

Abstract

Objective: To describe the content of parent and young adult coresidence contracts, attending to understandings of development and adulthood, processes of socialization, and conflict prevention and resolution.

Background: Little is known about overcoming the challenges of parent and young adult coresidence. Popular media encourages families to adopt written contracts to clarify expectations, prevent conflict, and cultivate positive experiences. However, their content, use, and effectiveness have not been empirically investigated.

Method: Qualitative content analysis of sample young adult and parent coresidence contracts obtained from popular self-help and parenting resources.

Results: Contract content emphasized: parent and young adult rights and responsibilities, timelines around the termination of coresidence, and other responsibilities and developmental milestones, legal motifs, operant systems of punishments and rewards, rationalizing commentary, and personalization opportunities. Overall, contracts focused on role-specific rights and responsibilities and positioned young adults as subjects of socialization in hierarchical family systems.

Conclusion: Coresidence contracts scaffold young adult development according to traditional Western understandings of adulthood. Depending on family circumstances, they have the potential to benefit and harm parent-child relationships.

Implications: The asymmetrical nature of coresidence contracts raises questions about their ability to support mutual aims, intergenerational understanding, young adult independence, interpersonal trust, and healthy parent-young adult relationships.

Keywords: conflict, contracts, coresidence, living at home, parent-child relationships, young adulthood

Sign Here: Coresidence Contracts for Parents and Young Adults who Live Together

There has been a notable increase in the proportion of Canadian and American young adults coresiding with parents over the past three decades (Mazurik et al., 2020; United States Census Bureau, 2017). Coresidence is defined here as a living arrangement in which a young adult (roughly aged 18–30) lives with one or more parents (Mazurik et al., 2020). From 1981 to 2022, the proportion of Canadian coresiders in their 20s grew from 27.5% to 42.3% (Statistics Canada, 2016). In 2014, 31.6% of Americans aged 18–34 lived at home, the first time in over 130 years that this arrangement was more common for young adults than living with a spouse or partner in an independent residence (Fry, 2016). Despite increased coresidence in Canada and the United States, little is known about how families structure and negotiate this living arrangement, and studies of the psychological, relational, and financial outcomes of particular family practices are sparse (Hill et al., 2020; Mazurik et al., 2020).

Having young adults remain in, or return to, the family home presents unique family challenges. Young adults and parents must navigate shifting roles and relationships as children pursue independence within environments characterized by parental authority (Ben-Shlomo et al., 2022; Newman, 2012). Although many young adults and parents report satisfying experiences of coresidence (Casares & White, 2018; Fingerman et al., 2017; Newman, 2012; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018), this living arrangement can also result in family conflict, strained relationships, and perceived exploitation (Parker, 2012). Existing research provides little guidance to families navigating this living arrangement or professionals seeking to support coresiding parents and young adults. Given the importance of parent-child relationships to the well-being of parents and young adults, it is important to understand what promotes and detracts from harmonious coresidence and to develop insights into conflict prevention and mediation strategies for this living situation.

The present study is part of a program of research that explores conflict prevention and resolution in young adult and parent coresidence. It aims to evaluate the content of written

coresidence contracts, with an eye to (a) what these documents imply about sociocultural understandings of development and adulthood, (b) how they relate to ongoing socialization processes, and (c) how they approach conflict prevention and resolution. We analyzed 16 sample contracts sourced from popular books and websites using qualitative content analysis. Based on this analysis, we argue that these agreements overwhelmingly affirm parental authority and position adult children as subjects of socialization who require guidance to become responsible and self-sufficient persons. Reflecting on interpersonal contract literature, we suggest that coresidence contracts have the potential to facilitate communication, help families prevent or overcome conflict, limit financial and labour strain on parents, and foster the development of trust between young adults and parents. However, the absence of shared aims, obligations, and entitlements in these works and the frequent presence of punishments suggest these contracts could also undermine healthy family relationships in particular circumstances. How and when coresiding families might best utilize such contracts is discussed.

In what follows, we outline young adulthood as a specific developmental stage, discuss the rise of young adult and parent coresidence, and review the current literature related to coresidence, including motivations, attitudes, experiences, and processes of behavioral contracting. We then outline the current study and present the findings of our qualitative content analysis. We close with attention to how these contracts, as a whole, position various parties, reflect particular sociocultural understandings, and approach conflict prevention and resolution.

Literature Review

Young Adulthood and Coresidence in Canada and the United States

Young adulthood is a unique developmental period following adolescence and preceding adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Arnett et al., 2011). Spanning approximately age 18 to 35, young adulthood in the contemporary West is often an “in-between” age, marked by increasing responsibilities alongside ongoing parental dependence and the sense of not yet being a fully mature adult (Arnett, 2015). We take *development* to indicate a series of progressive and

organized changes in human beings that are shaped by one's sociocultural context and occur throughout the life course. Within Canada and the United States, young adulthood is a relatively new developmental stage, driven by educational, social, and economic shifts that have increasingly delayed marriage, financial independence, parenthood, and home ownership relative to the post-World War II period (Mintz, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016). Young adults are subject to various modes of socialization during this period (the processes whereby individuals learn the values, skills, and behaviors needed to permit competent functioning within the social group [Grusec, 2011]). Parents are primary socialization agents in the lives of young adult children, particular among those who continue to live at home as adults.

Shifting economic realities, a lack of affordable housing, and growing educational demands have delayed residential independence across the global West (Furstenberg, 2016; Hill et al., 2020; Newman, 2012). Within Canada and the United States, young adults have consistently cited financial concerns as the primary reason for living at home (Fry et al., 2020; Maroto, 2019; Mazurik et al., 2020). Families have been shown to use coresidence to cope with rising costs of living, intensified job competition, diminishing returns on postsecondary degrees, and inadequate social welfare systems (Britton, 2013; Hill et al., 2020; Kamo, 2000; Maroto, 2017; Mazurik et al., 2020; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018). Indeed, young adult unemployment has been positively correlated with coresidence (Kaplan, 2012; Matsudaira, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2016) and greater personal and family incomes predict leaving the family home (Fingerman et al., 2017; Fry, 2016; Hill et al., 2020; Swartz et al., 2011).

