

QUALITY OF LIFE IN AGING: A SURVEY FOR CO-LIVING

Marie J. Myers

Faculty of Education, Queen's University (Canada)

Abstract

Aging populations are faced with increasing challenges. The idea is to live well and be serene throughout retirement. Financial constraints add to the burden in today's society. Post-COVID additional stresses have been identified. In our study we aimed at uncovering characteristics for the creation of a survey to identify seniors with suitable characteristics for co-living arrangements. In this research we look at retired independent women living in the 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. As well, retirement homes are costly and often do not meet the needs of more independent people. Living alone in aging has also become fraught with issues. Studies have shown that people living together while also keeping independent enjoy longer healthier lives. For this qualitative study, the first step was to have members of a successful co-living model make regular journal entries for six months so as to identify desirable traits and attitudes through their ways of being and doing. The journals were analyzed along with data found in the public domain on the group, including the House Charter each member had to sign and abide by. Identified categories were grouped into themes. Following that we searched established well-being surveys to tease out corresponding questions to the items we had uncovered. We then created a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert. This questionnaire is presented under a format with radio buttons. The final questionnaire includes 33 theme sections with various numbers of questions under each section going from one to 17 for autonomy. The autonomy section as the most important one is further subdivided into four sections. The themes will be explored and discussed in light of our findings and their relevance. Further steps will be presented as well as suggestions for further research.

Keywords: *Themes for well-being, question items, seniors co-housing.*

1. Context

Living with others 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 on 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, however in some cases the young people had left 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, the object of the present study, which was highlighted and received much praise. 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, just like the groups in Europe are also getting together in order to create co-living spaces. Few have lasted 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. In addition, when fires occurred there

were additional deaths due to 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.

The idea of each having their own separate small apartment yet working together as a collective supporting one another as in the Babayagas House has much appeal. They see to their own governance, remain active and develop friendships.

2. The research

This study aims at providing a questionnaire to ensure more reliable characteristics for people to be able to live together in the long turn 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, 1990, 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 retrieved information from five journals with mostly 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 commit to.

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 were tenants in the Babayaga House in Montreuil. 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 searched the literature for information on questionnaires (Kirkwood & Cooper, 2014; Robitschek, 1990; Watson & Clark, 1988).

We then searched known well-being questionnaires to tease out corresponding questions to the items we had uncovered and grouped into themes. This enabled to avoid field testing the questions and in addition we already were ensured that these 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.

Using all the available information we had arrived at, we then created a questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale presented under a format with radio buttons. The final questionnaire includes 33 theme sections with various numbers of questions under each section going for example from one to 17 for autonomy. The autonomy section as the most important one is further subdivided into four sections.

After submitting the questionnaire to present residents in Canadian retirement homes we were advised that it was too lengthy. As a result, we trimmed it down further and we now have two versions, the longer version for administrators to interview prospective co-housing members and a questionnaire to be self-administered and scaled down for the aging, with only 78 questions to make it more user-friendly. In addition, in the Canadian context, the retirement home residents were hesitant about the addition of the questions related to activism and advocacy, which is one of the important features that helps create community in the French housing project.

3. Findings

The themes were explored and discussed in light of our findings and their relevance.

We gleaned some general information that could facilitate the situational context such as presented below. 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.

So far, as a result, the initial 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.

These items above appeared to be of great relevance in the hope of circumventing half-truths as identified from among co-housing dwellers. From the above, 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 Babayaga 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 were 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.

These questions were more of a practical nature. First as regarding the ideal number of people to share housing, considering that there are 25 units in the Babayagas House, by stating 11 as the number, this co-living member was thinking of people who share a sufficient number of affinities. As regards another opinion on this topic, “more than 12 but fewer than 22”, seems to refer in particular to that person’s experience. Indeed 22 units are dedicated to the women but four are occupied for equity reasons by a young family, a handicapped person and men. This co-living member is obviously not happy about the additional dwellers in the building who are not part of the Babayagas group, not sharing responsibilities.

The questionnaire items mostly based on the House Charter have to do with more practical questions and these too seemed to constitute bones of contention. Overall, there were 33 sections identified under themes with a number of questions for each.

In terms of issues, 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. So, in fact the previous socio-economic status appears to impact the behaviors and differences take away from cohesion. Hence, we thought that getting a general background on prospective co-housing residents might be useful, especially because a lack of commitment to the community was identified in a number of cases.

Another concern was raised about men not allowed to stay as residents with the women. According to the living arrangements for the Babayaga women specifically, men cannot live in the Babayagas house, they cannot move in, only visit for short stays. They also often are invited guests during their monthly dinners. The Babayagas women are often criticized because of their feminism which is however one of the basic principles of their living arrangements corresponding to a sort of 'sisterhood'.

Self-space management as an entry seemed to be important as they all have their own space varying from very small studios to more specious 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. For the abridged version of the questionnaire, all 33 sections were maintained, and any questions that appeared somewhat superfluous were eliminated, trimming down the questions to 73 by removing, good listener, modesty, sense of humour and sociability and questions covering similar contents. As well sections were added namely cooperative living, social gathering, interest in activism, activism opportunities, participation in decision making, common activity and knowledge sharing, commitment to refuse prejudice and discrimination, openness to city surroundings, feminism and gender equality, religion diversity and non-discrimination, promoting first aid and knowledge, visionary, and adherence to rules.

4. Discussion and conclusion

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 of them 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 all-encompassing list, plus a shorter version of the questionnaire for more practical reasons, allowing for self-identification.

The context 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. According to the researcher, the process moves on with constant changes between asymmetry and remaking symmetrical (p. 125). Luhmann's (1995) theory about systems complexity points to unavoidable reciprocal adaptation of organisms to each other, 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. There are however some members in the Babayagas house who do not partake and hence lack the contact in a

participative way in the co-housing model. Hence, offering a questionnaire for the selection of prospective members could provide a welcomed solution.

Overall, the co-housing collective can be likened to a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; 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 take into account information on their attitude toward participation. It is possible to reach common ground because knowledge and cultural aspects allow for reflective co-orientation (Luhmann, 1995; Olson, 2003). Therefore, by living together and sharing activities and interacting regularly the group members can achieve the desirable outcome.

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 far as the notions of cooperation, 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. Overall, however, there was an obvious coming together of minds (Olson, 2003).

Regular meeting 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.

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 i-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).

To expand on the use of the questionnaire, it appears that adaptation to diverse backgrounds of aging populations would be welcomed, if not using the same questionnaire where 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 displaying various of the features in a similar way.

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