

Elderly care as an epistemic object to confirm
and deconstruct gendered family scripts

La cura degli anziani come oggetto epistemico di conferma
e decostruzione dei copioni familiari di genere

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ABSTRACT

In an ageing society, elderly care is a mainstream topic, calling into play not only formal but also informal care provided by the family. Women have historically been positioned as primary subjects to rely on within the domestic politics of intergenerational care, both in broader social discourses and within situated experiences, through the enactment of often stereotypical family scripts. This paper explores how women frame this situation building on a thematic analysis of a sample of posts from a dataset of discussion threads collected from an Italian online forum, where interacting parts shared stories and perspectives about the care of their elderly relatives. This work attempts to unravel the complexity of women's experiences associated with their socially expected role of informal caregivers, exploring how through these discussions the interacting parts reinforce and/or de-construct specific pedagogical frameworks of family caregiving.

In una società "che invecchia", la cura degli anziani è un tema molto dibattuto che chiama in causa non solo i sistemi di cura formali, ma anche informali, in particolare la famiglia. Le donne sono state storicamente posizionate come soggetti primari predisposti alla cura, tanto nei discorsi sociali sull'argomento quanto nell'ambito delle esperienze individuali, attraverso la messa in atto di copioni familiari spesso stereotipici. Il contributo esplora il modo in cui le donne stesse inquadrano la questione attraverso un'analisi tematica di un campione di post provenienti da un dataset di discussioni raccolte su un forum online italiano, dove le parti interagenti condividono storie e prospettive associate al loro ruolo di cura dei genitori anziani. Il lavoro intende svelare la complessità delle esperienze vissute da queste donne rispetto al loro ruolo socialmente atteso di caregiver informali, esplorando come attraverso tali discussioni si rafforzino e/o decostruiscono determinati modelli pedagogico-culturali di caregiving familiare.

Keywords: elderly care | informal caregiving | family scripts | gendered caregiving | online community of practice

Parole chiave: cura degli anziani | caregiving informale | copioni familiari | caregiving di genere | comunità di pratica online

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Introduction

In an ageing society, elderly care is a mainstream topic of interest calling into play not only formal, but also informal care provided by the family. In this context, women have historically been positioned as primary subjects to rely on within the domestic politics of intergenerational care, both in broader social discourses and within individuals' situated experiences, through the enactment of quite often stereotypical family scripts (Petrini *et alii*, 2019).

This paper explores how women themselves understand and frame this situation building on a thematic analysis of a sample of posts from a dataset of discussion threads collected from the Italian online forum *Al Femminile*, where posters shared stories, experiences, and imaginaries about the care of their elderly relatives. Informed by scholarship highlighting the gendered nature of caregiving responsibilities, this study attempts to unravel women's understanding of their socially expected role of informal caregivers, exploring how through these discussions the interacting parts reinforce and/or de-construct the morally laden frameworks of "good" and "bad" family caregiving.

Considering the individual situated experiences, the construction of meaning taking place through social interaction, and the broader cultural discourses requiring women to provide care for others, this work delves into how women-in-conversation navigate these expectations.

Findings shed light on the moral compass underlying common sense knowledge of family intergenerational care of older adults, with the forum functioning as an informal learning environment, namely an online community of practice (Wenger, 1999), where women share and construct perspectives of meaning about their caring roles with peers that become parts of the broader cultural milieu, adding to the larger conversation on intergenerational care.

1. Elderly care as a naturalized gendered family experience

Contemporary society is defined as an "ageing" society, for the increasing demographic ageing resulting in the rising average age of the population. Conceptually and practically, we can appreciate at least two trends aiming at tackling this process: a relatively "more recent" one, echoing at times certain neoliberal logics, that calls into play the older person as a subject who is required to age "actively", through self-directed care (Rubinstein, de Medeiros, 2015); a more historically entrenched tendency, concerning practices of other-directed care of older people, involving formal and informal proximal systems. The latter, which is the focus of this paper, always includes the family (Akgun-Citak *et alii*, 2020).