However, the growth of this living arrangement across much of the global West is not a purely economic phenomenon. Cepa and Kao's (2019) analysis of longitudinal survey data, for example, highlighted the role of cultural values and expectations in coresidence decisions by linking an emphasis on familism (wherein the needs of the family are prioritized over those of individuals [Kamo, 2000]) to higher rates of coresidence among Black, Latino, and Asian young adults in the United States. Coresidence can also be motivated by family closeness and young

adults' desire to access instrumental, social, and emotional support from family members (Akin & Gözel, 2020; Mazurik et al., 2020; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018). The need to care for parents or siblings might also drive coresidence within some families (Dehn, 2017; Koltz, 2015). For instance, Napolitano's (2015) interviews with parents revealed that some families rely on young adults' contributions to household finances, home maintenance, and care provision.

Outcomes and Experiences of Coresidence

Studies of coresidence suggest advantages and disadvantages for parents and young adults (Mazurik et al., 2020). On the positive side, this living arrangement provides opportunities for financial and emotional support, stability, practical assistance, and intergenerational learning and can help young adults develop a greater sense of identity and purpose (Fingerman, 2017; Fingerman et al., 2017; Swartz et al., 2011). However, an analysis of longitudinal survey data found that American young adults who returned to the family home after a period of residential independence reported increased depressive symptoms relative to stably independent peers (Caputo, 2020). Coresidence can also limit young adults' independence and sense of self-efficacy and delay the attainment of various social and psychological indices of adulthood. For example, longitudinal survey data suggested that parental financial support could negatively impact young adults' sense of self-efficacy and hinder their ability to cope with the complex transition to adulthood (Mortimer et al., 2016). Questionnaire data from Ben-Shlomo et al. (2022) further revealed that moderate-to-high parental support (emotional and financial) was tied to lower life satisfaction among young adults as they aged—a fact the authors attributed to parental interference with the development of autonomy and growing expectations of independence in later young adulthood. Coresidence can also have complex financial outcomes for families and individuals. For example, Maroto (2019) found that although coresiding resulted in lower personal debt for Canadian young adults pursuing post-secondary education, their parents reported fewer savings, higher debt loads, and reduced financial assets.

In terms of everyday experiences, qualitative and quantitative research has found that Canadian and American parents and young adults generally report being satisfied with this living arrangement (Casares & White, 2018; Fingerman et al., 2017; Mitchell, 1998; Statistics Canada, 2006; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018). Moreover, several factors are known to contribute to positive coresidence experiences. For example, Mitchell (1998) found that shared activities and child helpfulness were tied to more positive experiences in interviews with coresiding parents and children. Interviews with families also suggested that coresidence is experienced more positively when young adults established a sense of independence and adulthood in the home through ongoing discussions with parents about privacy, autonomy, and financial contributions (Newman, 2012). The motives, circumstances, and expectations of coresidence have also been found to shape these experiences. For example, more positive perceptions and fewer conflicts are reported when young adults are excited to return home, feel parents support coresidence, and work, attend school, build savings, avoid debt, or carry on family traditions of closeness while coresiding (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021; Lewis & West, 2017; Newman, 2012; Roberts et al., 2016; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018; Ward & Spitze, 2007; West et al., 2017; White, 2002).

Despite high satisfaction rates, young adult and parent coresidence can present challenges. Compared to living independently, coresidence has been associated with increased conflict between parents and young adult children (Statistics Canada, 2006; Ward & Spitze, 2007). Qualitative studies have suggested that tensions around privacy, chores, cleanliness, behavioral monitoring, cost-sharing, unwanted advice, or age-inappropriate treatment can breed tension in coresident parent-child relationships (Hall & Zygmunt, 2021; Hill et al., 2020; Mitchell, 1998; Newman, 2012; Sassler et al., 2008). Coresidence can also influence perceptions of adult-child relationship quality. Parker (2012) reported that 25% of American young adults felt coresidence had been bad for their relationship with their parents; 48% felt it had not made a difference; and only 24% said it had been good for their relationship. Conversely, research has

suggested that moving out of the family home can improve parent-child relationships. For example, in studying unemployed young adults, Buhl (2007) reported that parent-child relationships improved with increased child independence and the cessation of coresidence.

Though reports of interpersonal challenges are plentiful, few studies have addressed how coresiding families communicate expectations, facilitate positive experiences, and manage interpersonal tensions. Australian and British studies have pointed to wide variations in how overtly or tacitly parents communicate expectations about financial and housework contributions to coresiding children (Warner et al., 2017; West et al., 2017). Warner et al. (2017) noted that struggling to ask for increased contributions from coresiding adult children frequently results in frustration or a sense of being too permissive among parents. Interviews with American parents revealed that the majority found it difficult to set boundaries and address conflicts with coresiding young adults (Casares & White, 2018). Conversely, young adults have reported challenges in establishing privacy, autonomy, and shared decision making while living at home (Sassler et al., 2008), and qualitative research has suggested that parental authority can restrict young adult autonomy, even when exercised sparingly (Newman, 2012; White, 2002).

Surprisingly little research has addressed how families might pursue positive coresidence experiences and prevent or resolve related conflicts. To our knowledge, Kirby and Laczko (2017) are the only authors to have assessed interventions for coresidence conflict. They explored the effectiveness of a Loving-Kindness Meditation program for coresiding young adults in increasing prosocial interactions and connectedness with parents. Unfortunately, the authors could not confidently comment on how the intervention influenced parent-child relationships. Reflecting on this gap in the literature, Mazurik et al. (2020) lamented the lack of practical guidance available to families and professionals seeking to navigate the challenges of coresidence. Hill et al. (2020) similarly observed that existing research offers little advice for those seeking to develop satisfying coresidence experiences.

