

# The multiple ambivalence of contemporary individualism

Urban foundations and frameworks of intergenerational households

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“This is the story of Sarah and Frida. Sarah is a student in her early twenties and Frida, a pensioner of 92. On the face of it, they have nothing in common. And yet, they have been sharing a three-room apartment in Paris’ 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement since October.” Thus begins an article published in the *Journal du Dimanche* on 27 February 2005. “Two lonely women who get along like a house on fire. One needs a roof over her head. The other can’t live alone any more,” was the comment in a brief article in Paris’ free newspaper *20 minutes*, on 29 March 2005. “My flatmate is a granny” ran the title of the “*Vie étudiante*” (Student Life) column in *Phosphore*, in May 2005.

If we are to believe everything we read in the Press, the number of highly unlikely households has recently multiplied in France, as an experimental remedy for solipsistic individualism. In fact, while students are finding it increasingly difficult to find accommodation in the major university cities of Europe, many old people live alone and, in these same urban areas, own properties with two or more rooms. In light of the growth, in terms of numbers, of both these population groups in western metropolises, and given the parallel effects of the democratisation of higher education and demographic ageing, Spain, followed by other European countries, including France, has, for some years now, been calling for intergenerational mixing, encouraging retired property owners to accommodate students in their homes in return for services rendered (housework, shopping and company, etc.). If the political formulation of the issue of mixing manifests all the characteristics of an “allegorical tale” in which “society, by fusing together individual interaction, will produce a pacified sociality, with social ties that level out differences” (Jaillet, 1998, p. 41), this paper presents an empirical challenge to the supposed “active principles” that underlie this, to borrow a pharmaceutical term. Is it possible to see a student and an old person living together under the same roof as a sign of a new urban solidarity between people at opposite ends of the age spectrum? “*Dans quelle mesure la réduction de la*

*distance sociale s’opère-t-elle par la proximité spatiale ?*” [To what extent are social distances narrowed by spatial proximity?] (Chamboredon, Lemaire, 1970). It is in these now famous terms that the phenomenon of intergenerational home-sharing will be discussed in this paper, in a bid to avoid falling into the trap of reiterating nothing more than a kind of social utopia, a spatialist presupposition devoid of sociological insight.

To fully understand the different urban and intercultural aspects at play in this form of extrafamilial “residential rapprochement”, I have chosen, for the purposes of my second-year Masters thesis in Sociology, to carry out an in-depth study of this issue in two major European cities, which comparable in terms of the student population and the number of old people living in these areas<sup>1</sup>, namely: the Paris region and the Greater Madrid Area. Thanks to a new qualitative, sociological approach that is based more closely on individual experience, it has been possible to explore this emerging social phenomenon scientifically, a phenomenon that lies hidden beneath the layers of experience that are imperceptible to statistical quantification. In the spring of 2006, around a hundred cohabitations of this kind were recorded in the Paris region, and slightly less than 200 in the Greater Madrid Area. The investigation procedure used made it possible to focus on these specific cases, which, while by no means representative of standard means (since this is not the aim of this method), reveal an alternative way of living that is socially new. To analyse the role that individualism plays in the production of urban

1. There are 417,000 senior citizens over the age of 60 and 550,000 students in the Paris region (figures published in November 2005, available on the Île-de-France region website: [www.iledefrance.fr](http://www.iledefrance.fr)). In the Greater Madrid Area there are 340,000 senior citizens over the age of 65 and 400,000 students (figures available on the official website of the Greater Madrid Area: [www.munimadrid.es](http://www.munimadrid.es))



Mihai's cupboard in Marie-Rose house



The kitchen managed by both user

life other than by referring to the average person, who only exists in the realm of statistics, around twenty in-depth individual interviews were held with old people and students who live together in the same home. The sample group questioned consisted of people aged 18 to 96, forming around ten households in equal proportions in the French and Spanish capitals.

Drawing on the concept of “sites of knowledge” developed by Alain Bourdin, this sociological investigation will therefore consider the “individual as a frame of experience” (2005). Viewed from this inductive perspective, it is then possible to define how a concrete individualism (understood as a set of social representations and practices) establishes new forms of urban cohabitation that are contrary to what one would intuitively expect. Covering local institutions that promote intergenerational home-sharing in Paris and Madrid, and the day-to-day experience of home-sharers, as well as how they reached the decision to live together; this detailed analysis sets out to observe the extent to which individualism is a social fact that is as ambivalent and complex as it is a decisive factor in life in contemporary metropolises.

