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# Balancing the formal and the informal: the relational challenges of everyday practices of co-operation in shared housing co-operatives in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges of everyday practices of co-operation in UK shared housing co-operatives, situated within literatures that stress the relational basis of these practices and the centrality of 'critical associations' to the conduct of everyday life. Shared housing co-operatives, based on mutual ownership and co-residence between unrelated adults, represent a radical departure from both the traditional landlord/tenant model of shared housing and newer models of shared provision such as co-living developments. They allow sharers to access affordable housing through effectively become their own landlord. Yet the practices of co-operation that generate these benefits are challenging, necessitating high levels of commitment to a common ethos and involving an unusual mix of both formal and informal ways of relating to co-residents. These features are explored in this paper. The paper concludes that, despite wider societal pressures towards the commodification of housing, the structures and norms of shared housing co-operatives allow them to transcend the strengths and weaknesses of their membership at any given time, and hence facilitate an unusual alternative to more widespread models of sharing in the private-rented sector.

## Equilibrando lo formal y lo informal: los desafíos relacionales de las prácticas cotidianas de cooperación en cooperativas de vivienda compartida en el Reino Unido

### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora los desafíos de las prácticas cotidianas de cooperación en las cooperativas de vivienda compartida del Reino Unido, situadas dentro de la literatura que enfatiza la base relacional de estas prácticas y la centralidad de las 'asociaciones críticas' en la conducción de la vida cotidiana. Las cooperativas de vivienda compartida, basadas en la propiedad mutua y la co-residencia entre adultos no relacionados, representan una desviación radical tanto del modelo tradicional de propietario/inquilino de vivienda

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## MOTS CLEFS

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compartida como de modelos más nuevos de provisión compartida, tales como desarrollos de convivencia. Permiten a los participantes acceder a viviendas asequibles convirtiéndose efectivamente en propietarios de dichas viviendas. Sin embargo, las prácticas de cooperación que generan estos beneficios son desafiantes, requieren altos niveles de compromiso con un espíritu común e implican una combinación inusual de dinámicas formales e informales de relacionarse con los residentes. Estas características se exploran en este artículo. Este concluye que, a pesar de las presiones sociales más amplias hacia la mercantilización de la vivienda, las estructuras y normas de las cooperativas de vivienda compartida les permiten trascender las fortalezas y debilidades de su membresía en cualquier momento dado, y por lo tanto, facilitan una alternativa inusual a modelos mayormente difundidos de vivienda compartida en el sector del alquiler privado.

## **Équilibrer le formel et l’informel : les enjeux relationnels des pratiques de coopération quotidiennes dans les coopératives d’habitants au Royaume-Uni**

### **RÉSUMÉ**

Cette communication explore les enjeux des pratiques de coopération quotidiennes dans les coopératives d’habitants au Royaume-Uni, situé dans des littératures qui soulignent le fondement relationnel de ces pratiques et la centralité des « associations essentielles » pour la conduite de la vie quotidienne. Les coopératives d’habitants, fondées sur la propriété partagée et la co-habitation entre des adultes non apparentés, représentent un départ radical à la fois du modèle traditionnel de co-habitation propriétaire-locataire et des modèles plus récents de systèmes de partage tels que les projets d’habitations partagées. Elles permettent aux coopérateurs d’avoir accès à des logements abordables en devenant de fait leur propre propriétaire. Toutefois, les actes de coopération qui engendrent ces bénéfices sont compliqués: ils nécessitent des niveaux élevés d’engagement envers une philosophie commune et consistent en un mélange insolite de relations formelles et informelles entre les co-résidents. Nous explorons ces éléments dans cette communication. Cette dernière se termine en concluant que, malgré l’accroissement des pressions sociales envers la marchandisation du logement, les structures et les normes des coopératives d’habitants leur permettent de transcender à tout moment les avantages et les inconvénients de leur adhésion. Elles offrent ainsi une alternative insolite aux modèles de cohabitation plus répandus dans le secteur privé.

## **Introduction**

With a growing population, rising housing costs and housing providers struggling to meet the demand for affordable accommodation, more and more people in the United Kingdom (UK) are living in shared housing at some point in their lives (Maalsen, 2018). Most sharers reside in the private-rented sector (PRS), where shared provision is often overpriced and poorly managed, particularly at the bottom end of the shared housing

market (Croucher et al., 2018; Reeve et al., 2018; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, [this special issue](#)). Numerous models of 'co-living' are also emerging, targeted at geographically mobile and affluent urban professionals (Bergan, [this special issue](#)). Developers of these more niche models of private rental sharing often invoke the so-called sharing economy (Stephany, 2015) and associated practices of collaborative consumption (Botsman & Rogers, 2011), yet co-living is invariably light on genuine collaboration and heavy on commodification (Bergan, [this special issue](#)).