Coresidence Contracts as a Means of Preventing and Resolving Family Conflict

Although academic scholarship provides little practical advice for coresiding families, the popular press has been keen to offer guidance on successfully navigating this living arrangement. Of note, popular self-help and parenting authors have recommended the use of written contracts to clarify parent and adult child expectations and support harmonious coexistence (e.g., Caldwell, 2019; Newberry, 2020; Treadwell, 2018). Some books, articles, and blogs even offer sample contracts to be used by coresiding families.

As Malhotra and Murnighan (2002) noted, humans rely on a host of formal (regulations, laws) and informal (norms, open communication) structures and processes to manage interpersonal risks and increase the predictability of everyday life. Contracts are explicit agreements between parties that reduce interpersonal uncertainty by formally clarifying expectations and constraining individual behavior (Godbout & Caillé, 1998). From a psychological perspective, coresidence contracts can be considered a form of behavioral contracting. Behavioral contracting is an approach to goal setting and behavior modification that involves a written agreement between two or more parties outlining specific desired behaviors (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2015; Strahun et al., 2013). Studies have pointed to the numerous benefits of behavioral contracting, including cost effectiveness (Bowman-Perrot et al., 2015) and the ability to promote communication (Cupples & Steslow, 2001), clarify responsibilities and expectations (Strahun et al., 2013), and motivate action (Strahun et al., 2013). To be effective, behavioral contracts must include a clear rationale and well-defined goals and rewards, specify whose behavior is being monitored and how, and involve negotiation, mutual input, and agreement from all parties with respect to contract goals and terms (Cooper et al., 2007; Strahun et al., 2013; Ziser et al., 2018). Requesting positive behavior is said to be more effective than prohibiting unwanted behavior (Strahun et al., 2013) and punishments are to be avoided as they can undermine trust, unfairly stigmatize behavior, and produce negative coping strategies, such as avoidance (Cooper et al., 2007; Ino et al., 2023). Best practice also involves avoiding unrealistic goals and expectations, which can result in antagonism, purposive non-

adherence, or increased conflict (Boyd, 2015). Critics have also noted that behavioral contracting can become manipulative when one party holds more power, leading to a lack of free and informed consent, unequal bargaining, and the potential for coercion or exploitation (Cooper, 2017; Fiester & Yuan, 2023; Ino et al., 2023).

Though contracts can be beneficial in managing interpersonal risks and pursuing cooperation, they are not always necessary or appropriate. Malhotra and Murnighan (2022) noted that when trust between individuals is strong (as evidenced by a willingness to expose oneself to vulnerability given optimistic anticipations of another's intentions or actions [Rousseau et al., 1998]), people generally feel no need for formal contracts. In fact, they have pointed out that formal contracts can actually undermine the development of trust by eschewing the sense that collaborative behavior is being freely enacted through bonds of care and concern. However, where trust is lacking, a formal document specifying parties' rights and responsibilities is thought to help manage uncertainties and develop a foundation for future forms of cooperation grounded in informal mechanisms of communication and trust.

For many Western families, young adult and parent coresidence has proved an unfamiliar and unpredictable experience (Hill et al., 2020). As families confront the challenges of this living arrangement, they have access to a plethora of self-help materials and popular parenting and relationship guides, including books, websites, blogs, and social media content (Sanders & Calam, 2016). Within these popular works, written contracts are promised to improve coresidence experiences by clarifying expectations (e.g., Caldwell, 2019; Devine, n.d.; Jacobs & Jacobs, 2003; O'Kane, 1992), preventing conflict (e.g., Curtis, n.d.), and setting limits on parental support to adult children (Fried, 2016; Merrill, n.d.; Parent & Ende, 2010). However, these documents have not been subject to academic analysis.

The Current Study

The current study is part of a broader program of research that explores conflict prevention and resolution in the context of parent and young adult coresidence. However, thus

far no studies have explored young adult and parent coresidence contracts' development, content, use, or outcomes. To address this gap, the current study sought to document the content of sample young adult and parent coresidence contracts, attending to how they construct development, parenting, and adulthood; point to socialization processes; and approach conflict prevention and resolution.

Method

Study Design

Our study was guided by Margrit Schreier's (2012) approach to qualitative content analysis (QCA). This methodology produces a systematic description of the meaning of textual data. It involves the iterative development of a hierarchical coding frame used to organize data in terms of manifest and latent content. QCA allows researchers to distill rigorous and parsimonious analyses of texts and empowers them to draw inferences about the social contexts in which these materials were produced.

Data Collection

To locate sample young adult and parent coresidence contracts, we completed searches of both academic databases and popular self-help and parenting resources in the spring of 2020. For both searches, we combined keyword terms related to contracts ("agreement," "terms," "conditions," "rules," "guidelines," "provisions," "stipulations," "contract," and "arrangement"), family members ("young adult," "coresider," "parent," "mother," "father," "mom," "dad," and "emerging adult"), and living arrangement ("boomerang," "living with parents," "coresidence," and "living at home"). We found no samples of coresidence contracts within academic web search engines (Google Scholar), the University of BLINDED catalog, or a wide range of academic databases, including Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, Scopus, PsycINFO, EconLit, HeinOnline, ElgarOnline, SocIndex, and Web of Science Core Collection.

A search of popular literature was undertaken using Google and the City of BLINDED public library system, which included nine physical locations, a digital library (including the

holdings of cloud-based media lending and streaming platforms Libby and Hoopla Digital), and a broad interlibrary loan network that facilitates borrowing from academic, public, and research libraries across Canada. Google searches produced 14 sample contracts. Our search of the public library system yielded two self-help and parenting books that contained sample coresidence contracts. Of the 16 contracts located for analysis, 8 were published between 2010 and 2020, 5 were drafted between 2000 and 2009, and 2 were dated between 1990 and 1999. One contract had no publication date listed. According to author biographies, the occupations of the contract authors included news and magazine columnists ($n = 6$), mental health professionals ($n = 7$), attorneys ($n = 2$), and 1 lifestyle blogger ($n = 1$). The authors of three contracts were unlisted. The target audience (i.e., the individual addressed in the contract or the broader source material) in most contracts (13 of 16) was parents. Only 1 contract expressly targeted young adults and 2 were aimed at both parents and young adult children.