From broader social imaginaries on the subject, to situated experiences, the family is often seen as the quintessential site of elderly care. This situation has become part of a larger taken-for-granted discourse which, as Wærness (1987) puts it, follows a subsidiary logic in which the responsibility of older people is decentralized and informalized, always more actively involving the family system. This is particularly relevant in a country like Italy, characterized at once by: a familistic culture and a strong social expectation in terms of internal bonds of solidarity among members; a high life expectancy of the elderly, meaning they can be longtime recipients of care; unequal social welfare and educational services distributed throughout the country (Charenkova, 2023).

In the heterogeneity of family constellations older people can play both the role of caregivers and care recipients. Focusing on the elderly as recipients of family care (Schulz *et alii*, 2020), it is relevant to acknowledge the relationship between gender, generations, and informal caregiving. Indeed, gender continues to be a significant variable in shaping certain caregiving experiences and responsibilities at the social, individual and intersubjective level. Despite changes in our society in terms of women's employment and empowerment over the years, Italy still dialogues with a long tradition of gendered family caregiving scripts (Brenna, 2021), leading to an uneven division of care work between women and men, concerning also elderly caregiving. Research shows that the former are more likely to provide care for the elderly as part of daily life, and more intensively than the latter (Petrini *et alii*, 2019).

But far from being a natural matter (Biemmi, Mapelli, 2023), and despite being generally an undervalued practice (Mortari, 2006), gendered caregiving is socially constructed at the micro, meso, and macro

level: in terms of individual experiences and personal beliefs; intersubjectively, through social interactions between different actors; in the macro-discourse on the phenomenon. All these levels mingle in complex ways, framing women as the “natural” caregivers within the family.

This situation can cause challenges for women who are required to balance multiple caregiving duties – like caring for children, ageing parents, and/or in-laws– with their personal and work life (Crespo, Mira, 2014). The perpetuation of stereotypical family scripts of intergenerational care, that naturalizes caregiving as a women’s matter, in addition to reinforce unequal power dynamics within the family ecosystem can also negatively impact both on the well-being of female informal caregivers, who feel overburdened and lacking support (Revenson *et alii*, 2016), and of care recipients (Hazzan *et alii*, 2022).

From a critical pedagogy perspective (Mariani, 2008), it is important to interrogate the premises and assumptions underlying certain family scripts learned informally from one’s experience in the family, relationships with others, and social discourses on the topic (Formenti, 2012). The discourse of caring for the elderly as a female prerogative can, in fact, translate into discriminatory positions at multiple levels. Such a commitment places additional substrates of responsibility on women, especially for *some*, from an intersectional perspective, in relation to unequal socioeconomic and sociocultural resources (Hengelaar *et alii*, 2023).

But how is elderly care understood and signified by women themselves? In this paper we will explore this line of inquiry, focusing on social interaction as a site where social expectations and individual beliefs can not only be reinforced, but also renegotiated, beyond common sense lenses (Caronia, 2011; Formenti, Cino, 2023).

2. Studying an online forum as an informal learning environment

This work explores how women understand and frame matters concerning elderly care reporting on some findings from a thematic analysis of a sample of posts from a dataset of discussion threads collected from the Italian online forum *Al Femminile*, founded in 1999 and active to date, where interacting parts shared stories and perspectives about the care of their elderly relatives. According to its homepage, the forum is “a virtual space dedicated to women of all ages. For over twenty years the most frequented forum by women in Italy” (Al Femminile, n.d., author translation). *Al Femminile* is articulated in many sections, each dedicated to different aspects of the users’ lives, including parenting and family life. In this paper I argue that online forums can be understood as communities of practice and informal learning environments where to learn hermeneutic trajectories to better understand certain topics of discussions (Cino, 2023; Wenger, 1999).

More specifically, women’s online forums have been studied concerning users’ experiences as mothers, with research finding they allow them to tell the “unsayable” about their mothering (Pedersen, Burnett, 2022), voicing thoughts that would not be socially acceptable otherwise. There is, however, a paucity of literature on the use of these spaces by women with respect to their caregiving role for older adults. This exploratory work aims to make a first step to fill this gap.