Shared housing co-operatives (SHCs) represent a radical departure from both the traditional landlord model and these newer models. They not only offer affordable accommodation but also allow co-residents to collectively become their own landlord via the mechanism of mutual ownership. Residents thus assume control of their housing in relation to the critical features of affordability and security of tenure. Despite these features, SHCs based on mutual ownership account for only a few hundred properties across the UK, with numbers of residents probably in the low thousands at best. There are structural reasons behind such low take-up, including the difficulties of gaining appropriate financial backing, and the amount of bureaucracy that surrounds the establishment of new co-operatives of this kind. More generally, the political economy of UK housing continues to be strongly market-driven and largely discouraging of non-commodified provision. Important as they are, these factors nonetheless tend to overlook the relational challenges of everyday life in SHCs, including the legal necessity to co-operate in the household's management, and the formal structuring of relationships between members that flows from this.

It is these distinctive features, and the practices of everyday co-operation to which they give rise, that are explored in this paper. It draws on qualitative interview data from research on diverseshared living arrangements in the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council-funded *Under the Same Roof* project. Before introducing this study, the paper first situates the research within literature on practices of commoning and the critical associations of everyday life, and briefly considers existing work on the relational elements of life in shared housing co-operatives. It then focuses on the nature of everyday co-operation within the specific type of housing co-operative represented in our research, initially highlighting some of the tangible benefits of co-operation and then considering how co-residents negotiate the unusual mix of both formal and informal ways of relating to each other that is inherent to this living arrangement and which gives rise to relationships that occupy a rather uneasy middle ground. The paper concludes that, despite wider societal pressures towards the commodification of housing, the structures and norms of shared housing co-operatives – their 'practices of commoning' – allow them to transcend the strengths and weaknesses of their membership at any given time, and hence enable them to offer an unusual alternative to more widespread models of sharing in the private-rented sector.

### **Shared housing co-operatives and the feasibility of co-operation**

Shared housing co-operatives of the kind explored in this paper constitute only a very small sub-category of the broader UK co-operative housing movement. Housing co-operatives are based on the democratic control and management by tenants of their homes. They have a long history in the UK, with their roots usually traced back to the mid-

nineteenth century Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. Most of the UK's co-operative housing sector consists of tenant management organisations and tenant-controlled housing associations managing often very large quantities of housing stock on behalf of local authorities and housing associations. These units are typically occupied by families, couples, and solo dwellers rather than unrelated adult sharers. However, the wider sector has long included a form of co-operative known as a 'par value fully mutual common ownership co-operative'. As the name suggests, this form of co-operative involves mutual ownership alongside mutual control and management, based on a legal arrangement whereby all tenants are directors of a company owning the property/ies in question, all directors are tenants, and all director-tenants pay rent to the company. Co-operatives run on this basis have been described as 'rented housing without landlords, or rather the tenants are collectively their own landlord' (Radical Routes, 2015, p. 4). To join, members buy a nominal non-returnable share (typically for just one-pound sterling). Although this type of co-operative can extend to mutual ownership of multiple single household dwellings (as is the case in some cohousing developments), co-operatives of this kind tend to consist of a singleshared residence or several adjacent shared residences, usually in urban areas, with a typical household size of six to ten people. It is this very specific living arrangement, which combines both a specific tenure type (par value fully mutual common ownership) and a specific household type (shared occupancy by unrelated adults), that provides the focus of this paper, and the use of the acronym 'SHC' throughout this paper refers solely to this configuration.

SHCs rely on members' willingness and ability to co-operate in virtually all aspects of everyday domestic life, yet the feasibility of unrelated individuals learning to work for the common good has been questioned. The arguments of Hardin (1968) concerning 'the tragedy of the commons' provide a case in point. In examples as diverse as population control, farming, and waste disposal, Hardin noted how individuals ultimately end up maximising their own interests at the expense of the collective, resulting in either privatisation or state control. Foundational empirical studies of British communes by Rigby (1974) and Abrams et al. (1976) both included cases which lent some support to this view (albeit not with direct reference to Hardin's ideas), whilst Mause (2008) has directly applied Hardin's arguments to the experience of young people living in rented flatshares. Mause asserts that individually rational behaviours regarding the use of 'common-pool resources' by sharers often lead to collectively undesirable outcomes, concluding that 'the occurrence of serious collective action problems is nothing out of the ordinary in shared households' (Mause, 2008, p. 310).

Despite these critiques, there is growing interest in the possibilities of non-commodified forms of collaboration as evidenced by the burgeoning interdisciplinary body of work on the urban commons. Noterman (2016) argues that the concept of the commons has 'been revitalized in contexts associated with a wide range of collective resources, relations, and activities' (p. 434), including in relation to collective housing, whilst Huron (2014, p. 58) defines the commons as 'a resource that is governed collectively by its members and is used not to extract profit for a few individuals but to support the lives of a group'. This is an apt description of SHCs, given their overt resistance to the commodification of space both through their refusal to comply with dominant narratives of privatised home ownership and through bringing together like-minded people to live communally.

