The application of ethics of care to PIM: Potential for the study of successful ageing

Amber L. Cushing
School of Information & Communication Studies
University College Dublin
Dublin 4, Dublin, Ireland
amber.cushing@ucd.ie
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0186-0689
https://people.ucd.ie/amber.cushing

Introduction

My research focuses on how digital information is maintained over time in different contexts. Within PIM, I am most interested in how personal information is maintained over the long term and "for our lives and beyond", to invoke Jones (2008). I believe the ethics of care can be used to investigate how PIM can assist in ageing successfully and has potential to develop PIM theory. Instead of asking, "how can PIM help us age successfully?", we first need to ask "what could guide our attempts to apply PIM to successful ageing?" My response, considering what I have found in my own research, is that the ethics of care could guide development of PIM tools and methods. Below, I will describe the concepts of the ethics of care that I believe are most applicable, provide examples where ethics of care have been applied in related academic work (STS, archives, HCI, CSCW), examples of how I can apply ethics of care to my own previous PIM research, and how I envision ethics of care can help guide the application of PIM to successful ageing.

Ethics of Care and some relevant applications

In brief, many early concepts of care ethics can be traced to social psychologist Carol Gillian's widely read 1982 book *In A Different Voice*, which provided a new perspective to the moral development of girls and women, and challenged current beliefs of moral development at the time. Gilligan (1982) proposed that women "define their identity through relationships of intimacy and care" (p. 164). When faced with moral judgements, women make moral choices based on intrapersonal relationships, not on impartial understandings of justice, which is the starting point in responsibility based ethics and that was popular at the time (Edwards, 2009). Over the past decades, researchers have situated the ethics of care in feminist theory and have also offered many definitions for care and caring. One of the most highly cited is Tronto (1993), who broadly defines care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (p. 103). According to Fisher and Tronto (1990), caring is an action with four phases: (1) caring about, (2) taking care of, (3) caregiving, and (4)

care receiving. Ethics of care has been applied to nursing theory and practice, as well as social work (Edwards, 2009).

After I began reading about the ethics of care, what struck me about this definition was the placement of the terms "maintenance" and also "repair." Jones (2008) considers maintaining (for now, for later, and for our lives and beyond) a meta-level PIM activity, which Feng and Agosto (2019) found to be a frequent activity in which their participants engaged in relation to activity tracker technology. Bergman and Whittaker (2016) argue that curating personal data, which includes preservation, is central to PIM. Preservation involves repair to extend access to digital materials.

I found several examples of care being applied in information studies. These include Caswell and Cifor (2016; 2019), who suggest that the concept of radical empathy should guide archival ethics, as an ethics of care would allow archivists to demonstrate concepts of social justice, through demonstrating care for content creators. Within STS, Jackson (2014) cites Gilligan (1982) in his suggestion that an ethics of care could be used to help scholars shift their focus from innovation to repair and broken world thinking. In the context of studying health information behaviour, Dalmer (2020) has explored the information practices that result from providing care for family members with dementia. Within HCI and CSCW spaces, Muller (2011) writes about how feminist theory can assist one in understanding the user, and Toombs et al. (2015) applied the values of care theory to understand communities of makers and hackers. Toombs et al. (2018) also led a CSCW workshop in 2018 about how to apply care to CSCW research.

PIM as a form of caring

Can PIM be considered a form of care and does an ethics of care apply? If so, how? Would an ethics of care help underpin thinking about PIM concepts and how these concepts themselves age over time? I believe that PIM can be positioned as a care practice, (caring) and that using the caring lens can lead to new insights in PIM research. This can be useful in investigating PIM as self care, as well as exploring PIM as care work.

In reviewing the data from my work on how individuals conceive of digital possessions and a digital legacy, it is clear that some participants could have expressed an understanding of maintaining a collection of personal information as a form of self care, but also a way to care for others (Cushing 2012; 2013). In exploring the characteristics of a digital legacy, I found two characteristics that were particularly relevant to the concepts of self care: that individuals chose to maintain a digital legacy for people other than themselves (for example, to remind them of me when I'm gone), and that the digital legacy was often curated in a way that presented the individual in a positive light. A "positive light" was exemplified by a participant who described choosing to save photos that did not make her look too "old" and another participant who did not want to maintain too many photos that depicted his "immature" actions (Cushing, 2012, p. 90-91). This demonstrates an attempt to care for one's identity through digital possessions. In Cushing and Dumbleton (2017), we found that at the end stage of their doctoral programme, some doctoral students

viewed themselves within a community of scholars and planned to share their data as a way of "paying it forward" (which could be considered a form of caring) for others within their academic community.

