ÂGIR: Empowering Seniors! Take care of your own business : do it yourself

Alice Rouyer, Marina Casula

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TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN BUSINESS: DO IT YOURSELF

Alice Rouyer

Université Toulouse II- Jean Jaurès, Maison de la Recherche, 5, allées Antonio Machado, F-31058 Toulouse cedex 9
e-mail : rouyer@univ-tlse2.fr

Marina Casula

Université Toulouse I- Capitole, 2 rue du Doyen-Gabriel-Marty, F-31042 Toulouse Cedex 9
e-mail : Marina.Casula@ut-capitole.fr

Abstract :

The action research project ÂGIR (Âge, innovation sociale et réflexivité / Ageing, social innovation and reflexivity) allows seniors to take part in the building of a collective knowledge base on issues related to ageing and conviviality in the Greater Toulouse Area.

First, the seniors involved in the project collect information by conducting qualitative surveys in their daily living environment, among different kinds of actors or other seniors. This aims at reaching a better understanding of the various factors that shape the social life of elderly people and impact its preservation or revival. The survey results then allow to identify specific issues which can be translated into 'problems to be solved,' and thus, contribute to bringing local solutions that improve the social integration of elderly people. We are at the heart of a process of social innovation, which could lead to the implementation of different kinds of strategies: built environment (man-made environment); digital solutions (communication devices), co-production of social services (human organization)… or all three at once! This is why a research team composed of social scientists, urban planning and architecture scholars, and experts in computer science and software engineering supports the group.

Keywords: Ageing, social life, collaborative research, social innovation

Introduction

The action research project ÂGIR (Âge, innovation sociale et réflexivité / Ageing, social innovation and reflexivity) is funded by the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), France's largest governmental research organization, for 18 months. It allows seniors to take part in the building of a collective knowledge base on issues related to ageing and conviviality in the Greater Toulouse Area.

The originality of this program is to associate two moments. The first one consists in a collective construction of knowledge and reflexivity. The second is when the group of seniors defines, from the results of its investigations, a set of projects, which researchers and local actors will support. First of all, the approach required , , the envolement of a group of around thirty voluntary seniors, coming all from Toulouse and its urban area. This group was established between September, 2017 and January, 2018.

My communication presents the first part of our program. Actually, on June 12th 2018, the involved seniors made a collective presentation of their first results. However, these analyses have to be continued and completed. Therefore, what I present today are the transitory results of their commitment.

1. Do it yourself : « know thyself »

1.1. Getting self-organized to produce knowledge

ÂGIR is based on an implication at the long time of a collective of around thirty seniors. In order to recruit those people, we chose to contact several structures: the councils of seniors of the municipalities of the urban area, but also different associations, which gather numerous retired people and finally, the "university of the spare time" (university of the third age). Of course, we were fully aware, that this recruitment would bring us a profile of elderly rather in good health, active and with widened networks of social relationships. Nevertheless, at this step of our work, the goal was not to constitute a panel, but to enlist a stable long-term group, with people whose cultural capital would facilitate their commitment in this kind of project.

From the presentation of the research, we widely informed about our objectives and our expectations. We particularly insisted on the choice to mix a analysis of conviviality of the elderly and a project process. We also communicated the schedule of the program of the first part of our programme : a half-day introductive forum, then a set of monthly meetings, on a workshop format ; and a forum of presentation of the results to open the circle to a larger public, by inviting social and institutional actors or other researchers, and also other seniors.

Workshops took place monthly from February. They allowed to discuss relations of conviviality and to implement exercises allowing the group to know each other better. It is from these discussions that the group defined its objectives of search around those 4 questions:
1. Where do we meet, where we can make new acquaintances and share friendly moments at home and outside when we advance in age?
2 ° Why are some elderly people invisible, how do they become isolated, why do any seems to disappear by getting older?
3 ° What is the reality of the intergenerational links which we maintain and what do we actually, expect from other generations?
4 ° How to develop relations of solidarity in a long term, how to help one another?

The whole group has been divided into four teams.. Each team was supported by several researchers . Nevertheless, some of our seniors was not fully committed in this regular work, even if they choose to support our program and to be with us at the time of the plenary workshops.

