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To cite this article: Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia, M. Ferreri, J. Hudson, K. Scanlon & K. West (2023): Toward a feminist housing commons? Conceptualising care - (as) - work in collaborative housing, *Housing, Theory and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/14036096.2023.2247414](https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2023.2247414)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2023.2247414>



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Published online: 22 Aug 2023.



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Toward a feminist housing commons? Conceptualising care - (as) - work in collaborative housing

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes care-(as)-work in collaborative housing and addresses current debates on the potential of cohousing to embody a feminist commons. A focus on purpose-built cohousing projects in the UK enables us to focus on the values present in the initial phases of collective design and on the ongoing negotiations and mediation that take place through social interactions, resident-led self-management, and formal and informal mutual support. Our analysis is based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with two communities in England. Our contribution focuses on two aspects of care-(as)-work: how difficult emotions related to cohousing maintenance work are minimized for the good of the common and how such work is differentially embodied. Returning to cohousing's transformational capacities as a feminist commons, we show that while boundaries of care in commoning are critical to residents, they are inherently blurry, performative and gendered.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 February 2023
Accepted 8 August 2023

KEYWORDS

Collaborative housing;
commoning; care-work;
feminist commons;
emotional labour

Introduction

Proponents of collaborative housing commonly argue that living in cohousing is better than available alternatives. Cohousing is one form of collective, self-organized, self-managed and community-orientated housing; others include co-operatives, self-build initiatives, ecological villages, and community land trusts (Lang, Carriou, and Czischke 2020). They vary in terms of their social composition (age, gender); ownership and form of tenure; development model and ethos (e.g. ecological, financial pooling, affordability). Despite their differences, they share adherence to principles and practices of resident-led self-management, social interaction and mutual support, often grounded in collective scheme design and shared spaces. Such projects can engender a sense of agency, connection and mutual support amongst residents. The notion that collaborative housing (henceforth CH) brings such benefits can, however, lead to overlooking the everyday work

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of residents making and maintaining “community”. Given the emphasis on mutual aid and care as benefits of CH, this political and theoretical gap needs addressing.

In this paper, we posit that much of the caring work classified in the literature as “community building” should instead be examined through the lens of the feminist concept of *care-work*. This framing emphasizes the quotidian activities of social reproduction that take place in CH in order to sustain community life over time. In our analysis, we examine the collective, commoning characteristics of this type of everyday work, as well as the values, meanings and emotions ascribed to it. Theoretically, we join strands from CH and urban commons literature about the values associated with communal living (Stavrides and Travlou 2022) with feminist scholarship regarding the nature and value of care-work and social reproduction in the home (Fraser 2016; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014).¹ Methodologically, we focus on how the values associated with care are negotiated through everyday work that is often gendered, drawing on in-depth qualitative engagement with residents in two UK cohousing projects.

The article is organized around five sections. The first draws on feminist and urban commons literature to develop our main conceptual device of care-(as)-work (or care-work) in CH. The second describes our theoretical and empirical approach, including case study characteristics. The third and fourth focus on two aspects of care-(as)-work: how residents minimize difficult emotions for the good of the common and the different ways that care-work is carried out. Finally, we ask whether cohousing communities have become – or can strive to become – feminist commons.

Conceptualising Care-(As)-Work in Collaborative Housing

Collaborative Homes and Care-Work

Feminist scholar Silvia Federici argues that to generate a less destructive society in social, ecological and economic terms, we must reclaim the home as a collective arena of cooperation – a form of “commoning” (2012). The house, or *oikos*, should not be a space of individualized family life, but a kind of autonomous commons that can provide, “... safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and, above all, providing the foundation for forms of reproduction” (388). These visions echo calls for “communalization of housework” by nineteenth-century utopian feminists (Hayden 1981; Sangregorio 2010) who sought more egalitarian divisions of labour through shared domestic responsibilities. Historically, more politically radical cohousing schemes (such as Sweden’s *kollektivhus*) adopted feminist and utopian notions of gender equality and shared domestic work, including socialized cooking and childcare (Sangregorio 2010; Vestbro 2000; Vestbro and Horelli 2012). Now, with few exceptions, the incorporation of feminist ideals in CH projects depends largely “... on the residents’ views and aspirations if women will or will not be the main performers of unpaid reproductive labour” (Osipova 2021, 19).

Recently, a widespread desire for a more collaborative and neighbourly way of living, alongside interest in ecology, food, affordability, age, and health have contributed to the growth and internationalization of CH models. Proponents of these housing alternatives also espouse decommodification (Davidovici 2022; Ferreri and Vidal 2021), resource pooling (Ostrom 1990), community self-management (Aernouts and Ryckewaert 2019;

Thompson 2018) and socio-material design that balances individual and community life (Devlin, Douglas, and Reynolds 2015). CH residents are mostly non-kin and undertake various social reproductive activities including mutual support as members age in the community (Glass 2013; López Gómez, Estrada Canal, and Farré Montalà 2020); childcare when there are single parents or young families (Vestbro and Horelli 2012); and community care in responding to small conflicts and interpersonal crises, but also to larger ones like COVID-19 (Arroyo et al. 2021; Izuhara et al. 2023).