Huron (2015) argues further that what makes the *urban* commons distinctive from non-urban forms, apart from their location within spaces that are marked by population density and competing uses, is the way in which they are underpinned by the collective work of strangers united by co-presence rather than members of pre-existing networks. Massey's concept of 'throwntogetherness' is useful here, referring to the ways in which, within cities especially, 'the chance of space may effectively set us down next to the unexpected neighbour' (Massey, 2005, p. 151). SHCs fit this model well, as they typically involve individuals previously unknown to each other and who must learn to co-operate in ways appropriate for the successful running of the co-operative. The ways in which members subsequently manage their relationships – as both co-residents *and* collective owner-managers – are then critical to understanding the success or failure of SHCs as a specific form of urban commons. Indeed, Williams (2017) makes the important argument that, despite a preoccupation in much of the urban common literature with property-related concerns, 'urban commons are *more-than-property* and instead are constituted through *practices of commoning*' (p. 19, emphasis added). These consist of the 'dynamic, relational, social, and negotiated processes' associated with everyday life in urban commons. She argues that

It is these practices of commoning that reveal how urban commons are brought into being, relate to property, are constituted, and affect other ways of doing/being/thinking in urban life whereby people attempt to address injustices. (*ibid*, p. 19)

These arguments, alongside Williams' emphasis on the relational basis of practices of commoning, resonate with the approach adopted in the *Under the Same Roof* project. We found that shared living arrangements of all kinds were best understood through close attention to the nature and quality of the relationships that existed between co-residents. These in turn were profoundly shaped both by the range of resources available to sharers in negotiating the day to day realities of shared living and by structural factors such as tenure or spatial layout (Heath et al., 2018). Our work also utilised the concept of 'critical associations' (Heaphy & Davies, 2012). This term applies to relationships that defy ready categorisation in relation to some of the more typical categorisations used in daily life ('friend', 'relative', 'acquaintance', for example) and which are considered to be critical both in the sense that they are of importance in people's lives and that they are not always or straightforwardly experienced as positive or supportive. Accordingly,

critical associations can ebb and flow through the life course, becoming 'critical' at certain moments ... they might be experienced as fulfilling, supportive, loving, difficult, draining, cloying or even 'toxic'. (Davies & Heaphy, 2011, p. 6)

This description applies well to relationships between co-residents in shared housing, including in SHCs, which lack a widely understood and accepted language for describing their exact nature. Accordingly, sharers often struggle to define and name their relationships with co-residents, and how they shift and change over time, despite the centrality of these relationships to their everyday lives and their potential to have a profound impact upon their sense of wellbeing (Heath et al., 2018). Relationships with co-residents can, then, be close, rewarding and 'family-like'; they can be conflictual, volatile, and explosive; they can be fleeting, involving housemates who are no more than ghostly presences in

each other's lives; and they can be all or none of these things at different points in time. Yet they are usually *critical* to an understanding of sharers' everyday lives.

If we are, then, to fully understand the viability of collaborative housing – here, in the form of SHCs – we need to take seriously these 'more-than-property', relational aspects of housing, and consider how domestic space becomes a critical space of negotiation: 'at once a conduit through which broader political and economic relations are enforced and acted out, a place of domestic retreat and a means through which people engage with kin, community and other local actors' (Alexander et al., 2018, p. 129). These claims are substantiated by the insights into everyday practices of co-operation provided by a small number of recent ethnographic studies of housing co-operatives (albeit not all in the form of mutual ownership or shared occupancy under one roof). Lavolette's (2008) account of life in a London-based short-life housing co-op, where members reside temporarily in (mostly) shared properties destined for demolition or redevelopment, highlights the complex relationship that develops between 'domesticity, mobility and improvisational housing' (p. 130) and the impact this has on the relationships that consequently develop between members of the housing co-operative. Procupez (2008) likewise provides an insightful account of a collective housing project in Buenos Aires that provides shared accommodation for low-income families. She focuses on the 'emotional undertones' of living in close proximity with others and the degree of intimacy that develops over time between members of the collective, whether welcomed or not. Finally, Huron's study of limited-equity co-operatives in the USA focuses on the collective work of strangers in developing 'the basis for less commodified forms of life' (Huron, 2015, p. 964) and the hard work that this entails. Very distinct practices of commoning developed in each of these contexts determined in part by the specifics of the tenure and/or household form, yet the extent to which these practices contributed to furthering a broader communal ethos tended to rely on the quality of the relationships that existed between the co-operatives' members. The degree to which this was also the case in the SHCs involved in the *Under the Same Roof* project will now be explored, after a short introduction to the project and its research design.

## The Under the Same Roof Project

The rest of the paper draws on UK-based research on shared living arrangements involving non-kin. The *Under the Same Roof* project was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council between 2013 and 2015. We aimed to explore the critical associations of shared living, the degree to which house sharing implied a broader sharing of lives, and to consider the possibilities and limits of shared living arrangements in the context of austerity and rising housing costs. Our fieldwork focused on four contrasting shared housing forms: shared households in the privaterented sector, SHCs, private lodging arrangements, and cohousing, this last a hybrid form whereby residents retain separate residences yet share many aspects of domestic life in a communal 'common house'.

The main phase of the research involved qualitative interviews with 64 sharers, mostly interviewed on their own, and with each interview typically lasting between one and two hours. The research team conducted these interviews in participants' homes or in public venues such as cafes and bars. They involved initial elicitation of an unstructured narrative

of past housing experiences, followed by a semi-structured exploration of various aspects of their current experiences of sharing, including their motivations for sharing and how they organised the sharing of finances, domestic space, and time in their current residence. Our interest was in how these different elements affected the quality of everyday relationships between co-residents. A sub-sample of interviewees participated further in either a time-use diary or a photo-elicitation exercise. We also received photographs from a small number of additional sharers, including five who completed an extended photo-elicitation interview, bringing the total number of interviewees to 69.