Though non-academic, contracts promoted by self-help writers are worthy of investigation precisely because of their ease of availability, the potential impact on family well-being, and possible relevance to family therapists and other human service workers. Given that these resources are relatively inexpensive, readily available, and more private than engaging with human service professionals, people often turn to self-help materials before, alongside, or as a substitute for professional services (Zimmerman et al., 2001). On one hand, this points to democratized access to advice and information. On the other hand, engagement with these materials may expose families to tools, advice, and information that deviates from established best practices and lacks empirical support (Sanders & Calam, 2016). By analyzing the content of these public resources, we gain insight into their potential benefits and risks for coresiders.

Data Analysis

The first step of data analysis involved jointly developing a provisional coding frame by dividing the contracts across the three researchers. Each researcher developed an individual coding frame to cover the content of their assigned contracts according to the open coding

procedure detailed by Schreier (2012). This data-driven approach to coding included three steps. First, during the conceptualization phase, each researcher read through their assigned contracts multiple times, focusing on understanding these documents and noting rudimentary concepts and similarities and differences across cases. Second, in the category definition step, each investigator grouped similar concepts and defined these based on their common characteristics. Lastly, in the category development phase, each researcher introduced structure to their coding frame through hierarchical organization and the development of mutually exclusive and exhaustive dimensions and subcategories.

The three individual coding frames were then merged by removing duplicates and discussing, adding, or refining various dimensions and subcategories to develop a provisional coding frame. All contracts were then segmented such that each segment of text would fit into a single subcategory of the coding frame (Schreier, 2012). The beginning and end of each segment were marked with square brackets and tagged with reference numbers. Every coding segment was then checked against the coding frame to ensure it could be assigned to at least one subcategory (exhaustiveness) and would fit in only one subcategory within a given dimension (mutual exclusiveness) (Schreier, 2012, pp. 75–76).

A three-stage trial coding process was used to test the frame's internal reliability and improve its clarity and precision. First, a single contract was selected for trial coding based on its breadth and complexity. Using spreadsheets to indicate segments of text (rows) and assigned subcategories (columns), two researchers separately coded this contract. Upon completion and comparison, the team revised the coding frame to address ambiguous subcategories. Next, the same two researchers coded two contracts (the original trial contract and a second with similar breadth) using the revised coding frame. Text segments were again assigned to subcategories, and 17 discrepancies were identified. At this point, each discrepancy in subcategory attribution was resolved by either deferring to one researcher's classification, further revising subcategory definitions, or developing a decision rule for ambiguous cases. In

the third stage of trial coding, the first author double-coded the same two contracts from stage two, coding each twice with a seven-day break between rounds. The reliability of coding across the double-coding trials was deemed adequate, with just two discrepancies that were resolved by deferring to the correct code.

The first author then proceeded to code all contracts twice using the final version of the coding frame, inserting a 14-day break between each coding round. A comparative coding table highlighted three discrepancies between the first and second coding sessions. The three discrepancies resulted from entry mistakes and were resolved by deferring to the correct code assignment. Next, a frequency table was created to record the prevalence of each subcategory across all contracts. Next, coding dimensions were clustered around broader themes, imparting greater intelligibility to the data. Following Rothe (2000), the team then reflected on how the data as a whole related to existing theory and literature and attended to the implications of using written contracts to structure young adult and parent coresidence.

Results

The coding frame ultimately included 17 dimensions (see Table 1). Only four segments of text (<0.01% of the total) were coded as miscellaneous, pointing to the exhaustiveness of the coding frame. These dimensions were subsequently regrouped into seven core content themes for ease of presentation. <insert Table 1 about here>

Responsibilities

Responsibilities were the primary focus of the contracts, encompassing the obligations held by parents and young adults toward one another and the household at large (371 references; 16/16 contracts). Responsibilities primarily revolved around meeting the material needs of the household, including the management and division of household labor (such as cleaning and cooking) and financial obligations (such as utility bills and rent). Other responsibilities extended to moral and social development, with explicit instructions (primarily aimed at young adults) to, for example, demonstrate maturity and respect toward other

household members. Responsibilities also underscored the importance of the adult child's journey toward financial and residential independence, with specific directives to pursue education, secure employment, and save money, alongside notes on parents' obligation to support these aims. Young adults' responsibilities (Table 2) accounted for most of this content (86.3% of references to responsibility). In contrast, parents' responsibilities (Table 3) comprised only a small minority (11.1% of references to responsibility). No contracts identified responsibilities of other family or household members (grandparents, siblings, etc.), except one that mentioned responsibilities for adult children's dependents. Interestingly, responsibilities tended to be assigned to young adults or parents, instead of being framed as collective duties.

<insert Tables 2 and 3 about here>

Responsibilities of young adults were the most common contract content (320 references; 16/16 contracts). They frequently identified adult children's expected contributions to the household economy, namely via labor and monetary offerings. Required chores for young adults were prevalent (83 references; 15/16 contracts) and included dishes, laundry, yard work, grocery shopping, errands, cleaning, and preparing household meals. Financial responsibilities were also common in the contracts (63 references, 14/16 contracts) and included requirements to pay rent, contribute to household utility and maintenance costs, split the costs of shared or family vehicles, and pay for personal expenses (e.g., cell phone bills, clothes, toiletries).

