: while inspecting the written messages in the communal space other residents can see the person from their windows and have the chance to go and chat with that person. On a daily basis, this would result in several of the residents gathering for a chat in the communal area while they, secondarily, checked the information board.

As such there is an interrelationship between the physical closeness and the participation in a social network enacted through the daily routine of checking the boards and posters for new information. The physical design of the senior dwelling supports the establishing of a social community. In contrast, the technological infrastructure of the senior dwelling only partially support the social network, and the digital information on the intranet cannot directly replace the hand written posters at the communal space as these have other social purposes.

Collaboration and social activities

Checking the analogue news board is one way that social intercourse between residents takes place. Living together in a senior dwelling with shared facilities also gives rise to much social intercourse and collaboration between residents. In three of the senior dwellings, Munksøgård, Holbæk and Lumbylung, the residents themselves are in charge of the maintenance of the common garden and facilities. The three housing communities have a common house with a kitchen or dining hall, rooms for activities, and Holbæk even has a small store with groceries and a gym. Much collaboration is needed in terms of maintenance and organisation of the use of these facilities and the residents have organised days where they all participate in this work. This may occur on a weekly or ad hoc basis. Nevertheless, the collaboration provides the residents the opportunity to contribute in the establishing of a social community and for getting to know each other better. Moreover, common dinners are organised either on a weekly or daily basis. At Holbæk they have a café that prepares a daily supper. The residents do not have reserved seats, but instead mingle with each other. As the housing community is rather large the dinner provides an opportunity for the residents to expand their social network within the community, which is also a deliberate goal with the dinners.

Although collaboration on practical matters does not entail a social community per se, it does however open for the possibility of creating friendships. Often residents see such collaboration and the social activities as central for the

community as it gives the opportunity to share experiences, establish a common ground from where friendships can develop. The intertwining of a social and physical community often fosters an interest in each other's lives, and residents become attuned to developments in the condition and life situation of fellow residents. As such, collaboration prompted by the physical aspects of a senior dwelling will often prompt the social community, and hence reduce the risk of social isolation, which was also what motivated the residents to move into a housing community in the first place.

Social support and security

Finally, the physical proximity of the homes provides a unique opportunity for social awareness. Many of the senior dwellings have an explicit agreement of keeping an eye on each other, which is supported by the physical housing arrangement where homes are placed opposite each other and in small clusters. The residents are thereby enabled to keep an eye on each other without being nosy or intrusive which the residents attached great importance to in order to ensure privacy within the housing community. Examples of keeping an eye are to e.g. note lights being switched on and off or movements behind curtains (see figure 2).

Consequently, neighbours most often have a general idea of routines of other residents, which they draw on to detect irregularities and emergencies, and which produce a feeling of security in the individual who, for instance, lives alone. One example illustrating this stems from Holbæk where the neighbours had paid particular attention to Hans' house, as they knew that his health condition had been deteriorating. A neighbour noticed that the TV was on late at night and early in the morning, which he knew was unusual for Hans. By inspecting the home, it turned out that Hans had passed away. Although the senior housing communities often are extremely aware of each other's health condition and are attentive of irregularities, the residents realise that the solution has limitations. Agnete from Holbæk explains that *"you can't keep a 100 % eye on each other. One of my neighbours fell just after I had paid her a visit."* Residents from Munksøgård have decided against a suggestion on a daily telephone chain as one could still risk lying most of the night with for instance a cerebral haemorrhage. The telephone chain would thus act as a false security. Living in a housing community also provides the residents another kind of security, namely in regard to burglary. A couple from Holbæk explained that they felt much more secure in the housing community than had been the case in the house they used to live in due to the close vicinity of the houses in the community which reduced the risk of experiencing a burglary. As they lived at the outskirts of the clusters of houses, they still feared to experience a housebreaking, however, although to a lesser degree than in their old house. While the seniors may not experience a 100% guarantee, they explain that the combination of social and physical support and

security mechanisms within their senior housing community meet their wish for support and security while ageing.



Figure 2: The houses are placed in clusters opposite each other allowing for awareness of movements in the home without prying. On the left: Holbæk. On the right: Munksøgård.

The above sections have suggested an interrelationship between physical connectedness and a feeling of and benefit from social community. But the social community is not to be taken for granted simply because of the physical dimension. Disagreements and conflicts may occur, as we will explore in the following.

