

CO-LIVING AS A CHOICE FOR INDEPENDENT RETIRED WOMEN: HOPE FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

In this paper we present the results of a study of a successful co-living project for independent retired women. As our societies are increasingly concerned with sustainable living, we see that aging populations are often overlooked. Yet there is going to be an increase on these populations. During COVID in the Canadian context, some grave concerns were raised around retirement homes. For instance, by not allowing visitors the aging, already feeling lonely, were further cut-off from needed family social contact. Living close together in their common space increased major health issues with higher percentages of death. There were also increasing numbers of fires with significant numbers of deaths. Moreover, retirement homes are costly. With increasing financial constraints in many countries, older people feel financial burdens and there is a need to reconsider the conditions in which older people are finding themselves. Spontaneous groupings and living together experiments have generally failed. Even friends living in a house together usually experience issues after a few years. We investigated the successful Babayaga House co-living model in Paris that has been successful for over 12 years to uncover characteristics that are favorable for such projects to continue to thrive. Through the analysis of journals and other documents found in the public domain we uncovered desirable attitudes and qualities to help identify social factors that can lead to such a sustainable governance model. The method used was qualitative. To understand the complexity of the underpinnings of the system we recruited volunteers to make regular journal entries over six months. We also carried out a literature search to identify recognized questionnaire models that could be useful to map out the criteria for our study. The journal entries and additional documentation from the public domain were analyzed for emergent themes. Then these were paired with relevant entries from the existing well-being questionnaires identified in the literature search. We discuss our findings and present an articulation of the main concepts behind the successful functioning of the French model, also taking into account some of the major issues identified. Among major themes uncovered were autonomy, collaboration, accountability, the need for a number of positive traits like positive emotions, positive relationships and positive thinking with a total of 33 themes.

Keywords: Identifying characteristics, senior autonomous living in co-housing, wellness.

1. Background

1.1. Co-living

Co-living as a formula for a more sustainable way of life is garnering increasing interest. Many projects of a more cooperative nature have been reviewed in the document entitled Europe ICE-11 describing many successful formulas that show a renewed interest in co-housing and commitment by a number of actors including architects. This included creating more user-friendly spaces. Many of these European projects are inter-generational, and in some cases the young people leave the co-housing arrangement. Of almost 500 projects been investigated, very few are dedicated to aging populations, only two of them were expended upon, one being the Babayagas House in Paris which was highlighted and received much praise. The idea of each having their own separate small apartment yet working together as a collective supporting one another as in the Babyagas House has much appeal. These retired independent women see to their own governance. There is a long waiting list for an apartment in this co-living building. Altogether there are 25 rental units but only 22 for the women. There are three different types of these units, different orientations, and some larger than the others, yet all rather small. For equity reasons the government had also allowed a young family, a handicapped person and two young men to also rent in the building. Each apartment consists of an open concept kitchen living room, a bathroom with accessible shower, a bedroom and each has a balcony. They pay rent, not based on apartment size but rather on their

income. It is based on the known formula for French HLM (Habitat à Loyer Modéré, i.e., Moderate Rent Housing), although in HLM buildings all apartments are identical. They also do not get a bigger apartment if they pay more rent, it is based on whatever is available when their turn comes up to move in. They can decline but then have to wait longer. They can also put their name on the waiting list for a larger apartment. In the building there are also some common spaces. The women bought a washer and dryer together to have a laundry room on the first floor. There are two larger meeting rooms overseen by the city of Montreuil. One of these is for the exclusive use of the women, where they hold monthly dinners, conferences, view films, organize workshops, dances etc. The other one is kept by the city but can also be rented out to the women if they ask. There are two garden spaces with in addition a small green space in front of the building where they can plant what they wish.

1.2. Aging

Aging populations are faced with increasing challenges. The idea is to live well and be serene throughout retirement. As our societies are increasingly concerned with sustainable living, we see that aging populations are often overlooked. Yet there is going to be an increase of these populations. Groups of seniors in North America, Korea and China are also getting together in order to create co-living spaces. Few have been lasting or included people with more moderate incomes. In Canada new attempts are being made but financial constraints add to the burden. In addition, retirement homes are costly, usually over \$3,000 per month and often do not meet the needs of more independent people. With the additional issues during the flu season, especially recently, seniors find themselves even more isolated and vulnerable.