### **Intergenerational home-sharing: institutional promotion of urban individuation supports**

“*Logement intergénérationnel*” in French and “*alojamiento intergeneracional*” in Spanish: these are the terms used in

Madrid and Paris to describe the phenomenon of elderly people providing accommodation in their homes for students. This terminology is not neutral. It is used neither by the students nor by their elderly hosts, but is rather the jargon used by the institutional action groups that coordinate this particular form of house-sharing. This involves three associations set up in 2004-2005 in the Île-de-France region: “Le Pari-Solidaire”, “Atout'âge” and “Logement intergénération”, together with the NGO “Solidarios para el desarrollo”<sup>2</sup> and the “Viure y Conviure”<sup>3</sup> foundation, set up in Madrid in 1996 and 1997 respectively. All these local players were interviewed during the exploratory groundwork for this sociocultural study. On the mesosocial, or organisational, level, the French and Spanish institutions share a relatively similar individualist vision of the urban societies in which they operate (Bourdin, 2005). We also need to understand how the initiatives they run are presented using in the same protocol terms as affording greater individuation for the students and the elderly, rather than seeking to make them submit to a system of social cohesion.

On both sides of the Pyrenees, the local emergence of these institutional players is related in their discourse to the new urban issues raised both by the radicalisation of the

2. “Solidarity for development”.

3. “Living and living with”.

4. According to the Eurostat figures published in January 2006, senior citizens aged 60 and over represented 17 % of the population in the Île-de-France region and 19.2 % in the Greater Madrid Area.



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Sharing the fridge

individualisation process and the major trends of the “ageing society”, or “gerontogrowth” in their cities<sup>4</sup> (Dumont, 2006, p. 39). The organisations in Madrid base their arguments on the fact that there has been “an increasing number of women entering the job market since 1985, which shows a tendency to fall in the future in light of professional mobility and the loss of leisure time resulting from the need to provide informal care to elderly members of the family, which is mainly ensured by women,” (Androher Biosca, 2000, p. 31). The Latin model of the Social State seems somewhat out of tune with the times, in the capital of Spain, so the public authorities in the Greater Madrid Area have supported the emergence of the two local players coordinating this innovative residential scheme in many ways. As for the associations in the Île-de-France, the concern is less focused on women’s capacity for self-sacrifice or the structure of the extended family. The associative initiative in the Paris region is founded rather on political principles that are typically important to the French (human rights and the protection of individual freedom, etc.). These individualistic values are, in this context, proclaimed by people in their forties and fifties living in the Île-de-France region. Belonging to pivotal generations<sup>5</sup>, the women who founded the “intergenerational home-sharing” initiative in the Île-de-France are the very women who are the “primary family carers for the elderly and students” (Attias-Donfut, 1995). Drawing on their personal experiences, they have argued the case for the initiative before various public authorities which, subsequently, have supported them with regional, departmental and local city subsidies. Under the combined



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Each has an own food stock

effects of changes in women’s traditional behaviour and their greater autonomy, especially in these two European capitals, home-sharing between a student and an ageing pensioner is now more than just a new urban household configuration but a genuine opportunity for society to bridge the *divides* inherent in contemporary society.

In fact, although it takes different institutional forms due to differences in the French and Spanish governance systems, the “residential rapprochement” of these two age groups should provide, in Madrid and Paris alike, the “social support required for both groups’ individuality” (Castel, Haroche, 2001). “Private property ownership” or “self-ownership”, this is the driving force, in the Paris region where “70 % of retired people, living alone, own a home of two or more rooms” (Minodier, Rieg, 2004, p. 2) and the Greater Madrid Area where “60 % of old people live alone in a property with more than three rooms” (Fernandez, 2002) while “40.3 % of students in the major metropolitan cities of Europe say that they have difficulties finding accommodation” (*Eurostudent*, 2003). Indeed, it is by drawing on this change-generating imbalance, this residential inequality that divides people of different ages from one another in the cities for which they are responsible, that the institutional players present housing as the most acceptable urban perimeter for instigating intergenerational

5. Expression used in demographic studies to describe “people belonging to a family of three adult generations, with at least one child and one living parent”.

mixing. Living under the same roof, student and pensioner will form an autonomous and harmonious household. This is seen as an answer to the two-pronged problem of isolation and managing daily chores faced by people as they get older; and, at the same time, is a solution to the long-term financial insecurity experienced by students in higher education.

