The "Golden Girls": A Sociological Analysis of One Model of Communal Living for the 21st Century

By
Josephine A. Ruggiero

"The Golden Girls" is a popular primetime sitcom that ran on NBC for seven seasons, a total of 169 1/2 hour episodes, between 1985-1992. See the wikiquote website for a list of the titles of each episode and some of the dialogue shared among the women in various episodes across the seven seasons: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Golden_Girls.

"The Golden Girls" still remains a popular sitcom in syndication, more than 20 years after its original run ended. What explains the staying power of "The Golden Girls" *and* what makes this sitcom relevant to the theme of creating liveable communities? The sociological analysis that follows addresses both questions.

WHO ARE "THE GOLDEN GIRLS" AND WHAT EXPLAINS THE CONTINUING POPULARITY OF THIS SITCOM?

The "golden girls" are four older, previously married women: man-hungry Blanche Devereaux, the divorced homeowner, played by Rue McClanahan; tall, loud, opinionated Dorothy Zbornak, a divorced teacher, played by Bea Arthur; Rose Nylund, a sweet but ditsy recently widowed woman from St. Olaf, Minnesota, played by Betty White; and Sophia Petrillo, Dorothy's elderly, Sicilian, strong-willed, widowed mother, played by Estelle Getty. Sofia is generally accorded the status of the matriarch of the household-- a status which she uses to her advantage as often as possible. Blanche has a tender spot for Sofia and the sitcom viewer gets the impression that Blanche, a woman raised in the south, admires Sofia's strong will and, in a cajoling way, respects Sofia as a mother figure and let's her get away with some things that Dorothy would not. As mother and daughter, tiny Sofia and tall, outspoken Dorothy are often at odds. But underlying the frequent bluster in their conversations is love.

Feminists would surely have preferred that the word "Girls" in the title of a show of that time frame be replaced by "Women." The characters did, however, refer to themselves as *girls* in conversations with each other. Regardless of the title of this sitcom, the four principal characters were so original, feisty, and funny that calling them "girls" did not affect watcher's enjoyment negatively. I speak from experience here. My then younger age and their older ages were irrelevant. I loved them all and could relate to the challenges of three unrelated women over 50-- Dorothy, Blanche, and Rose and the fourth, the generation-older character of Sofia, Dorothy's mother, who joined the others after an unhappy stay at a nursing home. These women put

Miami, FL on the map for female sitcom viewers over 30. To adapt the name of Gloria Estefan's musical group of the same era, the Golden Girls could have easily been dubbed "The Miami Laugh Machine."

Although they did not get along well all the time—evidence the barbs and insults flying back and forth, fundamentally, Dorothy, Blanche, Rose and Sofia were a lot like the four musketeers of housemates. As house mates often do in real life, they disagreed, even argued, but pulled together when any of them felt threatened by an outside influence. It was clear to viewers that, when the dust settled, these women were "in it" together. Despite their individual idiosyncrasies, different personalities, and the challenges of house sharing, they formed a group bound by financial need and by personal choice. Most importantly, these women cared about one another's wellbeing. The fact that ordinary women across generations could relate to the "golden girls" and to their sometimes oddball adventures endeared them to us.

A SOCIOLOGICAL ANAYISIS OF "THE GOLDEN GIRLS" AS ONE MODEL OF A SHARED LIVING EXPERIENCE

The "golden girls" meet the sociological usage of the term group, defined as consisting of two or more individuals who interact repeatedly according to some pattern of social structure. Both large (secondary) and small, intimate (primary) groups develop a social structure as members interact with one another over time. Examples of the former are societies and organizations within a society. Examples of the latter are families and friendship groups.

Social structure refers to the pattern of rules and roles that shapes the way people relate to one another. The emergence of a social structure organizes both large (macro) and small (micro) groups into predictable relationships.

Can art mirror life in a house-sharing situation or is a shared domestic living by very different people inevitably a recipe for disaster? The sociological answer is that a lot depends on several key elements through, or around which, interaction is structured. These elements are goals, norms, roles and statuses, the effectiveness of social control, and the existence and nature of a ranking system among members. A sociologist would probably *not* call unrelated housemates a group when these individuals first begin to interact. However, over time, their continued interaction shapes how they relate to one another and tends to make them more like a true group. Who will forget the intimate late-night kitchen scenes of the "girls" sitting around the table, sharing cheesecake, secrets, and concerns?

Goals, the purpose for which the group exists and the focus of coordinated interaction, are both individual and collective. For example, the individual goals of those who share living arrangements include it being affordable and safe; located near access to public transportation, care sharing, or Uber service, having private access to one's own bedroom and bathroom; the opportunity to interact, e.g., socialize, share meals with other housemates, and get assistance from them as desired, but not required. Their collective goals typically include sharing living expenses as agreed upon by the individual and others living in the abode; house maintenance responsibilities including cleaning of one's own room and bathroom, shared responsibilities for cleaning the rest of the house on a rotating basis, grocery shopping, and meal preparation, the latter depending on one's ability to cook and interest in doing so; private time to entertain family and friends at mutually agreed-upon days and times—for example, on weekends or when other housemates are at work or out. In short, goals draw us to involvement in groups.

