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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

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 initiatives² 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 Olicker 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).

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 Olicker 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 every 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 re-design, 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 place 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—its 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

Date	Article Title, Newspaper
1/16/1999	By Bush, but for Chiles, <i>Palm Beach Post</i> (Palm Beach, FL)
2/10/1999	Seniors, <i>The Star-Ledger</i> (Newark, NJ)
5/9/1999	Chappell to be featured speaker at commencement, <i>News & Record</i> (Greensboro, NC)
6/15/1999	W.Va. Median population is oldest in nation, <i>The Associated Press</i> (Charleston, WV)
6/18/1999	Home safe home for the elderly allows seniors to 'age in place,' <i>Chicago Sun-Times</i> (Chicago, IL)
10/14/1999	The shape of things to come, <i>Star Tribune</i> (Minneapolis, MN)
11/28/1999	West weekly/Senior set; Con artists prey on holiday generosity, <i>The Boston Globe</i> (Boston, MA)
1/11/2000	A health club for the mind, <i>Omaha World Herald</i> (Omaha, NE)
3/1/2000	Seniors, <i>The Star-Ledger</i> (Newark, NJ)
8/17/2000	Consider everyone special, <i>Topeka Capital-Journal</i> (Topeka, KS)
5/12/2001	Aging in place: Builder puts his know-how to the test and devises transitional housing for his mother, and ultimately, for himself, <i>The San Diego Union-Tribune</i> (San Diego, CA)
5/14/2001	Summer fun at U: Courses offer recreation, if not rigor, <i>Salt Lake Tribune</i> (Salt Lake, UT)
5/23/2001	Admit we age, <i>The San Francisco Chronicle</i> (San Francisco, CA)
9/10/2001	The new seniors; With more people over 65, Buffalo Niagara is slowly changing to cater to the needs of an older and more vibrant population, <i>Buffalo News</i> (Buffalo, NY)
9/26/2001	Husband is lifeline to wife with Alzheimers, <i>The Charlotte Observer</i> (Charlotte, NC)
2/8/2002	Families don't rule the suburbs these days; Seinfelds are as likely as Brady Bunches to settle outside cities, the census data showed. The trend is likely to grow, <i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i> (Philadelphia, PA)
3/29/2002	Model house offers high-tech insides with older-home look, <i>Knight Rider Tribune</i> (Philadelphia, PA)
5/9/2002	Likely chairman charts a course for Columbia council, <i>The Washington Post</i> (Washington, DC)
8/5/2002	Haven for workers in Bronx evolves for their retirement, <i>The New York Times</i> (New York, NY)
8/28/2002	Real estate notes, <i>The Washington Post</i> (Washington, DC)
9/12/2002	Aging in place, <i>The San Francisco Chronicle</i> (San Francisco, CA)
11/24/2002	Remodeling industry grows along with projects, <i>Chattanooga Times</i> (Chattanooga, TN)
3/6/2003	Datebook, <i>The Washington Post</i> (Washington, DC)
4/23/2003	Community briefing; School gets \$1,000 grant, <i>The Boston Globe</i> (Boston, MA)
5/20/2003	Barrier-free homes benefit all, <i>The Record</i> (Bergen County, NJ)
6/1/2003	Easier does it; builders, contractors becoming specialists in adapting homes to the needs of the aging, <i>Winston-Salem Journal</i> (Winston Salem, NC)