As a product of individualist morals in the city, far from forming a structured network of players, the institutionalisation of “intergenerational home-sharing” thus, paradoxically, conceives of urban solidarity as a merging of personal interests. Its aim is to “enable everyone to get exactly what they need,” as the woman who founded one of the Parisian associations so prosaically put it. To this end, the institutional players focus less on the attraction of a relationship between an old person and a young person setting out on the path of life than on the rationalisation of their respective housing needs. Based on comparative observation of the Greater Madrid Area and the Île-de-France region, it appears that a similar operational protocol, like a concrete system of actions, governs the procedure for setting up such intergenerational house-sharing: one-to-one interviews with the applicants, followed by arbitration of each individual case based on a meeting between the two interested parties, all indicators that reflect a desire to provide a clear framework for the social aspects, and optimise the practical utility of the relation. While these institutional practices are intended to underpin the individuality of the house-sharers, what exactly is it, apart from the appeal of reciprocal utility, that makes them decide to live together on a daily basis?

### **“Residential rapprochement”: taking personal risks due to the constraints of urban life**

In his paper entitled “*Mixité sociale : une utopie urbaine et urbanistique*” (Social mixing: an urban and urbanistic utopia), Gérard Baudin criticizes urban policies for their failure to tackle the reasons why people decide to live with other people (1999, p. 10). To fill this gap, our interpretation of the metropolis from the point of view of the individual’s experience, focuses on the microsocial process underlying the student’s decision to move into an elderly person’s home. Looked at from this level, “a rationality, as such, does not exist, (...) but is relative to the interactions between a number of players in a restrictive situation” (Desjeux D., 2004, p. 19).

Based on what our primary interviewees, in Madrid and in Paris, have said, moving in together has nothing at all to do with a desire to interact with someone at the opposite end of the age spectrum; rather, it is a marriage of convenience, a selective rather than elective rapprochement. This implies a need to understand how individualism in the metropolis paradoxically results in these two generations taking the risk of living in forced proximity.

According to our interviewees, autonomous living is as much of a challenge for people at student age as it is for the elderly. To begin with, the irregular way in which higher education courses and institutions are scattered and the varying degrees of prestige attached to them, can lead to what amounts to a career as a student, entailing a multifarious series of training/educational paths crossing different territories. Thus, all the students living in pensioners’ homes that we interviewed define themselves in terms of similar migratory experiences (intercontinental travel from South America to Madrid, from China to Paris, crossing Europe from Romania to the Île-de-France, from Bordeaux to Madrid, or inter-regional migration from Valencia to Madrid or Lyon to Paris), motivated by the knowledge economy centred in these capital cities. With wider access to university study, internationally, student life, reflected by the students interviewed, is increasingly diffracted like a mosaic, implying a diversity of ages and of cultures. The individual’s pursuit of qualifications is now dependent on the ability to find a place to live other than the family home. These young people not only have to deal with a shortage of housing, but also with the surveillance that the people they leave behind “back home” exert over their new residential destination. In the face of parents’ concerns for their child, only just out of school, going off to live alone in the big city, or the jealousy of a wife as her PhD student husband leaves the conjugal nest, house-sharing with a pensioner is a particularly efficient strategy of emancipation for these young university students. While we see that a combination of a whole range of constraints, related to their educational ambitions, drive them to share the home of an elderly house-owner, what is it, on the other hand, that makes the latter invite these students into their own homes?

