



Social Support Exchange in Shared Living Arrangements with Older Adults—Exploring the Benefits of Intergenerational Living for Older Adults

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the social support experiences of older adults residing in co-housing projects in Belgium. Co-housing involves individual private homes sharing common spaces and resources. Respondents were recruited through an online search of existing co-housing projects in the region, and the final sample included residents from four different projects, with a mix of inter-generational and senior-only projects. Results indicate that co-housing provides a strong sense of community and support for older adults, reducing feelings of isolation and increasing connectedness with others. Residents also reported a balance of both community and privacy in their living arrangements. However, challenges related to decision-making and decreased contact with family were identified. These findings highlight the potential benefits of co-housing for older adults and underscore the need for further research in this area.

Keywords Co-housing · Social support · Reciprocity · Older adults

Introduction

Demographic processes over the last few decades have led to an increase in the proportion of older adults in the population (Fernandez-Carro, 2016; Lesthaeghe, 2007; Riedy et al., 2017; Statbel, 2021). This shift in the population pyramid is due to both an ageing population, an increase in life expectancy, and decreasing fertility rates (Deleeck & Cantillon, 2008). The proportion of people aged 65 and over in Flanders was 20% in 2017 and is projected to increase to 25% in 2033 (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2017). Additionally, the complexity of families has also increased (Baldwin et al., 2019), leading to a higher number of single older adult households. This trend of more older single adult households, however,

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challenges the paradigms about successful ageing and the socialisation of care that often point towards ageing in place. Ageing in place is, after all, not self-evident in these complex life situations at an older age (Bigonnesse & Chaudhury, 2020; D'herde et al., 2021).

Research has suggested that older adults are more susceptible to loneliness and isolation compared to other age groups. This vulnerability can be observed in the higher prevalence regarding social and emotional loneliness in groups of older adults with a lack of social support (Baldwin et al., 2019; Perlman, 2004; Rusinovic et al., 2019). Hence, cultivating social contacts is an essential need for older adults, especially those who have experienced complex life events such as migration or divorce (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2021). The coronavirus crisis has highlighted this vulnerability even more, particularly in care homes where visitors were not allowed for an extended period of time (Hartigan, 2021; Verbeek et al., 2020).

To address this issue, alternative forms of housing, such as intergenerational shared living, could offer a solution and provide older adults with more social contact (Brusselmans et al., 2019; Guinther, 2008; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2019; Pedersen, 2015; Weeks et al., 2020). Intergenerational living arrangements have been shown to improve social interactions and reduce loneliness among older adults in some cases (Guinther, 2008). Moreover, they provide opportunities for social and emotional support, companionship, and mutual benefits to all residents, both young and old (Weeks et al., 2020). By living with younger generations, older adults may feel more engaged in the community and less isolated (Pedersen, 2015).

In this article, we investigate the exchange of informal social support among older adults, which we define as adults older than 65 and younger co-residents in intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders. By social support, we mean all the informal types of help individuals receive in their everyday life to meet their basic needs, cope with stressful situations, and enhance their overall well-being (Van Gasse & Mortelmans, 2023). Co-residents are defined as those individuals who live with older adults but are themselves below the age of 65. This way, this article presents a multi-actor qualitative research design since we conducted in-depth interviews with residents of different generations living together in these housing groups. Despite the growing popularity of intergenerational shared living, there is limited research on this topic, particularly in the context of Flanders (Baldwin et al., 2019; Brusselmans et al., 2019; Rusinovic et al., 2019). Research that does exist either uses broad terms for social support or focuses on particular types of support such as health care (e.g. Meyer et al., 2019), or doesn't look at intergenerational shared living spaces, but rather to initiatives solely focusing on older adults (e.g. Glass, 2020). Moreover, we did not yet find studies that addressed the conditions in which support is successfully exchanged, which is important since some sources address that it does not always affect the residents positively (see e.g. Riedy et al., 2019). Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate how informal social support is exchanged among residents of intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders. Specifically, we examine the types of social support that older adults and co-residents provide and receive, the factors that influence their exchange, and the benefits and challenges associated with these exchanges. The study contributes to the limited research on this topic, particularly in the context of Flanders, and sheds light on the potential

benefits that intergenerational shared living can offer to older adults in terms of combating social isolation and loneliness.