Norms specify the rules of interaction among members of a group—in this case, those who share the household. Examples of norms include, but are not limited to, the following: good housemates respect each other's privacy and belongings; keep confidences; refrain from gossiping about housemates; settle disputes amicable or, if necessary, by mediation by a third party; do their fair share of chores; contribute to the quiet enjoyment of the premises (quiet times and spaces) at agreed-upon time; lock all doors upon entering or exiting the house and lock all windows on the lower level when no one is at home.

Sociologists view roles as *expectations about behavior* and the actual behavior of the person playing the role. Ideally, roles define the norms of the person holding a particular status in the group. If the abode is owned by one housemate, she or he has more power, and a higher ranking, than those who are renters. The owner may

or may not choose to exert that power in day-to-day situations but, ultimately, the domicile owner ranks at the top of the hierarchy of those sharing the household. Financial considerations can also impact on one's ranking.

Do all renters pay equal rent or is rent based on the size of one's room, access to a private bathroom, or having a prior friendship with the owner? These become variables that affect both the formal and informal ranking systems of the household.

How order gets maintained in the household is through the use of positive and negative incentives known as sanctions. Positive sanctions may include praise, being empathetic to a person's circumstances (e.g., "You are not feeling well. Let me help with that chore and we'll finish more quickly."); saying "Thank You" when warranted. Negative sanctions may involve a kindly-made request to lower the volume on the television, for repeated violation of norms, housemates may call a meeting to discuss what is going on and agree upon a sanction IF the behavior in question is serious and continues. The ultimate sanction is being required to move out of the dwelling unit and pay for damages to the dwelling, if damages are incurred.

Just as tenants usually sign leases on apartments or houses they rent, the idea of a written contract among the tenants in the shared household my help to avoid serious problems and misunderstandings. This contract would include defining individual and collective goals, norms, roles, what sanctions may be used to reinforce following the rules and performing one's roles to the group's satisfaction, and who has decision making power to evict a renter. Before signing the contract, potential renters should read each clause carefully, write down all questions and concerns, and raise them in a constructive general discussion. Once the contract is finalized, all housemates sign and date the contract. Housemates may agree to review the contact after 90 days to see how things are working out. Parts of the contract may be revised at that time if there is a consensus of house mates that specific clauses need to be changed. If no changes are needed, housemates sign and date the contract in its current form again. This time for the period of six to nine months. If changes are made to the first signed contract, there should be a trial period of 90 to see if the revised clauses are working better.

CONCLUSION

This concluding section begins with dialogue excerpts from the next-to-last episode in *Season 7: One Flew Out of the Cuckoo's Nest.* The context is that Lucas, played by Leslie Nielsen, has just asked Dorothy to marry him. She has accepted and they are getting ready to leave Miami. They have invited Sofia to move to Atlanta with them. In what follows, the "girls" are saying their goodbyes.

Dorothy: Well...
Blanche: Well...
Rose: Yea...
Sophia: ...I guess this is it.
Dorothy: *[nodding]* Right. Listen-
Blanche: Dorothy, you don't have to say anything.
Rose: What can you say about 7 years of fights and laughter...secrets...cheesecake...
Dorothy: Just that...it's been very...it has been an experience that I'll always keep close to my heart. *[sobbing]*And that these are memories that...I'll wrap myself in when the world gets cold and I forget that there are people who are warm and loving and...
Blanche: We love you, too...*[girls embrace and cry]*... You'll always be a part of us
Dorothy: Your friendship was something I never expected at this point of my life, and I could never asked for a better surprise
Blanche: *[sobbing]* That's how we feel too.
Dorothy: I have to go.
Rose: Dorothy.....is this goodbye?
Dorothy: *[walks to the door, looks at the girls and nods]*...I love you, always [leaves room while the girls stare at the door. Dorothy re-appears from the door] Oh god I love you! [girls embrace again]
Blanche: *[sobbing]* Oh Dorothy...Dorothy...
Dorothy: *[sobbing]* Lucas is waiting *[heads to the door again, looks at girls]* You're angels...all of you *[leaves room again while the girls stare at the door again. Dorothy comes out from the backyard hall]* OH GOD, I'LL MISS YOU!!! *[girls embrace once more]* Listen I have a flight... *[heads for the door once more]* ...you'll always be my sisters... *[sobbing]* always *[leaves room for good while the girls stare at the door again then at the backyard hall and at the kitchen door. The three remaining girls embrace, sobbing]*

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The "Golden Girls" sitcom provides a down-to-earth, funny yet reasonably functional model for how very different individuals can come together and make a communal living arrangement work. By the end of the series, the "girls" shared a level of intimacy, empathy, and caring for each other that created a haven from the troubles of the outside world.

This model of sharing a household can also work well if the members are a mix of older and younger housemates. When occupants of a dwelling share common goals, have a sense of cooperation, and are treated as status equals by other housemates, despite differences like age variations, many positive outcomes can occur. For example, younger tenants can bring energy, new experiences, interests, and skills into the living environment. Older residents can bring wisdom and perspectives on life and work to share with interested house mates of any age.

Of course, even with clear goals and rules, the unexpected can happen and throw a wrench in interaction among housemates of any age. For example, someone may need to move out because of financial or health reasons. Family members in another city or state may want or need their loved one to move closer to them. Anticipating possible changes may help to keep the composition, ebb and flow, of house mates in a state of dynamic equilibrium.

CITATION

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About the Author: Josephine A. Ruggiero is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Providence College and Editor-in-Chief of **Sociology between the Gaps.**