We visited a number of old women aged between 68 and 96. They include new pensioners, bedridden invalids and others who are in perfectly good health. The quest to find out more about who these pensioners are may become clearer if we bear in mind the fact that a) there are more elderly women than men in the population<sup>6</sup>, and b) the population category of “the elderly” is extremely heterogeneous. Among the many transitions that constitute old age, “growing old” entails increasing physical disability for some of our interviewees. Where this is the case, the routines that play a vital role in sustaining everyday life, the things that “we take for granted”, begin to fall apart. Loss of motor control thus creates a massive change of lifestyle, requiring them to reorganise their domestic life with outside assis-

6. INSEE figures show total parity up to the age of 60 (50 % of women in society) but, thereafter, 56 % of people aged 65-69 and 67 % of people aged 80-84 are women, a phenomenon that some observers sum up as follows: “old people are old women” (INSEE, 2001); this could be translated into Spanish. A higher percentage of women at the very top of the age pyramid is similarly observed in Spain (Androher Biosca, 2000)

tance. Although the standard definition of dependent-living, as the “inability to care for oneself”, applies to the ageing process for these city dwellers, it should not be confused with a loss of autonomy, the fact of carrying on making your own decisions even in spite of physical disability. It is to avoid having their old age treated as an illness, and a terminal one at that, or one that results in hospitalisation, which would mean leaving their homes in the metropolis, that these women considered providing lodgings for a student, reorganising their home lives in a way that affords a solution for coping with a number of daily chores.

In a similar spirit of instrumental rationality, providing student lodgings also has the effect of “alleviating the social pressure of living on your own” (Kaufmann, 1999, p. 42). In addition to qualitative changes that effect one’s sense of self, and the weariness that comes with old age, the experience of growing old is manifested in a major “relational transaction”, involving the loss of various social roles related to one’s job or due to widowhood (Caradec, 2001, p. 69). According to what some of the elderly women said, the reason for choosing this form of cohabitation was neither a solution to cope with dependency, nor because they were lonely, but rather because their children worried about them living alone in the city to the point where they felt that continuing to live in their own home was threatened.

Players rather than simply victims of the weakening of traditional forms of belonging in the urban environment, the students and pensioners questioned are *mutatis mutandis* in a dual residential venture, based on the search for a place where they can live and study and the desire to redefine the use of the home. The people at these two different stages of life also describe the selection of their new living partner as taking a major risk, one that is inherent in liberating the field of personal action for themselves. They say that it lies at the very heart of their encounter with one another that they feel exposed to this feeling in a determining manner, considering the experience to be an event-accession. This contact entered into between two people who are strangers to one another is unlike ordinary human interaction in the sense that it is determined by destiny, since it opens up horizons that neither party would ever have suspected. Far from fortuitous, the constant presence of a social worker third party at the interview with each other, an interview organised by the institutional players, has a bizarre effect on the ambivalence and on the result of the decision they make. In this social drama, everything happens as if the main characters have been eclipsed in favour of the screenplay, as if the future actors in the intergenerational house-sharing experience do not so much make a decision as find out what the institutional casting director has decided. United under one roof thanks to a synopsis of mutual interests, how do they interpret this residential fiction on a day-to-day basis?

### Relational households: plural set-ups controlled by two individuals

“Ever since Man first conceived of and expressed his relationship to space, the temptation to draw analogies between spatial order and social order has existed” (Ségaud, 2006, p. 60). The promoters of “intergenerational home-sharing” schemes in Paris and Madrid enthusiastically stress the appeal of new “supportive” frameworks in the metropolis, inspired by an “intelligent” individualism. To find out how these students and old people, motivated by the mutual residential consolidation of their personal autonomy needs, “are” together, we must stop generalizing, turn away from the institutional discourse and focus on the individual, throw off our scientist’s “cap” and instead don that of the guest, invited into homes where the hosts, little by little, in what they say and how they act, allow us a glimpse of how they are building a household together. By “household”, we refer to the meaning used by anthropologists specialising in European agricultural kinship relationships, “the relationships that unite a number of people together in the production of daily life even where no blood relationship or marriage ties exist between them” (Weber, Gojard, Gramain, 2003). Our study of the process of individuation in the urban environment is thus a socio-anthropological study of interdependence. In exploring the potential relationships afforded by the rapprochement of these two age groups in the metropolis, three “ideal models” of the intergenerational household will be discussed: the “student lodgings”, the “geriatric home” and the “neo-familial home”. This nominalist perspective encompasses, in Paris and Madrid alike, the different social adjustments that the two people make in order to live together in the same home. At the microsocal level considered for the purposes of our investigation, the cultural background of the people we interviewed does not determine the way in which they live.