Background

To contextualise this study, we will first address the global population and its subsequent growing need for informal support systems. Since this support can take many forms, we will then define social support as a theoretical concept and explore its importance in the context of older adulthood. Third, we will turn our attention to the living space as a space for support exchange, particularly in the context of shared living arrangements. Finally, we will examine the ways in which social relations and support exchange are influenced by shared living arrangements. By examining these topics, we hope to provide a comprehensive background for our analysis of how informal social support is exchanged among residents of intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders.

Older Adulthood and the Need for Support

The second demographic transition was characterised by a significant decrease in mortality rates and a slight decrease in fertility rates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Cantillon, 2016). It was thought to have reached its endpoint when a stable, older population with replacement fertility levels, no population growth, and life expectancies of over 70 years was reached (Lesthaeghe, 2007). Throughout this transition, people's lives have become more complex, unstable, and unpredictable, with increasing heterogeneity and diversity in life course patterns (Baldwin et al., 2019; Van Winkle, 2020; Zimmermann & Konietzka, 2017). These changes have brought new social challenges, such as ageing, changes in health, and less stable households (Lesthaeghe, 2007; Silverman et al., 2013; Tinker, 2002). This transition has affected our society in two ways. First, authors such as Grundy (2008) or Zeeb et al. (2018) have pointed out how the ageing trend in the Western world challenges our society and its traditional institutional solutions, leading policymakers to use the discourse of socialisation of care. Second, however, trends of individualisation and family destabilisation also put pressure on this informal solidarity within families, which has been problematised (Cantillon, 2016a; Felling, 2004; Howard, 2007; Tinker, 2002). Therefore, older adults rely more on formal and informal ways of support outside the family system to retain a high quality of life in older age (Alsubaie et al., 2019; Tinker, 2002). Receiving this kind of support, however, is not easy since older adults may develop a kaleidoscope of needs in terms of health and well-being, cultivating both higher levels of loneliness in some groups and health concerns in others. These needs are diverse and vary according to factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and place of residence (Callahan, 2019; Freedman & Spillman, 2014).

Defining Social Support

Social support is a critical component of well-being and has a significant impact on an individual's quality of life, especially in later life. While there are various definitions of social support, it is generally understood to be multidimensional, encompassing structural and functional support, psychological and material support, interpersonal relationships, social networks, and psychosocial resources (Cobb, 1976; Kocalevent et al., 2018; Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998; Xia et al., 2012).

Social support is particularly relevant for older adults, as they are more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness (Perlman, 2004; Rusinovic et al., 2019). Social and emotional loneliness, lack of social support, and isolation are the most common social vulnerabilities experienced by older adults (Baldwin et al., 2019; Perlman, 2004; Rusinovic et al., 2019). Studies have shown that social contact is an essential need for older adults (Baldwin et al., 2019) and can improve their well-being, especially when they face complex life events such as migration or divorce (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2021).

Objective social support, also known as obtained social support, refers to the support effectively obtained from the social network, while subjective social support, also known as perceived social support, is an individual's evaluation of social support (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998; Xia et al., 2012). Objective social support focuses on the quantitative aspects of social support, such as the number of social contacts or the frequency of social interactions. In contrast, subjective social support emphasizes an individual's subjective feelings and experiences of social support (Xia et al., 2012).

Psychological and material support are two additional aspects of social support (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998; Xia et al., 2012). Material support refers to meeting an individual's material needs, such as financial assistance or help with daily tasks (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998). Material support can reduce stress by providing a direct solution to instrumental problems or by giving the recipient more time for activities such as relaxation and entertainment (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Psychological support, on the other hand, focuses on empathy, trust, reassurance, and the ability to share emotions (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998). It also includes being accepted and recognised as worthy (Cohen & Wills, 1985). For older adults, psychosocial resources are crucial in accessing psychological support. Psychosocial resources refer to the skills, talents, beliefs, and individual characteristics that affect how a person deals with stressful situations. Access to these resources can help mitigate the negative impact of stress on psychological well-being (Taylor, 2011).

