

# Developing selection criteria for harmonious co-living: la Maison des Babayagas and beyond

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## Abstract

With an ever-increasing pace of change, dwindling resources, and an aging population, modern societies face harsh questions regarding effective governance systems. Moreover, with lingering problems brought on by COVID and ongoing inflationary pressures, the situation for growing numbers of aging women who have outlived their partners and are living on their own is increasingly grim. In Canada, when the elderly cannot manage independently, even the least expensive full-care retirement home options can have a formidable cost, which can be a heavy burden for many. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for society to support independent living as long as possible.

Independent living models are being developed with various constraints and often with profit in mind. However, we were interested in the most economically feasible and socially acceptable solution. One such development is *La Maison des Babayagas* in Paris, France. This innovative government-subsidized housing project has been developed for retired independent women who pay rent for small apartments according to their means. The residents live in independent units and support one another in an economic and social arrangement that promotes friendships, fights loneliness, and helps each maintain a healthy outlook.

This research aimed to gather data to create an inventory questionnaire to select independent retired women in Canada to live together harmoniously in a housing project based on the successful model developed in Paris. The questionnaire is based on analyzing the Babayagas House charter and resident journals and an extensive review of related inventories and questionnaires. The criteria retained will be explained, and examples of the questions will be presented.

Keywords: Effective co-living, necessary qualities and values, sustainability in aging.

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## 1 Introduction

The residents of this housing project, who have an average age of 75, share the building with other retired independent women, each paying rent for a small apartment according to their means. To create our inventory, we investigated this successful housing model by analyzing the journal entries of residents as well as the charter of responsibilities each resident must adhere to. In addition, we also examined various existing coping inventories and well-being and feminism questionnaires for insights into suitable and relevant questions.

All over the world, groups of elderly people are seeking a solution to the challenges of aging alone while enjoying the freedom of independent living. The issue is especially acute for individuals from lower and moderate-income levels who, affected by ongoing financial constraints, are looking to share expenses by living together with other like-minded seniors. *La Maison des Babayagas*, created for a group of independent retired women, represents an ideal support model for such people. This government-subsidized cooperative housing project for independent living with shared activities and support systems integrated into an inclusive and equitable format. The idea of the present study is to create a questionnaire, initially based on data acquired from the successful model in France on

desirable personal qualities for residents, to identify individuals who would be suitable candidates to participate in a similar project in Canada.

To effectively identify suitable candidates for the proposed housing project, it was important that the questionnaire being developed could help us meet several key objectives. These are as follows (1) to understand the roles of the women in their adaptation to their sustainable community; (2) to recognize the importance of self-help and interpersonal support; (3) to evaluate the impact of their actions on socio-educational dimensions; (4) to learn how they find common ground (Olson, 2003) and different aspects for co-orientation; (5) to examine the methods used to unite as a functional group (what is effective and not so practical); (6) to see how convictions, beliefs, assumptions, and connotations are processed.

Overall, we need to identify categories to arrive at a comprehensive and usable questionnaire that could be adapted for this situation. The present findings were arrived at by matching our lists of desirable qualities and personal responsibilities to existing questions from relevant inventories and questionnaires, attempting to identify and isolate dominant themes, and devising methods to adapt the existing questionnaires for our study.

## 2 Methodology

This is an empirical study examining several factors as observed through mediated communication. The approach is qualitative (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015, 1990), and for the first stage, text analysis was used. Analytical frameworks include Luhmann's (1995) input, output, and throughout, Habermas' (1974) concept of human interests combined with Apple's (1975) views in support of Habermas against institutional control. Text analysis is the method used to create a questionnaire to select suitable individuals to optimize the co-living experience.

To develop this questionnaire, we first identified a list of desirable qualities by analyzing journal entries from current Babayagas residents. We also examined and included personal responsibilities outlined in the organizational charter document of the Babayagas House (EST Ensemble Habitat, 2023) as it related to self-governance, social and civic responsibilities, ecology, feminism, no religious discrimination, and solidarity. These preliminary findings were then enhanced with research on a series of existing coping inventories and well-being and feminism questionnaires to develop our inventory of questions.

### 2.1. Initial data

From the initial analysis of resident journals, we derived the following list of 27 desirable qualities the inhabitants of Babayagas House deemed essential to succeed as members of the housing cooperative (Table). For additional information, we examined the Babayagas House charter. This document outlines personal responsibilities and serves as a contract that each person joining the collective must agree to abide by. The charter sets out six primary areas of responsibility: self-governance/autonomy; citizenship: social and civic responsibilities; ecology; feminism; no religious discrimination; and solidarity. These are further divided into several traits as listed in Table 2.

