

Robots for Care: A Social Scientist's View

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According to the scientific and technical literature, there is a continuous and significant increase of the importance of robots in economy and society. Most of those robots are produced to cover industry needs, thinking in the robot as a substitute of human beings. Robots are supposed to improve the quality of work by taking over dangerous, tedious and dirty jobs that are not possible or safe for humans to perform. Thus, most of the envisaged scenarios don't foresee the need to take into consideration how to manage the social interaction between human and robots; once the robot is placed, the human being disappears from there. Nevertheless, the idea that robots can cover other human needs than those related with industry has also gained ground and new concerns and debates are taken place. Robots appear in environments that would have seemed unexpected not much time ago assuming duties traditionally assigned to humans. In this vein, we are witnessing an increasing expectation over advances in robotics and artificial intelligence. The possibility of involving robots in caring tasks seems closer than ever. There are pilot experiences with robots and older people, robots working in therapy for children with autism or robots in hospitals enrolled in a variety of tasks.

In front of such a scenario, social scientists have been questioned regarding a wide range of uncertainties and fears. Can robots substitute human beings in any kind of situation? Is robot care colder than the human one? Can robots improve carers work? Are robots more effective than humans in certain tasks? And so on. Many times, these are rhetorical questions. People have their own conclusions, but they need to ascertain their idea about this possible future filled with robots. An idea that is summarized in terms of good or bad. The temptation to end up with a simple question is always there: are robots good or bad?

My position is that social scientists should try to avoid the discussion in such terms. At least from Science and Technology Studies, we prefer to maintain that technological artifacts are not good or bad. But, and this second part is very important, they are not neutral either. That means that they give rise to particular effects. They transform relationships, they affect people's identities or they change meanings, among many other possibilities. Thus, a question concerning the consequences of the introduction of a technological advance is always appropriate. A society with robots is not going to be the same than a society without them. There is, then, a certain kind of society proposed in every robot offered for such and such end.

If we assume this last idea, then, a very interesting space of collaboration between social scientists and roboticists and engineers is opening in front of us. A space that

should allow us to go beyond the kind of demand usually addressed to social scientists from engineers: “how can you make people accept it?”