Of these 69 interviewees, 20 were living in SHCs (thirteen women and seven men), and it is data from these interviews which are utilised in this paper. These twenty lived in SHCs across England and Scotland and we contacted them via publicly accessible directories of communal households such as those listed on the websites of *Diggers and Dreamers* and *Radical Routes*. Ten were aged 20–39, with the other ten aged 40–69. The majority were white British, apart from a British Asian woman, a Brazilian woman, an American woman, and a Finnish woman. Four had co-resident partners, whilst the remaining sixteen were either single or lived apart from their partner. Ten were in full or part-time employment, five were self-employed, two were members of worker co-operatives, one was a full-time home-based carer, and two were students. Most had lived continuously in shared housing of various kinds since first leaving home, including short-life housing co-ops, squats, private lodging arrangements, other SHCs, and house shares in the PRS.

In what follows we explore the nature of everyday co-operation in SHCs. First, we outline some of the tangible benefits of co-operation. These highlight the distinctive nature of the forms of co-operation that develop in SHCs, and which are derived from their radical economic underpinnings. Second, we consider how co-residents negotiated the unusual mix of both formal and informal ways of relating to each other, which are equally critical to the everyday functioning of SHCs.

### **The tangible benefits of co-operation**

SHCs are rooted within the wider politics of affordable housing, with many existing co-operatives of this kind having emerged out of the UK squatter movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kearns, 1981). As with the squatter movement, SHCs seek to balance ideological radicalism with pragmatism in the conduct of everyday life, and the provision of decent, affordable housing remains a central concern. Rent levels are collectively decided, are deliberately set low, and usually remain low. In one of the SHCs included in our research, for example, members had set their rents at just above the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR) for Housing Benefit (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, [this special issue](#)), and in most others were under £300 per month, whereas comparable rents for sharers living in the PRS in our study tended to be at least £150 more and were often considerably higher, especially in southern England. Daniel, a laboratory technician in his early 30s who lived in an SHC established in the 1980s, commented on the benefits of self-determination of rent:

... we can set our own rent. We can do that if we want to, we can just make any price, so the number that we have now, it's pretty arbitrary, the £235, it could be anything really, you know. And there's talk of putting it up to, to something higher just sort of to be more realistic



'cos our world is not particularly realistic, but not a most popular idea, really. Cos people were like, well then we'd have to pay more.

Although Daniel describes his world as 'not particularly realistic', it nonetheless provided affordable, secure, and decent housing and had done so for three decades. Rent levels as low as these are particularly important for younger people who are reliant on the SAR (which caps Housing Benefit at a locally set average cost of a room in a shared house) and struggle to gain access even to affordable *shared* accommodation (Reeve et al., 2018; Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcazar, [this special issue](#)).

Most members were also appreciative of the subversion of the usual landlord–tenant relationship that is a defining feature of SHCs. As Leanne (a student in her early twenties) explained, 'it's really empowering for a group of people who don't have a lot of money to be owning a house and taking it away from a private landlord, so just as a concept it's really important'. Leanne was a founder member of a new SHC consisting mainly of younger adults, including several other students, and she acknowledged the ideological and political importance of mutual ownership. Critically, then, mutual ownership gave members a profound sense of control and a strong sense of pride in their challenge to the dominant values underpinning individual home ownership and the standard landlord–tenant relationship.

Members were also conscious of the important principle that they should never individually profit from the unusual nature of their living arrangement – or, as Rowena (a teacher in her mid-30s) put it, they should not benefit unfairly from 'the fruits of many, many people that have lived here'. As Jim, a horticulturalist in his mid-50s, explained,

To be a member of the co-op, you know, you have to be accepted by all the other members, to join the co-op, and we have to pay a pound to be a member of the co-op and that's our financial stake in it, but we don't own a single brick of the property, none of us, so if any of us leaves at any time, we basically leave with what we came in with, er, minus our pound. And, erm, so there's no kind of incentive for anyone to think they own the property and, or anything like that ...

Members saw themselves, then, as temporary stewards of a shared resource, with a responsibility to safeguard it for future members. Karl, in his early thirties and a full-time carer to his two children, summarised the trade-off succinctly: 'we couldn't individually actually get any money out of the situation, we only get, effectively, secure living conditions' – a fairly significant 'only' in the world of shared housing. In addition, mutually owned co-operatives are expected to assist other co-operative ventures when their financial situation allows it. For example, several SHCs in our research had already paid off their original mortgages or were about to do so. In such cases, members would continue to make a monthly payment to the co-operative, with some of the money thus raised (aside from the costs of ongoing repairs and maintenance) used to support other co-operative ventures.

These values of mutual support and non-profit are fundamental to the co-operative ethos of SHCs, yet were often difficult for outsiders to understand. Friends often asked Daniel if he and his co-residents would sell the house once the mortgage was fully paid in a few years' time:

I remember hearing myself saying precisely the same words to [my friend who lived in a co-op] ... and just not getting it. Not understanding how it works ... In a capitalist society it just

doesn't make any sense ... Friends think the members will be really rich in due course. And I'm like, no. No.