Cohousing as Feminist Commons

All these CH efforts implicitly or explicitly challenge the “traditional binaries of the individual and society, the state and the market, public and private ownership . . .” (Bollier 2007, in; Noterman 2016, 434). They produce a kind of “queering [of] the home” (Vasudevan 2015 as quoted in Jaureguiberry-Mondion 2022, 9) and the nuclear family that blurs the boundaries of individual domesticity and shared living. Because of this, CH has increasingly been framed within critical geography, urban and housing studies as a kind of housing commons, or “common property resource” (Aernouts and Ryckewaert 2019), with emancipatory possibilities.

Critical commons scholars argue that in order to claim the commons as “a coherent alternative model for bringing economic, social, and ethical concerns into greater alignment” (Bollier 2007), we must pay attention to the pluralities and contradictions of difference or “differential commoning” (Noterman 2016), becoming more “. . . attuned to the fundamental, practical and often messy details involved in commoning, in order to illuminate possible productive frictions and unexpected alternatives that exist amongst normative socio-spatial relations in *any* community” (ibid, 435, our emphasis). We must also adopt a “much wider perspective that includes the intangible and affective infrastructures of . . . the community alliances and the shared spaces produced by those living there” (Stavrides and Travlou 2022, 4). To do justice to this “differential commoning”, we employ a feminist critique of the gendered nature of cohousing work, valorizing the specific role of women and foregrounding the political nature of home-making practices – particularly communal home-making – which was key to the radical feminist history of CH. Such practices are emotionally connoted. In our analysis, we mobilize work on the relationship between emotions, place and politics in geography and cognate disciplines (Ahmed 2014, 2017; Davidson, Smith, and Bondi 2012) to examine the relatively under-explored role of emotions in community building in CH projects as an important aspect of feminist approaches to care-work in collective dwelling (see Osipova 202; Tummers and McGregor 2019).

Federici conceptualizes feminist commoning (Federici 2009, 2012) as a bridging of the traditional divides between the public and the private that can help to revalorize the home as a productive, political space. This draws on the concerns of 1970s feminists (Cox and Federici 1975; Mainardi 1970) with valuing social reproduction as invisible work traditionally done by women in caring and domestic roles and typified in nuclear home environments (Boys et al. 2022). More recent scholarship attuned to the impacts produced by austerity policies and social care crises on the home (Humphries, Holder, and Hall 2016; Jupp 2023; Jupp et al. 2019; Skeggs 2017) has increasingly addressed the politics of care and household work (Lloyd 2018). Strands of critical human geography (Baxter and

Brickell 2014; Blunt and Dowling 2006) have also focused on how home spaces, at different scales, can act as “political sites that are intensely intimate and local, as well as being constitutive of wider economic and political rationalities” (Brickell, Fernández Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan 2017, 8), and how, in the context of austerity policies, home and (the ethics of) care intersect with a “more just distribution of work, care, income and time” (Jupp et al. 2019, 114).

Building on Caffentzis and Federici’s notion (2014) of “commoning” reproductive activities, CH’s “commoning” quality lies in its ability to create and sustain social, economic, political and/or environmental change over time while existing within (and sometimes quietly subverting) dominant neoliberal economic rationalities. Current forms of cohousing, understood *as a process* rather than end product, can enable continuous learning and provide models for future change. In this view, it is their active, everyday level of engagement with ideas and practices of change that constitutes the possibility of commoning, and this is not negated by the fact that CH communities also exist, and must grapple with the kinds of commodified capitalism they may be intentionally seeking to disrupt (LaFond and Tsvetkova 2017). Relatedly, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) say that autonomous projects like CH should be understood as processes of continuous, often contradictory negotiations within the everyday realities of capitalist societies. Some of these contradictions extend to the fact that the social, cultural and financial capital often required to develop these intentional communities within the constraints of profit-seeking housing systems means that, in spite of avowed intentions to be inclusive, there is a continuous risk of them becoming exclusive to the privileged (Chiodelli and Baglione 2014; Ruiu 2014). This highlights how, these emergent spaces are always “in the making”, and can give residents “. . . a sense of living between worlds: the one they are struggling against and the one they are trying to achieve” (ibid, 8).

Very little has been written on the gendered or social reproductive dimensions of CH. Tummers and McGreggor (2019), drawing explicitly on Federici and feminist political ecology’s understandings of care, have argued that cohousing can make the otherwise undervalued realm of care-work more visible and sow the seeds of longer term transformative, post-capitalist and post-patriarchal change. They argue that cohousing can exemplify alternative social relations of care – or a feminist housing commons – and note that it is *already* characterized by non-traditional relations that break with heteronormative, patriarchal versions of family home life. Discussing alternative communities in Berlin, Jaureguiberry-Mondion (2022, 9) further argues that in “. . .questioning the traditional script of the home, and at the same time engaging in a constant process of discussion and negotiation of what the collective life entails, new orientations are experimented with.” Building on this work, in what follows, we combine critical geography and feminist approaches to complicate questions of commoning and care-work in the everyday micro-practices of cohousing’s social reproduction that we propose to frame as care-work. We examine how reproduction is commoned in cohousing by focusing on the experiences of residents in two cohousing communities and their formulations of work and care.

