

# THE ROLE OF FEAR IN THE LIVE-IN CARE DISCOURSE. AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF GERMAN NEWSPAPERS

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## Abstract

Migrant live-in care is an essential but controversial part of the care system in Germany and is therefore discussed emotionally in public discourse. While there is already plenty of research on conflicts arising at the micro-level of these care arrangements, the public discourse on live-in care and its emotional dimension has received less scientific attention. The role of fear appears particularly significant as it points to moral assumptions about migrant live-in care. In our contribution, we analyse the communication of fear in the German live-in care discourse in various newspapers between 2017 and 2023, and explore the moral assumptions behind these fears. Two events turn out to be especially relevant: the Covid-19 pandemic and a decision by the Federal Labour Court on payment for on-call times of live-in carers. In both cases, the discourse is replete with predictions of the impending collapse of the care system, which correspond to fears about the future of eldercare in Germany. Fear functions as a moral call to action. Its public communication expresses a perceived lack of political solutions to fundamental problems in (live-in) care.

*Keywords: live-in care; fear; discourse analysis*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

"The bad news came just over a week ago," an older lady is quoted as saying in the German newspaper *Die WELT*. Her struggles to organise the care of her 89-year-old sister feature in an article from spring 2020 entitled "On the verge of collapse": "Fearing Covid, her sister's carer packed her bags at short notice and went back to Poland. Her children had urged her to take this step for fear of infection."<sup>1</sup>

The example illustrates three things: Firstly, carers from Eastern Europe who live and work in care recipients' homes play an important part in the German care system. Secondly, this form of migrant live-in care is susceptible to risk and gives rise to considerable uncertainty. A clear legal framework and reliable information are largely missing. Carers, care recipients and families often operate in an opaque and barely regulated market. Thirdly, due to its precarious nature, live-in care has become a subject of emotionally charged and controversial public media coverage and debate. However, while there is a growing body of research on conflicts arising at the micro-level of these care arrangements, this public discourse on live-in care and its emotional dimension have received much less scientific attention so far.

<sup>1</sup> Pieper 2020.

Our contribution presents an analysis of the recent public media discourse about migrant live-in care in Germany. The main focus is on the communication of fears, as this appears particularly prominent and often conveys assumptions about future developments and their moral implications. We first provide a short overview of live-in care in Germany and a description of the research methods of our study. We then identify the main perspectives portrayed in the media and trace the central timeline that structures the discourse. On this basis, we describe the scope of different narratives of fear, focusing on the relatives, the care recipients, the live-in carers, the brokering agencies, and the care system in general. We discuss our findings in light of recent studies on live-in care and draw conclusions for future research, media coverage and the public debate.

## 2 BACKGROUND: LIVE-IN CARE IN GERMANY AND CONCEPTIONS OF FEAR

In Germany, live-in care is considered a relevant part of the care system. Yet the number of live-in carers working here is not recorded. In 2017, a study estimated that 163,000 households employed a live-in carer.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, the estimate was 210,000 households.<sup>3</sup> Since the need for care is continuing to increase, it seems likely that this trend will also continue and accelerate. Current estimates of the number of live-in carers in Germany range from 300,000 to 700,000.<sup>4</sup>

The legal status of live-in care in Germany is often unclear. There are various employment models, ranging from hiring a live-in carer through an agency to employing a self-employed worker directly without any intermediaries. In most cases, the live-in carers rotate every few months. For families, the regulations are hardly transparent. In many cases, live-in care takes place in a legal "grey area" or is illegal under labour law.<sup>5</sup> This precarious situation nurtures manifold uncertainties and fears.

Live-in care in Germany is subject to an increasing body of research. Most studies focus on the perspective of live-in carers<sup>6</sup>, caring relatives<sup>7</sup>, or brokering agencies<sup>8</sup>. Fear in the context of live-in care has not been systematically investigated in Germany. A study about fears of care recipients and families with live-in carers in Israel highlights the fear of intrusion of privacy and abuse in the micro-setting.<sup>9</sup> While Israel has a different legal framework, privacy concerns are most likely also present within German families. A German interview study suggests that the fear of something happening to your older relatives constitutes a starting point for live-in arrangements.<sup>10</sup> Another study states that relatives are uncertain about the legal status of live-in workers, for example regarding their insurance.<sup>11</sup> While these studies do not focus on fear, they make it seem plausible that fears play a role in live-in care.

The media discourse on live-in care in German newspapers from 2004 to 2016 was analysed by Christiane Bomert, focusing on the position and agency of live-in carers.<sup>12</sup> This study also provides a list of events that influenced the discourse during the period of analysis, including the expansion of the European Union to countries from Eastern Europe in 2005 and 2007, new regulations like the introduction of a minimum wage for care workers in 2010, and a general minimum wage in 2015.<sup>13</sup> While a

<sup>2</sup> Hielscher et al. 2017, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs et al. 2020, pp. 73–75.

<sup>4</sup> Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration 2022, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Städler-Mach/Bünemann 2023, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> e.g. Karakayali 2010.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Rossow 2021.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Aulenbacher et al. 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Ayalon 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Kniejska 2016, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> Rossow 2021, p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> Bomert 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Bomert 2020, p. 118.

minimum wage had been discussed in connection with fairness before these events, at the time, it was primarily addressed as a financial problem for families.<sup>14</sup> Here, uncertainties and fears already seem to be playing an important role.

In general, the concept of fear is contested.<sup>15</sup> Jack Barbalet describes fear as an "emotional response to danger"<sup>16</sup> and sees danger as referring to "a liability or prospect of injury"<sup>17</sup>. This definition comprises two main aspects that lead our analysis and coding process: First, fear is based on *descriptive* assumptions about the plausibility or probability of certain future developments or situations. Second, these developments or situations are *evaluated* as harmful or otherwise problematic.

