
Retired Independent Women Adjusting to Co-Living

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ABSTRACT

With present financial concern and the increase of aging populations the French government has seen a way to support women in co-housing within buildings with moderate rents (HLM). This represents a significant saving, both for the women and the government as these women support one another with no medicalized need to the end of their lives. We investigated the characteristics, attributes and qualities for such successful co-housing as the model Babayagas House in Montreuil. It is extremely important to get a good grasp of the way people fit together. Many groups have tried similar endeavours in order to live more economically, yet few have lasted 12 years like the model housing in Montreuil. This is especially true in Canada. Friends have decided to share a house, and after three to five years it all falls apart. In all parts of the world similar attempts are being made. In Korea and China, it is usually wealthier people who get together. Retirement housing is expensive in Canada and often women who lost their spouse also lost additional income while finding themselves alone and struggling. This study is of a qualitative nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The outcome is an inventory questionnaire to be used for the selection of members of similar co-living arrangements. First we researched well-being questionnaires to identify a format that would best suit the targeted population. We then analyzed personal journals to uncover desirable characteristics. We also analyzed documents from the public domain pertaining to the housing arrangements as well as the House Charter, each member has to sign upon joining the Babayagas House. All categories were examined and emerging themes were used as items for the identification of relevant questions from an already existing well-being questionnaire. Questions were slightly modified for the convenience of an aging population. These questionnaires are further reviewed by people presently in retirement homes for annotations as regards their content and appropriateness. Findings show a number of characteristics that emerged from the data analysis which are deemed necessary for on-going harmonious co-living. It comprises 33 sections, from autonomy and responsibility to adherence to rules in an attempt to identify personal traits based on aspects that emerged from existing data, namely the participants journals and other documents through which these traits were deemed to be conducive to better co-living. Examples will be given. The results will be discussed in light of the findings of the analysis and also as they pertain to the annotated questionnaires from present residents in retirement homes.

Keywords: Economy of means, Aging populations, Desirable characteristics

INTRODUCTION

Our societies are increasingly facing hurdles that people feel helpless facing, not alone overcome. One such problem is looking after the aging population. Finances are stretched and these people who have contributed all their lives to insurance plans to be looked after in retirement find that there are very limited means available to them and they have to adapt. Moreover after COVID-19 problems are compounded. Retirement homes in Canada are expensive. There are limited medical facilities, however before these are needed, research shows that people socializing and keeping busy with a healthy outlook on life have been identified as living longer independently.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for society to support people's independent living as long as possible. Such models are being developed with various constraints and often with profit in mind, however we were interested in the most economically feasible solution. One of such developments is in the form of government-subsidized housing in France, just for women, who pay their rent according to their means for a small apartment, sharing the building with other retired independent women in *La Maison des Babayagas* in Paris. The important question is how to make the environment comfortable and how to help these women flourish in their co-adaptation (Luhmann, 1995).

The overall objective of this research was to gather data to create an inventory questionnaire with the purpose of selecting independent retired women to live together in harmony at an advanced age in Canada, after investigating the successful model developed in Paris.

We investigated the present situation in Paris to glean subtleties as well as major issues. This was done by having participants carry out journaling for six months. We were interested in uncovering their feelings as well as knowing about their daily activities. No constraints were placed on the journaling as to enable us to really capture what naturally deemed to be important to the participants. We analysed the personal journals to capture key concepts and identify codes to further organize the data under themes.

The questionnaire was developed taking into account results of the analysis of participant journals and the charter of the *Babayagas* house in Paris funded by the French government for such a group of women. These women live together supporting one another in a context of gardening, organizing activities together and helping each other while living in independent units. This arrangement is economical, helps develop friendships, fights loneliness and is favourable to maintaining a healthy outlook.

The building is comprised of 25 units of which 22 are dedicated to the women and for equity reasons, the three remaining units are occupied respectively by two men, a young couple with children and a wheelchair person. The building comes with three different dwelling types including a small studio, a larger unit with a bedroom, a small unit with one bedroom. They all have balconies allowing them to go outside without leaving their apartment.

The study reported here looks at characteristics that lead to such co-living possibilities, looking at human behaviour as impacted by organizational aspects as well as human factors. Thérèse Clerc, *Babayaga* Founder said in a

radio interview, “Old age isn’t about being shipwrecked. It isn’t an illness. It can be beautiful, and I plan to live it that way, with my friends and colleagues here”.

In another report, journalist Briquet-Moreno (2023) quotes words a long term resident exchanges with her best friend in the housing unit before their interview, “You didn’t forget that we will be talking about our friendship in solitude in old age. Friendships that are forged through solidarity, sharing and loyalty...and beyond death...”. In addition, it was pointed out that these women came to France from different countries and that some cultural factors also played a role in how close they became, giving the example of two co-housing members having lived in South America.