Table 1 List of Desirable Qualities

|                                                      |                                                  |                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Honesty                                              | Collaborative                                    | Genuine/sincere                                 |
| Supportive of others                                 | Openness                                         | Responsible                                     |
| Positive attitude                                    | Politeness                                       | Willing to engage with others/sociability       |
| Nonjudgmental                                        | Inquisitive                                      | Fair/generous/not selfish                       |
| Evenness/steadiness                                  | Willing to share knowledge                       | Feminist                                        |
| Engaged in outside/local community                   | Willing to run/organize workshops and activities | Interested in learning new things/engaged mind  |
| Looking to bring something positive to the community | Agreeing to volunteer                            | Willing to stick to initial commitment/enduring |
| Willingness to share for the common good/kindness    | Environmental and ecological awareness           | Interested in sustainable hobbies and skills    |
| Willing to advise others in life situations          | No pettiness or gossip                           | Taking charge of own life                       |

Source: Journal entries provided by Babayagas residents.

Table 2 List of Personal Responsibilities

|                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self-governance/autonomy                   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-space management</li> <li>2. Consensual decision making</li> <li>3. Cooperation/no competition</li> <li>4. Knowledge exchange from one another</li> <li>5. Common activities (shared space)</li> </ol>                                             |
| Citizenship: social civic responsibilities | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Refuse racism, antisemitism, class, age or physical prejudice (respect, personal responsibility)</li> <li>2. Openness to city surroundings with different partnerships (entrepreneurship)</li> </ol>                                                    |
| Ecology                                    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strict usage of water, electricity, garbage (recycling)</li> <li>2. Driven toward solidarity in the economy and sustainable development</li> </ol>                                                                                                      |
| Feminism                                   | Be a feminist and fight against unjust treatment of women and for equal rights for men and women.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| No religious discrimination                | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All have freedom of choice</li> <li>2. No attempt to convert anyone</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Solidarity                                 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sharing of means</li> <li>2. Help one another in daily gestures (except if need for nurses, doctors, firemen)</li> <li>3. Suggest everyone learns first aid</li> <li>4. Help one another to age well and face the end of life with serenity.</li> </ol> |

Source: EST Ensemble Habitat, 2023 (Babayagas charter document).

## 2.2. Additional data

Based on our list of desirable qualities and responsibilities, we then scrutinized several existing coping inventories (see Table 3), well-being questionnaires (see Table 4), and feminism questionnaires (see Table 5) for relevant questions that we felt were suitable to be adopted and adapted to create our inventory.

This process began by searching for scales and measurements. Keywords such as “senior”, “well-being”, “scale” (questionnaire, survey, or measurement), and “personal traits” (personal characteristics, personalities) were used to search for relevant academic literature. After reviewing several articles and books (e.g., Clifton et al., 2019; Kirkwood & Cooper, 2014; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), some basic ideas about the dimensions of personal well-being emerged.

Table 3 List of Coping Inventories

| <u>Coping Inventories</u>           | <u>References</u>                     |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Brief COPE Inventory                | Carver (1997)                         |
| Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (CSES)   | Chesney et al. (2006); Bandura (1982) |
| Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS) | Sinclair & Walston (2014)             |
| Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI)    | Greenglass (1998)                     |
| Dyadisches Coping Inventar (DCI)    | Bodenmann (2008)                      |

The search for scales for specific dimensions, such as happiness, autonomy, positive/ negative emotions, satisfaction, and so on, brought about interesting results. This way, information from 18 well-being-related questionnaires was collected, as listed in Table 4.

Table 4 List of Well-Being Questionnaires

| <u>Well-Being Questionnaires</u> | <u>References</u>                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Adult Hope Scale (AHS)           | Snyder et al. (1991); Snyder (1994, 2002) |
| Authentic Happiness Inventory    | Seligman (2002)                           |
| Emotional Intelligence Scale     | Schutte et al., 1998                      |
| Flourishing Scale                | Diener et al. (2010)                      |
| Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire   | Fordyce (1988)                            |