Several participants nonetheless recounted stories of SHCs where it was rumoured that members had indeed lived rent-free after paying off their mortgages or where mutual ownership had been eroded as successive members left without replacement, with the remaining residents subsequently selling off the property for massive personal profit. Technically, this latter situation should not be possible, as the legal framework under which an ownership housing co-operative operates in the UK means that its assets must be passed to another co-op if it folds (Radical Routes, 2015). These stories may then have served largely as cautionary tales (although Huron, 2015; Bruun, 2018 provide examples of the privatisation of co-operative housing in the US and Denmark, respectively).

The absence both of an external landlord and of the profit motive within SHCs also made it possible to support co-residents through lean financial times. Farah, who was in her late 20s, noted that

Basically this house has given me so much security. Like I moved in here, I felt immediately settled, I know that if I lose my job and I have a struggle with rent, I'll be able to negotiate with people, I'm not gonna get kicked out, I know I'm surrounded by good people who'll look after me if I'm having a difficult time.

To cope with such eventualities, some SHCs included a contribution to a contingency fund in their rent, to be dipped into if members were ever unable to pay their rent, whilst others had more informal systems in place. In Karl's co-operative, for example, the general household kitty – which operated very informally, with no requirement to contribute a fixed amount each week – was used by members to cover temporary cash flow problems. Karl explained the benefits of this system,

I've had periods of quite, of being quite poor, when I've not been able to pay in. I mean, you know there's been a few times when I've actually taken money out of the kitty to borrow for things like buying nappies or buying toothpaste or whatever and then like put it back in, you know, next week, when I had money.

As this example suggests, this system required a great deal of mutual trust to work effectively, and not all co-operatives allowed for such flexibility. Other financial benefits were common, arising from practices such as the pooling of resources and shared savings such as those made from the bulk purchasing of food and other household goods. This particular practice was almost universal in the SHCs represented in our research, and invariably supported the work of other co-operative ventures, such as local wholefood co-operatives, so there were both ideological and financial reasons for organising the household in this way. In most of the SHCs, moreover, jointly purchased foodstuffs were collectively cooked and eaten during regular shared mealtimes, which further reinforced the communal ethos of the household.

The low housing costs and security of tenure offered by SHCs also had positive consequences for members' wider life choices, allowing them to make decisions about their work–life balance that would probably have been impossible in other housing contexts (see too Huron, 2015). In particular, many were able to opt for part-time work or self-employment in sectors which were often poorly or intermittently paid or were in some other way precarious, for example, as artists, carers, gardeners, and in workers' co-

operatives. Ellen's rent, for instance, was 'so cheap I can afford to work part-time'. For three days a week, Ellen – who was in her early 50s – worked for a charity and spent the rest of her week developing her artistic practice. Angela, in her mid-30s, also worked part-time, as an events manager, explaining that 'this place has allowed me to be very flexible, to have a life, because before I used to just work and just work, that was my life before.' Part-time hours also facilitated participation in unpaid activism and voluntary work in causes including environmentalism, queer politics, feminism, and disability rights.

Finally, as SHCs tend to occupy properties of above-average size, members often had access to shared spaces and facilities that would be unusual in other housing contexts, including workshops, office spaces, extra-large lounges, or spaces that could be hired by the wider community. These facilities created opportunities for home working, thus saving on the market costs of renting workspace externally. Ellen, for example, rented a second room in her co-operative to use as a studio, financially possible because of the low rents. Knowing that the co-operative was a long-term venture also meant that many properties had been physically adapted over time to the specific spatial needs of multiple adults living together, rather than the presumed needs of families that had informed their original design. Internal walls had been removed to create larger spaces, for example, whilst ground floor reception rooms had often been converted into additional bedrooms, including in one case specifically to create a fully accessible room for members with disabilities.

This section has highlighted some of the benefits associated with practices of trust and co-operation between members of SHCs, premised on a willingness to work in the immediate and longer-term interests of the collective rather than of the individual (albeit simultaneously reaping benefits for the individual). The collective benefits of co-operation were, though, largely inseparable from the collective responsibilities of living in an SHC. These responsibilities necessitated ways of relating to each other that were both formal *and* informal in nature, which we explore in the next section along with some of the associated challenges.

### **Balancing the formal and the informal in shared housing co-operatives**

The rather unusual mix of both formal and informal ways of relating to each other that is integral to everyday life in SHCs was neatly characterised by Jim as a distinction between 'our tenants head' and 'our landlords head', the former concerned with relationships as co-residents, the latter as collective owners and managers of the property. These parallel ways of relating are premised on a shared commitment to a communal ethos that defines the co-operative movement more generally. In the more politically radical SHCs included in our study, this ethos included a shared commitment to ideological concerns such as socialism, environmentalism, feminism, queer politics, or other (usually radical left) causes, and new members would usually have a record of activism in these areas. Less radical SHCs had a more *laissez-faire* approach to ideology, yet nonetheless expected new members to participate in the collective everyday life of the household through practices such as cooking and eating together, attending house meetings, and participating in other shared activities within the household. The fundamental importance of ascribing to such an ethos was very clear to most participants. Karl, for example, noted that

the primary reason that most of us or all of us are here, does seem to be that we want to live with other people. I think it's very much a socially and ideologically motivated project. I mean part of it is that we all want to help each other do various types of, of activism work and various types of social change and things, and there is that aspect to it and it's a good supportive environment for doing that, but I think at least part of it is just that we all feel that living with other people is better than, than not living with other people.