Of course, the discursive negotiation of fears does not simply express individual emotions but conveys cultural narratives about these emotions and the underlying descriptive and evaluative assumptions. Judith Eckert notes that the rhetoric of fear is connected to issues of safety and uncertainty.<sup>18</sup> Paulina and Rafał Matera also define fear following Zygmunt Bauman as "uncertainty that results from ignorance about danger and a lack of knowledge about what to do with this threat."<sup>19</sup> For our analysis, the connection between fear and uncertainty is crucial since fear can be seen as connected to future uncertainties, such as *potential* dangers. The connection between narratives of fears and uncertainties is something we noticed during our coding process and added to our conception of fear for our analysis.

As we analyse narratives of fear, the reason why fear is narrated is relevant. In the context of ecological discourse, Niklas Luhmann noted that fear functions as a tool to make a moral statement.<sup>20</sup> This viewpoint focuses on a specific dimension of fear within narratives. Fear functions in narratives as a moral call for change. Moral in this case refers to a perspective where a subject views an action as correct according to their normative standards. Fear in narratives is not only the description of a situation and the assessment of a danger, but also the moral appeal for this situation to be fixed. Accordingly, Eckert notes that it is necessary to analyse the function of fear in its specific context.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 METHODS

Our study is part of the research project "Eastern European live-in carers in domestic care triads for people with dementia: Informal care concepts, communicative power and care responsibilities" (Triad-De) funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). It follows Keller's approach to discourse analysis in terms of sampling and structuring the data.<sup>22</sup> We also used his methodological framework to guide our content analysis process, especially when it came to looking for relevant events and perspectives within the discourse.<sup>23</sup> As the previous analysis by Bomert ended with 2016, the timespan we investigated started in January 2017 and ended in June 2023. The corpus was compiled from newspaper archives. The newspapers selected match those of Bomert and range from conservative to more liberal papers to cover a range of political perspectives: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Focus* (Focus), *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), *Der Spiegel* (Spiegel), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Die WELT* (WELT). We added *die tageszeitung* (taz) which is perceived to be a liberal-left newspaper.

<sup>14</sup> Bomert 2020, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Matera/Matera 2022, p. 454.

<sup>16</sup> Barbalet 1998, p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> Barbalet 1998, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Eckert 2020, p. 172.

<sup>19</sup> Matera/Matera 2022, p. 456.

<sup>20</sup> Luhmann 2004, p. 244.

<sup>21</sup> Eckert 2020, p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Keller 2011, pp. 88–93.

<sup>23</sup> Keller 2011, p. 70.

Our search phrases were "24 Stunden Pflege" OR "24 Stunden Betreuung" (24-hour care), which are the commonly used terms for live-in care in Germany. Additionally, we searched for "häusliche Pflege" AND "Osteuro\*" (home care AND Eastern Euro\*), "häusliche Betreuung" AND "Osteuro\*" (home care AND Eastern Euro\*) and "Osteuro\*" AND "Betreuungskr\*" (Eastern Euro\* AND care worker\*). The online archive WISO was used for all newspapers except SZ and FAZ. We excluded duplicates and articles that did not involve live-in care. We analysed 137 articles from seven different newspapers. Most articles were found in SZ (35) and FAZ (33). Welt (25), Spiegel (15), FR (13), taz (13) and Focus (3) followed in this order. Out of 137 articles, 84 had live-in care as the main topic while the other 53 described other issues but mentioned live-in care. Within these articles we identified events that were relevant for the discourse by sorting them according to their main themes and looking at timeframes with a spike in published articles. These events are described in 4.2.

We conducted a structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz<sup>24</sup> to structure the material. We started with a set of deductive codes reflecting our research interest and supplemented them with inductive codes where necessary. Accordingly, as we were interested in narratives of fear in the discourse, we created a deductive code for all explicit mentions of fear ("Angst", "Furcht") or related words like "Sorgen" (worries/concerns). We also started with a deductive code for all mentions of crisis. Regarding perspective, we differentiated between groups *talked about* and *talked to*. An article can mention a person or a group without claiming to have talked to them, which we coded as *talked about*. When an article cites (directly or indirectly) a specific person or group, it claims to articulate their perspective, which we coded as *talked to*. The results of this coding were used throughout our analysis. Our findings about the perspectives are presented in 4.1 and 4.3.

All codes were inductively differentiated into subcodes in the course of analysis to distinguish variations. Next, connections between the codes were identified. Our first three empirical chapters therefore reference the coding of fears and the subcodes of the different perspectives we developed. The authors discussed the process of coding in analysis sessions. The empirical material was summarised and connections between the codes were analysed. This was done by discussing the coded sections and comparing them with other sections to differentiate content. As we connected fear to different perspectives, these perspective-codes were relevant for this analysis. Links to the narratives of crisis were evident and therefore were also connected to our analysis of fears. Lastly, we included other aspects in our analysis, such as the article format and the publication date (e.g. early or later in the pandemic).

Following Willy Viehöver, we understand discourses as being structured by narratives, which are patterns of communication.<sup>25</sup> Viehöver also points out that the title, subtitle and last paragraph are often especially relevant for the content and tone of an article,<sup>26</sup> which is also the case in our analysis. Summarising our methodological approach, we conducted a content analysis following Kuckartz, while also acknowledging the characteristics of our empirical data, and paying attention to distinctive features of the discursive material. Our content analysis is a step towards identifying thematic patterns in the live-in discourse and how different perspectives are constructed regarding fear within the discourse. The identified narratives are summarised with examples in 4.3.

<sup>24</sup> Kuckartz/Rädiker 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Viehöver 2011, p. 194.

<sup>26</sup> Viehöver 2011, pp. 207–208.

## 4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS: MEDIA DISCOURSE ON LIVE-IN CARE IN GERMANY

A discourse does not usually articulate only one narrative or argument but a variety of perspectives, arguments and narrative structures that overlap, build on or contradict each other. Our analysis aims to unlock this range of perspectives and arguments. Accordingly, we will first distinguish the main perspectives and events that are addressed in the discourse, highlighting two major events: the Covid-19 pandemic and a decision by the Federal Labour Court on payment for on-call times for live-in carers. We then trace how narratives are linked with fears in these two contexts, focusing on the structure of the respective narratives and their moral functions.