|                                                                                       |                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Functional Assertiveness Scale                                                        | Mitamura (2017)                                                                                         |
| Gratitude Questionnaire                                                               | McCullough et al. (2002)                                                                                |
| Happiness and Subjective Well-Being                                                   | Kammann & Flett (1983)                                                                                  |
| Meaning in Life Questionnaire                                                         | Steger et al. (2006)                                                                                    |
| PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Scale) Questionnaire                              | Watson et al. (1988)                                                                                    |
| PERMA-Profiler (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) | Butler & Kern (2016)                                                                                    |
| Primals Inventory                                                                     | Clifton et al. (2019)                                                                                   |
| Psychological Well-Being Scale                                                        | Ryff (1989)                                                                                             |
| Satisfaction with Life Scale                                                          | Diener et al. (1985)                                                                                    |
| Subjective Happiness Scale                                                            | Lyubomirsky & Lepper (1999)                                                                             |
| The IPA (Impact on Participation and Autonomy)                                        | Cardol et al. (1999); Cardol et al. (2001); Cardol et al. (2002); Kersten (2002); Kersten et al. (2007) |
| The Personal Growth Initiative Scale                                                  | Robitschek (1998)                                                                                       |
| VIA Survey of Character Strengths                                                     | Peterson & Seligman (2004)                                                                              |

In addition, as feminism is advocated both from the journal entries and the Babayagas charter, two scales on self-identification as a feminist and on attitudes toward feminism and the women's movement were also included (see Table 5).

Table 5 List of Feminism Questionnaires

| <u>Feminism Questionnaires</u>                           | <u>References</u> |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Attitudes Toward Feminism and the Women's Movement Scale | Fassinger, 1994   |
| Self-Identification as a Feminist Scale                  | Szymanski, 2004   |

These 20 questionnaires then formed the database for the development of the tentative new inventory of questions for this project.

### 2.3. Analysis of the questions

The questions from these scales were imported to NVivo as data for analysis. The 27 desirable qualities from the journal entries (see Table 2) and the six personal responsibilities identified from the charter (see Table 3) were first entered as pre-existing codes.

Then, all the questions from the database were read, and those relevant were assigned to these codes. After this initial process, codes with fewer than 3 questions were either merged with other codes (of a similar nature), or they were set aside.

For example, no questions were found for the following codes: genuine/sincere, interested in sustainable hobbies and skills, curious, willing to share knowledge, and no pettiness or gossip. Nonjudgmental was merged with openness; being willing to advise others in life situations, being willing to run/organize workshops and activities, and agreeing to volunteer were all combined with the support of others.

Some code names were modified. For example, willingness to engage with others, engagement in outside/local community, and engaged mind were combined to form a code-named engagement; interest in learning new things was renamed as the love of learning; willingness to stick to initial commitment/enduring was changed to persistence; and being responsible was renamed as accountability.

As a result of this process, 13 codes remained: accountability, autonomy, collaboration, support of others, positive attitude, politeness, engagement, openness, love of learning, feminism, persistence, kindness, and sociability.

The next step was an inductive analysis to identify new, unlisted codes. All the questions were examined again to uncover the traits or characteristics influencing whether a person can get along well. Through several rounds of coding, nine new codes emerged: emotional intelligence, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, modesty, positive emotions, positive relationships, satisfaction, and self-acceptance. As a result, the updated inventory included 22 categories of qualities with 159 questions; further screening and comparison allowed us to create a final inventory of 133 questions (see Table 6).

### 3 Results

A final inventory of relevant categories of qualities was derived from the initial list of desirable attributes and responsibilities. There were different sets of questions for each category in the existing questionnaires, and we felt it was best to keep the integrity of these categories by not changing the contents: table 6 lists each category and the number of associated questions.

Table 6 Categories of Qualities and the Number of Questions

| <u>Qualities</u>       | <u>Questions</u> | <u>Qualities</u>      | <u>Questions</u> |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Accountability         | 4                | Love of Learning      | 5                |
| Autonomy               | 20               | Modesty               | 3                |
| Collaboration          | 8                | Openness              | 4                |
| Emotional Intelligence | 5                | Persistence           | 4                |
| Engagement             | 7                | Politeness            | 5                |
| Fairness               | 4                | Positive Emotions     | 6                |
| Feminism               | 5                | Positive Relationship | 7                |
| Forgiveness            | 4                | Positive Thinking     | 7                |
| Gratitude              | 7                | Satisfaction          | 5                |
| Honesty                | 6                | Self-Acceptance       | 6                |
| Kindness               | 7                | Sociability           | 4                |

Some examples of question types and wording will be discussed below. Regarding the general idea of “being responsible” under the quality of accountability, the following entry was found with five response choices:

A. I always keep my promises.  
☐ Very Much Like Me   ☐ Like Me   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Unlike Me   ☐ Very Much Unlike Me

Source: VIA Survey of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

All the questions under this quality follow the same format. It is good to have the same pattern within the section as it makes it easier for the respondents to concentrate on the statement as they are already familiar with the options for answers. To avoid monotony, it would also be desirable to switch the format, for example:

B. I do not keep my promises.  
☐ Very Much Like Me   ☐ Like Me   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Unlike Me   ☐ Very Much Unlike Me

Source: PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016).