Social communities and negotiations of engagement

Seniors in general have different understandings of being a senior and of ageing (Mitchell 1994, Mynatt et al 1999). Residents in a senior dwelling neither constitute a homogenous group. On the contrary, they have different opinions on what a community is, how a senior dwelling should be organised, and what the normative rules regarding participation in a social community should be. There may be different views on how to achieve a balance between individual rights and contributions to the community. Moreover, the seniors have different physical capabilities that may deteriorate with age and not everyone is able to contribute equally. On a personal level there may also be conflicts, dislike and even animosity between residents. To overcome these differences and to create and uphold a sense of social community residents engage in continuous negotiations and compromises. In the process, a minority may risk being left out or even excluded from the social community, even if the resident continues to live in the senior dwelling. Thus, the idea of a social community as being inherently of the good is a truth with modifications, and the establishing of a social community demands much effort from the participants.

Contribution and the challenge of ageing

As described above, both practical collaboration and social activities play a central role for establishing and upholding the senior housing communities and the social community within. However, ageing and deterioration in physical abilities pose a challenge for the continuation of these activities and to the contribution to the social and physical community. At Munksøgård, they previously took turns preparing shared meals, but now only few are able to cook for the entire group and hence they seldom eat together despite their continuing wish to do so. They also face the fact that Anne, one of the residents, has come to suffer from dementia. The other residents are concerned for Anne as she sometimes leaves her apartment improperly dressed for the weather and loses her orientation. They are also concerned for their own safety in their homes as Anne still cooks in her apartment and they fear that she will forget to turn off the stove or water, causing fire or water damage to the apartment below. Furthermore, Anne has no close relatives, which leaves the other residents with the responsibility of communicating with the municipality regarding the care she now receives. Although some assistive technologies have been acquired to minimise risks, the other residents remain concerned and consider her a burden to the social community. The situation has given rise to discussions among the residents on the course of action and on how the social community can cope with the general problem of ageing as the diversity within the group in terms of personal resources diminish and as the need for help and assistance rises.

The problem of ageing is also found in Holbæk and Lumbylung. Ageing poses a challenge for the social community as people become unable to live up to the obligations of participating in social and practical activities. Ageing, or deterioration in capabilities, points to a paradox in senior communities: all seek the benefits of being part of a community when in need for help, but it may become a burden to the upholding of the community if people are unable to live up to shared duties due to their need for help. That people in general get older and that residents only seldom move away from a housing community are among the reasons for this burden. As such, the social community cannot be taken for granted, but is very much affected and put under strain over time if residents become unable to contribute to and participate in the social activities.

The adaptation of the individual and the collective

From our visits to the senior dwellings we learned that a common challenge is to reach agreement on a balance between individual rights and collective concerns having to do with the residents constituting a heterogeneous group.

Collective dining was thought by some residents to be of vital importance for the social community and turned out to be a central topic for discussions in senior dwellings. At Lions Park, the management had decided that the residents in the senior housing community were obliged to buy dinner tickets for the common

restaurant as they considered the common dinners vital for the creation of a community feeling. The management believed that dining together would prompt more infirm residents to be more sociable and active. However, the idea behind the collective dining had played out quite differently as it had become a 'battlefield' of existing conflicts between groupings and individuals. Consequently, the management had given the residents assigned seats to avoid arguments. Furthermore, some residents were against the idea of collective dining and ate in their own apartment regardless their obliged monthly payment.

At Holbæk, one resident's dog fence caused a conflictual situation as it was considered too tall and un-aesthetic by the other residents who wanted it to be removed. The dog owner, however, insisted on his right to decide on the fence he preferred. Eventually, the board of residents decided that the owner had to remove the fence or else the board would. Consequently, the owner had put his house up for sale. The residents interviewed explained that the owners of the dog did not fit in with the rest of the social community: they kept to themselves; the husband was too infirm to participate; and the wife would do the grocery shopping in the city rather than in the housing community's small store.

The residents' different interests and perceptions induced conflicts in the senior dwellings visited. This diversity put a strain on the upholding of the social community and at times the result was exclusion and factions that again affected the possibility to benefit from being part of a community which was the main reason for moving in to a housing community.