The reporter comments on a poster with one of the women dancing the tango and advertising dancing lessons. Some of their activities are also mentioned in the article like holding a workshop in their garden to learn more about different herbs. Additional workshops include meditation, writing and technology. They also hold painting exhibitions. During the pandemic, they sewed masks together.

Additional comments report the fact that there are also disagreements, citing the view of one of the residents’ brother’s vision of women fighting. However, they have come to look at disagreement in a different light.

The context is participative co-living in aging. According to Luhmann (1995, 125), negotiations oscillate between agreement and opposition. The process moves on with constant changes between asymmetry and remaking symmetrical.

This research aimed to uncover functional aspects in interactions and how to communicate action education for awareness raising and living (Barbier, 1996; Argyris & Schön, 1974; Vergnaud, 2006). To uncover desirable characteristics, the main objectives for this study were to understand roles in the women’s adaptation to their created community for sustainability; looking at self-help and interpersonal support; investigating the impact of their actions on socio-educational dimensions.

Just to contextualize, this housing unit was just created for retired independent women and the average age is presently 75. The co-housing retirement unit we are examining does not have medical facilities but is accessible. The tenants pay their rent according to their means based on a set calculation and having nothing to do with apartment size or layout. The apartments are small, sharing the building with other retired independent women in La Maison des Babayagas in Paris, in this successful model that has garnered international attention.

All in all, major underlying issues were connected to difference and tolerance (Itkonen, 1997; Spiewak, 2005).

DEVELOPING THE TOOLS TO SUPPORT THE CO-LIVING CONCEPT

The method used in this research is qualitative in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and entailed text analysis for both participants’ journal entries and the categories from the House Charter.

These texts include both official documentation from the public domain as well as texts originating from participant personal journals over a six month period. The texts were read several times, first to identify categories to which codes were attributed, then in turn, these were placed under emergent themes. Cross-sectional analysis between documents was conducted to uncover what additional information could be gleaned.

We analysed participants journals to uncover categories, to find out if and where there was common ground through different aspects of co-orientation. It was important to identify what characteristics allowed the group to get together functionally, looking at what was effective and what was lacking. The qualities identified after analysing the participants' journals are the following: 1. Honesty, 2. Collaboration, 3. Genuineness, 4. Supportive 5. Balanced life, 6. Being responsible, 7. Positive thinking, 8. Politeness, 9. Willing to engage, 10. Non judgmental, 11. Inquisitive, 12. Sharing knowledge, 13. Advise others in life situations, 14. Openness, 15. Taking charge of own life, 16. Consistently engaged with the outside/local community, 17. Willing to run/organize workshops and activities, 18. Explore/learn new things/engaged mind, 19. Activism/agreeing to volunteer, 20. Stick to initial commitment/enduring, 21. Feminism, 22. No pettiness, 23. Fair/generous/not selfish, 24. Willingness to share for the common good, 25. Interest oriented towards rich intellectual pursuits, not gossiping, 26. Looking to bring something positive to the community, 27. Evenness/steadiness/keep up interest in the community.

Despite the fact that all participants had to sign the House Charter upon entry, it was important to see how different convictions, beliefs, assumptions and connotations were processed. The House charter lists items as related to self-governance, social and civic responsibilities, ecology, feminism, freedom of choice, and solidarity. We also identified an initial list of values as uncovered through the analysis of participants' journal entries.

Analytical frameworks include Luhmann's (1995) input, output and throughput, Habermas' (1974) concept of human interests with in addition Apple's (1975) views, supporting Habermas against institutional control. As well, we examined dialogicity and how it helped propulse into activism (Itkonen, 1997). We kept in mind that the boundary for difference is tolerance with different tolerance boundaries (Kelek, 2005; Spiewak, 2005). As well as knowing that in communication, the perception of a stimulus is conditioned by an indefinite number of factors and expectations, including rules of socialization.

Investigating possible questionnaire formats, we looked at existing questionnaires and adaptations of scales, like for instance how Carver's (1997) Brief COPE inventory was adapted in its layout, and use of strategies from the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989) with five scales as well as four other coping scale adaptations.

Other Coping scales examined are CSES (Chesney et al., 2006; Bandura, 1982), BRCS (Sinclair & Walston, 2004), PCI (Greenglass & Schwartz, 1998), DCI (Bodenmann, 2008). More studies on psychological well-being from the context of special needs provided some interesting data (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The other document we examined was the House Charter that each tenant has to agree to by signing it. In the analysis, we found some areas that were causing concerns, reported below.

