The Problem of Ableist Paternalism in Assistive Robotics

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Full Paper

Paternalism is the interference of an individual's autonomy against their will, with the objective of pursuing "their best interests". Disabled people are often subject to unnecessarily paternalism in their daily lives. This is primarily due to **ableist assumptions** from non-disabled people. We describe the importance of analyzing the multifaceted risk of paternalism in the robot design lifecycle. We also propose a path towards developing a practice-oriented guide for HRI researchers to **identify** and **mitigate ableist paternalism** when developing assistive robots [1].

Robot-Mediated Paternalism

Robot-mediated paternalism occurs when a robot takes an action that is intended to benefit a user, when the user is either unaware of what the objective is, or directly does not want it.

This can occur in relation to the: (1) General functional objective (e.g. the robot is intended to promote healthy eating), or (2) The manner in which the robot attempts to provide this benefit (e.g. robot nudges the user to cook healthy recipes, or physically removes unhealthy food)

We talk of *robot-mediated paternalism* instead of *robot paternalism* because **when a robot behaves paternalistically, it should be considered in the context of the human-led design process that has resulted in paternalism.**

Ableist Robot-Mediated Paternalism

Technoableism occurs when designers assume disability is a problem that can be fixed by technology [2]. Ableist assumptions that oversimplify disability often result in technologies that fail to respond to the needs of the intended users.

Robot-mediated paternalism can arise from ableist assumptions that disabled people are unable to act in their own best interests, and therefore need a robot to supervise them, take care of them, or act on their behalf. However, **a disabled person's autonomy should always be promoted as much as possible** [3].

Yet, as disability is complex and many stakeholders are involved in a disabled person's care network and the robot design lifecycle, it can be challenging to identify and mitigate ableist paternalism in the design of assistive robots.

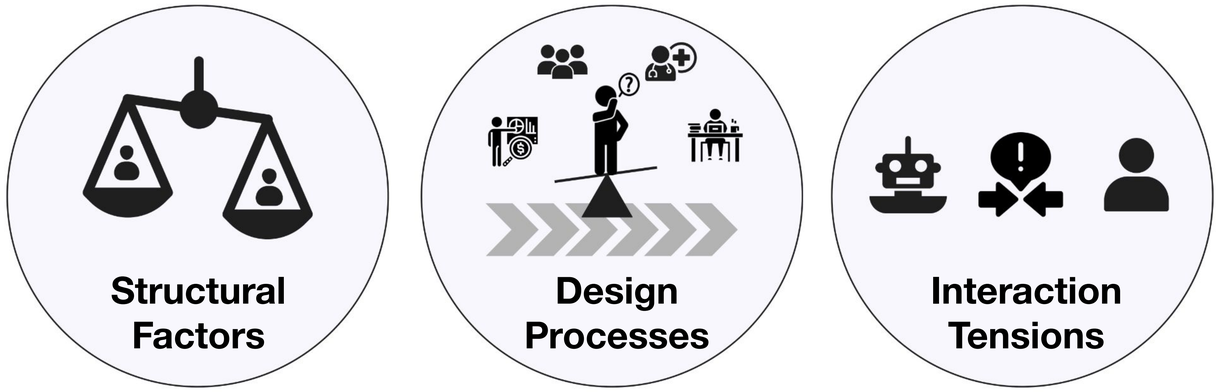

Figure 1: Our proposed three-level risk analysis of ableist paternalism in assistive robotics.

Our Work

In our three-level analysis of ableist paternalism in assistive robotics, we will:

1. Consider ***structural factors***, i.e. ableism and power inequalities between the different stakeholders involved in the robot design lifecycle
2. Examine the multi-stage robot ***design processes*** (design, development, deployment, and exit), each involving multiple stakeholders
3. Evaluate the ***interaction tensions*** that emerge between robots and disabled end-users which may lead to robot-mediated paternalism towards users

Building on this theoretical framework, we will provide a checklist that will raise questions on how and why certain decisions are being made during the robot design lifecycle. We hope HRI researchers can draw on our work to identify and counteract the multiple ways that disabled people's agency and autonomy can be at risk due to robot-mediated ableist paternalism.

[1] B. Liedo*, P. Ghosh*, and L. D. Riek. "Ableist Paternalism in HRI: A Roadmap" *In preparation.* [2] A. Shew. Against technoableism: rethinking who needs improvement. First edition. New York, W.W. Norton & Company. 2023 [3] . C. Tronto. Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice. NYU Press, 2013.

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