Outside of chores and financial obligations, most contracts (12/16) also referred to goals young adults were obligated to work toward as part of the coresidence agreement. These involved securing employment, pursuing postsecondary education, saving money, or creating an exit plan for achieving residential independence. Statements about social etiquette and moral virtues also appeared. Several contracts (9/16) noted that young adults were expected to engage in "respectful" exchanges with siblings (1/16 contracts), parents (4/16 contracts), or household members at large (4/16 contracts). These expectations included both behaviors to be avoided (e.g., telling parents or siblings what to do) and adopted (e.g., being courteous and

communicative). Often, mentions of respectful conduct implied deference toward parents and recognition of parental authority. For example, one contract stated that the adult child “will respect parents’ household” (“Adult Child Rental Contract,” n.d.). Some contracts (5/16) also required young adults to provide certain information to parents, including intentions to host guests (4/16 contracts) and details of any late-night or overnight plans (5/16 contracts). Four contracts required adult children to embody a host of virtues more generally, such as being “responsible” or “productive” in their everyday lives. For example, one stated, “Above all else, be responsible, respectful, peaceful and productive” (Boomerang Kids Help, n.d.).

Lastly, spatial and social boundaries were present in three contracts, clarifying which areas of the home were (and were not) available for young adult use. Spatial divisions and the stipulation prohibiting areas for coresiding children (such as parents’ or siblings’ bedrooms) reaffirmed distinctions between private and communal spaces. The boundary demarcating the private family home from broader public space was also emphasized in coresidence contracts, with parents situated as gatekeepers to this private realm. In addition, nearly all contracts (13/16) defined specific conditions for permitting guests of coresiding children into the home. They included a host of rules attached to such events, including stipulations about noise levels, quiet times, acceptable spaces, overnight stays, and the need for parental permission. Parental dominion over the home was also reinforced in contract elements that regulated adult children’s possession or use of certain substances in this space (8/16 contracts). This included the prohibition of certain illegal or regulated substances (street drugs, drug paraphernalia, alcohol, and tobacco) or stated conditions for the use of alcohol and tobacco (e.g., the need to be 21 years old, to consume substances responsibly, or to smoke in designated areas).

Like young adult responsibilities, those of parents pointed to both behavioral requirements and characterological or interactional obligations. However, parental obligations were much less frequent across the contracts than those of young adults (41 references; 5/16 contracts). In addition to providing room and board, these statements (17 references; 3/16

contracts) outlined the financial support parents agreed to provide to young adults, such as tuition funds, recurring allowances, or covering household expenses such as groceries or utilities. Five contracts also stipulated characterological and interactional expectations for parents. These included the obligation to “respect” young adult coresiders (16 references; 5/16 contracts) by recognizing their right to privacy and independence and providing them with notice of anticipated disruptions to household routines, such as upcoming parties.

Rights

Rights outlined the freedoms and entitlements of household members and appeared less frequently and across fewer contracts than responsibilities. Our sample had over 10 times more references to responsibilities (371 references; 16/16 contracts) than to rights (35 references; 11/16 contracts) and addressed the freedoms and entitlements of parents (17 references; 7/16 contracts) more often than those of young adults (13 references; 7/16 contracts) or other household members (three references, 2/16 contracts). The types of rights accorded to parents in these contracts were also greater in scope than those of adult children.

Young adults were provided highly circumscribed rights concerning contract development and implementation. Two contracts affirmed the right of young adults to plead their case if accused of violating contract terms (2 references). However, these passages also stated that parents alone held the power to determine verdicts and sentences (e.g., “it is ultimately up to my parents to decide whether or not I will be subject to any consequences”) (Bredehoft, 2017). Four contracts (5 references) also outlined adult children’s right to collaborate with parents in developing or renegotiating coresidence agreements. However, these contracts similarly specified that parents would be the ultimate arbiters of contract content. Beyond such contractual rights, other diffuse entitlements provided to young adult coresiders within various contracts included the right to “personal opinions,” to “make one’s own decisions,” and to be subject to “respectful treatment” from parents (5 references; 3/16 contracts).

In contrast to the limited nature of young adults' rights, those attributed to parents were framed as immutable and provided parents with sweeping authority to set the terms of coresidence. Explicit reference to such rights appeared in roughly one third of the contracts (11 references; 6/16 contracts). In parallel with the restrictions placed on the rights of adult children, these references explicated family hierarchies and clearly affirmed parental authority over the home and conditions of coresidence. Six of the contracts also afforded parents the right to unilaterally modify, waive, or terminate coresidence agreements at any time. In two contracts, such actions required the provision of notice to adult children (e.g., "My parents reserve the right to change this contract at any time and as a courtesy will give me 5 days' notice before the change takes effect" [Hutton, n.d.]). However, providing notice around contractual changes was not mentioned in any of these contracts. Other, less common parental rights included receiving financial contributions from the adult child (2/16 contracts) and the right to place the adult child's dependents in day care if the adult child proves neglectful (1/16 contracts).

Timelines

Timeline references specified the chronological ordering and frequency of expected events and behaviors within the home. This content placed temporal parameters on various contract activities, including reoccurring schedules, deadlines for meeting stipulated goals, and contract start, end, and renegotiation dates. Such content was the second most common, appearing in nearly all contracts (125 references; 16 contracts). Timelines further formalized the rights and responsibilities discussed above by establishing predictability in household functioning (particularly in the execution of parent and child duties) and explicitly scaffolding the child's movement toward greater independence.

Schedules were the most common type of timeline content (71 references; 14/16 contracts). Most frequently, these outlined the routine responsibilities of young adults with regard to household obligations. Twelve scheduled the performance of chores, noting, for example, that the young adult must "mow the lawn on Saturdays, grocery shop on Sundays . . .

and cook dinner on Mondays and Wednesdays” (Hutton, n.d.). Eight of the contracts provided schedules for adult children’s financial contributions, including the monthly payment of rent or utilities. In addition to structuring household tasks, one quarter of the contracts (4/16) contained schedules to scaffold young adult goals. These schedules formalized the pursuit of residential and financial independence by indicating how much time adult children were expected to dedicate to occupational or academic pursuits (2 references) or stipulating set savings contributions (2 references). For example, one contract stated that the coresiding young adult “agrees to work and save a minimum of \$500 monthly for the next 6 months (to be used for move out money)” (Newman, 2012). In only a few contracts (2/16), schedules also pertained to parents’ financial support of adult children, including providing allowances and covering agreed-upon expenses at set intervals. Lastly, regularly scheduled quiet times (10/16 contracts) and weekly family meetings (2/16 contracts) were established in some contracts to reduce conflict and facilitate communication within the family.