The Living Space as a Space for Support Exchange in Old Age

Older adults' living spaces play an essential contextual role in how and which types of social support they receive, and consequently, in their well-being (Aydın et al., 2020). In many cases, the living space serves as a central hub for social activities and interactions, particularly for those who face threats of social isolation or who are no longer part of the active working population (Kemperman et al., 2019). Research

suggests that living in a well-connected and socially supportive environment can help prevent social isolation and loneliness, leading to better health outcomes and higher levels of well-being in later life (Baldwin et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2020).

Shared living arrangements, such as co-housing, intergenerational living, and home-sharing, are increasingly being recognised as potential solutions to support older adults' social and physical well-being (Guinther, 2008; Martinez et al., 2020). These arrangements provide opportunities for social interaction, shared activities, and mutual support, fostering a sense of community and belonging (Jakobsen & Larsen, 2019; Pedersen, 2015). Moreover, they can also provide practical support, such as help with household tasks or transportation, which can alleviate some of the challenges of ageing (Put & Pasteels, 2022).

Research on shared living arrangements suggests that they can positively affect older adults' well-being and quality of life (Guinther, 2008; Martinez et al., 2020). However, some challenges remain, such as issues of privacy, autonomy, and cultural differences (Put & Pasteels, 2022). Moreover, these arrangements may not be accessible or desirable for all older adults, depending on their individual needs, preferences, and resources (Jakobsen & Larsen, 2019; Pedersen, 2015). Nonetheless, existing research is rather vague about what types of support are exchanged and how cohabitants manage their roles as support givers and receivers.

Shared Living Arrangements

In this paper, we use the term "Shared Living Arrangement" to label multiple types of housing arrangements that include living arrangements in which people of different generations share spaces and live together under a shared roof. This type of living arrangement is defined by the choice of people to live together while they are not necessarily family members (For our research question, we specifically looked for cases in which there was no familial bond). Guinther (2008) defines it as a form of housing that has more common spaces and facilities than conventional housing, aiming for a more practical and social living environment. Labit (2015) states that it promotes mutual aid within or between generations, depending on the composition of the residents. We can distinguish three subtypes.

The first form is the communal house, which is a regular house shared by different people, usually with their own bedrooms but shared common spaces such as the kitchen, bathroom, and living room. It is characterised by its short-term nature and is managed by the residents themselves (Labit, 2015). The main reason for choosing a communal house is to be part of a community, often forming close relationships with other residents as friends or family (Tyvimaa & Kemp, 2011). This promotes solidarity within the communal house, and it also helps to break social isolation (Corfe, 2019; Tyvimaa & Kemp, 2011). Despite the focus on the community, residents maintain individual autonomy (Labit, 2015). The atmosphere within a communal house can change with new residents.

The second form is the living group. This form of co-living is similar to a communal house, but the residents have more private space (Samenhuizen *vzw*, 2021). The private space is more than a room but usually limited to a small studio

or apartment (Corfe, 2019). The living group distinguishes itself from a communal house by its long-term character (Corfe, 2019; Samenhuizen vzw, 2021). Moving to a living group at a later age can lead to difficulties in maintaining qualitative and quantitative contacts with people outside the group, such as family, friends, and previous neighbours (Winstead et al., 2012). When people move into a living group, new social bonds are formed. However, gaining trust in these new friends takes time, according to Winstead et al. (2012). There is also a concern about having bad neighbours (Corfe, 2019). These decreased social connections can lead to a decrease in the quality of life (Winstead et al., 2012). On the other hand, Taylor et al. (2018) argue that contact with neighbours, friends, and support from social networks can lead to less loneliness in older adults. Research by Corfe (2019) shows that reducing loneliness can be a great advantage of living in a living group.