Rowena made a similar point, noting that 'wanting to share things together' was a core criterion in making decisions on new members: 'we kind of really try to promote that, with people that are moving in, it's what we look for in people.'

The desire to make a life together with like-minded individuals in a shared domestic space was then a key motivation, emphasising the more informal ways – as housemates – in which co-residents related to each other. The selection of new members nonetheless emerged as a process that highlighted the need to strike a balance between the informal and formal aspects of relationships in SHCs. When vacancies arose, potential new members had to submit a formal application and meet with existing members in order to ascertain their suitability and to determine what they could offer in terms of skills and competencies. Consensus was then required from existing members, followed in most cases by a trial period of residency, providing a cooling-off period for both parties should either change their minds.

There were no exceptions to these formal routes into membership, despite the awkwardness that this sometimes generated in relation to relationships that are not usually governed by such formality, including in shared contexts (Heath & Scicluna, 2017). For example, should an existing member wish to move in a partner, the partner had to await a vacancy and then apply in their own right, with the expectation that they would rent their own room rather than share with their partner. Tony, a public sector employee in his late 50s, acknowledged that this was 'a very, very difficult thing for co-ops to deal with ... for people who are single within a communal group, to integrate a, a new love, lover, partner or whatever, into their lives, particularly their home lives, is a very, very difficult thing to do.' Informed by personal experience, he stressed how important it was that partners gained acceptance as members in their own right rather than solely as the partner of an existing member:

I'd had previous experience of a community group, against some people's better judgement, accepting a partner come in which was very, very divisive later, because that person actually had no interest in the community at all. They had an interest in one person who lived there and it was, it was a wrong decision for that group to make. So I'm quite hard-lined about it ... they've got to be accepted as a group member, as dispassionately as that group can manage, and it isn't, you can't switch off from, in that way, so it's a very, very complex, emotional situation.

Tony's SHC had encountered an equally awkward situation relating to the balance between formal and informal relationships. The child of existing members had recently turned eighteen, leading to a big debate about how best the co-operative should accommodate the child's transition to adult status. It was agreed that if they wished to continue living there (and hence to continue to live with their parents) then they had to apply for membership in their own right and demonstrate their commitment to the collective ethos. In the event, they were happy to do so, but this example provides a stark illustration of how the formal and the informal can often rub up against each

other in very challenging ways, highlighting the strong links between the personal and the political – the informal and the formal – for members of SHCs.

The importance of achieving the right balance between the formal and the informal is also evident in Andy's account of his SHC's recent recruitment practices. Andy, a self-employed horticulturalist in his late 30s, felt strongly that his fellow members were beginning to place too much emphasis on potential friendship instead of on the ability of new members to contribute to the effective management of the co-operative. He highlighted a recent tendency to choose people whom the bulk of the membership liked as people rather than thinking more strategically about the bigger picture, such as prioritising those in housing need and/or those who would bring tangible benefits to the running of the co-operative. These newer recruits were, he argued, 'slightly middle class, younger, dynamic':

And there's been people in the past who have got experience in co-ops and been, they've had really good things to offer. Maybe socially they didn't get on with everyone but, amazingly, but it would have been good for them, with the house, and they've, they've gone ... I think it's a bit of a talent contest and I don't like that. I tried, and I try to say to people, you're not looking at the person but at everything they can offer. You're not looking at them as if they're your best friend, you know.

Andy's concerns were echoed by Angela, who felt that her SHC had also seen 'a lot of middle class people moving in here now', despite its mission being 'to supply affordable housing to those who really need it'. This shift towards a different type of member was also despite the lifestyle afforded by SHCs being best suited to those who were *not* in full-time professional employment and who therefore, as noted, had the time to grasp the personal and collective opportunities opened up by genuinely low rents. Both Andy and Angela felt that this shift amounted to a dilution, if not a gentrification, of co-operative ideals, and an inappropriate prioritisation of informal ways of relating over more formal ways.

The importance of contributing to the communal ethos through formal ways of relating to each other was most evident in relation to the legal requirement of SHCs to hold regular business meetings involving either all members (as was the case in all those represented in our research) or an elected management committee (Radical Routes, 2015, p. 13). The dynamics of these monthly (sometimes fortnightly) meetings generated considerable discussion in interviews. New members in particular often had high expectations of how they would operate. Emma, for example, who was in her mid-20s and worked part-time as a member of a co-operative food business, had expected house meetings to be characterised by the achievement of consensus via 'well-practiced processes' and 'that it would be part of the culture that everyone's voices would be heard and that would be like a really important thing.' Instead, she found that 'it was quite normal for it to be quite a highly charged energy and, erm, there not being really a process'. Jim also observed that the need to reach either consensus or a majority view could result in 'a fair bit of inertia' and 'massively slow progress of getting things done', which members generally acknowledged as a weakness in the way in which SHCs operated in practice. House meetings could also bring out the worst in people. Lily, for instance, a community worker in her early 20, disliked attending them because of a surprising lack of respect shown by some

members, the poor levels of intergroup communication, and the absence of structured processes of facilitation, all of which left her feeling ‘generally uncomfortable’.