Each working group had to specify its objectives and strategy for its research:

What is the research issue?
- How to succeed in collecting informations
- What are our hypothesis?
- Which methodology is to adopt (by taking into account the availability of seniors,, the short and limited-time of the project and short and limited resources!)
- How to find, read and appropriate bibliographical resources?

6 to 8 people took part in each and self-organized group. They reported their steps each month when we met in the collective workshops.

1.2.: Working group 1 : « Places to meet »

Working group : « Places to meet » came to think into two directions. The first one concerned the co-housing. Is it possible to imagine that sharing one's housing environment can be an answer to the loss of autonomy? How could cohousing improve the social life of senior residents? In order to explore this question, the group first identified the regional actors who support and develop this sort of initiatives: the local actors of the participative housing environment, the social landlords who implement intergenerational housing environment. This working group also wished to question and analyse the point of view the of their elected representatives, asking them if they did take seriously this kind of initiatives and if they would be ready to support them.

With energy, the group has identified some interesting actors. Nevertheless, obtaining interviews from them was much more complicated. Therefore, the group finally met only two kinds of persons: an elected representative and some members of a collective that created in the 80's, near Toulouse a cohousing hamlet through a housing association. Nevertheless, these first interviews have revealed the complexity of this kind of operations and the limits of their dissemination. These results incited the members of the working group to continue their investigation. They decided to organize a forum about cohousing and aging. This meeting could gather local actors who could present their experiences and put them into debate. Interested elderly could also consider the constraints and the commitment that suppose those ways of living.

The group decided to investigate a second direction, meeting places in the public space. Where are neighborhood cafés or bistros, the places where it is possible to meet each other and to be noticed, recognized, in spite of the stigmas of the old age and the loss of autonomy? What kind of space facilitate interactions between neighbors? How to think about (third) places where it is possible to have activities, to find some advices for the small concerns of everyday life? How to meet one's close relations, acquaintance, or unknown people?

It was difficult for the group to become aware of the variety of the friendly relations. So, with their help, we integrated, in the workshop of March 21st, a small exercise in which all the members of the collective participated. It aimed to express better the situations of meeting that are important to enjoy life. Then, with them, we elaborated a simple questionnaire to describe situations of conviviality.
This work was led with the support of the whole collective of seniors. It took the shape a " frieze of conviviality ": the frieze represents different scales of space, : home, neighborhood, district, city and the vast world. We asked the whole group to position of "scenes" representing meeting moments they hold so dear. These small theater scenes needed to precise a moment (when?), a place (where?), an activity (what to do?) and protagonists. The analysis of theirs choices revealed several things: the social life of seniors focuses at first around family and a few close friends: . they are welcomed at home, go to the public places together (theater, concerts, parks and gardens, cinema) and travel together. Senior members of our collective didn't speak a lot of the neighbouring area. In reality, they do very few things with their neighbors. They circulate in the city and somewhere else. They consume activities allowing them to network, to make new acquaintances with same affinities . Actually, the exercice put the stress on social or class distinction phenomena and had the merit to make the group aware of this.

The exercise supposed moreover to imagine that could become those situations by getting older: anticipating what could go wrong (or better), and imagine solutions, . We had to notice that defining problems and anticipating action was difficult, even impossible, for the seniors involved The group agreed to continue to collect testimonies on the situations of conviviality of older and more fragile people.

1.3. Working group 2 : « looking for the isolated people"

The objective of the workgroup " looking for the isolated people " was to know better the reasons why some elderly become isolated of their own free will or in spite of their will. The discussion and the readings allow us to discover that there are different forms of "solitude The working group identified

- Invisible people" : "those we do not know and see"." They maybe know a long-time exclusion, their social networks became weaker or split for a long time; They are sometimes "people outer any system"
- Others are "people whom we do not see anymore" (as noticed a senior because of his associative experience). Why? Sometimes, they have money troubles, sometimes health problems or something is getting wrong with the filling for their own dignity. Those situations may bring their family to protect them and to isolate them of their former relations. Nevertheless the working group makes the hypothesis that some are isolated "by choice", because they do not want any more to take part in an thriving social life. Quite the reverse, others people will suffer from this situation. So, how to help them? We thus try to understand the factors of "isolation", being aware that they are of various natures. Maybe we can positively act again some of those factors, but it is probably more difficult for others.