In describing the relationship between caring for ourselves and an ethics of care, Ward (2015) is critical of how the term "self care" has been co-opted by neoliberal governments as a way to shift caring responsibilities from government services to individuals. Lupton (2016) argues that the quantified self movement, which includes tracking information about the body, has similar roots in neoliberalism: that self tracking can be contextualised as a was to care for oneself, and caring for oneself is a way to be a good citizen in a neoliberal democracy. Drawing this work together presents an opportunity to understand how maintaining personal information over time can be understood as an act of self care. If the act of self tracking can be viewed as a demonstration of self care, then the organising and maintaining of that self tracked personal information (which Feng and Agosto, 2019 describe) could be positioned as a form of identity self care via PIM. In this understanding, PIM becomes an example of "everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). However, it is clear that the concept of self care as identity preservation and management is intertwined with caring for those with whom we have relationships (often, friends, family and those within our communities). This is described above in how individuals maintain a digital legacy for others (Cushing, 2012), and also by Cushing and Kerrigan (2022) who explore instances of where official personal information (largely birth certificates and passports) did not represent the individual's identity as a parent, but had to be maintained by the individual for the purpose of engaging with society. To counter this "does not represent me" view of the personal information, many participants maintained additional personal information that did represent their identities as parents as a way to "counter" the official documents, and/or work to change data collection systems, to allow for the recognition of multiple family structures. In Cushing and Kerrigan (2023, in process) individuals that identify as nonbinary discuss a similar requirement to maintain personal information that does not represent them, but is maintained in order to engage with a society structured by a gender binary. In one example, a participant spoke of the effort that they expended to write their own obituary, preserve representative documents and find a trusted relative that would honour their gender queer identity through maintaining and sharing the "correct" personal information. Alternately, Cushing (2018) found that individuals maintain personal information for a loved one as an act of duty, which Kirk and Sellen (2010) describe as fulfilling obligations. Both of these groups of individuals discuss the work, effort and burden at length that this PIM requires. In this sense, this PIM burden (PIM-B) can be understood as a form of caregiving: caring for one's identity through PIM for oneself and for others with whom the individual has a relationship. Dalmer (2020) also found that care-givers often experience burdens from the caregiving they perform.

Future directions to explore

I believe that using ethics of care to explore PIM can be particularly useful in two main avenues: PIM as self care, and the PIM involved in caring work. An ethics of care can help guide our understanding of motivations for PIM as a form of self care. If self tracking is positioned as a form of the neoliberal reaction to self care that Lupton (2016) identified, then there is ground to further explore self tracking in PIM as self care, which can build on Feng and Agosto's (2019) work. Bergman and Whittaker (2016) also list quantified self and self tracking data as a future direction for PIM research. How individuals maintain personal information over time for others, including the concept of a digital legacy, also provides fertile ground for future work. How might this research go forward, if it is explored from the point of view of an ethics of care? What new insights might develop, if the starting point of PIM is that individuals engage in PIM as a way to demonstrate care for themselves and others? As early as 2001, Whittaker and Hirschberg stated that a period of transition (in their example, an office move) was a good time to explore PIM behaviours because an individual would have been more likely to take stock of the personal information they manage and their habits for managing that personal information. When considering the question of how PIM can assist in successful ageing, care ethics can be useful as a theory to underpin tools and methods to help individuals over the long term, and during different "ageing events." For example, parents often manage the personal information for a child, until the child begins to take on more of this management themselves-Jones (2008) describes this as the information needed to fulfil responsibilities. An "ageing event" in this instance could be the ways in which caregivers teach PIM to children and the transition that follows, as an example of caring work within a family. In addition, the moments at which family members, often adult children, must begin to transition to caring for the PIM of their elderly parents with diminished capacities also represents an "ageing event" at which PIM as a form of care work can be explored. These events represent transitions in the maintaining of personal information over time. What can we learn about PIM from these transition events if these events are viewed as acts of caring?

Several scholars have pointed out that PIM lacks philosophical direction, theoretical foundations, and principles which are needed to advance research within the field (Bergman & Whittaker, 2016; Dinneen & Julien, 2020; Feng & Agosto, 2019; Nwagwu & Williams, 2022). Applying an ethics of care to PIM may be an avenue to address these concerns, especially in the context of applying PIM to successful ageing.

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