The contracts and specific clauses were also temporally bounded by start, end, review, and expiry dates (30 references; 8/16 contracts). Specific start dates appeared in 7 of 16 contracts, clearly demarcating when the terms of the coresidence contract would take effect. Contract end dates were also present in six contracts, highlighting the finite nature of the agreement and the possibility of coresidence support being withdrawn at a future date. Six others contained contract review dates, either biannually (in 1 instance) or at the discretion of families (5 instances). The scheduling of regular revision periods positioned these contracts as living documents, suggesting that the terms of a satisfying agreement were expected to evolve and that coresidence was not necessarily offered indefinitely. A handful of clauses also included expiry dates for particular forms of parental support within the broader contractual period, such as the cessation of a regular allowance or tuition funding after a certain period (5 references; 2/16 contracts). Overall, contract start, end, review, and expiration dates clarified expectations

around young adults' pursuit of independence and emphasized the need to revisit the nature of coresidence as circumstances evolved.

One third of the contracts also included specific deadlines by which young adults were expected to meet stipulated goals, including securing employment, meeting savings goals, moving out of the family home, or enrolling in postsecondary education (24 references; 5/16). For example, one contract stated, "Child will find a job no later than {date}. Child will be expected to find {his/her} own lodgings by {date}" (Returning Child Rental Contract, n.d.). Through these deadlines, stipulated goals were grounded in concrete timeframes and adult children were urged to progress toward specific developmental milestones.

Legal Motifs

As is evident from the foregoing presentation of results, all contracts contained express terms and conditions with which young adults and parents were expected to comply. These contracts also contained other stylistic and structural elements reminiscent of legally binding agreements (84 references; 16/16 contracts). Such legal motifs included segments that formally identified contracting parties (parents and adult children) (24 references; 13/16 contracts), agreement clauses indicating that all parties understood and agreed to abide by contract terms (15 references; 11/16 contracts), and signature blocks calling for names, signatures, and dates (11/16 contracts). Signature blocks for both parents and adult children were present in over half of the contracts (9/16), whereas two asked for the signatures of adult children only.

Punishments and Rewards

Specific and non-specific punishments and rewards were present in about half of the contracts (42 references; 8/16 contracts). These segments introduced operant conditioning principles that attempted to incentivize adherence to the terms of the contracts and modify adult children's behavior. Though sample contracts outlined the responsibilities of multiple household members, coresiding young adults were the only parties whose behavior was regulated through the threat of punishments or promise of rewards.

Consequences for young adults who deviated from terms and conditions were specified in approximately half of the contracts (31 references; 7/16 contracts). These included negative punishments (a privilege is revoked), such as eviction from the family home (5/16 contracts) or the suspension of benefits (e.g., use of vehicle or cellphone; 3/16 contracts). Positive punishments (a consequence is added) were also present, including being assigned additional chores (4/16 contracts) or monetary fines (3/16 contracts). Whereas some punishments were tied to violating specific obligations (e.g., failing to pay rent on time or complete weekly chores), others outlined the consequences of failing to abide by general contract terms. For example, one noted, "Failure to follow this agreement will result in consequences, up to and including needing to find alternate living arrangements" (Lehman, 2020).

Rewards for adhering to contract terms were present in half of the sample contracts (11 references; 8/16 contracts). These primarily consisted of ongoing monetary gifts from parents that would continue as long as young adults fulfilled contract terms (6 references; 4/16 contracts), such as allowance, tuition funds, or rent-free housing. Other positive rewards, including rent reductions, the elimination of rent, or additional forms of parental labor (i.e., laundry service or meal preparation), were also offered to young adults in exchange for adhering to specific terms (such as enrolling in university courses) or the contract as a whole (3 references; 2/16 contracts).

Rationalizing Commentary

In addition to statements that supported patterns of rights and responsibilities within the coresident household, most contracts (17 references; 14/16 contracts) also contained diffuse rationalizing comments that justified terms and conditions through appeals to normative behavior and life stage outcomes. Such comments frequently affirmed the rationality and reasonableness of requests being made of young adults. For example, one contract noted that the requests being made of young adults (such as notifying parents if they stay out overnight or asking permission to borrow items) reflected "common courtesy" (Gray & Bedwell-Wilson, 2009,

p. 220). Another implied that scaffolding independence by incrementally scaling back financial support to young adults was a moral act that would ultimately benefit the child: “Daughter, I love you enough to set you free” (Herst, 1998, p. 97). Other rationalizing comments positioned the introduction of a formal coresidence contract as an act of benevolence and good parenting. For instance, one closed by affirming, “the goal with all of the above is to move you to be an educated independent adult with the life skills required for independence” (Weck, 2020). Justifications for particular terms were also present in four contracts. For example, one justified the assignment of additional household duties to young adults who failed to secure employment by noting the need to support working family members (Hutton, n.d.).

Room for Personalization

Room for personalization was the third most common type of content, next to responsibilities and timelines (115 references; 12/16 contracts). These segments allowed families to tailor superficial aspects of the contracts by, for example, filling in specific information or selecting inclusions from a series of options. All previously mentioned dimensions contained such modifiable content, including the amount of rent contributions (responsibilities), the nature of chore schedules (timelines), or the types of consequences to be applied if contract terms were not fulfilled (punishments and rewards).