### 4.1 PERSPECTIVES REPRESENTED IN THE MEDIA DISCOURSE ON LIVE-IN CARE

The perspectives of the groups that shape the care setting itself are also the ones most frequently portrayed in the articles we analysed: live-in carers, care recipients and their relatives. In addition, brokering agencies figure prominently in the live-in discourse. Other groups mentioned are: politicians and political parties, unions and lobby groups. The perspectives of these groups overlap. For example, unions are usually on the side of the live-in carers, endeavouring to see things from their perspective and focusing on good labour conditions.

The most prominent perspective in the discourse is that of brokering agencies. This is not least due to their lobby group, Verband für häusliche Betreuung und Pflege (VHBP) (Association for Home Care), which was very active during the pandemic. VHBP distances itself from "bad" brokering agencies conducting malpractice, thus promoting the image of a clear distinction between "good" and "bad" agencies.

While live-in carers are central to all the analysed articles, they are often written *about*. In particular, articles that portray the general debate tend to cite brokering agencies and other formalised perspectives, like those of unions or scientists. Live-in carers themselves are mainly talked *to* in longer reports that focus on the micro-setting. The perspectives of caring relatives are mainly considered when the organisation of live-in care is portrayed. The perspectives of care recipients are largely missing.

### 4.2 TIMELINE OF THE LIVE-IN DISCOURSE

In the period analysed, we identified two major events. One is the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the first lockdown in Germany in March 2020 and the following months. The second event is a Federal Labour Court case in 2021 in which a live-in carer sued a brokering agency for the payment of on-call times, mostly during the night. The court ruled in favour of the live-in carer, which started a debate about the fairness and affordability of live-in care in Germany.

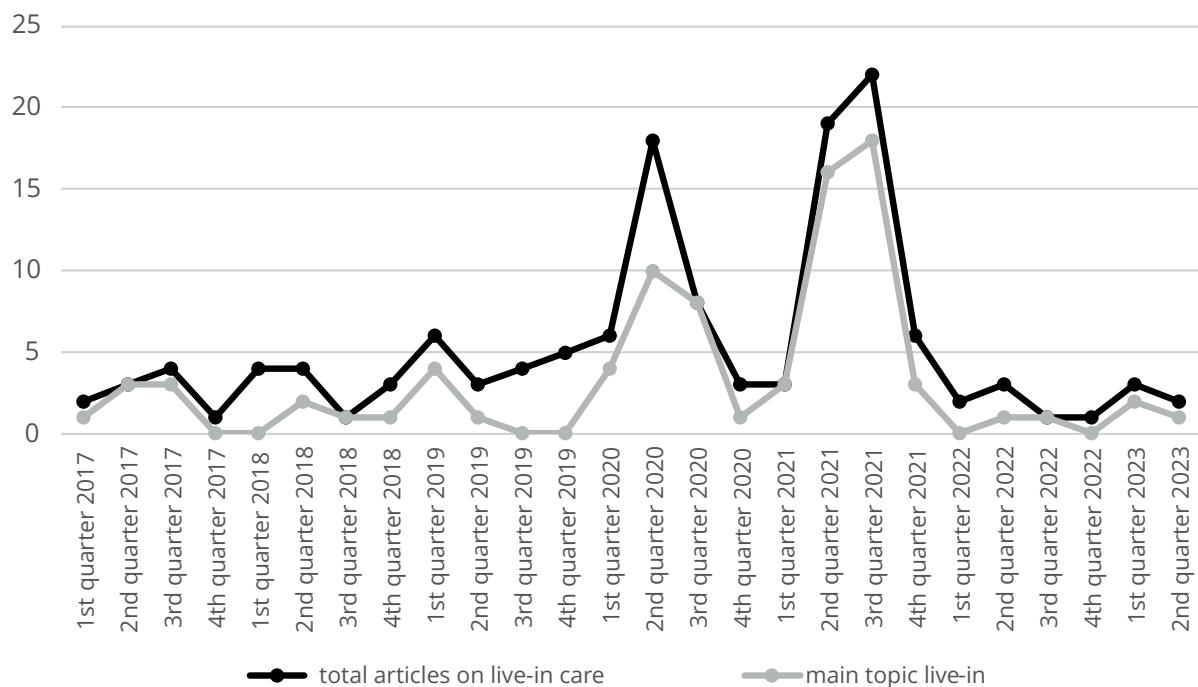


Figure 1 Number of articles per quarter

Both events were described as threats to live-in care in a number of different ways, frequently through fear-evoking metaphors. Words like "Krise" (crisis), "Notstand" (emergency situation), "Katastrophe" (catastrophe) and "Zusammenbruch" (breakdown/collapse), alongside verbs like "drohen" (threaten) and "(be)fürchten" (to fear), were employed to describe the situation. After the Federal Court decision in 2021, the possible consequences for live-in care were labelled as a "tsunami" or "Armageddon" by representatives of two associations representing caring relatives. As we will show, the corresponding narratives express fear of perceived uncertainty of the future. They shed light on different perspectives and narratives of fears in the context of live-in care in Germany.

## 4.3 NARRATIVES OF FEAR

### Relatives in Need

The central perspective regarding problems arising in the care setting itself was that of relatives. The border closures during the pandemic were described as a major problem for them. It seemed uncertain if the current model of switching live-in carers every other month could be continued. If this system had failed, a viable alternative would have been necessary to cover the existing care need. It was said that the closure of national borders caused many live-in carers to return to their homeland or stay there. This was portrayed as creating or increasing a gap between the need for care and the available live-in carers.

If Iwona and Maria are not the only ones leaving and not returning, families face a problem. Not everyone is as fortunate as Heidi Jung, whose daughter took her in, knowing "that as a freelance photographer, I won't get any work anyway." Many families are now frantically searching for emergency solutions. While you are supposed to avoid contact with elderly relatives, you can't just leave them on their own.<sup>27</sup>

Relatives were depicted as being in need. If the live-in system had not provided sufficient support, they would have needed to organise a substitute. In many cases, this would have meant caring for their relatives themselves. In this narrative, the language reflected urgency. The relatives were described as "frantic", suggesting that a feared situation was becoming reality. If relatives were not described as frantic, they appeared at least "worried". In this narrative, the worst had not yet happened, but it would only be a matter of time.