Thirdly, cohousing is a widely recognised form of communal living where each resident has their own private living space with all the amenities but also has the opportunity to engage in shared activities with other residents. Common spaces such as gardens, kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms, and garages are often shared, and community events are organised. The lot-model, which describes a shared large property with individually-owned homes, is commonly used in international literature (Beck, 2020; Fromm, 2000; Guinther, 2008; Pedersen, 2015). The lot-model also typically includes a common house, which is a centrally located shared space with a kitchen and living room, and sometimes includes guest rooms, playrooms, salons, and laundries. Residents can come together to eat, watch movies, play games, and participate in organised activities (Beck, 2020; Pedersen, 2015). Research suggests that cohousing can reduce feelings of isolation while still allowing residents to maintain their privacy (Guinther, 2008; Pedersen, 2015). Studies have shown that older adults who live in cohousing can provide mutual support and look out for each other (Pedersen, 2015). Beck (2020) emphasises that cohousing is designed with an emphasis on social interaction, with spaces to allow for spontaneous and informal interactions. Fromm (2000) found that the benefits of cohousing outweigh the drawbacks such as difficulty in decision-making and less privacy, noting benefits including community support, good social life, shared meals, personal growth.

In Belgium, shared living arrangements are slow, but steadily on the rise, yet the interpretation of the topic varies much. First, regarding older adults with age-related care needs, policymakers try to promote intergenerational households in the discourse of socialisation of care, aiming to establish more ageing in place with the help of informal caregivers (Batur et al., 2022). Second, a couple of organizations focus specifically on shared living amongst older adults. These projects profile this age group as separate from others, yet focus on active ageing and are less care-oriented (Verstraete & De Decker, 2017). Lastly, similar to other trends in other European countries, a growing set of smaller shared living communities pops up, without an age-related focus, but in which older adults may find their way as well (Tummers, 2016). It is in these communities that our research attention went to.

Social Relations and Support Exchange in Shared Living Arrangements

Only a small number of studies have investigated the social relations and exchange of support in shared living arrangements for older adults (Martinez et al., 2020). These studies have demonstrated that shared living arrangements can provide opportunities for social interaction and companionship, thereby reducing loneliness and social isolation in older adults (Schmitz et al., 2021). Additionally, shared living arrangements involving multiple generations can facilitate intergenerational interactions, with younger residents offering assistance and support to older adults while receiving guidance and mentorship in return (Glass, 2020). Practical and emotional support can also be exchanged within shared living arrangements, such as sharing household tasks, providing transportation, and offering emotional support during difficult times (Put & Pasteels, 2022).

Furthermore, shared living arrangements can create a supportive environment for older adults with specific care needs or health conditions (Izuhara et al., 2022). For instance, co-housing communities have been shown to offer a supportive environment for residents with minimal care requirements, as the communal living arrangement promotes engagement, reduces anxiety, and fosters a sense of belonging (Puplampu et al., 2020). These shared living arrangements also enable residents to age in place by providing access to social and practical support that helps older adults maintain their independence and well-being (Rojo-Pérez et al., 2022).

Methods

Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using a multi-actor design and Grounded Theory methodology to explore the exchange of informal social support among older adults and co-residents in intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders. The study aims to examine the types of social support provided and received by residents, the factors influencing these exchanges, and the associated benefits and challenges.

Participants

The participants in this study are residents of intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders, aged 65 years and above, as well as their co-residents below the age of 65. A total of 23 participants were recruited from four different cohousing projects, with 12 participants being older adults aged 65 or older, and 11 participants being co-residents aged younger than 65. The age range of all respondents varied from 28 to 76.

Additionally, besides considering the age distribution and form of shared living, we also examined the residents' profiles. It is worth noting that all respondents had

a Belgian ethnic and cultural background. This finding is noteworthy because nine respondents come from an urban context where ethnic and cultural diversity is present in the broader neighborhood. However, the focus of this article is not on the ethnic and cultural background of the residents. Therefore, we did not actively seek respondents with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Among the thirteen respondents, eight were single individuals, which aligns with what the literature refers to as a complex life course (Baldwin et al., 2019; Lesthaeghe, 2007; Silverman et al., 2013; Tinker, 2002).