During the pandemic in the Canadian context, some grave concerns were raised around retirement homes. For instance, by not allowing visitors to the aging, who already feel lonely, they were further cut-off from needed family and social contacts. Living close together in their common space increased major health issues with higher percentages of death. There were also increasing numbers of fires with additional deaths due to the fact that the seniors had to be rescued from individual rooms during the quarantine. Living alone in aging has also become fraught with issues. However, studies have shown that people living together while also keeping independent enjoy longer healthier lives. Hence it is worthwhile investigating co-living possibilities, looking at human behavior as impacted by organizational aspects as well as human factors. Thérèse Clerc, Babayagas 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".

2. The research

2.1. The method

This study aims at providing a questionnaire to ensure more reliable characteristics for people to be able to live together in the long term in Canada. The Babayagas House in Paris has received many accolades and was identified as a good source for our research. To carry this out, we first investigated retired independent women living in this government subsidized rental co-living building in Paris, in order to establish desirable criteria to adopt or adapt the formula in Canada. At present there are no such arrangements that have lasted, despite some examples of friends living together. Co-living as a choice for independent retired women. The model arrived at in Paris gives hope for social transformations.

The method used is qualitative in nature (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The first step was to have members of a successful co-living model make regular journal entries so as to identify desirable traits and attitudes through their ways of being and doing. We collected five journals with almost daily entries over several months. Other documents were also analyzed to provide for triangulation, there were interviews by journalists as well as other magazine and newspaper articles and including the list of responsibilities from the House Charter each member was expected to sign and abide by. First, through the analysis of personal journals, we aimed at uncovering characteristics for the creation of a survey to identify seniors who would best qualify for co-living arrangements.

The participants who carried out almost daily journal entries were tenants in the Babayagas House in Montreuil, a suburb of Paris, as described above. The average age of these women living independently is 75 years. All the apartments are totally accessible.

2.2. Data analysis

All the data were carefully analyzed. The journals were analyzed along with data found in the public domain on the group as mentioned just above. Identified categories were grouped into themes. In parallel, we researched known well-being questionnaires to tease out corresponding questions to the categories we had uncovered and grouped into themes. This enabled to avoid field testing the questions and in addition we already were ensured that these questionnaire items had worked in widely used

well-established questionnaires. Any repetition was eliminated, and as well, themes were regrouped in order to reduce the number of questions. We reduced the questions to the lowest possible number while still staying true to our objective.

We gleaned some general information that could facilitate the situational context such as presented below. With each identified theme 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. These items appeared to be of great relevance in the hope of circumventing half-truths as identified from among co-housing dwellers.

2.3. Questionnaire items

From the findings, 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.

We further developed questions related more specifically to general items gleaned from the Babayagas 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. The difference between these items and the qualities uncovered as mentioned above is the fact that they are not necessarily connected to well-being and therefore simple questions we created would deem to be acceptable without further research.

3. Findings

The themes were explored and discussed in light of our findings and their relevance, and overall yielded a wide array of possibilities for items for the planned inventory questionnaire. 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. Nonjudgmental, 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. From the above, the items referring to qualities, were coded as identified in journal entries, then placed in categories before grouping them into themes, and matched to relevant questions in existing well-being questionnaires. As a result, the tentative inventory includes 24 items with 167 questions. These items 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. We also included questions of a more practical nature. Although the immediate objective for these is not compatibility for co-housing, it was deemed important to also glean information on the set-up of the actual building if such a concept with its own building were to be subsidized in Canada. First, we were interested in knowing what could be regarded as the ideal number of people to share co-living. Considering that there are 25 units in the Babayagas House, it seemed important to know if that would be a reasonable number. One person thought that 11 people sharing would be best, clearly concerned about people getting along and having a number of affinities. Another co-living member suggested "more than 12 but fewer than 22", which seems to refer in particular to that person's experience. It is interesting to note that 11 and 12 are close numbers. However, this person suggested a building with fewer than 22 units, which could also mean that this co-living member is obviously not happy about the additional dwellers in the building who are not part of the Babayagas group and not sharing responsibilities. Thus, this person was pointing to 25 units, the present number of apartments at the Babayagas House, as perhaps not desirable.