From an epistemological and methodological point of view, given the social expectations surrounding the topic of elderly care, I decided to work with online naturally occurring data for they allow to explore situations women themselves felt a need to discuss, without prompts from researchers, limiting occurrences of social desirability biases due to the anonymity of online forums (Silverman, 2011). Furthermore, this forum presents several pedagogically relevant characteristics (Formenti, Cino, 2023): the subjects of the enunciation are women themselves, whose epistemic authority lies in their perspectives as insiders of certain experiences, allowing the researcher to focus on something deemed meaningful by the interacting parts; the affordances of the platform allow for a bottom-up process of collective meaning-making which, as Zittoun and Brinkmann (2012) argue, is an indicator of informal learning; the narrative agency, here intended as the ability of being at the origin of a construction of meaning, is distributed, allowing users to actively contributing to the framing of elderly care as an epistemic object (Goffman, 1974).

Based on the above, online forums fits the frame of informal community of practices, as conceptualized by Wenger (1999), where the *domain* is the topic being discussed (here, elderly care), the *community* is fostered by the pool of interacting parts, whereas the *practice* is based on the social interaction process

through which, in a hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1975), stories, experiences, and worldviews are shared towards the construction and de-construction of frameworks of references as lenses to look at the situation based on the epistemic (and moral, as we shall see) work performed in the conversations (Caronia, 2022).

3. Dataset generation and data analysis

To generate a dataset relevant to my topic of inquiry, I applied the Advanced Google query within the *Al Femminile* website through a combination of keywords containing terms such as “elderly”, “care” (“cura”, “anziani”), leading to 6140 results. To reduce the number of threads to a manageable quantity, informed by previous research (Eriksson, Salzman-Erikson, 2013), I went through a sequentially top-down filtering of the first 150 discussions, followed by a purposive sampling according to thematic relevance (i.e., conversations that actually dealt with the topic of elderly care, leaving out the noise). This process led me to a final sample of 44 discussion threads with 1339 posts, published between 2004 and 2024. Number of posts per discussion thread ranged from 2 to 366 ($M=30.62$, $SD=61.57$). All posts appeared to be written by users who either directly or through usernames and pronouns within their messages can be identified as women (consistently with this forum’s target).

Informed by the Association of Internet Researchers’ ethical guidelines (Franzke *et alii*, 2020), I worked only with archived data on public areas of the forum, with no registration required, where posters used usernames. Furthermore, all the excerpts in this paper do not report usernames and have been previously checked using the Google search engine to ensure they are non-retrievable (Smedley, Coulson, 2021). The English translation from the original Italian texts also adds an additional layer of anonymity so that the original posts cannot be traced back. Anonymized excerpt translations were checked and back translated by a bilingual English-Italian native speaker to ensure semantic soundness with the original text. In interrogating this sample, I was guided by an exploratory research question:

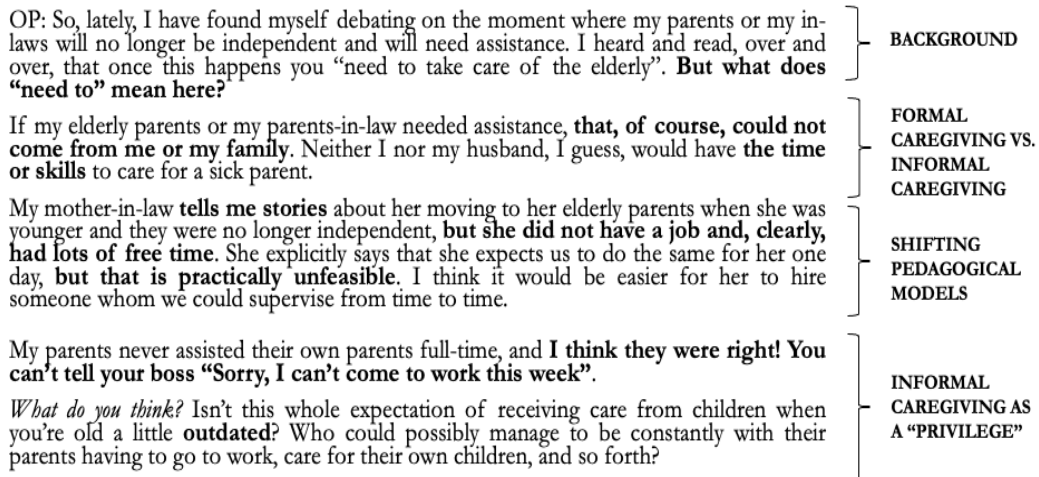
RQ: How do interacting parts understand and make sense of the domestic politics of intergenerational care for elderly relatives?