Methods

Our analysis is based on interviews and focus groups from a pre- and post-pandemic study of five CH communities in England² and an ongoing longitudinal study of a single

cohousing project (2015 onwards). As our interest was in identifying the care-work dimensions of CH, we focus here on two of the few existing cohousing communities (inaugurated over the last 15 years),³ where residents are known to play a significant role in the codesign and participatory management and governance. To enable comparison of experiences, we chose cases that, while similar in their new build typologies (designed for maximizing social interaction), also have differences in some of their social or material composition (see Table 1). In both, some of the current residents worked in the original co-design process, and all are actively engaged in the running of their communities. Community A is a rural, ecologically oriented project in the north of England with diverse, multi-generational residents, while Community B is an urban senior cohousing model in a city in the South of England with 27 residents committed to issues of agency, self-determination and mutual support in older age. Despite the important differences between the two cases, there are significant commonalities in the way care-(as)-work is framed by its residents.

Researchers were invited into each of the two communities through negotiated frameworks of research collaboration that abided by research ethics guidelines, protocols and reviews (pre- and post-pandemic) from the three participating universities.⁴ In the case of Cohousing A, the engagement was built on prior collaborations but took place over a one-year period in 2020, immediately before, then during, a series of COVID lockdowns. Cohousing B took the form of longitudinal research begun in 2015, offering perspectives at key moments before and after moving into the new-built housing. This longer period enabled us to examine the role of expectation and anticipation in the early stages of co-living, and the affective experience of moving in. Its same-sex composition also allowed us to speak to other axes of difference like age and class (Fernández Arrigoitia and West), challenging the idea that a women-only CH is friction-free in regard to care-work.

Overall, the research underpinning this paper draws on 16 in-depth interviews with cohousing residents (8 in each community) and 5 focus group discussions in Cohousing B that took place at semi-regular intervals between 2016 and 2020. Interviewees were asked questions regarding the meaning of home, understanding of health and well-being, family and friends, and life in community. The research

Table 1. Cohousing case-studies.

	Cohousing A	Cohousing B
Location	Semi-rural	Urban
Sex	Mixed	Same-sex (cis-women)
Age	Intergenerational (65 adults and 15 children)	Senior (27 adults)
Focus	Environmental sustainability	Ageing together
Tenure	Mixed (home-ownership and private rental)	Mixed (home-ownership and social rental)
Number of households	35	26
Construction type	New-build 41 terraced houses, from 1 to 3 bedrooms per unit	New-build 26 apartments, from one to three-bedrooms per unit
Shared spaces and self-managed facilities	A common house with a dining room and kitchen; office; laundry, guest bedroom, self-managed hydroelectric plant, a separate co-working, studio and event space, bicycle facilities, a food store, community car club.	Large common room with a kitchen, office and flexible multi-use living area; laundry; communal garden; vegetable allotment; guest flat; shared car ownership

length enabled new questions related to coping with COVID-19 conditions, which encouraged a heightened sense of awareness about interpersonal care, and the forms of collective organizing and decision-making that emerged (Izuhara et al. 2023).

In both case studies, only a subset of residents were interviewed, and there was an over-representation, in the mixed-sex cohousing, of self-identified women (6 out of 8).⁵ The age of respondents varied, although most were over 55. Within Cohousing B, we note that despite its “senior” denomination, there was a large range of ages among respondents, which we have argued elsewhere reflects a kind of intergenerational character to the community (see also Fernández Arrigoitia and West 2021); and – as we explore below – this mix is significant to how informal support might take place internally, as well as to the everyday dynamics that respond to life stages. While the majority of residents would probably identify as white British, there were some non-British migrant or second generation.⁶ In both cases, sexual orientation and household composition were not surveyed directly but were often expressed implicitly. In Cohousing B, interviewees often reflected on the differences between their past heterosexual or nuclear households and the present same-sex community, and about decisions around old age and caring.

By comparing women’s experiences and reflections on care as work, despite the different gender composition of the two CH groups, we have identified a number of significant similarities, which we outline in greater detail in the second part of the paper. These similarities point, on one hand, to common mechanisms of conceptualizing care (as) work (or not) within the community and, on the other, to the significance of differential subject positions and power differentials *beyond gender*. By comparing women’s responses, we were able to explore how age and health differentials affect and articulate the differential commoning of these housing communities.⁷ We are nevertheless aware that in a qualitative, longitudinal project like this, drawing only on a subset of communities, there is potential self-selection on the part of respondents leading to a partial perspective on the care-as-work within those communities, potentially excluding those who are very unhappy, or have no time to engage in research due to other commitments.