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with participants to gather data on their experiences of informal social support exchange. We utilized an open topic list that guided the interviewer through various subjects related to living together, social support, and well-being. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and had durations ranging from 45 to 90 min. Audio recordings were made, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach. The transcripts were read and re-read to identify patterns and themes associated with social support exchange. These patterns and themes were then coded and organized into a coding tree. The coding process involved inductive coding (developed from the data itself), axial coding to construct core concepts and types of support, and theoretical coding to construct the theoretical framework for addressing our research question.

Ethical Considerations

This study obtained ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the study commenced, with participants signing a document to indicate their agreement to participate and allow the reporting of their interviews in an anonymized manner. The informed consent was read aloud by the interviewer and explained as necessary. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any penalties. Throughout the study, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and respondent numbers were used to protect participants' identities.

Results

Types of Informal Social Support in a Co-Residential Setting

A first categorisation we made in our analysis was the distinction between formal and informal social support. Informal support refers to the assistance and

care provided by family, friends, and other informal caregivers, while formal support refers to services provided by professionals such as nurses or social workers, or, when living alone is no longer possible, by formal institutions such as nursing homes or hospitals. In many cases, informal support is preferred over formal support as it is often more accessible, affordable, and perceived as more natural.

'These are autumn days, you know? We, the older residents here, are delaying the inevitable. One day we will have to move to care homes, and maybe some of us would have been there already, but we have a social buffer here' (Respondent 8, 70 years old).

One important concept related to the distinction between informal and formal support is subsidiarity. Subsidiarity refers to the idea that support should be provided at the lowest possible level, and higher levels of support should only be used when lower levels are unable to meet the needs of the individual. In the context of social care, this means that informal support should be used as much as possible, with formal support being used only when informal support is unable to meet the care needs of the individual.

'It's just always preferable if we can help each other out, both for us and for older people, to be honest. I mean, I myself had an operation on my knee a few years ago, and a nurse had to come by to clean the surgical wound. It felt a bit uncomfortable because the nurse is some kind of intruder in our home. It was only a couple of weeks she had to pass by before I went to work, and a stranger was in our house, but I can imagine it not being easy if you have to rely on these people every time' (Respondent 1, 34 years old).

In our study, respondents argued that they wanted to rely as much as possible on informal support as it feels more natural and delays the status of being perceived as an old person. This is consistent with the concept of subsidiarity, as it suggests that informal support should be the first line of support for older adults. However, respondents also recognized that there may be care needs that are too personal and/or for which the burden for co-residents is too high, making formalized support more necessary."

Financial Support

Financial support is a form of informal social support that can significantly impact the financial well-being of co-residents. As one respondent noted, "financial support happens behind the scenes" (Respondent 1, 34 years old). This observation highlights the less obvious nature of financial support compared to other forms of informal social support, such as household tasks. Co-residents may require financial support due to a lack of resources, which can be a concern.

"When we started living here, my partner and I decided to treat this as a kind of family, and you help family. So when a co-resident couldn't pay a monthly loan, we stepped up. But it wasn't easy because people don't want to talk about finances" (Respondent 1, 34 years old).

Some of our interviews revealed how the intergenerational aspect in shared living arrangements can introduce power dynamics between generations. However, many respondents expressed their willingness to assist younger co-residents in financial need. Nonetheless, some also mentioned that informal financial support is a sensitive topic, but it becomes less avoidable when people live in the same house. Thus, sharing a living space creates a sense of shared responsibility.

"I'm old and alone. When I die, my money disappears, so I might as well spend it now, and what better way to spend it than on the people you love? So, when I see someone struggling here, I see what I can do" (Respondent 15, 70 years old).

The exchange of informal financial support can take various forms, from covering a co-resident's loan payment to helping those facing financial difficulties. These examples illustrate the different levels of financial support that can be provided and received among co-residents. It is important to note that the need for informal financial support may arise even when there are financial resources available from the larger community. As Respondent 1 noted, people may prefer to turn to their co-residents for financial support because of the stronger sense of community and familial bond they share.

"Finances are difficult. We all work for our income, but it's more challenging to say, 'Your problem is not my problem,' when people live in the same house as you" (Respondent 7, 51 years old).