After downloading each conversation, numbering it, and anonymizing it, I entered each thread’s file into NVivo, where I thematically analyzed the materials through recursive reading, first-level and second-level coding, and thematization (Riessman, 2008). Themes are here understood as both the product of the conversational process and the hermeneutic activity of the researcher. In my analysis I was informed by Lindholm (2017) in searching within the corpus of conversations the problem posing in the opening post (OP), as well as the hermeneutic trajectories thematized in the commenting posts (CPs), as interactional products.

Due to space constraints, and for the purpose of this paper, I will focus here on the analysis of a discussion thread from 2023 formed by 219 posts, that well illustrates some of the broader conversational trends I identified in the wider dataset. Also, the focus on a single thread is epistemologically and methodologically supported in the literature on online forums where the analysis, as it is the case here, is more concerned with the specificity rather than the generalizability of data (Jowett, 2015). It is also in line with the indexicality typical of pedagogical research (Caronia, 2011). Findings, to be intended as contextual and situational, prove useful for they offer an account of an under-investigated area concerning elderly care and family dynamics through a gendered lens.

4. Thematizing elderly care: competing hermeneutic trajectories

In the conversation examined here, the original poster (OP) opened a thread discussing the social expectation she felt for elderly care, referring both to broader social imaginaries and the pressure to perform a good informal caregiver role coming from her mother-in-law. The figure below (Fig. 1) reports the whole excerpt:

Fig. 1: *The opening post* – author’s emphasis

Starting from a personal anecdote, the post poses a problem, bringing to light several matters concerning elderly care. Interrogating the meaning of “need[ing] to” take care of the elderly, the OP resists an interpersonal norm regulating the relationship between children and their ageing parents/in-laws, questioning the politics of intergenerational care and delegating the caregiving responsibilities to formal caregivers. Implicitly, referring to the mother-in-law moving in with her parents when she was young, gender roles are remarked, implying that caregiving was traditionally a woman’s responsibility (as it is also suggested by the fact that the mother-in-law did not have a job).

Matters of power and agency intertwine as the OP reiterates that not her nor her family/husband can fulfill this caregiving role, redefining the boundaries of their expected care obligations; also, traditional pedagogical models are juxtaposed with contemporary realities, comparing the mother-in-law, who was unemployed and with “lots of free time”, with the OP and her husband having demanding jobs. In doing so, changes in the job market and a paradigm shift from communitarian to more individualistic belief systems (Greenfield, 2009) are reflected. Framing the social expectation for intergenerational care as “outdated” the OP, at once, reclaims the multiple responsibilities working adults deal with, contrasting this identity with older generations, while also aligning with neoliberal ideologies emphasizing the primacy of work.

Overall, the excerpt reflects a questioning stance towards traditional caregiving values, also making use of rhetorical questions to engage other people in the discussion (“Isn’t this expectation [...] outdated? Who could possibly manage to be constantly with their parents [...]?”).

Commenting posters (CPs) contributed to the framing of elderly care as an epistemic object following two routes: the naturalization (Fig. 2) and the de-naturalization (Fig. 3) hermeneutic trajectories.

<p>CP₁: I don't even know how someone could ask something like that. Are you an orphan? What are your parents going to do when they need you? Will you throw them away in a retirement home and forget about them? I find this post terrible.</p>	}	REPROACHING
<p>CP₂: I think that we should be grateful to our parents for all the sacrifices they made for us. And what better occasion than becoming ourselves their parents when they are old and sick? What better occasion to show them all the love we feel toward them and thank them for everything they did?</p>	}	SENSE OF RECIPROCITY
<p>CP₃: We shouldn't even ask questions like that. It is your duty to take care of your parents. It is not only a legal duty but a moral one. It should not even be a problem for you, caring for them should come naturally. We are all so focused on ourselves today that we forget about what is truly important.</p>	}	MORAL IMPERATIVE
<p>CP₄: Well, yes, I am making some sacrifices for my parents, and guess what? I am HAPPY about it. It gives me purpose, I'm their daughter, it's what I'm supposed to do. Who else should do this if not me? My siblings say they're too busy, but frankly, I don't care. You'll never find the love of a family in a retirement home, no matter what. And what goes around comes around, we will all be old one day...</p>	}	SACRIFICE SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FORMAL CAREGIVING VS. INFORMAL CAREGIVING

Fig. 2: *The naturalization trajectory* – author's emphasis

As per the excerpts above, the naturalization trajectory is built on moral superiority, confirming traditional family scripts and framing “good” and “bad” caregiving. Here the elderly's needs come before the caregivers', informal caregiving is deemed to be better than formal caregiving, and elderly care is constructed as a natural duty.