Closing analytical remarks

Munksøgård, Holbæk and Lumbylung are what we call self-organised communities, where residents themselves set up the rules for contribution and for engagement in social activities. The other three housing types, Betty Sørensen Parken, Lions Park and Bellevue Park are based on an institutionalised organisation where staff arranges social activities and are in charge of the maintenance. However, regardless of the self-organisation of the senior dwelling, rules were made to regulate behaviour, norms were established for the expected and desired pattern of action, and sanctions were defined for deviant behaviour. As such, being part of a senior housing community involves much work not only in the sense that residents must contribute to the community, but also in the sense that the communities must negotiate individual preferences against collective considerations. These pointers indicate that being member of a senior community, although manifested physically, is not always straightforward, but may be conflictual and burdensome and hence in opposition to the motives for moving in.

4 Discussion

The home visits proved to be a suitable way to encounter many non-sick senior citizens, i.e. not through a diagnosis or condition, but simply as people with whatever interests, concerns, or points of departure they may have. Furthermore, the home visits proved to be a valuable source of knowledge as the immediate connection to the spatial surroundings fostered in-depth discussions on topics considered relevant by the senior citizens within the frame of our study. In this section, we will discuss our findings and explicate how they can apply to the design of social media technologies for elderly people.

Designing social media for elderly people: inspirational pointers

A well-established point, that our study confirms, is that seniors cannot be boxed into one category but rather constitute a heterogeneous group. It is hence an illusion that being part of a community is inherently of the good, as seniors have different needs, perspectives and standpoints that may affect their wish or possibility to participate in a certain community, but also may affect their benefit if participating. For instance, some senior citizens dislike to be looked upon as elderly people. They would probably not participate in a community if it would draw direct or indirect attention to their age. As Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) point to, however, social media often treats all users the same. In our view, the heterogeneity between seniors addresses the formation and composition of communities, either physical or digital, as well as the definition of purposes of such communities.

Another finding from our study is that seniors need to collaborate and invest time and resources to establish and participate in a community. A senior community marked by an unequal balance of giving and taking may lose its attraction and hence diminish with time. The demand for both collaboration and resources point to the need of entering a community when still possessing resources and perhaps before the immediate advantage of being a community member arises. Furthermore, a certain replacement of the community members is necessary to avoid that they are too alike and hence face deterioration in resources at the same time. Many tend to see the advantages of being part of a community when the need for support arises or is expected to arise in the near future. However, a community will probably not survive if the people to receive either physical or psychological support outnumber those who can offer the support and contribute to the upholding of the community. Questions of member composition and replacement rules are hence relevant topics to discuss in regard to the design of social media for elderly.

Related to this is that being part of a physical community not necessarily leads to a social community feeling. However, our study shows that the physical

contact indeed inspires social community providing a possibility to get to know each other laying the foundation on which the community feeling can be built. While social media technologies may facilitate the immediate connection between the senior citizens, the social connection cannot be presumed. This constructionist perspective on community highlights the challenges of how a social community within a digital community may be established and how technology can contribute to it. To be considered is also whether the establishment of a social community should follow a bottom up or top down approach; i.e. whether the participants themselves or someone else should have the responsibility of creating and maintaining the community. As seen from our study, a top down approach may be opposed by the seniors as was the case with the management's idea of fixed seats in the restaurant at Lions Park. However, our study also showed that the senior citizens might be too weak to be the responsible part.

A community is, as shown above, not static as the level of social activity of the participants is subject to change over time and with changes in health condition and capabilities. We found that communities are sensitive to changes especially in regard to contribution and dependability and that this may cause conflicts among the community members. Sustainability and the ecology of social communities are hence topics that need to be further explored.

Rules of engagement and decisions on inclusion or exclusion are also continuously negotiated among community members. Participation in a community is governed by normative rules and attached with certain values. We suggest that besides from the senior citizens' abilities to use social media technologies, interesting issues to look into in a design process are also the experienced value of participation in a community, the social norms governing interactions and how values and norms differ between 'real' and virtual communities.

Lastly, we want to draw attention to the connection between social awareness prompted by both the physical and social environment and the feeling of security. The social awareness in a community might make it possible or easier to cope with insecurities, also those related to growing old. As such it may act as an important motive for being part of a community, even if it does not offer a 100 % guarantee of support and security to the senior citizen. The senior citizens deliberately take the risk of false security into consideration when assessing a 'system' to improve their feeling of safety. Interesting questions are to what extent social media provides false security and how the senior citizens evaluate the risk of it in the social media 'system'.

To belong to a community enhances the physical home environment, either virtual if the community is digital, or physical through shared spatialities outside the individual home as was the case in the senior housing communities.

Membership of a community might be a way to deal with some of the challenges of growing old; either these are related to ageing in place or social wellbeing.

5 References

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