In the first type of relational framework that we studied, retired older women, of various ages and all in good physical health share their homes with young male foreign mature students who are pursuing their university studies away from their home countries. Looked at closely, these households, at the domestic and urban levels, display an original set of intergenerational relations that could be interpreted as a housekeeper at the service of her guest. An unequal balance in sharing domestic work structures the material and daily lives of such groups of residential affiliation. Student lodgings therefore resemble a relatively traditional hospitality situation. An asymmetrical relationship is maintained thanks to the dominion exercised by the old person in her own home. As the provider of room and lodging for the student, her role is that of housekeeper and domestic wardrobe mistress, devotedly performing all the household chores, the shopping, cleaning and washing his dirty laundry. In the face of this, the student is increasingly, exponentially, in her debt. In fact, in his essay, *The Gift*,

M. Mauss gives a rigorous definition of the relation between giving and exchange, with “the three obligations to give, receive and reciprocate” (1950, p. 162). And, according to what our younger interviewees said, accepting without being able to reciprocate makes them subordinate, makes them feel like children. If the survey on how domestic chores are shared provides a point of entry to the relationship with the Other and the relational dynamics, to what extent does old person’s monopoly on household tasks structure the territories within the household? The concept of territory is distinct from that of space in that it is delimited, marked out and appropriated either collectively or individually. As a relational construction, the student lodgings are built on the decompartmentalisation of domestic space, the expansion of territories according to a single communal logic. This form of cohabitation is characterised by the lack of differentiation between public, private and intimate space within the home. The domestic decor, entirely decided by the elderly householder, leaves little room for the student to create his own territory. At Marie-Rose’s house, Mihai, a Romanian student specialising in European Politics, has just one old shoe cupboard to keep his clothes in but, in any case, does not have a room of his own.

Student lodgings are thus conceived of as a box by the young lodger, a residence where he goes to sleep, eat, pick up his belongings or rest, but not somewhere where he can manage how he spends most of his time. Such patterns of occupancy of the home, reduced to the strict minimum, warrant closer examination of this form of intergenerational home-sharing viewed from the point of view of city dweller profiles. Student lodgings are home to two distinct types of city dweller: the sedentary old woman and the young nomadic man. In this type of intergenerational household, students and the elderly do not have the same daily routines. While the elderly woman makes most of her journeys within the local neighbourhood where she lives, going to hubs of social life (shops, social clubs, neighbours, friends homes) near her home; her student lodger’s mobility involves not only “dispersed study/course times” but also a “dilution in terms of space” (Bonnet, 1997, p. 68).

An escape from the communal home for the young adult, such forays across the city are tolerated by the retired home-sharer and this in both senses of the word - “endured with difficulty” and “allowed”. In opening their doors to a foreign student, these old women play the role not only of landlady, taking care and managing the home and disrupted by the unpredictable comings and goings of their lodgers, but also that of guide, initiating the young foreigner into the system of signs and the semantic wealth of the urban area. Between tension and cooperativeness, how do the occupants of the student lodgings see each other? The receivers of unilateral gifts from their retired housemates, the students living in this type of intergenerational household feel extremely aware of the precariousness of the situation they are in. Marked by the figure of the mothering landlady and

a gendered vision of domestic roles, living in student lodgings undoubtedly enables them to devote themselves entirely to their studies. However, these young adults hope that such accommodation is temporary, aspiring to greater independence and privacy. In spite of their young lodgers’ secret wish to desert them, the old ladies say that they enjoy their role as housekeeper insofar as it allows them to take on an identity, and a functional status, that is familiar to them: that of housewife and housekeeper. Any reservations they have focus on the lack of any signs of affection they might receive in return for their domestic devotion. We see therefore that the student lodgings model is surrounded by a mist of unsatisfied expectations, but this is not the case with all the intergenerational households we observed. The others include other forms of relational dyad that have been identified.