A second fear of relatives is addressed in the quote above. Especially in the early stages of the pandemic, it was unclear how the virus was transmitted and how to avoid infection. Articles during the first lockdowns pointed out that any contact with older people, who counted as a particularly vulnerable group, should be avoided. This was clearly not possible when living together with a live-in carer. Hence, it was pointed out that relatives were torn between their family members' need for care and the responsibility to avoid infections by isolating as much as possible. While there was a general fear of infection, the need for care was prioritised.

After the Federal Labour Court decision in 2021, relatives were also faced with the fear of live-in care failing, as it appeared uncertain whether they would still be able to afford it. A typical headline asked: "How expensive will Grandpa's care become now?"<sup>28</sup> Relatives were quickly identified as those suffering most from the decision, as they were the ones who needed to organise the care. The headline about the more expensive care for Grandpa does not address "Grandpa" as an active agent. The people responsible are the caring relatives.

In the cases described, fear (mostly) referred to situations that might occur in the future and that were portrayed as a possible danger. In the narrative, however, the possibility almost seems to turn into a certainty that must be managed. In many cases, a solution appears next to impossible, leaving the relatives "frantic". This narrative suggests an intense sense of responsibility on the part of relatives to organise care for their dependent family members. At the same time, being frantic points to a feeling of being overwhelmed by the responsibility while not being allowed to fail, as there is no further safety net.

<sup>27</sup> Mihm 2020 a.; all cited articles were published in German. The translation of cited articles was carried out with Google Translate and adjusted by the authors.

<sup>28</sup> Balzter 2021.

## Helpless Care Recipients

While relatives were pictured as the ones having to fear for their dependent family members, the care recipients themselves were portrayed with very little agency. In many articles, their own fear was accompanied by a sense of helplessness: "Mrs. H. cried and stroked her [the live-in carer's] hand and asked her a thousand times if she would really come back."<sup>29</sup> While there is desperation in the narrated picture of the care recipients, they are at the same time not the ones managing the situation. In the quote, Mrs. H. is portrayed as crying and fearing that the live-in carer might never return. In this case, the care recipient's perspective is reported through the live-in carer. In many other articles, their perspective was narrated from the point of view of caring relatives. While there were a few articles that interviewed people in need of care, these generally did not pertain to the two crisis events. It appears that the care recipients' own perspective is less relevant in the live-in discourse, at least in these crisis events.

The picture of helpless care recipients becomes vital in the aftermath of the Federal Labour Court decision. "The decision triggers a tsunami for all those who depend on the support of foreign nursing staff at home."<sup>30</sup> This quote by a representative of an association for patient rights was cited in several articles. It employs the metaphor of an unstoppable and devastating natural disaster. The fear addressed was that many families would no longer be able to afford live-in care. However, when it comes to (re)acting, it is the families or the relatives that are in a position to do something by way of preparation, not the care recipients themselves. The portrayed helplessness and the lack of agency in the narrative of care recipients point towards a moral problem. Not only is there little knowledge of the perspective of care recipients, especially in moments of crisis, but their perspective seems to be of secondary importance.

## Live-in Carers and Covid-19

For live-in carers themselves, the two crisis events had very different implications. The Federal Labour Court's decision had the effect that their morally problematic position as potentially exploited workers was recognised. During the Covid-19 pandemic, their status as migrant workers was highlighted in the debate and whether they would stay in Germany to care for the care recipients or leave to be with their own families. This question related to their fear of infection with Covid-19.

In one article, a representative of a brokering agency, when asked about the risk of too few live-in carers remaining in the country after Easter, answers: "This is related to the fear of the virus, fear for one's own families, and also the situation at the borders."<sup>31</sup> In this quote, there is a clear distinction between the live-in carers' working-life in Germany and their family life abroad, with the latter being prioritised.

However, several articles highlighted that some live-in carers decided to stay in Germany and continued to work. Sometimes this was narrated as an exception because they had decided to wait with the care recipient until a new live-in carer arrived, but the new carer was either unable or unwilling

<sup>29</sup> Klovert 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Beeger/Jung 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Pütz 2020.

to come. In other cases, it was portrayed as an opportunity to receive better healthcare than in their home countries, or to work for a longer period than would normally be possible and therefore earn more money. These views became more prominent over time. At the beginning, the dominant narrative was that large numbers of live-in carers were leaving. After a few weeks, it was said that the situation was not so bad after all.

In this narrative, the live-in carers' fear appeared as a reaction to the unknown virus and its consequences. It was a fear for their own families. They did not want to be separated from their relatives for a longer period of time or to be away from home in case someone fell ill. In this situation of uncertainty, they were depicted as wanting to be at home. However, especially in the articles that focus on real micro-settings, it becomes clear that this decision was not taken lightly. There was also a feeling of responsibility for the care recipients, which is why some live-in carers stayed for a longer time than contractually stipulated. While the fears of the live-in carers were portrayed as a reason for them to leave, the general focus remained on the problems connected to their departure, like the urgent need to organise alternative care for the care recipients.

In this case, the fear revealed an enormous dependency on migrant workers, as well as the ensuing dangers when these workers are no longer available. The current system of live-in care does not involve any integration of live-in carers into German society or an option to migrate as a family, which poses a risk in unexpected events like a pandemic. Here, the narrative that live-in care constitutes an irreplaceable part of the German care system is in evidence (see *Live-in Care in Danger*).

## Brokering Agencies as Managers of Uncertainty

For brokering agencies, the perspective on fear was different. They were very vocal during the pandemic, trying to react to the fears described. "He considers some of the highly critical portrayals of the availability of caregivers to be exaggerated. This unsettles those in need of care and their families."<sup>32</sup> This statement by the manager of one agency is a good example of the way agencies were portrayed during the pandemic. They responded as experts who knew more about the situation. In the quote, there is an assessment of the appropriateness of fear. And in this case, the verdict was: There is no need to unsettle care recipients and their relatives.