Discussion

The current study analyzed the content of sample adult child and parent coresidence contracts drawn from popular self-help and parenting resources. Contracts emphasized 1) the socializing of young adults into a system of household labor, 2) the scaffolding of adult children’s development in line with traditional Western understandings of adulthood, and 3) the preservation of parental authority within the home. These documents primarily targeted the behavior of adult children, especially concerning their contributions to the household economy. Adult children’s responsibilities accounted for 39% of contract content (320 references) and were evident in all 16 contracts, whereas parents’ responsibilities represented only 5% of

content (41 references) and appeared in just 5 of the 16 contracts. Further, coresiding children were the sole targets of rewards and punishments for contract compliance. This asymmetrical balance of responsibilities and incentivization points to adult children as the chief subjects of socialization within coresidence agreements. Indeed, content addressing children's financial and labor contributions comprised nearly half (45.6%) of all adult child obligations and constituted nearly one fifth of all coded content. These findings point to household management as a core challenge of coresidence that can ostensibly be managed through a contractual agreement.

Interestingly, the responsibilities of young adults went beyond behavioral prescriptions (e.g., household duties, rules, and financial contributions), requiring adult children to affirm and pursue specific maturation goals. These included finishing postsecondary education, securing employment, attaining residential independence, amassing savings, and embodying specific characterological traits, such as 'respect' and 'responsibility'. In doing so, these documents explicate idealized developmental outcomes, nudging adult children along a maturation path that proceeds promptly from childhood dependence to financial and residential independence following secondary education (Rogoff, 2003). These contracts seek to socialize young adults into particular ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving by structuring and incentivizing practical and moral aims. Although rising rates of young adult and parent coresidence reflect social, economic, and cultural shifts across the global West, these agreements promote decidedly traditional understandings of adulthood, steering children toward longstanding sociological markers of adulthood in Canadian and American societies, such as workforce participation and residential and financial independence (Mitchell & Lennox, 2020; Sharon, 2016).

As they socialized young adults into traditional roles and norms, coresidence agreements simultaneously asserted parental authority and set limits on the support of adult dependents. They declared parental control over the home and clarified the place of young adults within the family hierarchy, positioning them as dependents who, as adults, were nevertheless expected to contribute to household labor and (in some cases) finances. Here,

discourses of law and care intermingled. By drawing on legal motifs, parents and adult children were abstracted from the intimacy and familiarity of the family context and positioned as independent parties agreeing to specific social and economic terms. However, such formality was often tempered by the inclusion of rationalizing comments that framed parents as benevolent caregivers and coresidence agreements as serving the child's interest.

Though rarely stated outright, contracts also implicitly pointed to parents' linked developmental transitions toward an empty nest and reduced financial responsibility for adult children. As Elder and colleagues (2003) noted, the lives of young adults and their parents are intertwined as the former take on adult roles and the latter navigate transitions of aging. Whereas young adults' obligations to attend school, secure employment, save money, or move out were explicitly identified, few contracts directly addressed the linked transitions of parents and how they are impacted by the financial and opportunity costs of coresidence (e.g., retirement or residential downsizing) (Mitchell et al., 2021). Rather, ideas about linked developmental outcomes were implicit in these documents, highlighting expectations of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and independence among young adults and freedom from the burden of dependents among parents. From this perspective, coresidence contracts might represent a form of parental resistance to socioeconomic shifts that would see parent and child developmental trajectories linked well beyond secondary school across the global West.

When viewed in relation to behavioral contracting and previous coresidence research, we can consider what these agreements might mean for young adult and parent coresidence and interpersonal relationships within coresiding families. On the positive side, sample coresidence contracts reflect various processes and practices associated with positive coresidence attitudes and experiences, including (theoretically) facilitating adult children's progression toward financial, educational, and career goals (Lewis & West, 2017; Roberts et al., 2016; Sassler et al., 2008; Ward & Spitze, 2007; White, 2002), outlining specific and reasonable timeframes for coresidence (Abetz & Romo, 2021; Seltzer et al., 2012), encouraging adult child

contributions to household labor (Seltzer et al., 2012), and pre-negotiating financial responsibilities (Lewis & West, 2017; Sassler et al., 2008; White, 2002). More generally, these documents encourage communication about the challenges of coresidence and clarify expectations around this living arrangement, both of which are valued by parents and young adults and can help alleviate uncertainty and anxiety (Casares & White, 2018; Newman, 2012; Warner et al., 2017). Although many families will undertake such discussions organically, some might benefit from more structured communication guidelines that affirm the child's sense of adult identity and ensure parents are not overburdened with the labor and costs of housing adult children (Sassler et al., 2008; Warner et al., 2017; West et al., 2017). Where a mutually acceptable living situation cannot be tacitly established, a more formal, overt negotiation process could promote individual interests and help establish a common frame of reference. The introduction of a coresidence contract could also be used to shift unsatisfactory or unsustainable coresidence situations, providing an opportunity for self-expression and the development of mutual understanding among parties.

Contracts that specify clear deadlines for residential and financial independence and that place limits on the provision of parental support might also benefit family financial planning. We know that parents with lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to support young adults through coresidence than financial support (Fingerman et al., 2017; Fry, 2016; Swartz et al., 2011) and that having adult children in the home is associated with increased expenses, reduced assets, and financial opportunity costs for parents (such as the inopportune timing of home sales) (Copp et al., 2017). Within coresidence contracts, financial or residential support deadlines provide parents with an important opportunity to balance the financial well-being of coresiding children with that of the broader family unit.

However, despite their potential to clarify expectations, communicate promptly, and address problematic behavior, several aspects of these contracts are concerning, given what we know about attachment, trust, influence, and established best practices in behavioral

contracting. First, these contracts embrace a top-down approach, imposing a series of responsibilities, aims, and rules on young adults. Coresiding adult children are afforded little opportunity for meaningful input and might possess few alternative prospects for affordable housing. Even when contracts affirmed the right of young adults to negotiate with parents, they ultimately reinforced parental decision-making power over contract terms and shared living arrangements. As Fiester and Yuan (2023) cautioned, coercive or unilaterally imposed contracts can breed animosity and conflict between parties. Although some degree of parental authority is to be expected, studies have consistently suggested that adopting a “conversation” orientation within the family and creating an atmosphere where all members can comfortably express their perspectives predicts greater bonding (Ghali, 2010; Schrodt et al., 2007; Scruggs & Paul, 2020).