The CPs construct pedagogical models revolving around moral imperatives and blame, framing institutional care as a form of negligence and abandonment (CP₁ “Will you throw them away [...]”, CP₄ “You'll never find the love of a family in a retirement home”). Caregiving is not just a duty, but a moral principle based on clear-cut disputes of right vs. wrong. References to gratitude and reciprocity were frequent across posts (e.g., CP₂, CP₄), pointing to a role reversal where everyone is, at certain points in life, a provider and/or a recipient of care (Biemmi & Mapelli, 2023). Caregiving is then seen as a continuation of familial love initially provided by parents.

Within this narrative, critiques of modern individualism were also present, contrasting it with care as a natural event (CP₃ “caring for them should come naturally” vs. “We are all so focused on ourselves today”). The naturalization of care also intertwines with gender norms, framing women as the primary and natural caregivers for elderly parents, who should embrace sacrifices as a form of fulfillment (CP₄ “I'm making some sacrifices [...] I am HAPPY about it. [...] I'm their daughter, it's what I'm supposed to do”).

On a opposite note, the de-naturalization trajectory questions socially expected roles in favor of women's emancipation, moving beyond moralistic accounts, and voicing the material and financial difficulties of informal caregiving, as in the excerpts below.

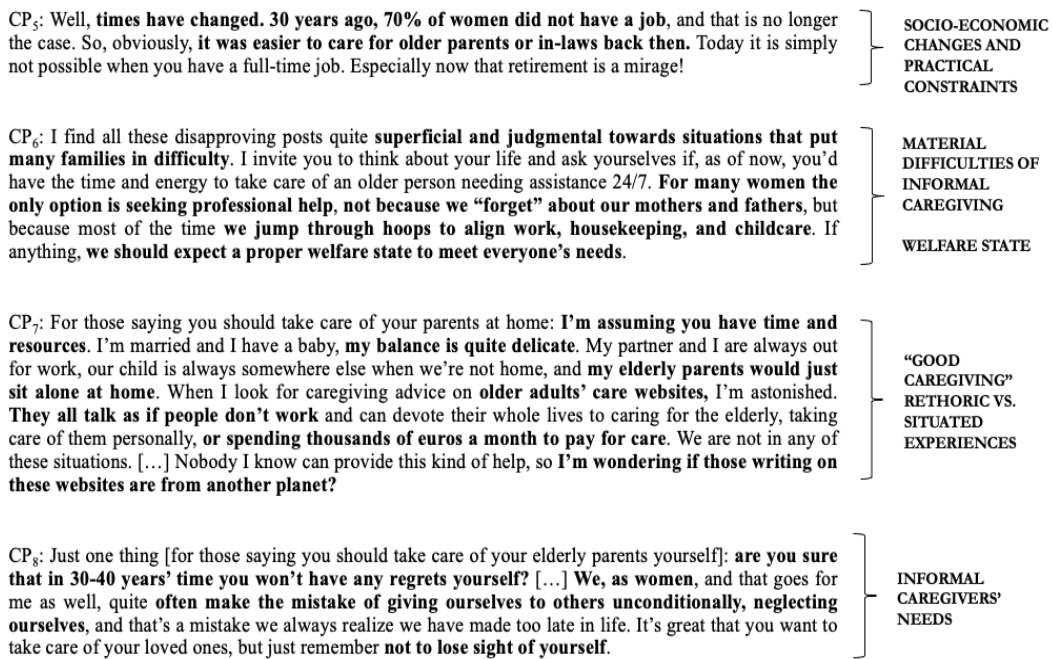


Fig. 3: *The denaturalization trajectory* – author's emphasis

Here, the gendered nature of caregiving is acknowledged, with posters pointing to a change in gender roles (CP₅ “30 years ago 70% of women did not have a job”) and a recognition of caregiving as an unevenly distributed burden for women who need to manage triple responsibilities (CP₆ “work, housekeeping, and childcare”), whereas caring for elderly parents would add an extra layer of duties that many women could not manage alone.