However, since the questionnaire is intended for people of an older age, a cautionary note should be added about possible format switching. Although switching questions might help to keep people alert, it can also confuse if questions are not read carefully. A reasonable amount of variety in the format of the questions is also desirable, significantly if it reduces what has to be read; examples are given below.

As regards the idea of “willingness to engage, not isolate oneself” under the quality of engagement, there is a choice of six numbers, with only one to be selected.

C. How often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?  
 0 (never)   1   2   3   4   5 (always)

Source: PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016).

It is also good to break the pattern. For example, under the quality of “positive emotions”, the questions are designed to rate the degrees of certain emotions.

D. How lonely do you feel in your daily life?  
 0 (not at all)   1   2   3   4   5 (completely)

Source: PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016).

In addition, questions related to physical autonomy were more difficult to find except in the disability literature, in which sections pointing to independent will and mobility could be used. For example,

- E. My chances of visiting relatives and friends when I want to are:  
 F. My chances of going on the sort of trips and holidays I want to are:  
 G. My chances of using leisure time the way I want to are:  
☐ Very Good   ☐ Good   ☐ Fair   ☐ Poor   ☐ Very Poor

Source: The IPA (Cardol, et al., 1999; Cardol, et al. (2002).

Using different methods for presenting choices to select is a good strategy to keep people paying attention.

As an example, the questions below are all for the quality of autonomy (e.g., taking charge of own life/planning, learning new things):

- A. I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they oppose most people's opinions.  
 B. My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing.  
 C. I tend to worry about what other people think of me.  
 D. I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is essential.  
 E. I have a good sense of where I am headed.  
 F. I know what I need to do to get started toward reaching my goals.  
 G. I have a plan for making my life more balanced.  
☐ Very Much Like Me   ☐ Like Me   ☐ Neutral   ☐ Unlike Me   ☐ Very Much Unlike Me

Source: Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989) and the Personal Growth Initiative Scale (Robitschek, 1998).

In this example, including seven questions appears sufficient; however, it does not cover physical independence or single-minded, outgoing traits.

#### 4 Discussion and conclusion

A preliminary questionnaire has been developed, but there is concern that there may be too many questions (133), an issue that will be verified with testing. The intent is to distribute the preliminary questionnaire in a select sample of Canadian retirement homes to be field tested by residents before they are finalized. The number of questions and their content may have to be amended based on the results of these tests.

A second round of analysis is intended to clarify further and articulate more finely what has been gleaned. Several aspects of the research require closer scrutiny, and perhaps there is a need to further group some categories of qualities. Then, submitting the questionnaire for annotation in the Canadian context will allow us to further refine the specifics for sustainable co-living.

The themes in the existing preliminary questionnaire cover most of the desirable qualities thus far identified, but to better balance the instrument; we should have an equal number of questions for each theme, eliminating those deemed superfluous. The idea was to cover all the desirable qualities identified and to ensure validity; it was initially considered necessary to inquire about the various aspects of each quality using at least two questions with reversed wording. Since the questionnaire is not intended for strict information but primarily for guidance, it was decided not to include the second question, especially as it would have significantly added to the number of questions. Also, since the questions are mostly worded, giving at least a five-point choice will provide considerably better indications than a direct question on quality with a yes or no answer, which could be inaccurate.

The question of copyright also needs to be addressed. Attempting to use excerpts from existing validated tools presented us with a limited number of inventories and questionnaires that were publicly accessible, so we only used items derived from authorized data.

Based on results gleaned from the French site, a recognized successful model for such an arrangement, these results aim to identify qualities among a group of people that would enable them to live together in co-housing. We can still question whether choosing people with shared similarities is more effective or if being together will create a closeness among individuals and help them find common ground (Olson, 2003). Nonetheless, as stated by Vergnaud (2006), "living together allows behaving similarly and communication is possible within the range of assumed similarities," it would appear that there needs to be the possibility for people to be able to behave in similar ways, which was one of the crucial problems identified by the residents of Babayagas. Hence, selecting people who are not too distant in their ways of being and doing is essential to ensure harmonious co-living arrangements.

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