Regarding adaptation, we uncovered the following aspects. We also gleaned some general information that could facilitate the situational context. With each identified topic, we associated a question or a series of questions in order to uncover characteristics that were deemed desirable in the selection of future participative co-housing partners.

The items referring to qualities, coded as identified in journal entries, then placed in categories before grouping them into themes, were matched to relevant questions in existing well-being questionnaires. These include accountability, autonomy, collaboration, emotional intelligence, engagement, fairness, feminism, forgiveness, good listener, gratitude, honesty, kindness, love of learning, modesty, openness, persistence, pragmatic politeness, positive emotions, positive relationships, positive thinking, satisfaction, self-acceptance, sense of humour and sociability.

What we develop further on in this article were questions related more specifically to general items gleaned from the House Charter and information available in the public domain, as for instance, resulting from interviews. There were entries in the journals, of conversations about general items as well, that should also be added to the questionnaire as they have relevance. The difference between these items and the qualities uncovered as mentioned above is the fact that they are not connected to well-being and therefore simple questions we created would deem to be acceptable without further research.

First as regarding the ideal number of people to share housing, one participant suggested 11 thinking of a number of people who could share a sufficient range of affinities. That could also mean that such other groups with different types of affinities could also constitute a co-living group. As regards the other opinion, “more than 12 but fewer than 22”, the statement seems to refer in particular to that person’s experience, not being happy about the three additional dwellers in the building who are not part of the Babayagas group. These persons are living in the building for reasons of equity and also not sharing responsibilities, however in this case the participant seems to find a larger number as allowing for more diversity. We also looked at more practical questions as these too seemed to constitute bones of contention.

First, there appeared to be conflicts due to very diverging backgrounds. The criteria were low income in aging due to a variety of factors, at the present time, with no bearing on previous socio-economic status nor background. Hence, we thought that getting a general background idea might be useful, especially because a lack of commitment to the community was identified in a number of cases. However, this is not intended to be non-inclusive. In fact, for reasons of equity the French government reserved three units for diverse populations including one apartment with men only, a young family and a person in a wheelchair. However, according to the living arrangements for the Babayaga women specifically, men cannot move in, only visit for short stays. The next step consisted of comparing this set of questions to the set devised around qualities and matched to well-being questionnaire items. Any

repetition was eliminated and, as well, themes regrouped in order to reduce the number of questions.

PROVIDING COMMON GROUND

The idea was to identify characteristics to permit harmonious co-living arrangements for retired independent women to alleviate the impact of the dire circumstances in which some find themselves, and this by using a selection questionnaire also keeping in mind the impact of COVID on the women. Prior common experiences also seem to provide a positive understanding, if not subconscious kinship. Luhmann's (1995) theory about system complexity points to an unavoidable adaptation of organisms to each other, which should also be evidenced in their interactions. This appears to be so in the case of the groups coming together. There are however some members who do not partake and hence lack the contact to be full fledged participants in the co-housing community, which can be likened to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

The backgrounds of the women are very diverse because although they lived in France for a long time their cultures of origin are not necessarily French, so it was reasonable to request information on their attitude toward participation. Siegrist (1970) says it is possible to reach common ground because knowledge and cultural aspects allow for reflective co-orientation.

Luhmann also mentions the notion of attempts at aligning paths and it is clear that a number of the co-housing members put effort into doing so and find joy in the realization that they develop friendships. However, these feelings are also somewhat mixed as for example the fact that some of the women do not contribute to the maintenance of the garden but enjoy reaping its fruit is frustrating these who put effort into gardening. Hence questioning their willingness to participate and their propensity for sharing seems relevant.

As regards the findings there are also some insights gained around a number of other key issues, which certainly warrant inclusion in the questionnaire.

Self-governance and autonomy are deemed desirable qualities and study results show that these women are independent, although some to the point of not mixing with the group as mentioned earlier and hence the questionnaire has to take these aspects under scrutiny.

Regular meetings of the group enabled them to reach conclusions together and make the best decisions as regards group interests. These decisions were not always well received and having like-minded co-housing partners would alleviate some difficulties related to consensual decision making which is a feature in the House Charter.

As far as the notions of cooperation, or competition are concerned, regarding the common spaces like in their garden, cooperation left much to be desired.

Concerning exchanging knowledge and learning from one another we have uncovered this to be one of the most successful aspects among co-housing members. It was observed how they helped each other with special phone features. They conducted workshops. Encouraged critical reviews of films

followed by discussions, providing a stimulating intellectual climate. They invited journalists and students to lunch. This was cited in the magazine *Elle*, reporting also that the journalists visited them several times (Briquet-Moreno, 2023). Many workshops were conducted in the common space the city allotted to them on the ground floor of their building for conferences, workshops, exhibitions and the like. Workshops were held on gardening, on writing as well as socializing together around meals on a regular basis.