Our thematic analysis identified language, aspirations and quotidian practices of “commons” and “care” that included themes of meaning of home, understanding of health and well-being, family and friends, and life in community. We were attentive not only to what is being said but also how it was said, self-correction, conscious recalling of “ethos” when explaining a particular action, position, or feeling. We also engaged closely with residents’ own formulations of the types of work involved in community-building. The tasks spoken about were often those like child-rearing and cleaning, traditionally seen as “women’s work”; other activities, like meetings and training (e.g. on consensus decision-making) were more closely linked to those of political groups or communities of interest. A central emphasis in both is the learning and evolving that they enabled for both community and individual. It is important to note that our focus groups, interviews and long-term interactions informed by a participatory action approach have also offered additional spaces of reflexivity to their existing emotional literacy, supporting an unintentional re-evaluation of needs, values and commitments across scales and issues.

The Care-Work of Housing Commons

Getting Things Done

Living in CH requires engaging in a variety of regular activities: from shared tasks such as the repair and maintenance of communal spaces, to more managerial-type work such as participation in decision-making through boards and committees, and in working groups on specific issues (e.g. new membership, legal, financial, contractual, building maintenance or service). These working groups look after the formal and informal social infrastructures that are key to the functioning of the CH (Jarvis 2011). Community A, for example, has a community governance team that works on processes for collective decision-making, including practical solutions like a buddy system for new arrivals into the CH, while Community B has a consensus group to improve decision-making mechanisms and “find processes by which everyone can be involved” (for full list of community activities, see Table 2).

For Community B, controlling the design, direction and management of all these was key to setting up a women-only CH in the first place. This approach towards autonomy formed part of members’ wider politics of empowerment against gender stereotypes, both in the male-dominated construction sector and in broader socio-cultural understandings of ageing. Pam, from the early founding group, explains this in relation to a feminist framework:

We do have a number of specific aims, we are first of all, all of us ardently feminist, obviously, we wanted to run the place ourselves, I mean we’re not anti-male necessarily at all but we’re anti-male domination, and particularly for my generation men would expect to look after the building and be in charge of various things like that, the finances and so on, just that’s the way it is, that’s what men do, and the women would have been expected to be part of the kitchen and the cleaning rota and making sure that the place was — fine that’s what women do, and that we didn’t want, we wanted to be in charge of it, all of it ourselves, so I think that’s something we have strongly in common (Pam, resident of Cohousing B)

Table 2. Self-management and social committees/groups of case-study communities^x.

Community	Lead committee	Self-management and social committees and groups		
A	General Meeting Company board of directors	Service Committee	Buildings Service Team	Allotments Art & craft club
		Membership & Integration Committee	Common Areas Service Team	Black Lives Matter group
		Community Governance Team	Team Travel Service	General book club
		Information Service Team	Wild swimming and river group	Supper club
		Finance Team	Science fiction book club	Covid-19 team
		Land Service Team	Wellbeing team Car club (car sharing)	Running group
B	Management Committee	Membership Team	Fire Alarm Team (health & safety)	Health and wellbeing group
		Buildings Team	Consensus Decision-making Team	Board play games group
		Finance Team	Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Team	Yoga group Play reading group
		Treasurer Service Charges Team	Covid Team	Theatre review group
		Communications Team	Gardening Team	
			Film group	

Note: ^xThe numbers and range of working groups are never static, as they may change (close down, or proliferate) in relation to shifting community needs or composition..

For this group, then, the aspiration to be in charge of all components of CH was initially⁸ constructed as challenging the more traditional view of women as domestic or passive. Taking on “masculine” tasks was critical to their sense of autonomous living and involved a considerable amount of intense practical and logistical work that was not typically considered “women-like”, especially in older age (Brenton 2001). At the same time, their choice not to contract out traditional housework labour like communal cleaning was motivated by an idea that continual, active engagement was essential for staving off physical and cognitive decline in older age. Additionally, the decision to voluntarily take on tasks was not a “given”, but the result of discussions around a common goal of keeping costs down, which was particularly important in their mixed tenure project.

Many interviewees emphasized how the minutiae involved in running and maintaining a new-build project (with a long list of build and construction faults) was “like a job”:

... it's actually been quite exhausting, not just physically, but very much so emotionally, and psychologically. I retired last year, and now moving here I have found in a way it may sound funny, but it is like having a new full-time job. It is actually a job living here, and it might get less, but it is hard work and it's not for the faint hearted, in my opinion anyway. (Carla, Community B, FG1)

For Carla, the work-like features of communal living marked a divergence between the expectations of CH and its reality. She describes the “job” of developing and maintaining CH as physically and emotionally draining. Difficulties, however, are continually bracketed with “it may sound funny” and “in my opinion”, expressing a certain hesitancy or discomfort in being critical. She continued,

... you have loads of emails to respond to on a daily basis, but then the positives of that are the spontaneous “fancy a cup of tea?” when you weren't expecting one, or “I'm going wherever would you like to come?” And that's lovely. But it's all about balance, and we keep saying we think it's going to get better [laughter] I do hope so, because I am tired ...

Negotiating the positive and negative feelings associated with cohousing work is also evident here, with reticence now framed around future hopes and expectations: while working for community building *now* feels burdensome, it is seen as necessary and as something that provides, “on balance”, a sense of achievement and creating the conditions for a better tomorrow. Viola, another resident of Cohousing B, added,

We talk about sweat equity, but the amount of work you put in, and I think one hopes that in the second year when there are slightly less meetings, and there's more cups of tea and more chats, like one day when we'd finished the cleaning we all sat down and had a cup of tea, and those are the magic bits.