From these preliminary remarks, the workgroup decided to survey various actors who fight loneliness among the elderly.. This supposes to define what it want to know, to create an interview guide and then to make seniors members of the group familiar with interviewing methods.. The group questioned a representative of the "Secours Populaire" (a French help association), , a municipality social work center's in Toulouse urban area, some elected people and social services of another municipality, and last finally an association that helps elderly in a social housing district.Working by pairs, sometimes with a researcher, sometimes without, investigators realized interviews.

Analysis is the last step of this work. The group noticed that spontaneously, according to their mission, some organizations categorize "isolated" elderly into two categories of public: the people in precarious situation or the fragile people. Nevertheless, it appears in the discussion that this professional approach is much more complex. Members of the group red a public report made by "Les petits Frères des Pauvres" about isolation (Young brothers for poor people, a French help organization). It puts a stress on the fact that isolation is not specially related to ageing. Many elderly have been isolated for a long time. Family breakdowns, divorces, precarious situations are well-known pre-existing factors of isolation, before being old.

Nevertheless, new factors of isolation can merge when ageing: retirement can break former working relationships, people can suffered the loss of their relatives. Involvement in associations, seniors "over-activity" also aim to build new links. Finally, others factors are health problems, disabilities, difficulties to remain oneself … or more simply untold and lonely pain.

Without entering into a full depth analysis, the problem was how to fight again elderly social isolation. The group remarked then the importance of the associative environment, but also the difficulty to look for isolated people and that it also implied a voluntary and active approach. Their survey shows however that the charitable organizations provide places where people can meet each other, but cannot necessarily join elderly at home. Moreover, it appears as well as that the neighborhood remains a good proximity scale to create a network of contacts and shared knowledge between professionals and goodwill people in order to identify isolated elderly.

1.4. Working group 3: Pass down and intergenerational exchanges

The third workgroup was interested in the relations between generations and in the conditions of meeting with other categories of age. Their objective was to work with several tools: an interview guide linked to a week-to-a-page diary, where the person listed his/her "meetings" and commented on them. Using a diagram of those interactions, he/she could try to specify the nature of the feelings associated with each of these meeting . Members of this working group forts applied this exercise to themself, they then realized about twenty interwiews, with their own circle of acquaintances (family, neighborhood), but also by visiting relations in establishments. At last, the group has elaborated some mini-portraits of each person they met.

The analysis of this small corpus called a reflection around four axes: the space-times of intergenerational meetings, the situations of communications and exchanges (and of feelings) shared with other generations, the nature of what we pass down from generation to generation and finally the identification of the situation of mutual aid in and outside the family. The analysis of these materials is only beginning. However, we can underline some points: seniors live in space-times, which are not necessarily the same as for working people or young generations. Then, family support takes an important place in their lives. Nevertheless, apart from family, relations of mutual aid are rather the fact of the seniors who are available to help other people.

1.5 : working group "Mutual aid, sharing, solidarity"

The fourth working group "Mutual aid, sharing, solidarity" had for objective to question the foundations of solidarity. Who helps whom? Why do we help others people? How we help them? How is structured this field? Rather quickly the group had a clear preference for qualitative survey, mainly centered on interviews but also on observations of places dedicated to solidarity. So the academic researchers and the seniors involved met representatives of associations. One of the members of the group had the opportunity to join an open day in a " House of the solidarities ". She met people of the help field that have a strong commitment to create a deep dialogue with the users of this place: seniors or disabled people who were present during this day.

This group is peculiar as some members are also implied in their own town, in said actions dedicated to their neighborhood, in connection with "les petits frères des pauvres". They aim to recreate links and of facilitate mutual aid between people living within the same territory, Ramonville Saint-Agne. The working meetings, between every monthly workshop, were thus also the occasion to review and think about their own actions and about institutional limits that they could meet.