In some SHCs, tensions that built up in business meetings could carry over into the more informal aspects of co-operative life, whereas others had become adept at maintaining clear boundaries between the formal and the informal aspects of co-operative life, including through developing practices of consensual decision-making and conflict resolution. Either way, the dynamics of business meetings were often emotionally exhausting, even when debating a seemingly uncontentious issue such as which colour to repaint the hallway, a decision that had rumbled on for years in more than one SHC. Regardless, the expectation remained that members should put the interests of the collective before those of the individual, even if this was sometimes detrimental to concentrating on one’s own personal goals and ambitions. As Elsa, a postgraduate student in her early 30s, explained, it was often difficult to have energy for both collective *and* individual development, such that a conscious decision to prioritise the latter often acted as a trigger for individuals to leave, making way for new members bringing new energy and commitment.

However, the fact that SHCs are often located in unusually large properties sometimes offered the possibility of a recalibration of the exact terms of mutual ownership in direct response to the shifting needs and desires of co-residents, without members feeling that their only option was to leave. Linda’s story is an interesting case in point. Linda was a gardener in her early 60s whom we had initially believed lived in an SHC (hence our decision to interview her), but it transpired that she and the other original members of her co-operative had decided some years previously to sub-divide the large house that they had shared as housemates into self-contained flats and a shared office space, albeit still on the basis of mutual ownership. Linda explained that

What happened is people got older, it got more and more difficult to share, and also some people took advantage of it. And didn’t pull their weight, and that’s why erm the decision was made to have it changed into flats, because people have grown older. It’s all very well when you’re younger, sharing with people, but as you get older its harder, and things that you know, you might have, like little foibles people had, after a few years drive you completely potty ... so that’s why we ended up having our own flats, doing it that way.

In this case, the SHC had mutated into a more manageable form of collaborative living, whereby its members were able to place both the formal and informal elements of co-operation at arms’ length. The members remained strongly committed to co-operative ideals, and retained their need for affordable housing, but had found a way of renegotiating some of the more challenging aspects in line with their changing needs.

More generally, though, the residents of the SHCs included in our research welcomed the close proximity of others in their everyday lives that came from forming a shared household and valued the sense of shared purpose that underpinned their living arrangements. Nonetheless, as suggested earlier, the exact nature of the relationships that developed between co-residents, sometimes over many years, often proved difficult to define. Ellen had lived in the same co-operative for 22 years, whilst other members, Lynne and Jen, had lived there for roughly the same time. These three women had lived under the same roof for over two decades, and for much of that time had eaten together at least twice a week. Yet Ellen struggled to describe the nature of their relationship to each other:

It's a funny, diff- sort of relationship really, because erm, it's different to a sort of friendship because I don't do stuff out, we don't do that much outside of the house together. Erm, me and Sarah [another member of ten years standing] will go and do things together now and then, and me and Hilary [another member for 18 months] will now and then. But less so actually with Lynne and I and it's, it's actually I don't know how to describe it, it's a funny sort of relationship ...

Others similarly struggled to define their relationships with their co-residents and were equally uncertain whether they were best defined in formal or informal terms. They rarely described them straightforwardly in terms of *either* friendship or collective responsibility, but more often than not expressed ambivalence and some form of qualification of their status.

## Discussion

A housing co-operative is not bricks and mortar, it is a group of people and the means they use to collectively control and manage their housing. (Radical Routes, 2015, p. 4)

This quote, from a guide produced by a UK network of housing and worker co-operatives, acknowledges the centrality of practices of cooperation to the routine functioning of SHCs. These practices constitute the minutiae of the 'dynamic, relational, social, and negotiated processes' (Williams, 2017, p. 19) of everyday life in SHCs, and the relationships that underpin these practices can be understood as *critical associations*: not always easy to define and name, but of fundamental importance to understanding members' quality of life.

Living in close proximity with unrelated co-residents necessitates a degree of self-awareness about the conduct of everyday relationships that is common to all forms of shared housing (Heath et al., 2018). Yet this aspect assumes particular significance within SHCs because of the expectation that members are ideologically committed to collective living. Co-residents therefore live with and negotiate collective principles on a daily basis in ways that are either absent or less transparent in other shared living arrangements and expect to be held to account for their commitment or otherwise to a collective ethos. The legal basis of an SHC also means that members are not simply co-residents but are also collective owner-managers with mutual obligations. These include the requirement to manage the co-operative's affairs through regular business meetings and to recruit new members through fair and open procedures. Co-residents of SHCs thus conduct their everyday domestic lives within a context that is fundamentally shaped by mutual commitments, rules, responsibilities, and an imperative to co-operate, providing the backdrop for both the formal and informal ways in which they relate to each other.