Administrative Support

Administrative support encompasses various forms of assistance or guidance provided to individuals or organizations to facilitate administrative tasks. These tasks may involve paperwork, record-keeping, scheduling, communication, and other related activities. The need for administrative support can arise from a lack of knowledge, expertise, or resources required to complete such tasks.

Administrative support can take different forms, including mentoring, training sessions, access to specialized software or tools, or direct assistance with specific tasks. Co-residents of different generations may encounter challenges with administrative tasks. Older generations, for example, may require help with digitalized paperwork and may seek assistance from younger co-residents who are more familiar with the process. However, it's important to note that administrative support can be reciprocal, as younger co-residents may also require assistance due to age-related or individual circumstances.

For instance, one respondent mentioned, *"We had to have all our faucets checked by Pidpa for water. And we also helped a few of the older generation who didn't really know how to do it, helped them fill out their papers properly"* (Respondent 2, 38 years old). Another respondent shared their need for support related to their autism, stating, *"There was an example at the sports training. The trainer wanted me to keep training, but I had a sprain. So he sent an email to be more careful next time.*

These are the things where I really need support, because it's difficult for me with my autism to send an email easily" (Respondent 22, 28 years old).

Technology Support

Technology support is a type of informal social support that involves co-residents helping each other with computers, smartphones, tablets, and other technological devices within the household. As with administrative support, the need for technology support arises from a lack of knowledge and expertise in keeping up with technological developments. The interviews revealed that the 65+ age group, in particular, requires support in technology, which they often receive from younger co-residents. Interviewees reported that they felt the importance to stay engaged with the outside world and that being technologically savvy is a part with that. Younger co-residents often describe how they can be a help for them with this since older respondents also report how it becomes increasingly difficult to stay competent with ever evolving devices.

"They don't need instagram, but you want to help them stay engaged with the outside world right? We can help them with that" (respondent 12, 28 years old)

"These devices get smaller and smaller, but also seem to get more complicated. I'm happy I can ask for help here whenever I want to see one of my grandchildren". (Respondent 8, 70 years old).

Advice

Support in the form of advice is a vital component of the informal social support exchanged among co-residents. This support manifests in various ways and is often driven by empathy and a genuine desire to assist one another. Advice may be actively sought by a co-resident, or it can naturally arise when someone expresses difficulties in a specific matter. The advice shared among co-residents can encompass a wide range of topics, such as finding inspiration, practical problem-solving, or sharing life wisdom and experiences. The need for advice typically arises from a sense of uncertainty or lack of knowledge in a particular area. Younger co-residents may seek advice to address challenges they are facing or gain a fresh perspective on a situation, benefiting from the experiences of older residents.

"Sometimes, you just need someone to assure you that you're on the right track or provide ideas on how to navigate a new situation" (Respondent 2, 38 years old).

Co-residents can also offer advice based on their own personal experiences, which can be immensely valuable. Learning from others' experiences allows individuals to gain insights and approach similar situations more effectively.

"I feel like I have a wealth of experience to offer, and it's important for me to share that with the younger people in the house. I want to help them avoid the mistakes I made when I was their age" (Respondent 10, 67 years old).

Overall, the exchange of advice among co-residents plays a significant role in fostering a sense of community and support within the household. By providing guidance and support to one another, co-residents can navigate life's challenges together and cultivate stronger relationships.

Types of Formalized Support in a Co-Residential Setting

The forms of social support discussed in this text are based on the needs of the residents. The main difference between informal and formalized social support is that informal support arises naturally, while formalized support is pre-arranged. Another difference is that informal support is often given by individual residents to individual residents, while formalized support is provided by a group of residents to the entire community or to specific individuals.

Formalized social support in communal living is structured through the use of working groups. Each working group has its own responsibilities, such as organizing activities, maintaining the garden, overseeing construction projects, managing finances and legal matters, etc. Participation in these working groups may be mandatory or simply an implicit expectation.