The hard work, seen as particularly intense during the initial set-up period, is justified by the “magic bits” when the work is done and relaxation is “earned”. This give-and-take approach to benefits achieved through work was not uncommon and was often emphasized in the way the strains and joys of maintaining community were weighed up, particularly evident in the care-work involved in meetings, which at a minimum involved the respectful facilitating, listening and non-conflictual addressing of personal or group issues. Meetings were perhaps *the* topic most repeatedly mentioned across interviews and focus group discussions, due to their volume as well as how often they

impinged upon leisure time, with residents expected to give up evenings and weekends.

The continual meetings- both large and small- are beginning to get me down, because there's so many of them, I don't know how many meetings I've had this week. But they were important, *they're necessary*. But it is one of the factors you have to be aware of when you move in to a place like this. There are a lot of things that need sorting out, and if we're going to do it together we've got to talk about it and take time, and it does. (FG2, Kitchen group)

Even when the work linked to meetings is characterized as challenging, as above, negative reflections are mitigated by a strong justification of this work as *necessary*. Attending to the time-consuming work of meetings is seen as integral to the care that residents invest in interpersonal relations that sustain the structures of commoning over time. Care for the communal home can be linked here to broader social structures that have socialized women through expectations of care in the domestic realm, including family, home and friends (Butler 2004; Marcus 2018), as “expectations about who should care, how they should care, and when and where they should care” (Jupp et al. 2019, 8). While these perceived obligations may change over time, they tend to remain strong and to mediate actions and choices over a lifetime (Boudet, Petesch, and Turk 2013). Further, for the “pioneers” involved in setting up both communities, caring for community in the context of a societal care-giving crisis was also about “successful ageing” (Higgs and Gilleard 2016), eschewing not just gendered expectations, but age-related ones as well.

Making and Maintaining Collective Processes

It is not just the sheer amount of work that attending meetings or administration work requires, but the *kind* of work involved in consensus decision-making and community building. There is often an underlying sense by those involved that they are caring not only for the current life and values of the community but also for its future. This intense form of collective decision-making, regarded as essential, has to constantly negotiate between different timeframes, positions and opinions. It is exhausting work, which can have important implications for individual members.

In both communities, there was a certain amount of friction around the fraught process of change and adaptation, which requires time and energy both at the individual and group level. At the same time, even as negatives were remarked upon, or spoken about explicitly, a wider narrative was often alluded to which involves issues of purpose, shared values and social integration. This tended to minimize personal experience in the name of collective cause, especially towards people beyond the community, as in this exchange:

A But I think the other big responsibility is that we've got to appear to be living well and to be happy, otherwise people won't want to come and live here, therefore there is an amazing incentive ...

A Well we have been told to be quiet on occasions have we not, in the run up?

A No negativity.

A Yeah, it was a lot of pressure actually ... We were told as a collective not to be negative in the run up to the moving in for example, “don't make a fuss, the builders could walk” is that's the message I got.

A Well also to the press . . .

A I felt that I was not living a lie, but I'm not being totally overtly honest . . .

A . . . but I've got to smile and be a nice girl or else they'll walk. So it's not being totally truthful, and I think for me Community B's core value is honesty, and openness and I can't be honest and open.

A And when I was cleaning the floor about ten days ago, and Paul, the head guy of the builders said, "Why aren't you on your hands and knees?" I felt like kicking him in the balls, and I wish I had brought up a witty rejoinder, but it's actually it's like a drip, drip, drip.

A You've got to smile.

Here, we learn that what was publicly divulged was initially mediated by the need to manage problematic contractors and building defects after moving in, as well as a media-induced pressure around a "model" project which had generated a sense of success that needed to be maintained. Even though the move-in period was draining and intrusive – setting up working groups for the year-long repairs, cleaning up after the workers, managing finances associated with the reparations *and* informal daily socializing, including cups of teas for the workers – maintaining the appearance of "living well" was necessary in order to avoid conflict. Such maintenance ("I've got to smile and be a nice girl") for the sake of others can be understood as a form of gendered work that, especially in the context of a women-only scheme designed at least partially as a challenge to a patriarchal housing industry, resulted in an additional form of performative labour that felt, to some, insulting and uncomfortable.⁹

In the "give and take that has to take place in order to get us to a collective place", as some residents put it, there is also a shared value placed on *individual* flexibility and the capacity to adjust to change. Such work requires a "type of personality" or "certain type of strength", something within individual character that allows for coping with the associated stress and pressures.