We noted earlier that Hardin's assertions (Hardin, 1968) regarding the tragedy of the commons have cast a long shadow over collective enterprises of diverse kinds, yet they have not gone unchallenged, whether in earlier work on 'common pool resources' (e.g. Ostrom, 1990) or in more recent literature on urban commons, and our own research also leads us to question the universality of his assertions. The conduct of everyday life in an SHC can definitely be challenging, as they are places where individuals must learn to manage the exigencies of 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005). Nonetheless, Massey's description of such places as 'not-inconsiderable collective achievements ... formed

through a myriad of practices of quotidian negotiation and contestation' seems apt (Massey, 2005, p. 154). Indeed, the members of SHCs involved in our study had few illusions about the high levels of commitment to a communal ethos that were required to make mutual ownership a workable context for their living arrangements, and in doing so had learnt through trial and error to tread a careful path between the needs of the collective and the individual.

The SHCs included in our research were, then, quite distinct from the examples examined by Hardin, which Ostrom described as

[CPRs] common pool resources [CPRs] in which no one communicates, everyone acts independently, no attention is paid to the effects of one's actions, and the costs of trying to change the structure of the situation are high. (Ostrom, 1990, p. 183)

She argues that collective endeavours are indeed likely to fail under such negative conditions, and offers counter-examples where, through close physical proximity and frequent interaction, those involved 'can learn whom to trust, what effects their actions will have on each other and on the CPR, and how to organize themselves to gain benefits and avoid harm' (Ostrom, 1990, p. 184). This, she argued, requires mutual acceptance of agreed rules and responsibilities between users of the common resource, alongside mechanisms for dispute resolution and the adaptation of rules. This rings true for SHCs; where these conditions and structures were present and willingly embraced, the SHC was a viable and mutually beneficial living arrangement, whereas where they were sometimes challenged or weakened, the living arrangement was less satisfactory, both at the collective and individual level.

Importantly, though, SHCs operate within timeframes that transcend the strengths or weaknesses of their membership at any given time. Individual members come and go, but the underpinning structure can outlast them all. SHCs can continue to thrive and/or renew themselves within an indefinite temporal framework that in many of the SHCs involved in our research had already lasted several decades. Moreover, the legal framework is deliberately designed to resist the pressures of privatisation. Even in the case of the SHC that had mutated into mutually owned self-contained apartments within the space of the formerly shared property, the members had succeeded in resisting privatisation and had instead adapted the form of the co-operative to their own changing circumstances and needs. We also uncovered a widely shared view that co-residents should probably consider leaving if and when the balance between collective and individual needs became intolerable for them, hence acknowledging their temporary stewardship of a collective and durable resource that would outlive their individual contribution to it. This was not regarded as a weakness, but as recognition of the reassuringly cyclical nature of life in SHCs.

## Conclusion

In our broader research on diverseshared living arrangements, we found that the nature and quality of the relationships that developed between co-residents were inevitably shaped both by the range of resources available to them in negotiating everyday experiences of shared living and by structural factors such as tenure or spatial layout (Heath et al., 2018). In the case of SHCs, co-residents had to learn to negotiate both formal



and informal ways of relating to each other, given their combination of business-like relationships rooted in the shared management of the co-operative and the specific forms of friendship and camaraderie that can arise in more conventional forms of shared housing (Heath, 2004). In practice, these relationships tended to occupy an often uneasy middle ground, as the formal structures of life in an SHC acted to constrain the freedoms of co-residents in ways which would be highly unusual in other domestic contexts (including at times with respect to their intimate relationships), whilst simultaneously bringing many benefits to them. These benefits included the affordability and security of tenure that are often so elusive within shared housing in the private-rented sector, the possibility of creating new ways of negotiating the work–life balance, and the opportunity to redefine relationships between non-kin.

These conditions render SHCs particularly unusual examples of Alexander et al.'s (Alexander et al., 2018) observation, noted earlier, that domestic spaces – of all kinds – are places where 'broader political and economic relations' (p. 129) are enforced and acted out, with the home acting as 'a confluence of affective, moral, political and economic relations' (*ibid*). The unique combination in SHCs of a very specific tenure type (mutual ownership) with a very specific household type (shared occupancy by unrelated adults) brings these tensions between the public and the private – the formal and the informal – to the fore in unique and often challenging ways. Nonetheless, the structures and norms of SHCs – their 'practices of commoning' – allow them to transcend the strengths and weaknesses of their membership at any given time, and hence enable them to offer an unusual alternative to more widespread models of sharing in the private-rented sector.

The broader challenge for SHCs, along with other forms of urban commons, is to continue to resist the forces of privatisation and, as Huron (Huron, 2015, pp. 976–7) puts it, 'to weave new networks of trust and care amid the alienating pressures of the capitalist cityscape'. Interestingly, there is currently a resurgent interest in developing such networks in the context of collaborative housing, including examples such as cohousing, community land trusts, and self-build, often combining co-operative models of various kinds (Mullins & Moore, 2018). It is also noteworthy that newly popular commodified forms of shared housing such as co-living invoke a communal ethos in their publicity and marketing, as they attempt to tap into the zeitgeist. Perhaps SHCs may also become more popular on the back of these diverse schemes. Our research suggests, though, that to fully understand the feasibility of alternative models of shared housing, it is essential that researchers should focus not just on 'bricks and mortar', but 'go through the front door' of shared housing to consider what actually happens in the critical spaces within. Shared housing co-operatives are, indeed, '*more-than-property*' (Williams, 2017, p. 19) and are constituted as much in the everyday practices of co-operation that underpin them as in the broader macro-economic frameworks that shape them.

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