Dubbed “geriatric home”, the second type of intergenerational household identified arises from the elderly person’s need for more or less constant home care. This model applies to very old women over the age of 80, who are in a state of “*déprise*”, i.e. of abandonment, or “letting go”, a condition that sociologists specialising in ageing issues define as the loss of a variety of functional statuses due to deteriorating physical health, which may leave them bedridden in some cases. These women “share” their homes with female students of varying ages, who may be foreigners but not necessarily. They are homeless and lack sufficient financial means to pay for accommodation; all are prepared to act as home carers in exchange for a roof over their heads. This form of home-sharing is based on a utilitarian logic. Accommodation in the elderly person’s home is conditional upon performing domestic tasks in return. This may imply shopping, cleaning, preparing meals and doing the laundry, these tasks are performed by the student at jointly agreed times, in return for which the elderly person provides accommodation in her home, pays a small salary and pays all the domestic expenses (food consumed, cleaning products, travel expenses as required for the household shopping).

This daily home help appears to be particularly restrictive for the student bearing in mind that it is very time-consuming and she is expected to carry out sensitive tasks, especially personal care for the old lady (washing and dressing, etc.). How is this relationship of householder and domestic employee defined in territorial terms in the home? During our visits to such homes, the decors of the homes of some of these very elderly property owners represented what amounts to a veritable museum of their personal histories. Guardians of “discourse objects”, like “holograms of lost identities” (Muxel, 1996, p. 96), these old ladies are attached to their familiar living environment even in spite of their unsuitability for the physical disabilities from which they suffer. In this type of household, the student’s own territory is the space on the fringes of the home, the maids’ rooms on the same floor, smaller rooms with less light. Basically, these are spaces that the students perceive as



Between women relations are family like

being less pleasant to live in than the rooms occupied by the elderly people. Although they all have their own bedroom and bathroom, the difference in the standard of comfort observed between the old woman's home environment and that allowed the young woman denotes a difference in the status of the two home-sharers, where age has the advantage.

This power relationship between home sharers is reversed once outside the front door. In the urban space, the older woman stumbles, having lost her bearings, while the younger woman runs free to discover new haunts. In fact, founded on the physical fragility of the elderly, this type of home-sharing set-up reveals urban experiences that are diametrically opposed. At the mercy of encroaching old age, mobility is the locus of pain and anxiety for the old women. Their homes represent a safe and protective cocoon but also a prison from which it is difficult to extricate themselves unless they have access to major material and logistical resources (wheelchairs, taxis, assistance from a carer, etc.). Although their young home-sharers accompany them on their occasional trips around town (mainly for healthcare treatment), they go alone to the shops, etc. to stock up on household provisions (food, medicine, etc.). In the eyes of the latter, urban space seems to offer a broad range of amenities (intellectual enrichment at higher education institutions where they study, social life, friendship, nightlife, etc.). Under their own control, their travels across the capital expediently open up a spatio-temporal range of possibilities more in line with student life. While such different experiences of the city expressed by the student and the old woman work to widen the gap already created by the difference in age, how do they perceive this themselves? Alienated from their own bodies, the elderly women living in this type of household set-up make the provision of student accommodation dependent on their goodwill, and on their satisfaction with the services provided. This position is not unambiguous since it reflects both a desire to be in command and a need to be cared for, to be pampered. Thus, what these old women seek in their relationships with the female students is the latter's youth, their ability to

make them feel young again. The students on the other hand worry about the old women's physical decline, which would thereby precipitate the loss of the accommodation. Where this second model of home-sharing is founded on necessity, the third model is founded on the assent of the occupants.

The "neo-familial home" is the ideal model of companionship between students and the elderly. Company is precisely the issue that is at stake on a day-to-day basis in their residential rapprochement. This involves a third form of interdependence based on the reciprocal exchange of the gift/return gift. At the heart of these daily life micro-situations, in what ways does this mutual exchange objectify a familiarity between an elderly lady and a female student? The two female characters will now be described. In light of our field study, the concept of the neo-familial home brings together retired women of varying ages, in good physical health, who, until relatively recently, provided accommodation for members of the family (grandchildren or nephews, for example). As for their home-sharers, they are female student from a variety of cultural backgrounds, aged between 18 and 30, who all say the same thing - that their academic success is the most important thing to them. Avoiding generalisations regarding this initial identification, we will rather subject it to in-depth analysis. Where the household economy in the two previous models functions according to the unilateral management by one of the home-sharers, the neo-familial home economy is shared equally. Each of the sharers is responsible for specific household production and management tasks. This pluralistic model of household organisation can mainly be seen in the fact that they keep their food products separate. Even though the old lady and the student keep their stocks of household production commodities separate, both women say that they are brought closer together by the occasional moment of mutual help (sharing a meal that takes a long time to cook, washing some of the other's laundry to have a full load in the washing machine, etc.).