Formalized Social Support in Household Garden and Kitchen

Formal social support in the co-residential setting takes the form of household, garden, and kitchen support, where co-residents help each other with various household tasks and garden work. This type of support is typically provided by workgroups that focus on building maintenance, common property maintenance, and common areas. Examples of these workgroups include the gardening group, the workgroup that monitors the progress of the construction site, the workgroup responsible for the maintenance of common areas, the interior workgroup, the sustainability workgroup, and the car-sharing workgroup. Attendance at these workdays is not mandatory, but there is an implicit expectation to participate if you are available.

Some narratives show how participation is less evident for younger co-residents. One respondent, a 51-year-old, mentioned, "...Like now, the period when we had to move ourselves... That was terribly poorly prepared because I also just changed jobs. So, I have something like I can't do it now. I don't have the energy and time to give. And then you keep getting the question of 'it's a workday, you're coming, you're coming?' (Respondent 7)". That can be quite demanding sometimes."

However, these workdays take into account the possibilities of people, and there is an intergenerational dimension to this formal social support. Younger residents can provide help to older residents in these workgroups. For instance, a 70-year-old respondent mentioned, "We always have a workday at the end of the month. Then we do, then there is some heavier and some less heavy work. I usually look after children or I make food, such things... I have done other things too. But if there are really heavy things to be moved or something, that can be difficult for me. (Respondent 8)".

This kind of mutual support enhances social cohesion and reduces feelings of isolation among co-residents. Hence, formal social support in the form of household, garden, and kitchen assistance is provided by co-residents to each other, and these workgroups play a crucial role in organizing and executing these tasks, making their formalization an essential part of the functioning of the co-residential community.

Administrative Support

Administrative support as a form of formalized social support within cohousing mainly involves the group providing assistance and support in terms of administration. This can include maintaining the website, communicating with the government, following up on emails, ensuring payments are made, making sure everything is legally sound, getting insurance in order, and so on. Work groups that provide administrative support include the legal group, financial group, communication group, and association of co-ownership or association of co-owners. The administrative complexity of a cohousing arrangement makes administrative support essential for the entire group, as highlighted in the following quote:

“In the legal-financial aspect, I am involved. And, in the beginning, I was also in the board of the actual association. But that actual association then became BMG, a civil partnership to build. I didn’t join that, but I am in the non-profit organization (NPO), because we also have an NPO. So, we had an actual association, we went to a BMG, so the actual association stopped. We have a parallel NPO from the beginning. Now, there’s the association of co-ownership, because we live here. So, there are different legal facilities that you have to comply with. So, it’s quite administratively complex.” [Respondent 3, 61 years old].

Balancing Support in a Cohousing Community

In this section, the focus is on reciprocity in the exchange of support and intergenerational dynamics. Reciprocity, or mutual exchange, appears to be crucial in the exchange of social support within a co-housing community. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the same form of support needs to be reciprocated, but rather that a balance must be maintained. For some individuals, expressing gratitude is enough for them to consider the exchange as reciprocal.

“I don’t want to say ‘tit for tat,’ no. I think a certain level of response is necessary... I don’t need to be paid back in kind. You always try to repay with the right coin, in my opinion... I think it’s a sad state of affairs if it’s tit for tat. But something seems necessary to me.” [Respondent 9, 65 years old].

Age plays a role in different forms of social support. Depending on the type of support, it may flow from older individuals to younger individuals, or vice versa. It’s important to note that this is truly a mutual exchange—younger individuals may provide older individuals with help in administrative or technological matters, while receiving advice or emotional support in return. The different age groups complement one another. The exchange of social support doesn’t always

have to be perfectly balanced at all times. During exceptional circumstances, it's understood that one person may receive more support and provide less. However, this should only be temporary. If a co-resident is consistently in need of social support, it's not sustainable within a co-housing community.

"So if I break my leg, there will be people who will do my shopping for me and vice versa. But if I'm bedridden and need to be washed every day, that's not going to happen. And I think that's okay." [Respondent 6, 76 years old].