Second, mutual or shared rights and responsibilities were notably limited within the contracts, overwhelmingly positioning adult children as the chief targets of intervention. This asymmetrical pattern of influence is not inherently problematic; by virtue of living in their parents’ houses, coresident adult children may be reasonably subject to some legitimate restrictions on their autonomy (Newman, 2012; White, 2002). Still, the asymmetry implicit in these documents could become problematic if such imbalance indicates an absence of shared aims and mutuality within the parent-child relationship. That is, if contracts impose one individual’s will on another rather than promote perspective taking, open communication, and fair negotiation, they are unlikely to create easier or more peaceful living arrangements.

Third, the use of punishments in sample coresidence contracts will likely undermine parent-child trust and diminish contract adherence (Cooper et al., 2007; Ino et al., 2023). Heavy use of punishment within the contracts also risks unfairly stigmatizing child behaviors and outcomes. For example, within unstable economies marked by increasingly competitive educational programs and rising living costs, the failure to secure employment, gain entrance to professional schools, or amass savings might reflect challenging sociohistorical circumstances, not a lack of effort on the part of young adults. By leaning too heavily on punishment, these

contracts risk breeding resentment and avoidance among young adults (Cooper et al., 2007; Ino et al., 2023; Strahun et al., 2013; Ziser et al., 2018).

To summarize, the coresidence contracts reviewed here are characterized by promise and risk. While they might contribute to clarifying expectations, promoting communication, or scaffolding trust and collaboration within challenging situations, they also violate several best practices with regard to family contracting. Where these documents (a) are unilaterally imposed, (b) lack respectful and empathetic negotiation, (c) fixate on punishment, or (d) fail to develop mutual aims and shared understandings, they risk harming parent-child relationships and increasing conflict within the home. As Fiester and Yuan (2023) noted, even when contracts successfully elicit desired behaviors, they can erode the foundations of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, care must be paid to their use and implementation.

Implications

Several implications emerge from our analysis. First, coresidence agreements might not be appropriate in all, or even most, Canadian or American families. Where trust and communication between parents and adult children is strong, conflict is low, and coresidence is mutually satisfying, such formal agreements are likely unnecessary (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002) and risk harming parent-child relationships and familial well-being. Consequently, we imagine these tools would be best used in cases where parent-child trust is low and collaboration via informal structures and processes (norms, open communication) has failed. Using written contracts in such scenarios can reduce perceptions of risk and scaffold the reestablishment of trust, paving the way for more intimate and risky forms of communicating and relating (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002). Simply put, the benefits and risks of coresidence contracts can only be understood in the context of specific family and individual circumstances and should be assessed therein.

Second, in cases where families or service providers feel a coresidence contract might be beneficial, these documents should be tailored to the needs and strengths of families and

align with established best practices. For example, parents and adult children struggling with trust might consider discussing shared expectations of coresidence while avoiding more formal, binding terms. As Malhotra and Murnighan (2002) explain, this approach allows parties to retain some of the benefits of written contracts and increase mutual understanding while avoiding threats to parent-child trust. The inclusion of punishments in these contracts should particularly be avoided, as these might erode trust, unfairly stigmatize young adult behaviors, or generate undesirable behavioral patterns, such as avoidance (Cooper et al., 2007; Ino et al., 2023). Further, if the goals or expectations established in the contract are unrealistic or not within the adult child's skillset, this may bolster non-compliance or conflict between young adults and their parents (Boyd, 2015). Since adult children often struggle to establish independence while living at home (Newman, 2012), we must also be mindful of the potential of coresidence contracts to become imbalanced or manipulative. The unequal power held by parents and dependent children can undermine the principles of free and informed consent, leading to unequal bargaining and feelings of coercion or exploitation (Ino et al., 2023).

Third, research suggests that coresidence contracts are best used in conjunction with other tools to address family conflict, increase interpersonal trust, and develop mutual understanding. Although Ziser and colleagues (2018) noted that behavior contracting is rarely considered a standalone intervention, only one coresidence contract (Gray & Bedwell-Wilson, 2009) within our sample was intended to be part of a broader intervention strategy. Incorporating more collaborative approaches to goal setting and behavior change is likely to improve the outcomes of behavioral contracting. For example, the incorporation of motivational interviewing, which emphasizes autonomy, encourages communication, and seeks to develop collaborative relationships, could hold promise in helping families prevent and overcome coresidence conflict (Hibbard & Greene, 2013; Lieber et al, 2011; Ziser, 2018).

Limitations

The present study is part of a program of research exploring how families prevent and manage coresidence conflict. Given its exploratory nature and focus on sample texts, it has some notable limitations. First, the popular resources referenced in our study were all written in English and authored by and for those living in Western contexts. As existing literature highlight cultural differences in understandings and experiences of coresidence (Britton, 2013; Ho & Park, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2016; Tomaszczyk & Worth, 2018), the generalizability of the findings to other contexts is limited. Second, this textual analysis provides no insight into the contracts families might develop on their own or in the context of, independent of popular resources. Third, content analysis of coresidence contracts tells us nothing about what families actually think about and how they use these agreements.

Future Directions

Much remains unknown about the use of coresidence contracts. Notably, it is unclear how common such documents are within Canadian and American families or what form they take in various family contexts. How families creatively appropriate coresidence contracts while working to navigate shifting family dynamics and the challenges of coresidence also remains unclear. For example, although some families may adopt sample coresidence contracts in their entirety, others may use these as a basis for their own family documents or as a guide to more intimate family discussions. At present, we also lack a clear understanding of how, when, and why families implement these agreements. Future research should address such patterns, investigating when and why coresidence contracts are implemented, who initiates their use, and how they are negotiated within families. Research should also explore the role of these tools in creating open, respectful, and satisfying home relationships and their potential to become sources of inflexible or unreasonable control. Attention to how contractual obligations are monitored and enforced in everyday life and how conflicts around these agreements are processed and negotiated within different families would also help clarify the potential benefits and limitations of these tools in particular familial environments.

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