As such occasional gifts multiply in the course of time, the ways in which they are strangers yield to familiarity, to the point where a feeling of being related is created. In spontaneously comparing their relationship to that forged between grandmother and granddaughter, several of our interviewees suggested that a family bond could develop simply by sharing their daily lives together. This feeling, viewed from the perspective of F. Héritier's theory of the humours, is related to "the traditional belief that sharing food and dialogue creates a kinship bond that is just as strong as any blood tie" (1994). How is each person's territory organised in this form living-in-proximity, i.e. in the neo-familial home? While the housing unit is a fixed structure, which defines geographic boundaries, the way in which the territories of each member of the household is organised is less a spatial construction than a social one.

In fact, as we have seen above, the student lodgings is

no different from the geriatric home in terms of the number of rooms, but rather in terms of the communal and non-hierarchical system that pervades all the different spaces within the home. In the social system of the neo-familial home, the distribution of personal territory (bedrooms and bathrooms) and communal areas (kitchen and living room) is one of the building blocks of this household model. Thus, “the dialectics of the social bond” between the two women can be interpreted in spatial terms: “between convergence and divergence, presence and absence, doors and bridges” (Simmel, 1999, p. 43). In this metaphor used to describe forms of socialisation, G. Simmel thinks of « the door » as all the barriers we set up against any form of Otherness. The “bridge”, on the other hand, refers to crossing these barriers and connecting with other people. If company and isolation, alternating like a heart beat, lie at the domestic heart of the neo-familial home, what can we observe about the urban environment in which it is developing? If we attempt to represent their travel patterns within the city graphically, the occupants of the neo-familial home relate two experiences of urban living, in other words, two different forms of relationships forged within the urban space. The elderly property owners’ travel in the city is intricately related to their possibilities for maintaining key emotional bonds. Some of the retired women we questioned illustrated this finding in writing, in spite of their shaky handwriting that made it difficult to read, but accompanied by a discourse full of enthusiasm for their close relatives (children and grandchildren). While the elderly women tend to their family-gardens through the visits they make; their student home-sharers, recently arrived in the capital city, go out to cultivate new social ties in the city. The experience of either one of these city dwellers cannot be reduced to that of the other, these intergenerational households discover alternative urban adventures in listening to each other, and worry

more about their prolonged absence from the home the more they are unfamiliar with the areas of the city where the other home-sharer spends time. This mutual enrichment through contact with a generation other than one’s own nurtures the image of an “elective family” bond within the neo-familial household (Singly, 1993). By this concept, François de Singly describes a “willed reappropriation of kinship bonds, focused on people and on the quality of the relationship” (1993, p. 77). We are also given to understand that the inhabitants of this type of household associate their complicity with a feeling of being related. “Taming one another, it means establishing ties,” says the fox in Saint-Exupéry’s story *The Little Prince* (1999, p. 48). This could be the motto for the neo-familial home, where an original form of solidarity between student and elderly woman is established, the right balance of proximity and distance between two generations.

As we close the contingent doors of these typical ideal set-ups, this empirical study provides a rich source of indicators regarding the individualistic characteristics of our metropolitan societies. In spite of the fact that our “approach via different scales of observation leads to a theory of knowledge as a limited, imperfect, discontinuous and constantly shifting system” (Desjeux D., 2004, pp. 116-117), it nevertheless has the advantage of demonstrating, without oversimplifying the issues, the ambivalence inherent in urban reality. Sharing a home does not have to be prejudicial to a desire to live together, or to friendship, to positive social interaction. It is only by working toward enriching the individual’s personal development and providing people with the means to sustain their independence, that adults living in the city, regardless of age, will be in a position to consolidate such innovative and affectionate social ties, without giving up the values of equality and freedom typical of contemporary individualism.



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