I would think there's certain characteristics that make life easier, like a certain mental flexibility or willingness to move towards each other with a kind of curiosity if somebody's got a different position or view from you. (Community A, Sonia)

However, this narrative of pre-existing personality traits regarded as inherently conducive to the collective work of CH is often contradicted (or qualified) by a reference to *self-work*: that one must transform oneself and "work on it" to adapt to the new collective dimension, even when, in theory, CH members already self-selected based on the shared principles and values of collective self-management. Residents discuss this in terms of the necessity of engaging with those challenges, in the shift from individual to collective housing:

When I first moved in I thought, "What have I done?" And . . . you have to work at it. I had to work, it took me a good 18 months to start feeling comfortable. (Community B, Carla)

Such individual adjustments can also be interpreted within the long "tradition" of women averting breakdown of relationships, avoiding conflict, or caring for others according to their prescribed social role. Yet, at the same time, this flexibility and desire to be self-aware in the interest of a group one cares about is at the centre of

the reciprocal “give and take” approach discussed here: that to contribute meaningfully to the collective, flexibility and openness to change can be a care-driven departure from mainstream approaches to conflict management and resolution, generating relationships of respect and listening that can, also, be more attentive to differences. It is to those differences we turn next.

Embodiment and Differential Care

Who Does, and Who Defines, Work

The perception of work as necessary hinges upon a common understanding of the activities categorized as “community-building work” as well as on the expectation that all must contribute – in some form – to the collective project. At a minimum, residents must formally take part in meetings and consensus decision-making, and any individual interested in being a future neighbour must also agree, during induction processes, to be actively involved in operational aspects. Serving the community through such work is a crucial part of the intentionality through which living in cohousing is framed, and thus comes with a set of associated expectations to carry out such work; for every cohousing group, there will be a set of collective, normative understandings about what constitutes a valid contribution to community life and maintenance, of what “counts” as work. Over time, these understandings will diversify and change according to needs and a group’s own evolution, but the fundamental understanding of work as necessary remains.

Nevertheless, there are significant differentials as to who can actually *do* the work expected of them at a particular moment in time, which is also influenced by group composition (e.g. senior vs intergenerational). Below, Sonia reflects on this issue in terms of how life stage and background influence the extent of individual involvement in work deemed necessary:

Many in the cohousing are academics and many semi-retired or retired like work, bureaucracy, documents; this makes the place less accessible to others in other life moments or jobs ... when we arrived it was like, we didn’t know how to stop, we just went buzzzz and it’s been very frenetic and very busy and very, yes a lot of work to do, and I don’t know whether it’s, and that’s made it very hard for other people to access really, people who come who are not tech savvy, who don’t want to be tech savvy particularly, or who are just busy, whether with young children or work, it’s difficult (Community A, Sonia)

The characteristics of those who set up the project initially (i.e. highly educated, retired individuals with ample “free” time) were, according to Sonia and others we interviewed, instrumental in its inception. But those very classed attributes that granted leisure time for a passion project may have excluded others with less available time or expertise. In Sonia’s words above, there is an understanding that other kinds of formal commitments, associated with “jobs” or parental status, could be the cause. She further intuited that integration is mediated by the care duties and responsibilities associated with the often-gendered work of parenting,

... it also pricks a bit of a strain on people in terms of, you know, if you’ve got a young kid, kids and you’re working, it’s very hard to find time to commit to the community I think, so it’s not the expectations around work; work contribution could be hard for people with young kids, for parents. (Community A, Hannah)

This raises the question of who gets to take part during set-up periods, and who is excluded by not conforming to dominant imaginaries of community-building work regarded as ideal or essential. In some cases, enjoying the intensive work of early community-building, then, may be the preserve of the privileged few, where age and class intersect to favour the contributions of older, housing-secure, middle class retired individuals with time available as a resource (Arbell 2021). Yet we also saw how during their initial move-in stages, residents of Group B did not appear to conform to this, clearly not “enjoying” the work of setting up. Instead, they were consciously negotiated their mixed feelings in a way that collectively emphasized joy over worry, and social benefit over other costs (e.g. time, energy). This give-and-take was additionally bound up with imaginaries of successful and active ageing, so that doing this work was not merely good for the collective but also for staying young, engaged and relevant. In both communities, this felt particularly true for the older, retired members; several said they were able to make additional, labour-intensive contributions to the group because they were retired and had more time than their younger, working counterparts.

Even though cohousing is often understood to offer more fluid systems of communal support for children which can free up parental time, setting up these infrastructures requires its own time and effort, as well as individual affinities and sustained commitments. In practice, such needs are not always formally recognized, leading in Community A to smaller groups of parents and friends creating their own informal networks of practical support. Such examples of parental care-work (social reproduction) occur often in cohousing contexts but paradoxically can make wider community contributions difficult; the strain of being seen to not be “pulling your weight” even though in practice such work may be enriching a community’s micro-atmosphere of mutual aid and thus contributing to the deepening and expansion of actual care-work. This invisibility of less formal networks of parenting support may reflect wider societal attitudes, and value accorded, to traditional divisions of domestic labour.