It's also important to note that the exchange of social support doesn't always involve actual support being given or received. For some respondents, simply feeling that they have the potential to receive support is enough to feel a sense of social support.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on the benefits of shared living arrangements for the well-being and social support networks of older adults (Baldwin et al., 2019; Fernandez-Carro, 2016). Our findings align with previous research that has demonstrated how shared living arrangements can provide practical and emotional support (Bredewold et al., 2020; Glass, 2020). The study highlights the significance of informal social support among co-residents in intergenerational shared living projects in Flanders. We identified nine different forms of social support, including emotional support, everyday interactions, gifts, and shared activities, which can help combat social isolation and loneliness experienced by older adults, who are known to be more susceptible to such feelings (Aydın et al., 2020).

Recent literature emphasizes the crucial role of older adults' living spaces in their well-being and social support networks (Martinez et al., 2020). Shared living arrangements, such as the ones studied in our research, offer opportunities for social interaction, mutual support, shared activities, and a sense of community and belonging. These arrangements can alleviate social isolation and loneliness, provide practical and emotional support, and contribute to better health outcomes and higher levels of well-being in later life (Choi et al., 2020; Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2021). However, privacy concerns, issues of autonomy, and cultural differences may present challenges for some older adults, and shared living arrangements may not be accessible or desirable for everyone (Dettman, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that these arrangements are inclusive and can accommodate diverse needs and preferences.

Although this study has its limitations, such as a small sample size and a geographically restricted area, the knowledge gained from this research can inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting ageing in place and enhancing the quality of life for older adults (Bigonnesse & Chaudhury, 2020).

Conclusion

The present study aims to explore the forms and dynamics of social support within a co-residential setting. While the existing literature has traditionally distinguished between material and psychological forms of support (Rodriguez & Cohen, 1998; Xia et al., 2012), our study identifies four distinct forms of support, including domestic, administrative, and technological support, advice, and emotional support. These forms encompass a wide range of support mechanisms that are integral to individuals' well-being and functioning within a co-residential context. While some of these forms align with traditional conceptions of material or psychological support as discussed in the literature, such as financial support being predominantly material and emotional support being predominantly psychological, it is important to recognize the inherent diversity within each category. For instance, within the material support category, the provision of domestic support involves tangible acts such as cooking, cleaning, and running errands, which contribute directly to the physical well-being of individuals. On the other hand, emotional support, which is generally considered psychological, can take various nuanced forms such as active listening, empathy, and validation, encompassing both cognitive and affective elements. By identifying and examining these diverse forms of support within a co-residential context, our study provides a more nuanced understanding of how material and psychological support manifest and interact in everyday social dynamics.

Furthermore, reciprocity in the exchange of social support was found to be a crucial aspect within shared living arrangements (Baldwin et al., 2019). The study also highlighted the active role played by older adults (65+) in the provision of social support, despite commonly being portrayed as a group primarily in need of support (Alsubaie et al., 2019). The specific forms of support needed and offered by older adults were found to vary based on age, with older adults requiring more technological and administrative support and offering emotional support and advice to younger individuals.

The study also hints at the importance of considering the conditions under which social support is provided and received, as well as the subjectivity of social support experiences. However, the scope of this article was too small to dig deeper into this conditionality. Hence, we recommend future researchers to look further into this. Additionally, the limited ethnic-cultural diversity within the cohousing community studied raises important questions for future research to investigate the attractiveness of cohousing for these groups and the potential barriers that may exist for ethnic-cultural minorities in entering such communities (Dettman, 2016). It is crucial to recognize that the decision to live in cohousing or other forms of communal living is multifaceted and influenced by various factors, including cultural norms, preferences, and family dynamics. For example, it is possible that some ethnic minorities may prioritize informal care provided by their families due to cultural values emphasizing duty and obligation. This reliance on informal care can place an additional burden on families who may already be facing financial challenges. While it is essential to understand the

potential barriers ethnic minorities may face in accessing cohousing communities, it is equally important to explore the reasons why individuals from different ethnic and cultural groups may choose not to enter such communities. Future research could investigate the interplay between cultural values, familial obligations, and the preferences for communal living among diverse ethnic and cultural communities. By considering a broader range of factors, future studies can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of social support and communal living practices across various ethnic and cultural contexts, including intentional communities and senior living communities.

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