The actual assessment might differ between articles, as some brokering agencies were less optimistic: "Many agencies no longer have enough caregivers to send to Germany," he says, estimating: 'Tens of thousands of families are now affected.'<sup>33</sup> The assessment of the situation also changed over time, as we already noted when describing the narrative about live-in carers leaving the country. However, the general tone of the articles suggested that brokering agencies were the ones that knew most about the current situation. Almost no article offered an assessment of the current situation without asking an agency. While problems were described in the beginning of the first lockdowns, these were also solved by the agencies: "There's enough staff," says Blassnigg. 'The market isn't completely empty. If necessary, they can also rely on harvest workers who are currently unable to find work there during the crisis.'<sup>34</sup> Brokering agencies were acknowledging problems, fears and uncertainties, but they were

<sup>32</sup> Mihm 2020 b.

<sup>33</sup> Mihm 2020 a.

<sup>34</sup> Mihm 2020 b.

also depicted as the ones providing solutions, like giving care jobs to other migrant workers who could not find work in their sector.

This role of managing fears was vital during the pandemic. The problems associated with closed borders or fewer live-in carers were mostly problems of organisation. This means they fell within the domain of the agencies. This changed in 2021 when the Federal Labour Court decision was made. The decision revealed a problem with the agencies' business model and simultaneously questioned whether live-in care can be affordable and fair at the same time. "Brokers often attract families in Germany seeking help with the promise of 24-hour care – usually for little money."<sup>35</sup> Here, the brokering agencies appeared rather as part of the problem. Their business model was framed as a false promise. Despite becoming much less vocal in the discourse, they were still trying to manage the problem, for example by proposing a legal framework like the Austrian one – a self-employment model which still includes agencies as intermediaries – as standard for Germany. Overall, however, agencies were asked less frequently about their assessment of the situation after the Federal Labour Court decision.

In the case of brokering agencies, fear pointed towards the need to tackle and control perceived dangers. During the pandemic, agencies were able to fill this role. Fear needs to be met with possible solutions. Every fear described above raises the question of how to deal with the danger. In the aftermath of the Federal Labour Court decision, however, the agencies could not provide a viable solution to the resulting problems.

## Live-in Care in Danger

The narratives of fear analysed so far mostly referred to personal fears about possible future events and, in the case of the brokering agencies, dealing with these fears. Yet there is another, more abstract fear on a systemic level which is nevertheless still linked to these individualised fears: the fear that the system itself might no longer work. While this fear is also the frame in which the described individual fears are located, it is effective on a larger scale.

Headlines during the pandemic, like "On the verge of collapse"<sup>36</sup> or "The care crisis"<sup>37</sup> and "Finished, amen, catastrophe,"<sup>38</sup> or "Trapped in the care dilemma"<sup>39</sup> in the aftermath of the Federal Labour Court decision, illustrate this systemic level of fear. All these headlines highlight the perceived fragility of the live-in care system. This systemic fear predates the two analysed events. For example, in 2018, FAZ published an article with the headline "Care collapse under German roofs"<sup>40</sup>. In this article, fairness was highlighted as a problem in live-in care. In the context of the two analysed events, this abstract fear was intensified and translated into concrete individual fears. Furthermore, live-in care was narrated as the last resort to avoid collapse. Both the pandemic and the Federal Labour Court decision cast doubt on the sustainability of the current system.

As previously described, agencies proposed hiring harvest workers to fill jobs in care. "Anyone who wants to get on the bus can be placed," reports a Bavarian broker.<sup>41</sup> The need for live-in care seemed

<sup>35</sup> dpa 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Pieper 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Pütz 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Prantl 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Beeger et al. 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Beeger/Pennekamp 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Spinrad 2020.

## 5 DISCUSSION: FEAR AND MORAL CONFLICTS IN THE MEDIA DISCOURSE ON LIVE-IN CARE IN GERMANY

Our findings highlight the central role of fear in the German media discourse on live-in care. In general, we were able to identify two different types of narrative of fear. One focuses on individual fears, like the fears of relatives and live-in carers. The other one refers to a more systemic fear. These narratives include several core stakeholders of live-in care: the overwhelmed relatives who are responsible but might not be able to organise care for their family members; the person in need of care who is portrayed as helpless; and the live-in carers who are torn between their own family and their work responsibilities. All these narratives address an uncertain situation demanding security.

Relatives feared that the care needed would not be carried out due to closed borders or financial problems and were uncertain about who would provide this care in the future. They knew that, if everything else failed, they would have to provide a solution themselves. This media portrayal of relatives as those ultimately responsible for care provision corresponds to findings on relatives' own perspectives. For instance, an interview study shows that caring relatives will hand over the responsi-

<sup>42</sup> Lindenbach 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Pieper 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Beeger/Jung 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Rossow 2021, p. 63.

so desperate at one point during the pandemic that quality of care was perceived as a secondary problem. The rationale seemed to be: better bad care than no care. This shows how live-in care was viewed within the bigger picture of care in Germany. For many people, there is no other option. Not only do the families depend on live-in care, but so does the care system itself, because there is no alternative way of caring for those currently cared for by live-in carers. Live-in care is the last resort for many families.

This narrative also sheds light on the role of politics. During the pandemic, brokering agencies took on the role of managing the crisis. Government policy was mentioned only occasionally, and politicians were cited making statements about the bigger picture of live-in care. While policymakers were identified as being responsible, they were also seen as not meeting the task. A brokering agent states that while Austria's Home Secretary chartered a plane for live-in carers, "he does not see such solutions"<sup>42</sup> in Germany. Problems related to the pandemic were also seen as being rooted in political complacency in the face of more fundamental systemic problems: "According to Isfort, Germany is currently sliding unchecked into a care crisis. A development that is also a consequence of years of political inaction [...]."<sup>43</sup> This narrative became even more vital in the aftermath of the Federal Labour Court decision, probably because of the shift in the perceived role of brokering agencies as managers, after which a lack of solutions became apparent. Here, again, political actors were portrayed as ignoring the problem: "Such structural problems have been known for a long time, even in politics – but nothing has changed so far"<sup>44</sup>. The narrative clearly addressed political actors as the ones needing to find solutions. At the same time, it made clear that their negligence contributed to the current crisis. Within our sample, there was no article reporting new policies or regulations. While in 2021, live-in care was reported to be on the political agenda after the election, this was never carried forward afterwards.

bility of daily care to the live-in carer but retain general responsibility for the organisation of care.<sup>45</sup> In the context of the pandemic and the Federal Labour Court ruling, this may have caused considerable uncertainty. In both cases, relatives were described as being responsible in situations they could not control, which was then narrated in terms of uncertainty and fear. Apart from this *felt* moral responsibility, there is also a legal responsibility for the care of relatives in Germany. The narrative of fear in this case can be interpreted as a call for help directed towards policymakers.