Other life course “events” or changes in health, age, physical ability and other circumstances can influence involvement in community work over time. In the example below, Virgo discusses how she negotiated her own sense of diminished contribution:

Managing my health, I have a terminal health condition, and doing what I can, finding useful things I can do and asserting my limits, and also accepting my limits – that’s a major thing for me, really big. For instance, I can’t clean, and that feels like a major loss of agency for me. It’s a really “saying no”, a really big deal that this is something that has to be done, nobody particularly likes it. [But] everybody is being wonderful, I can’t do it, and that’s an example of lots and lots of other things. (Virgo, Community B, FG1)

Virgo’s inability to continue to do the necessary cleaning work meant reconfiguring her sense of agency in a way that subjectively accepts, but also collectively asserts these limitations. In a space like older women’s cohousing, built on tenets of second wave feminist resistance, the potential for managing change over time *with care* (in people, practices, ideas and ailing bodies) was always imagined as possible. And yet, when care is centred as a reciprocal arena of neighbourliness, the deeply gendered battle between selfhood, autonomy and others can become acute in times of crisis (e.g. terminal diagnosis or cognitive degeneration). For someone like Virgo, the value of being helpful to others remained paramount to a sense of self in community and was enabled by

a supportive environment (“everybody is being wonderful”). The practicalities of this meant that any previous physical efforts Virgo would have put into the community were taken over by other more able-bodied members of the community and she was checked on informally more frequently by her nearest neighbours or “health buddies”,¹⁰ while she continued to partake in relevant community discussions or meetings as/when she was able.

Setting and accepting clear boundaries of work by “saying no” (or “being okay”) is, in itself, a feminist gesture of wilfulness (Ahmed 2017) that, in this case, values caring for the ailing self as a modality of work. For Virgo above, her act of wilful refusal constituted a fundamental reorientation (“a very big deal”) towards self and others. In a context of shifting capacity to contribute, the preservation of community is made possible here by much emotional “acceptance work” happening individually and communally.

In the case above, collective acceptance would have also been partially mediated by this resident’s long-term involvement in the group and the micro-practices of accounting that can occur unregistered over time in a community: residents who have “paid their dues” may be perceived as more deserving of time off essential work. This may sometimes be a question of temporality (being pioneers, or of initial group set-up, as Virgo was) or of intensity (being more recent, but very actively engaged in life of community work).

Who is Seen to Work

Carla: I don’t know if it’s just the way my mind works, but I know that I do quite a lot of stuff that isn’t visible, and I ... the neurotic side of me is anxious *to be seen to be doing stuff*. So I worry that people think I’m malingering or something, and I know that’s just me, it’s the way I’m made ... (Community B)

Meredith: the lovely thing about having a group this size, if you actually fail to turn up for a cleaning rota it actually will probably be alright. Yesterday they changed the time of the cleaning, and I came down saying to Paula, “Oh I’ll be down at 5.30,” and she finished at three o’clock because she said it suited her better to do it earlier. Two people were around, and I think in a way we should be quite a forgiving group. (Community B)

The concern expressed by Carla in the exchange above over whether others were “seeing” her work was an experience lived by many although not necessarily shared openly or lived in exactly the same ways. We can see the value of commoning work in action, with neighbours doing the relational, empathetic work of assuaging Carla’s concern over “being seen to do work” by connecting her feelings to their own sense of community work pressures, and how particular experiences (e.g. a cleaning rota) led to an understanding of a flexibility and openness to change (“a forgiving group”) regarding work.

At the same time, the compulsion to be “seen to be doing” for the community, or others, can be analysed as an issue of self and community-surveillance. This is a form of fraught, emotional labour as it involves managing fears and anxieties associated with imagined expectations, judgements or possible repercussions of not doing enough. The terms of guilt that were used to reference this are yet another way in which gender matters in the way shame is attached to particular practices or behaviours (Ferguson and Eyre 2000). In her turn towards emotions, Ahmed (2014, 208) talks about how emotions helped her “explain not only how we are affected in this

way or that, by this or that, but also how those judgements then hold or become agreed as shared perceptions". In resident accounts, there is indeed an underlying agreement that performing community work is a kind of barometer for belonging, helping explain the uneasiness Daisy feels about going away for days at a time, and how that absence could be judged by others:

...it's interesting what you said, a few times I've had said to me, "Oh are you going away again?" And you think, well should I be here all the time? And I think, *can* I go away for a few days? And they probably mean because one is missed, but not in a negative way. But, "Oh glad to see you again," you think well I'm not here all the time. I've got, I have my life. It's funny, it's getting used to things (Daisy, Community B, FG2)

Daisy reveals here how consuming the idea of presence and work visibility can be – so much so that a pre-emptive position (I've got my life') is part of the emotional boundary work she sets for herself. Moreover, "getting used to things" is not an act of simple complacency, or of falling in line with norms. What she is speaking to is a deeper modality of adaptation that recognizes the emotional interdependence ("because one is missed") that results from this form of living while also being capable of shifting and asserting personal boundaries so as to retain a complex sense of self that exists both in and out of cohousing. What makes her anecdote comical to her is how despite an implicit expectation that co-living is somehow straightforward as an active co-presence, it is in fact a continual process that involves the internal "working-through" of issues, as they happen, and the relational co-construction over time of commoning practices and expectations.

Conclusions: CH as a Feminist Housing Commons

Care-(as)-work is key to bringing a critical understanding of the labour, often gendered, that goes into making and maintaining "community" in collaborative housing. In some ways, the practicalities involved in the everyday work of cohousing replicate the mundane characteristics of "formal" employment (e.g. attending meetings, sending emails) – so much so that one of the recurrent reflections of residents was how "job-like" building a community can feel. Yet despite the often tiring, demanding work necessary within these collective endeavours, there is also joy and a feeling of purpose achieved in the production of alternative logics of existing in the world (e.g. anti-sexist, anti-ageist, ecological) through domestic practices of everyday sharing and management. In cohousing, this commitment to collaborative living involves an ethos of neighbourly care that, however imperfect, strives for greater fairness and justice through modes of interdependence.

