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► To cite this version:

Arne Berger. Understanding the Informal Support Networks of Older Adults in India. 16th IFIP Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (INTERACT), Sep 2017, Bombay, India. pp.509-512, 10.1007/978-3-319-68059-0_62 . hal-01679822

HAL Id: hal-01679822

<https://inria.hal.science/hal-01679822>

Submitted on 10 Jan 2018

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Understanding The Informal Support Networks Of Older Adults in India

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Abstract: We propose a field trip to understand how older adults in India construct and maintain informal support networks. The aim of the study is to get a nuanced view on older adults' practices of receiving from and providing support to peers, family, friends, and neighbors. Group discussions and collaborative photography will be applied to investigate. Findings will be interpreted to understand implications for how to design for support.

Keywords: older adults, cultural comparison, informal support, home

1. Project Description

There exists a plethora of research on smart objects and services, their implementation and evaluation. In contrast relatively little is collectively known about how older adults perceive, construct and maintain communication and support structures for help, security and comfort, within their home and the artifact ecologies at their disposal. Our goal is to understand how older adults socially shape, perceive and use informal support networks. How do they cope with the growing need for support? How do they reciprocate? To investigate we are conducting a comparative cultural study in Germany, Australia, China and Mumbai, India (this proposal).

2. Method: Group Discussion & Collaborative Photography

This field trip is building upon a study that we conducted in Germany. There, we utilized two methods. We conducted narrative interviews, and asked the helping person (the supporter) and the person being helped (the supported) to collaboratively take and discuss photographs of places and objects that are important for their support relation. This is a combination of "reflexive photography" and "collaborative photography". The first aims on "*participants' interactions with their environment through their personal reflections on images*" [1.] and arguably shares similarities with aspects of probes [2.]. With reflexive photography people are asked to take photographs of objects, places and

topics within their daily life, followed by a discussing with the researchers. With collaborative photography informants and researcher take the photographs together. Still, participants remain the leading creative force in this endeavor: *“Collaborating with informants to produce images need not involve the ethnographer taking the lead as photographer”* [3.] A combination of both methods has proven to be insightful to understand the cooperation and communication between supporter and supported. Most importantly, to observe the cooperation and communication between the supporter and the supported while taking the photographs is prerequisite to get a nuanced view on the bond between them. In addition, older adults may not be acquainted with digital photography which makes the presence of the researchers helpful.

3. Plan

Our field trip is focusing on two local areas with different social geography. We look for people with at least two different socioeconomic backgrounds. We are aware that those different areas will call for different methodological approaches. With this proposal we can only give an estimate for the field trip plan. In the *first phase* we will explore general issues. We will conduct interviews with people reflecting on situations where they help older adults. In the *second phase* we aim to interact with individual pairs of supporter and supported. We will explore the neighborhood of the supporter and supported and shadow them. When possible we will interact directly with both supporter and supported and hold narrative interviews with both parties in order to gain insight into their support relations. *Further*, we will encourage the supporter and supported to take photographs of objects and places that are meaningful for their support relation and to comment on them. Also, we will document those objects and places via field photographs and field sketches. We plan to do this routine on both days of this field trip.

3.1 user group

We look for various pairs of supporter and supported. Within these pairs, one person is occasionally or habitually helping the other. Preferably both are older adults, but at least one of them should be 60 years or older. It is important that we can visit the supported person in or near their home together with the supporter.

3.2 location

We aim at two neighborhoods where people do not have servants to run their household. We rather look for neighborhoods where people are engaging in neighborhood help. As we are not acquainted with the local areas we trust the expertise of the local researchers to lead us to a suitable area for the field trip. We are open to all suggestions from the local researcher regarding a suitable location as well as socioeconomic background. And we need help from the local researchers in contacting people in these locations.

3.3 schedule for day 1 and day 2

09 am - 10 pm	demographic profiling of the neighborhood, participant sampling
11 pm - 12 pm	group discussion / shadowing / exploring
01 pm - 03 pm	individual pairs of supporter and supported
03 pm - 04 pm	debriefing of the researchers

3.4 participating researchers

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Andreea Ioana Niculescu

Human Language Technologies, Institute for Infocomm Research, Singapore

Pascal Weidenmüller

Designer, Plauen, Germany

3.5 ethical considerations & financial aid

To engage the interviewees in the aim of our study, we trust that the interviewees in India can relate to the pictures we show and stories we tell from home. These vignettes will illustrate, how this study was done in cultural comparison. We trust that the local researchers will help us to organize financial compensation for the interviewees. We have funds available for gifts or a small honorarium to the interviewees or a donation for the benefit of the local area.

3.6 material

We will bring cameras, dictaphones, notebooks. We trust the local researchers to help with travel arrangements.

4. Expected Outcomes

The field trip is part of a comparative cultural study. Overall it will result in a description of how older adults design communication and support for help, security and comfort within the infrastructure of their domestic environment. Through the comparison we aim to understand these networks in areas that are shaped differently regarding their social geography and cultural background. This is an ethnographical study meant to inform the future design for support. The aim of this study is to help designers to align their work more closely with the needs and demands of older adults who are already engaged in informal network structures.

In reflection of previous studies we adopted a mixed method of interview and reflexive photography. We found it helpful to augment the interviews of supporter and supported with opportunities for them to directly reflect moments and places through collaborative photography. In observing and analyzing these acts of collaborate meaning making, issues of trust, values, and relevance structures will surface that may not emerge in interviews only. These issues, values, and relevance structure will in turn inform designers to better design for support.

References

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