What does it emerge that from those interviews? We are going to present the outstanding features. Answering the question to know who helps who, young retired people are not necessarily the most present people in all the associations. We could suppose that they had spare time and thus could put a lot into actions with other seniors, more isolated, or other public. In fact, they are rather family caregivers: they take care of their grandchildren, or their own parents, and are not still so available as we could think. Their main obstacle is thus time. But when they are available and when they mobilize in associations, they bring their previous professional, technical or human skills. Sometimes, they want to break with their former career and can be trained in the listening or in others needs by the associations for which they are going to put a lot.

It appeared that when we help others, we also help ourselves. Being younger, in job search, or in situation of migration or social isolation, mutual aid can be a way of acquiring skills, which will be recognized on a professional level. Also it takes you out of your own isolation, to get recognition and to find or to keep your place in society. Solidarity thus joins in a process of reciprocal gift giving: «we are not charity workers said one interviewed person. There is inevitably reciprocity in the relations build during these exchanges. Most of the met people so distinguish voluntary work which is a matter of "care" and charitable actions which are rather a matter) of the good deed.

The group investigated with associations or with structures that favor an intergenerational mutual aid. Therefore, it emerges from this that the helped people are mainly rather autonomous or more fragile elderly but who always live at home. The representatives of associations also insisted on the necessity of building a network around the person, where various skills and forms of help coexist.

Both more psychological features for solidarity are confidence and empathy. To help the others, it is necessary to be capable of listening and of arousing the confidence, in particular at the elderly who do not open easily their door. In addition, when we help older people, it demands to be capable of facing our own fears: those of our own ageing or our own death. Some volunteers can so feel difficulties in entering the place of residence of the elderly and will rather choose to accompany them for moments of conviviality outside. Finally, sometimes sharing does not consist necessarily to help the person to

do something. It can be the occasion of sharing a meal, to have a cup of a coffee or to be an attentive presence.

Finally the last element that it is important to note is of organizational order. Numerous associations and structures are acting in the field of solidarity and mutual aid. Yet it is not always easy for them to collaborate around common projects. It is difficult sometimes to build a common interest. They are sometimes competitors because they address the same public. It is thus complex to organize the coordination of their various interventions, even if partnerships exist; they are very dependent on the willingness of some and on others to cooperate on a given territory. The representatives of associations insisted on the question of the risk to defend private domains of some and others. It is not easy for a structure to let others enter on its ground of action. If cooperation's exist however, there is a whole denser network to be organized. This issue of self-organization of this sector of solidarity leads to think about how to facilitate meetings, to work in common and preserve relations of conviviality around the ageing people.

2. Do it yourself: from idea to action

21. What research means.

These small inquiries led by seniors pursued a dual objective.

- The first is to bring seniors to start a process of reflexivity on their own practices., enabling them to ensure the articulation between the knowledge of their own reality and other social realities. Also, to allow them access to a scientific and technical literature.

- The second is to change their position in the relation with local actors. By producing knowledge and informations through their own enquiries, Senior are not anymore only "ageing people", for whom public authorities should develop public policies. They reinforce their legitimacy to participate in the construction of solutions .

On the first point, the balance sheet is rather positive, even if the actual production of materials is the fact of the most active half of our group. Few seniors left the program, but some weren't very active. We were regularly told that this participation of the seniors was one of many activities and their availability was limited. On the other hand, some seniors have impressed us with their desire to read scientific works, to participate in the construction of surveys and to meet various actors. We had the opportunity to create real skills.

On the second point, we were able to contact a vast panel of actors. In addition, the main institutions concerned by the politics of ageing, take part in workshops or forums. Thus, seniors learnt to know better their interlocutors, but also the logic and constraints of their action.
A good local advertising about AGIR aimed to prepare the second phase of work.

22. Transverse approaches: identification of problems-targets or how to find "what we have to solve".

The four themes of the working groups allowed to progress in a global reflection:
  - What does the social life of seniors look like today and how can conviviality evolve by getting older,
  - Why a some elderly people in situation of isolation?
  - What is the reality of exchanges and relations with other generations?
  - How and to what extent are the seniors "helpers" for the family and others?
  - What do we have to expect from the help of others?