As regards the second overarching item after self-management, having to do with citizenship, social, civic responsibilities, we uncovered activity in a number of categories. They entertained groups interested in their activities and set-up. They are essentially a feminist group and they disseminated information about their activities with *Elle*, *Monde campus* and *actu.fr* (Briquet-Moreno, 2023)

The context is participative co-living in aging. In most cases communication played out according to Luhmann (1995) thinking that negotiations oscillate between agreement and opposition. The process moves on with constant changes between asymmetry and remaking symmetrical (p. 125).

This is crucial, because change, when looked at from a specific orientation, may appear overwhelming when any of the three dimensions namely citizenship, social and civic responsibilities, are concerned; one has to make sense of things within it: this is a real issue when confronted by aging in retirement and having to admit to the evidence deriving from the rules adopted as compelling.

Nonetheless, it would appear that as social and interactional relations between speakers are concerned, and the co-construction of collective action that a stronger governance model should be put in place. However, a great deal of tolerance was noted. This concurs with findings that the boundary for difference is tolerance with different tolerance boundaries (Kelek, 2005; Spiwak, 2005). Here culture played a part. Tolerance for outliers points to legitimate participation at the periphery (Wenger, 1998). The group really got together for public events, showing a strong image of collaboration, solidarity and a strong affirmation of feminism. So much so in the latter case that they were qualified at one time as being extreme feminists. They do indeed engage in political action and are vocal, and united in that quest. In some cases mostly as regards practical aspects like gardening, we heard about one-sided effort. This concurs with the notion that in communication, the perception of a stimulus is conditioned by an indefinite number of factors and expectations, including rules of socialization. Some of the 'workers' shared their frustration as regards the ones who were 'takers' only.

Another important point concerned orientation and interpretation. There were many differences in previous financial status obvious in the fact that different things were valued. One started golfing and engaged in activities with grandchildren, while others were more content just with daily routines. Examples of persons taking part in the orientation of others, are the fact that they helped one another with smart phones, texting, sharing information about interesting movies at the local movie theatre. There are also tenants who are still supporting family members.

The impact of their background on their subjectivity has to be noted. Many were more idealistic as for example, the strong feminism expressed, and sometimes differences in meaning making led to fights over a number of issues. With women coming from culturally different background (South America, countries north of France...) and some having experienced bigger upheavals, they were more vocal, mostly in a very positive sense. At the level of interactions, because of the diversity in the group, some did not feel that they belonged to the 'community of practice' and cliques developed. The leaders attempted to bring everybody together through fun workshops. The selecting and planning of these workshops also boosted moral.

All this, is not surprising, given the complexities inherent in co-living and we should add that post COVID sensitivities appear to be at the highest point ever. The hope is that thanks to the questionnaire devised for selecting co-living partners in the future, there will be a sufficient number of affinities to enable them to reach common ground. It is clear that this is a requirement and possibly needed for the survival of the co-housing arrangements, as the women with a positive attitude were the ones who kept everyone moving forward. When they had their common goal in mind, they all came together in sympathy, when they looked at personal gains they diverged in their support to one another. Activism is part-and-parcel of the agreement each member has to sign, yet is the most overlooked aspect by the co-living members. The greatest downfall comes from the fact that they are all ready to reap the benefits but all of them do not show a willingness for engagement.

The outcome of their positions on reality and theoretical reflections led to many probabilities and selections, the closure of some and the opening of others including their effects and consequences, which concurs with Luhmann's system thinking.

The analysis also showed a lot of tolerance (Schiffhauer, 2005) and they seem to look at their bickering in a lenient way. Overall, we were able to arrive at a number of questions to allow for the creation of the more practical part of the planned inventory questionnaire seeking positive features and most importantly to uncover what is to be avoided.

CONCLUSION

The data uncovered is very rich and we are still in the process of reducing the number of matched items from established well-being questionnaires to specific qualities uncovered in the participants' personal journals. These women are still trying to get back their pre-COVID footing and it has not been easy.

An interesting feature uncovered through the news media is that the Municipality might have tried to create more diversity, by also renting an apartment to two single men, one to a disabled person as all apartments featured accessibility, as well as one to a young family with two children. Although this added some social balance, we also found out that it created fear among the women over a possible take-over of the women's house by infiltrating others.

Finally, we have noted that all the interactions among the actively participating women were very positive. They often mentioned how invaluable to them were the close-knit friendships they developed in the co-housing unit.

For the next step we are submitting the questionnaire for annotation in the Canadian context which will allow to further refine the articulation of the specifics for a sustainable economy of means in co-living.

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