- 9/16/2003 With aid, adaptive devices, many people can remain in their homes, *Chicago Daily Herald* (Chicago, IL)
- 10/16/2003 Notebook: Workshop offers tips, tools new home-owners can use, *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR)
- 2/24/2004 The game of life, *Capital Times* (Madison, WI)
- 6/10/2004 Business notes, *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC)
- 7/11/2004 Making homes livable for years to come, *Spokesman Review* (Spokane, WA)
- 8/21/2004 Home & Garden Show offers design tips, more, *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio, TX)
- 9/20/2004 Doing your home work; Checking out contractors a good idea; Talking to past clients could decrease chances of a bad experience, *The Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX)
- 10/29/2004 No title, *The Hollywood Reporter* (Hollywood, CA)
- 1/26/2005 Wave immigration should slow, *Whittier Daily News* (Whittier, CA)
- 2/5/2005 New American Home Showcase most expensive ever, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA)
- 2/20/2005 Home designs meeting needs of people of all ages, *Albuquerque Journal* (Albuquerque, NM)
- 4/8/2005 A strong foundations; from repairs to remodeling, Tim Davis built a solid work ethic; small business office: Davis Remodeling Contractors, *The Ledger* (Lakeland, FL)
- 5/1/2005 As ages climb, houses proliferate, *The New York Times* (New York, NY)
- 5/12/2005 Property tax deferral for seniors set to start soon, *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC)
- 9/21/2005 Staying put; More homeowners anticipating own changing needs, *The Patriot Ledge* (Quincy, MA)
- 10/2/2005 Prospecting in the silver age, *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA)
- 11/3/2005 Resources, tips can help seniors stay in own home, *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR)
- 11/24/2005 Couple donate van to Mill Ridge; New residents present 15-passanger vehicle to independent living community in Union, *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH)
- 1/15/2006 Conference looks at challenges facing older adults, *Albuquerque Journal* (Albuquerque, NM)
- 1/23/2006 Savvy Senior, *Richmond Times Dispatch* (Richmond, VA)
- 4/15/2006 'Aging in Place' takes root here, *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison, WI)
- 4/17/2006 Slew of gadgets help tackle small tasks; Occupational therapists advise seniors on ways to ease independent living, *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC)
- 4/22/2006 Barrier-free living; Parade home meets needs of older owners; Focus on real estate, *The Ledger* (Lakeland, FL)
- 5/6/2006 NASA needs to recruit new blood, report says; Experts call for a long-term strategy to hire people with the skills needed to meet the future, *The Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX)
- 6/25/2006 Aging homeowners update spaces, *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (Chattanooga, TN)
- 7/16/2006 When it feels right at home, *The New York Times* (New York, NY)

- 9/10/2006 The ranch house is standing taller with a pitched roof; Some prefer one-story home to have a two-story feel, *The Houston Chronicle* (Houston, TX)
- 11/20/2006 Building a standout a tall order; Single-story ranches' tall ceilings, roofs blend with two-story neighbors, *Contra Costa Times* (Contra Costa, CA)
- 12/10/2006 Boomers may cause stagnant housing market, *Chattanooga Times Free Press* (Chattanooga, TN)
- 12/16/2006 Aging in place; Specialists outfit baby boomers' homes so they can stay functional in retirement, *Tampa Tribune* (Tampa, FL)
- 3/18/2007 By design; Aging in place; House can grow old with owners; Planning can allow occupants to stay put during retirement, *The Columbus Dispatch* (Columbus, OH)
- 4/8/2007 A loser look: Home Show will highlight meeting changing life needs, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Atlanta, GA)
- 4/28/2007 Innovative planning can help challenges of everyday life, *Inside Bay Area* (Oakland, CA)
- 5/4/2007 Recipe for remodeling; Tour dishes out ideas for kitchens and other rooms, *Chicago Daily Herald* (Chicago, IL)
- 5/13/2007 A closer look: Preparing for limited mobility, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*(Atlanta, GA)
- 5/15/2007 Stay-at-home elderly spur new market for remodelers; owners seek to 'age in place', *The Washington Times* (Washington, DC)
- 6/10/2007 A community for all ages; Planning that accommodates seniors can benefit young and old, *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (Sarasota, FL)
- 6/12/2007 Prime time: News & notes: Love's lamp keeps burning, author says, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*(Atlanta, GA)
- 8/17/2007 Zero step' condo project considered, *Grand Rapid Press* (Grand Rapids, MI)
- 8/26/2007 Hi, neighbor! Seniors welcome a chance to chat, program relieves sense of isolation, *The Star-Ledger* (Newark, NJ)
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- 10/7/2007 Aiming to age in place, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA)
- 10/13/2007 America needs elders, aging expert says, *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH)
- 11/3/2007 'Aging in place' is a good choice for many seniors, but it takes planning, *The Virginia-Pilot* (Norfolk, VA)
- 11/9/2007 Limited obligation to assist seniors; Boards reluctant to do more than minimum for aging residents, *Chicago Sun Times* (Chicago, IL)
- 11/23/2007 Programs help healthy aging; Seniors can get help they need as they remain in their homes, *Chicago Sun Times* (Chicago, IL)
- 1/6/2008 State pressing for major changes, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA)
- 1/20/2008 Fine living: Don't stop thinking about tomorrow for interior design, *Marin Independent Journal* (Marin, CA)

- 2/2/2008 User-friendly design, *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio, TX)
- 2/12/2008 Washtenaw United Way picks new set of priorities. Money will go to charities that fulfill 5 basic needs, *Ann Arbor News* (Ann Arbor, MI)
- 2/16/2006 Maybe it's never too late to remodel, *The San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA)
- 4/17/2008 Local company works to curb fall injuries, *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, LA)
- 4/20/2008 Oregon's remodeling industry alive and well, *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR)
- 4/27/2008 Lack of sufficient funds threatens key services for senior citizens, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA)
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