Regarding the persons in need of care, the newspaper articles analysed create the impression of a fundamental lack of voice and agency. While some articles portray the perspectives of care recipients themselves, they are generally represented to a much smaller extent than those of caring relatives. This neglect corresponds to a general desideratum regarding the perspectives of cared-for persons in research on live-in care. Given that many live-in arrangements are initiated to meet the specific requirements arising in the context of dementia care, this may add to the widespread and pervasive epistemic injustice vis-à-vis people with dementia in research and public discourse.<sup>46</sup> They do not seem to be considered to be equally credible or relevant respondents or sources of information. In consequence, those at the centre of live-in care arrangements remain silent and their needs, interests and concerns are left out of the discussion of this form of care.

For the live-in carers, the situation was different. In the pandemic, they were the ones facing an actual decision, but all available alternatives had their downsides. On the one hand, they did not want to leave the person they cared for, and they also wanted to keep their financial security. On the other, they might have been separated from their home and family for a longer period of time. This is in line with previous research showing that 9 out of 15 interviewed live-in carers "mentioned stressors with regard to their own family, including separation from their family, children, or partner".<sup>47</sup> The live-in carers' primary motivation was found to be financial, but intrinsic motivations like altruism also played a part.<sup>48</sup> This aligns with the narrative in the articles we analysed. However, while relatives were under an obligation to organise care for the care recipient, the live-in carers' responsibility was not narrated as a strict moral obligation. Relatives in the micro-setting seem to have a different view, as they attribute considerable moral responsibilities to live-in carers. There were no articles claiming that live-in carers should stay or blaming them for leaving. The need for regulations is even more prominent in the context of live-in carers than in the narrative about relatives in need. The live-in carers' fears about Covid-19 and about their families were described as plausible and therefore valid. The moral appeal was to have more security and fairness for these workers, and addressed the regulating authorities. However, this narrative might also serve another purpose: to show how fragile the live-in system is in general. After all, the analysed articles are aimed at relatives in need, care recipients and those who might become part of these groups in the future. The prioritisation of needs of caring relatives over live-in carers does align with findings of Ewa Palenga-Möllenbeck about the live-in discourse during the pandemic.<sup>49</sup>

Overall, our empirical findings indicate that the moral call to the authorities was not seen as very successful. The discourse remains static during the period analysed in the sense that no new regulations were announced. The events analysed here triggered specific fears among all groups involved in the

<sup>46</sup> Halonen et al. 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Kriegsmann-Rabe et al. 2023, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Kriegsmann-Rabe et al. 2023, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> Palenga-Möllenbeck 2024, p. 162

micro-setting of live-in care. These fears seemed to originate from a fear on a more abstract systemic level: the fear of the (live-in) care system collapsing. The moral obligation to save this system and the fears and uncertainties arising from its failure lie with the political authorities. In the analysed articles, politicians are rarely vocal about these issues, while there is no change in regulations at all. A recent policy discourse analysis found six policy statements and papers in the timespan from 2020 to 2023.<sup>50</sup> However, these were not picked up by the newspaper articles we analysed. Therefore, the efforts in question either do not appear convincing or are not communicated well enough. These findings confirm that despite the need for more sustainable solutions, there is no perceived effort towards such solutions. This is also noted by another policy analysis during the pandemic, which concludes that solutions were only short-term fixes and did not solve underlying issues of live-in care.<sup>51</sup>

## 5.1 LIMITATIONS

Our study has several limitations. Our sample only comprises articles from quality newspapers. Tabloids and other media, like television and social media, have not been analysed so far. Especially with the rise of social media, such an analysis could shed light on different aspects of the live-in discourse. Furthermore, the sample has limitations regarding the timeframe and the specific national context. Comparative studies could help explore historical variation and international differences. Finally, our analysis employed qualitative methods. Further, quantitative research is needed to make more general statements, e.g. about the prevalence of the identified narratives.

## 5.2 CONCLUSION

Our analysis illuminates how fear functions as a moral call to action that points towards a problem and postulates responsibilities in the German media discourse on live-in care. Yet the discourse also exhibits particular foci, biases and blind spots that need critical reflection. For example, the discursive focus on the caring relatives appears problematic as it can reinforce the responsibilisation of the family and the neglect of structural and systemic responsibilities. At the same time, the perspectives of live-in carers and especially care recipients are marginalised in the discourse, meaning their concerns are hardly addressed in public. In assessing live-in care, these viewpoints should be more prominently covered in public discourse.

By contrast, brokering agencies are frequently consulted and portrayed as neutral managers of and experts on live-in care, especially during the pandemic. This appears highly problematic as these agencies are by no means neutral and have substantial stakes and economic interests in the field. Here, media coverage of live-in care needs a more critical approach towards one of its major sources of information. Public authorities could support this by collecting and providing information on relevant facts and figures.

Our findings highlight the media portrayal of live-in care as a last resort in the care system. There seems to be no other form of care that could replace it. This means that even though live-in care is

<sup>50</sup> Leiblfinger et al. 2020, p. 147.

<sup>51</sup> Leiblfinger et al. 2020, p. 147.

fraught with manifold uncertainties and substantial problems, these cannot simply be resolved by choosing an alternative. According to the newspaper discourse, this paradox of live-in care as a last resort and, at the same time, an ignored problem needs to be tackled by policymakers. Indeed, the long announced political debate and regulation appear highly desirable.