For residents, working out what counts and does not count *as* work is not self-evident and involves ongoing care-work such as repairing (e.g. anxieties) and respecting (e.g. different working lives and commitments). Learning to compromise at both the individual and group levels involved what we called the "acceptance work" of approaching, accommodating and negotiating embodied differences that allow work contributions to vary in quality or quantity. Finally, identifying what is "legitimate" work in emotional and practical terms is part and parcel of making cohousing relationalities, life and communal futures, where undoing dominant models of work is an integral part of a commons "in the making".

The care-work of commoning housing emphasizes and even internalizes certain narratives of “working on” the self by adjusting and adapting. This can also involve the careful “management” of personal emotions and opinions by placing the needs of the collective before one’s own. The various emotions expressed such as guilt, fear and anxiety show that there is an affective dimension to commoning that needs to be attended to. Moreover, we see that the care-work of collective management is often not explicitly discussed as a form of work, potentially contributing to the problematic reproduction of its invisibility.

Our analysis has highlighted how to understand the production of cohousing as a differential commons requires becoming attuned to the messy, “productive frictions” (Noterman 2016) in CH’s necessary work; in (re)valuing it, individuals and groups must remain flexible and attentive to the varying capacities to enact such work over time. This interpersonal, everyday work – which involves accepting disagreement and change as a natural form of community evolution – can make cohousing projects an arena of commoning characterized by continuous learning, change and transformation.

Finally, residents have underscored that the way in which commoning takes place through the non-familial reproductive work requires that autonomous boundaries of care are not assumed, but collectively negotiated. Here, the care with which everyday community-building work was considered and distributed over time foregrounded a feminist logic, or orientation, towards home and work that values emotions, relationalities and embodiment over the transactional relations normally associated with housing as a commodity. Open deliberation regarding work contributions – and the various implicit forms of care-work (for self and other) – *can* make cohousing a type of feminist commons. Indeed, if as Ticktin (2019) states, a feminist commons can form “capacious structures and infrastructures of political care”, then the political care-work of cohousing commons highlighted here offers insights into how the work integral to community building – albeit fraught with tension and uncertainty of outcome – can, and does, form part of such a rich, amplified vision of a caring future in CH practices more widely.

Notes

1. We recognize that the political project of feminism, and by extension of a feminist housing commons, is multiple and contested. Our modest proposal here is to build on a generally agreed-upon view across radical, second, third wave and postfeminist currents regarding the devaluation of care-work and social reproduction, in order to contribute critically to literature on both CH and housing commons.
2. See (Hudson et al. 2021; Scanlon et al. 2021); and ongoing (2021–2023) CHIC project (Collaborative Housing and Innovative Housing in Social Care [CHIC]: <https://collabhousing.care.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>)
3. According to the UK Cohousing network, there are now 19 built cohousing communities, a further 60+ groups active with developing projects, and new groups forming all the time (see: <https://cohousing.org.uk>)
4. London School of Economics and Political Science, Lancaster University and University of Bristol.
5. A more balanced sample of respondents by gender in community A could have offered insights into care-work differentials and everyday negotiations between women and men.
6. In our first pilot project with Community B, we collated data on ethnic identity (based on national census questions) but our subsequent research activities, which followed slightly

different questions and methods, did not collect comparable data on ethnic identity or migration status.

7. While classed practices and meanings are part of our analysis of care-work, the class composition of the communities is not explicitly addressed in this paper; diversity of tenure, employment and income across the CH case studies are discussed elsewhere (Scanlon et al. 2021).
8. Our research reveals that while the pioneers of this group were self-identified feminists, many of those that joined later were not- and indeed, only came to see and celebrate the value of a women-only group after some time.
9. It is important to emphasize that residents framed these concerns as a temporary problem: “There’s much joy, but I think we have to acknowledge this is a very . . . it’s a transitional stage, and we’re all experiencing all of the symptoms of transition” and that over time, some became close to and friendly with the workers.
10. Community B instituted a health buddy system during COVID lockdowns where at least three members of the community team up and are responsible for (a) having each other’s basic health and key contact information and (b) checking in informally, as (ir)regularly as they decide, on their health status.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all the community residents that generously allowed us into their lives. This work has been made possible with the generous support of the Tudor Trust, the British Society of Gerontology’s Averil Osborn Award for Participatory Research, Lancaster University’s (LU) Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences Research Fund, LU’s Centre for Ageing Research Seminar Series, and the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (now the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities). Writing was supported through the ‘Inhabiting Radical Housing’ ERC Starting Grant project, n. 851940.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Lancaster University [0]; ‘Inhabiting Radical Housing’ ERC Starting Grant project [851940]; British Society of Gerontology’s Averil Osborn Award for Participatory Research [0]; Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government [0]; Tudor Trust [0].

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