Also, in answering their peers, posters pointed to the importance of self-care for women who risk neglecting themselves by dedicating their lives to others (CP₈), questioning the rhetoric of self-sacrifice and advocating for a balance between caring for others and for oneself. Additionally, posters reject the idea of formal caregiving as a form of negligence, framing it as a necessary and trustworthy option, challenging simplistic and moralistic views (CP₆ “superficial and judgmental”), and calling for a more systemic response to the problem.

The idea that all families can rely on infinite resources, either in terms of time and space for informal caregiving, or money for formal caregiving, is also denounced as failing to acknowledge the many situated experiences that go beyond the moral framing of “right” or “wrong” accounts, calling for structural support and a shift from individual to societal responsibility.

From the opening post to the comments, the identified trajectories reflect cultural and pedagogical beliefs contributing to the construction of a larger discourse on caregiving responsibility, morality, and social expectations. In doing so, online discussions help create interpretative frameworks on elderly care as an epistemic object.

5. Closing remarks

From a systemic perspective (Formenti, 2012), the conversation analyzed at the micro-level offers a glimpse into individual situated experiences of care, at the meso-level shows how the understanding of intergenerational care can be re-negotiated in a process of collective meaning-making that may promote informal learning (Zittoun & Brinkmann, 2012), while at the macro level questions and reinforces broader social discourses.

The naturalization narrative on informal caregiving, framing it as better suited to meet elderly's needs and based on more collectivistic values, emphasizing intergenerational solidarity, risks being detached

from the reality many families live, overlooking the fact that intergenerational informal care is not feasible for many and, quite often, may reflect gendered family scripts, invisible because they are taken for granted. This finding is in line with women's positionality, as reported in previous research, who feel burned out by overlapping levels of responsibility and a lack of support (Revenson *et alii*, 2016). These perspectives were, in turn, voiced through the de-naturalization trajectory, questioning traditional politics of intergenerational care and emphasizing the role of formal caregiving.

However, whether promoting communitarian or more individualistic values, all these posts reflect, but do not acknowledge, neoliberal narratives. Following Wærness (1987), the naturalization narrative, while seeking to promote communitarian values, normalizes intergenerational care as a gendered taken-for-granted individual answer that families (and women, in particular) give to a lack of proper societal support for elderly care. Providing individual responses to systemic problems is, in fact, at the core of neoliberalism applied to care (Trnka, Trundle, 2014).

This is particularly relevant for women, for they find themselves disproportionately burdened with caregiving duties, quite often both as mothers and daughters. On the other hand, the de-naturalization trajectory speaks for thoughts and emotions that may not always be socially acceptable to share, denouncing consolidated gendered social expectations and the problematic narrative of "always joyful" care, or of families with unlimited resources.

Although certainly beneficial, this narrative may at the same time reinforce another neoliberal logic, which is tied to the primacy of work and the weakening of family time and bonds. If not critically interrogated, this assumption may "throw the baby out with the bathwater". While caregiving cannot be the solely nor the primary responsibility of women, realistically community care does represent a resource that, if truly balanced gender-wise, may allow to move beyond the binarism between private and public spheres, towards a relational and pluralistic ethics of care involving different actors, institutional and private, in different modalities and actively mobilizing heterogeneous networks of support (Gilligan, 1982), expanding opportunities of care as a systemic matter intended as an universal social value (Biemmi, Mapelli, 2023).

Being historically framed as primary caregivers, women's perspectives in challenging social expectations of intergenerational care are at the cornerstone of any change. This is even more relevant when differential degrees of inequalities intersect, making familial or professional care a privilege for few. Data from this research show that competing (and sometimes polarized) cultural and pedagogical models concerning elderly care are in the making. Moving beyond neoliberal logics that, at once, frame care as an individualistic matter and promote work-centered belief systems, one of the many open questions for researchers to explore concerns how to rethink intergenerational care beyond gendered stereotypical scripts and a view of the family as a social safety net.

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