As our analysis focuses on fears in the newspaper discourse, we cannot draw conclusions about the actual emotions of those involved in live-in care settings. However, existing literature suggests that some of our findings correspond to the micro-setting. This can be seen as a first hint that the perceived lack of political solutions is rooted in real problems within the German (live-in) care system. Hence, a more systematic exploration of fear in the micro-setting seems worth pursuing.

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## Primary Sources

No.	Date	Title	Type of publication
1	01/23/2017	Eine legale Betreuung kann ich nicht bezahlen	Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)
2	02/08/2017	Jeder zehnte Euro wird illegal kassiert	Die WELT (WELT)
3	04/04/2017	Pflege rund um die Uhr – und mit wenigen Rechten	Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)
4	07/06/2017	Zu Hilfe	SZ
5	07/06/2017	Auf dem Rücken der anderen	SZ
6	08/06/2017	„Das sind eigentlich sittenwidrige Löhne“	FAZ
7	08/07/2017	Wer kümmert sich um die, die sich kümmern?	FAZ
8	08/11/2017	Alles nicht so schlimm?	Frankfurter Rundschau (FR)
9	09/16/2017	Wenn die Eltern altern	Focus
10	11/22/2017	Die neuen Diener	Der Spiegel (Spiegel)
11	01/27/2018	Mamas hilflose Helfer	Spiegel
12	02/12/2018	Altenpflege kostet – bald wohl noch mehr	FAZ
13	03/06/2018	Wer kennt diesen Pfleger?	FAZ
14	03/07/2018	Tödliche Pflege	Spiegel
15	03/07/2018	Pfleger soll Rentner mit Insulin ermordet haben	SZ
16	05/10/2018	Pflegekollaps unter deutschen Dächern	FAZ
17	05/25/2018	Wenn die Pflege zur Lebensfalle wird	FAZ
18	05/xx/2018	Polnische Engel	FAZ
19	07/18/2018	Die einzige Option	WELT
20	10/15/2018	Unser Engel hieß Danuta	Spiegel
21	11/13/2018	Hilfspfleger steht unter sechsfachem Mordverdacht	Spiegel
22	11/13/2018	Hilfspfleger soll sechs Senioren mit Insulin ermordet haben	WELT
23	02/08/2019	Wie ein polnischer Haushaltshelfer offenbar etliche deutsche Pflegebedürftige töten konnte	Spiegel
24	02/11/2019	In der Pflege droht der Kollaps	FAZ
25	02/11/2019	Schwarzarbeit in der Pflege: Forscher fordern Hinschauen	WELT
26	02/14/2019	Wie zwei Polinnen die Pflegelücke schließen	WELT
27	03/07/2019	Verbraucherschutz berät zu häuslicher 24-Stunden-Pflege	WELT
28	03/19/2019	Mal ausgebeutet, mal unterfordert	FAZ

No.	Date	Title	Type of publication
29	04/13/2019	Pflegemigrantinnen für viele unverzichtbar: Grauzone	WELT
30	04/15/2019	Was dürfen Pflegekräfte?	WELT
31	05/11/2019	In ganz Europa unterwegs	SZ
32	08/06/2019	Beratung zur Pflege	FR
33	08/12/2019	24-Stunden-Betreuung nicht wörtlich verstehen	WELT
34	08/22/2019	Wie viele Sklaven arbeiten für dich?	Spiegel
35	08/27/2019	Eine vollkommen einseitige Diskussion	FR
36	11/24/2019	Wohin im Alter?	FAZ
37	11/25/2019	Pfleger wegen sechsfachen Mordes angeklagt	SZ
38	11/27/2019	„Danach ging ich schlafen“	Spiegel
39	12/02/2019	Abgezockt, ausgeraubt und totgespritzt	WELT
40	12/14/2019	„Franz hat ihm nichts getan“	SZ
41	03/21/2020	Notbetreuung	SZ
42	03/24/2020	Und wer betreut die Oma jetzt?	FAZ
43	03/24/2020	Die Betreuungskrise	Spiegel
44	03/27/2020	AUFSCHREI DER PFLEGE Häusliche Pflege in Gefahr	FR
45	03/27/2020	Immun, was nun?	Spiegel
46	03/27/2020	Corona: Betreuungskrise für Behinderte und Senioren	WELT
47	04/02/2020	Der Landwirtschaft fehlen Zehntausende Erntehelfer	SZ
48	04/03/2020	Flucht der Pflegekräfte	SZ
49	04/03/2020	Kurz vor dem Kollaps	WELT
50	04/06/2020	Die polnische Pflegerin kann nicht mehr kommen – und jetzt?	Spiegel
51	04/06/2020	Wenn die Pflegerin plötzlich weg ist	SZ
52	04/07/2020	Wenn Pflege töten kann	taz
53	04/07/2020	Infektiologe warnt vor hoher Totenzahl bei einseitiger Isolation	WELT
54	04/08/2020	Verband: Bei Betreuung alter Menschen droht große Lücke	WELT
55	04/08/2020	„Die Älteren weinen viel, kommen mit der neuen Lage nicht klar“	WELT
56	04/12/2020	Das Leid der Alten	FAZ
57	04/15/2020	Die Kosten für Pflege und Betreuung steigen	FAZ
58	04/17/2020	Fragen zu Corona Die FR gibt Antworten	FR