In addition, some questionnaire items were mostly based on the House Charter and having to do with more practical questions, as these too, seemed to constitute bones of contention, as for instance, tending to the garden, helping organizing activities and attending organized events etc. In the context of the House Charter which includes a commitment to activism, to sustainability and so on, it appeared that levels of accepted responsibilities were unequal and a concern was expressed as regards verifying that each and every person had indeed signed the Charter so that a commitment to it could be reinforced. First, there appeared to be conflicts due to very diverging backgrounds. The criteria for joining the Babayagas House 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 and the commitment of being supportive to the others. 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. In general, there was a lot of openness and tolerance, however according to the living arrangements for the Babayaga women specifically, there was an issue about men not being able to move in, only visit for short stays. The same applies to relatives. All in all, the Babayagas women can live autonomous lives and, as well, are supported by the co-living members around them. They were especially thankful for the many deep friendships they were able to acquire in their co-living community.

4. Discussion

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 the pandemic on the women and we managed to arrive at a very interesting list. The context in the co-housing is participative co-living in aging. In most cases communication played out according to Luhmann's (1995) thinking that negotiations oscillate between agreement and opposition. The process moves on with constant changes between asymmetry and remaking symmetrical (p.125). Luhmann's theory about systems complexity points to unavoidable reciprocal adaptation of organisms to each other, and makes our questions for co-living all the more relevant. This appears to be so in the case of the groups of women coming together and they have indeed gelled into cohesive groups as I observed when invited to an outdoor dinner with approximately 15 people present. There are however some members who do not partake and hence lack the contact in a participative way in the co-housing model. Overall, the co-housing collective can be likened to a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It was also uncovered that there were true friendships and people helping one another in a very supportive way, sharing information, knowledge and prepared food. 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. It was noted that closer friends often shared similar cultural backgrounds, as it appears that cultural aspects allow for reflective co-orientation (Siegrist, 1970), although that was not necessarily always the case. Self-governance and autonomy are deemed to be 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 into scrutiny. 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 new 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. To create more interest in gardening they managed to invite a group of students to teach them new techniques and more sustainable methods. Self-space management as an entry on the questionnaire seemed to be important as they all have their own space varying from very small studios to more spacious ones with only three models available. Each however has a balcony which also allows cultivation. Plants on balconies included mostly flowers according to our findings, so it seemed appropriate to question notions on space management. 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. However, according to the finding there have not been any major controversies requiring outside mediation despite differences of opinion been identified. As far as the notions of co-operation, or competition are concerned, regarding the common spaces like in their garden, cooperation left much to be desired. As identified, it appeared that only a handful of people actually carried out the work while everyone liked to reap the benefits. 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 identified 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* (2023), reporting also that the journalists visited them several times (Briquet-Moreno, 2023). On one of the days of my visit, a research group from Geneva came to interview them about their co-living arrangements in order to adapt it to a project in Switzerland. As well, a parallel women's group had sent a representative to investigate their day-to-day arrangements more specifically in order to adapt them to their group. To expand on the use of the questionnaire, it appears that adaptation to diverse populations would be welcomed, if not using the same questionnaire where also relevant. As for the use of the questionnaire

findings, perhaps it could also mean that different groups of people with similar types of affinities could also constitute a co-living group, not necessarily tending towards the positive end of selection of items but rather ranking similarly as regards the questionnaire items.

5. Conclusion

We were particularly interested in the communication among the co-housing members to uncover what features would work best in a similar co-housing unit and we have to acknowledge that because of the pandemic there are extenuating circumstances to be taken into account. These women are still trying to get back their pre-pandemic footing and it has not been easy. The data uncovered is very rich and we were able to match items from established well-being questionnaires to specific qualities uncovered in the participants' personal journals. 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 other groups to this house dedicated to the women. Finally, we have noted that all the interactions among the actively participating women were very positive. They often mentioned the close-knit friendships they developed on the co-housing unit. The following step was to submit the questionnaire for annotation in the Canadian context to allow for further refinement of the articulation of the specifics for a sustainable economy of means in co-living in the Canadian context. We noted that although stemming from a study of aging women, the questionnaire could also be used for any group of seniors thinking of making co-living arrangements and as well could probably also be used by intergenerational groups. Just to remind us of the important social impact of the Babayagas House model we see it fit to report Briquet-Moreno's (2023) quote of words a long-term resident exchanged 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".

Acknowledgments

This research was subsidized by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I also wish to thank the Research Assistants who participated at this stage of the study, Hui Xu and Akomaye Undie.

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