It is of course necessary, in the coming months, to continue the exploration of the materials constituted and maybe, to lead additional explorations. The working groups are ready to continue their work..

Nevertheless, what interests the collective is due to the fear of no longer control one's social life The "problems to be solved" are focusing on how to support a long term affectionate and friendly circle of acquaintances. The main postulate of our approach is that a capacious, well-thought living environment , can support the capacity of each to maintain the entourage and to develop new links. Designing these environments suppose ton think about spatial, organizational and social **devices**.

Surveys and debates during the workshops allowed to update our three hypotheses, but it's now necessary to test them. They will turnaround three levels of scale:

First hypothesis : It's possible to think that some forms of housing and modalities of semi-collective life can answer both the need to support links (intra and intergenerational links) and also promote mutual aid. Rather than putting older people in a simple position of assisted people, this privileged social space could encourage the exchange of services and help; mutual help (reciprocal gift-giving).

To verify this hypothesis, it supposes that the collective explores the shared housing/ cohousing initiatives for seniors with a set of questions :
What do we share? With whom? What are the contributions of each? What's the place of mutual aid or the link between generations? What the new ways of living together require in the cohabitation? Who are the operators of these initiatives? The partners? The resources?

The **second hypothesis** concerns the people who wish to stay at home. We think that some organizations on the scale of the neighborhood can also support a close circle of acquaintances.

What **devices,** what kind of organizations could favor the conviviality in the old age ,on the scale of the neighborhood? How can these **devices** allow to avoid isolation, to favor the identification of in trouble and/or dependant people ? Etc…These questions require an exploration and an analysis of the existing devices.

Finally, the **third hypothesis is** that it's possible to promote intermediation schemes, at the city or departmental level, which allow seniors, but also other publics, to work together on common projects. , in order to promote mutual help and social bond.

We suppose, as before, that mutual aid means reciprocal gift-giving. We notice that energies are scattered and that it is difficult to network organizations (associations, institutions,). There is a low memory of initiatives, great difficulties to capitalize on experiences and knowledge and a lack of cooperation. Given this fragmentation context, how to implement a dynamic of cooperation and synergies?

23 - Understanding and innovating together: towards social innovation workshops (Ateliers-Chantiers)

In this next phase of work, we will accompany a participative social innovation process. The three structuring hypotheses defined by the collective refer to three scales of devices that facilitate capacitation: the cohousing residence, the neighborhood, the intermediation device on the scale of a vaster territory. We named it the workshops-site (Ateliers Chantiers)

Where are we going henceforth?

1. Firstly, seniors will analyze existing devices, to characterize their intrinsic logics, their contributions, their limits and to understand their financial, organizational, technical etc. .constraints

2. In a second step, this work implies a process of production: we have to escape from what already exists: we can imagine an idealized version (voluntarily utopian) of the devices and work with the strength of the imaginary for bringing out a coherent set of propositions.

3. We will have to work on those analysis, evaluation, creative projects, with local voluntary partners. We mean territorial authorities, social landlords, associations,… in the context of cooperative workshops, in order to consolidate proposals taking into account their operational feasibility.

We would like to develop with the group, a better ability to evaluate, capacity to ask questions to actors and to develop creativity. We hope that these abilities change the mind of institution about elderly people .The program's team, which associates urban planner, sociologists engineers, and involve actors panel, set itself the target to translate some of the proposals of the group in operational projects.

Conclusion

AGIR is an experimental program that has the ambition, in Toulouse ecosystem, "to unsettle" the institutional look on ageing. We have in a first phase to bring seniors into a research process and then invite them to participate in a project approach that gradually leads them to adopt a role of devices designer. This requires a support and the deployment of important participatory engineering solutions.

The challenge of this approach is double:
- creating a place for empowering elderly people
- opening a space where dialogue between local actors is possible . we notice actually that actors don't always know each other and don't work together.

When, in France, Public authorities officially emphasize the transversal and cross-sectorial dimension of ageing issue, and officially support public participation forced to note that such spaces of exchange and empowerment are missing. Our program of action-research, positions us,not only as researchers, far beyond the simple function of observer, but as voluntary actors, moved by a modest but targeted project of societal and political transformation.

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