No.	Date	Title	Type of publication
59	04/25/2020	„Relevanter als die Spargelernte“	FAZ
60	05/05/2020	Achterbahnfahrt für die Angehörigen	SZ
61	05/12/2020	Küche, Wäsche, Schwarzarbeit	SZ
62	05/12/2020	Den richtigen Pflegedienst finden	SZ
63	05/18/2020	Frau Popescu will nach Hause	SZ
64	06/30/2020	Einblicke ins wirkliche Leben	FAZ
65	07/17/2020	Rund um die Uhr im Dienst	SZ
66	07/20/2020	Eine faire Pflege für Oma und Opa	FAZ
67	07/22/2020	Die 24-Stunden-Pflege gerät unter Druck	taz
68	07/24/2020	Verband kritisiert Arbeitsbedingungen osteuropäischer Pflegekräfte	Spiegel
69	07/25/2020	Ausbeutung mit System	FR
70	08/17/2020	Gericht: Pflegerin steht Mindestlohn zu	WELT
71	08/18/2020	24-Stunden-Pflege ist kein Teilzeitjob	SZ
72	09/03/2020	Suche: Vollzeitkraft, biete: Teilzeitbezahlung	SZ
73	10/06/2020	„Todespfleger“ von Ottobrunn muss wegen Mordes lebenslang in Haft	SZ
74	10/06/2020	„Nicht friedlich eingeschlafen“: Lebenslang für Hilfspfleger	WELT
75	10/07/2020	Lebenslang für „Todespfleger“	SZ
76	11/04/2020	Verbände: Amnestie bei Schwarzarbeit in häuslicher Pflege	WELT
77	01/08/2021	Gute Pflege tut not, nicht Erbenschutz	FAZ
78	01/14/2021	Wie vereinbare ich Beruf und Pflege?	FAZ
79	01/29/2021	Dann wurde Svetlana ohnmächtig	SZ
80	07/03/2021	Die Jungen gehen, die Alten leiden	FR
81	03/12/2021	So beschäftigen Sie Ihre ausländische Pflegehilfe legal	FAZ
82	05/09/2021	Wenn Oma ruft, ist sie da	FAZ
83	05/11/2021	Neues Konzept fordert Rechtssicherheit für häusliche Pflege	WELT
84	05/18/2021	Vorschläge für bessere Pflege	taz
85	06/24/2021	Ausländischen Pflegekräften steht der Mindestlohn zu	FAZ
86	06/24/2021	Ausländische Pflegekräfte haben Anspruch auf Mindestlohn	Spiegel
87	06/24/2021	Häusliche Pflege wird teurer	SZ
88	06/24/2021	Ausländische Pflegekräfte können auf Mindestlohn pochen	WELT

No.	Date	Title	Type of publication
89	06/25/2021	Mindestlohn für Pfleger aus dem Ausland	FAZ
90	06/25/2021	Böses Versäumnis	FAZ
91	06/25/2021	Preisschock für die Pflege zu Hause	FAZ
92	06/25/2021	Rund um die Uhr pflegen	FR
93	06/25/2021	Was kostet Würde?	SZ
94	06/25/2021	VdK-Präsidentin Bentele zur Pflege: „Jetzt muss gehandelt werden“	SZ
95	06/25/2021	Mindestlohn gilt auch für Frau D. aus Bulgarien	taz
96	06/25/2021	Praktikable Modelle gefragt	taz
97	06/26/2021	Streit nach Urteil	FR
98	06/26/2021	Schwierige Pflege	taz
99	07/03/2021	„Nach der Wahl“	FR
100	07/03/2021	Nachforderungen können Pflege bedrohen	Spiegel
101	07/04/2021	Wie teuer wird jetzt Opas Pflege?	FAZ
102	07/06/2021	Wenn das Altern zu Hause unerschwinglich wird	SZ
103	07/08/2021	Häusliche Notgemeinschaft	taz
104	07/09/2021	Aus, Amen, Katastrophe: Was tun, wenn häusliche Pflege unerschwinglich wird?	SZ
105	07/09/2021	Würde im Alter dank Opfer und gratis Arbeit der Frauen	taz
106	07/12/2021	Ausbeutung von Pflegekräften	WELT
107	07/17/2021	Worauf Angehörige achten sollten	Focus
108	07/17/2021	Der Preis der Pflege	Focus
109	07/25/2021	Pflege ohne Recht	WELT
110	08/02/2021	Gerecht und unerschwinglich	SZ
111	08/09/2021	Gefangen im Pflege-Dilemma	FAZ
112	08/09/2021	Pflege-Blindflug	FAZ
113	08/17/2021	Todespfleger-Urteil rechtskräftig	SZ
114	08/21/2021	„Ohne diese Frauen würde das System kollabieren“	taz
115	08/23/2021	Rund um die Uhr versorgt	FR
116	08/24/2021	7. weil Existenzängste und ausbeuterische Arbeit unmenschlich sind	taz
117	08/25/2021	Pflegekräfte im Dauereinsatz	FAZ
118	08/25/2021	Angehörige tragen die Hauptlast	SZ

No.	Date	Title	Type of publication
119	09/04/2021	Was die Parteien für die Pflege planen	FR
120	10/26/2021	Eine Lösung für die Pflege zu Hause	FAZ
121	11/05/2021	„Kriminelle Machenschaften“ – wie Arbeitgeber beim Mindestlohn tricksen	WELT
122	11/06/2021	Die Vergessenen	Spiegel
123	11/16/2021	Wenn die Kraft zur Neige geht	FR
124	11/30/2021	An Mamas Seite	taz
125	12/23/2021	Immer da, aber unsichtbar	taz
126	01/21/2022	„Dabei wissen doch alle Bescheid“	SZ
127	01/27/2022	„Lieber Kassiererin im Supermarkt als impfen lassen“	FAZ
128	04/01/2022	„Geflüchtete nicht nur in Helferjobs bringen“	FAZ
129	05/07/2022	Das große Vergessen	SZ
130	05/13/2022	Frauen-Union will 24-Stunden-Betreuung aufwerten	SZ
131	09/06/2022	24-Stunden-Pflege muss entsprechend bezahlt werden	FAZ
132	10/18/2022	Neues Angebot für Pflegebedürftige	SZ
133	03/11/2023	6,6 Milliarden und kein Plan	WELT
134	03/11/2023	Wenn was mit Opa ist, hilft Frau Himmelmann	WELT
135	04/02/2023	Eine Frau, die ihre Pflege selbst in die Hand nimmt	SZ
136	05/10/2023	Das hausgemachte Pflegedesaster	taz
137	05/23/2023	Das bittere Ende	SZ