

**Commoners and commoning in neoliberal times:  
A critical realist study of English community-led housing**

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## Abstract

Community-led housing (CLH) is a promising model for socially and environmentally sustainable living. It is also a very small fraction of the housing sector in the UK. Could CLH be part of the solution to UK's housing crisis and benefit more people? Focusing on the social aspects and taking a critical realist approach, this research looked for mechanisms that make CLH work, and identified who it worked for, under what circumstances - and why. Using mixed-methods, it contributes qualitative insights on housing cooperatives and cohousing communities, thereby filling a gap in qualitative work on UK housing cooperatives. The quantitative work provided new data on the social profile of cohousing in England.

The main findings and arguments are set out in three papers, engaging with three research questions: what are the visions and aims of CLH; what kind of social relations form in CLH; what kinds of identities and subjectivities develop in CLH. The paper: "A place that is different from the usual capitalist world': The potential of community-led housing as safe and just spaces" (chapter 3), deploys Nancy Fraser's theory of justice to argue that the social relations in CLH can create safe and just spaces by responding to socio-economic, cultural-symbolic and political injustice. The paper, "Contested subjectivities in a UK housing cooperative: Old hippies and Thatcher's children negotiating the commons" (chapter 4), shows how neoliberalisation affected members' subjectivities and visions over time. The paper, "Beyond affordability: English cohousing as White middle class spaces" (chapter 5), applies a Bourdieusian analysis to show that the main barrier to diversity in UK cohousing is cultural rather than purely economic, since its core practices and values reproduce classed (and racialised) distinctions.

Overall, my contribution is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, I develop the concepts of safe space (in the context of justice and neoliberal oppression), the cooperative subject and the two-way relation between habitus and class perception. I introduce the concept of minimalist and maximalist visions of the commons, which affect the practice of commoning, and propose a framework to consider the impact of visions, social practices and subjectivities on commoning. Practically, I point at the benefits of CLH for its members; the practical ways commons can challenge neoliberalisation; and the way exclusionary practices operate in the cohousing sector and beyond.

## Acknowledgements

When I started my PhD I was warned that it is a solitary venture. This could not be further from the truth. I had the pleasure to work with incredible people; some are mentioned here.

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## Preface

This thesis is original and independent work by the author Yael Arbell. This research was funded by a University of Leeds Scholarship. This project received ethical approval from the University of Leeds AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee on 26 October 2016, under the project's original title, 'Community-Led Housing: Social composition and challenges to the neoliberalisation of housing' (Ethics reference AREA 16-024).

This thesis is presented as an alternative style of doctoral thesis, including published material, in accordance with the protocol set out by the University of Leeds Faculty of Environment for this thesis format. The three manuscripts included in this thesis, indicated as Chapters 3, 4, and 5, have been written for submission for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Two are solely authored by the PhD candidate, Yael Arbell, and one was a joint authorship with Prof. Paul Chatterton and Dr. Lucie Middlemiss, with Yael Arbell as lead author. All these papers report findings based on original research. The first manuscript (designated Chapter 3) was accepted for publication by *Spatial Justice / justice spatiale* (SJJS) In July 2020; the second manuscript (Chapter 4) was published by *Geoforum* on January 2020. The third paper (Chapter 5) was still under review at the time of submission. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis comprise the integrating preceding material required for this thesis format: a comprehensive introduction providing context and rationale of the research, and a methods chapter. The word length of these chapters combined is 14,444 words. At the end of Chapter 2 is a list of references for this integrating preceding material, as per the protocol. Each manuscript written for publication has its own reference list. Chapter 6 comprises the discussion and conclusions section required after the manuscripts. It is 7,481 words long and includes its own reference list. At the end of the thesis is a single, comprehensive list of all the works cited in each of these separate reference lists.

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# 1. Introduction

The promise and potential of community-led housing (CLH) are great, representing a model of socially and environmentally sustainable living through mutual aid and cooperation. Experts count numerous positive aspects of CLH: secure and affordable homes (rented or leased in cooperatives and CLTs) (Moore and McKee 2012; Thompson 2015), high level of tenants' satisfaction, and democratic decision making mechanisms ensuring members' voice is heard (Bliss 2016; Rowlands 2010); successful aging and battling loneliness (Fernández-Arrigoitia and West 2020), reduced and more responsible consumption and lower carbon footprint (Chatterton 2013; Pickerill 2016; Williams 2005), greater political involvement (Berggren 2020; Poley 2007), positive community spirit and a sense of belonging (Bliss 2016; Jarvis 2011) and so much more (Jarvis et al. 2016). These idyllic aspects are sometimes described as modern utopias (Sargisson 2012).

Despite its proven benefits, community-led housing is a very small sector in the UK and elsewhere (although it is more popular in some European countries). Can its many advantages benefit more people? Answering this question requires a better knowledge of what these communities are trying to do, what it is about them that works, and for whom. This research agenda answers Jarvis' (Jarvis 2015b:204–5) call for further conceptualisation and research on the “socio-spatial ‘architecture’ underpinning citizen participation and motivations that drive CLH from the bottom-up (...) if research and policy are to support and enable the process of growing locally driven housing solutions”. With this understanding, we can begin to think who it *can* be for and how it *might* work for wider publics.

This is not merely a hypothetical question for me: throughout my research, I lived in a housing cooperative and was part of an emerging cohousing project. These questions matter to me on a personal and moral level<sup>1</sup>. My initial incentive for the research was discomfort with the capitalist housing market and the perceived homogeneity of the cohousing sector in the UK. How did it come to be this way? Can CLH be for everyone, and should it be? In my drive to imagine what *might be* beyond what *is*, I was guided by Gibson-Graham's “politics of possibility”, which come with its signature ontological notions: the centrality of subjects and their practices of becoming; the importance of place to these practices; the

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<sup>1</sup> See more about my positionality on section 2.2.

acknowledgement of inequality as well as ways to move beyond it; and the constant change of all these (Gibson-Graham 2006). What “openings and possibilities” (Gibson-Graham 2006a:24) does the CLH sector hold? While noticing the impact of neoliberalisation on the communities I researched, I was reminded of Gibson-Graham’s technique of *negative thinking* (which is ironically positive and optimistic), looking for potential rather than limitations, and searching for spaces that are not “fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to and defined within a (global) order” (Gibson-Graham 2006a:xxxiii). These ontological notions and thinking techniques underpin to varying extents the papers that form the main body of this thesis.

### **1.1 The research questions and summary of argument**

Guided by Gibson-Graham’s approach and Jarvis’ research agenda, the research set off to discover the visions and aims, social relations, identities and subjectivities of community-led housing projects in the UK, as well as the wider implications of these to the community-led housing sector. The research questions were:

1. What are the visions and aims of groups attempting to develop and embed community led housing?
2. What are the distinctive group practices and social relations that emerge in community-led housing?
3. What is the role of identities in engaging meaningfully with CLH, and what kinds of subjectivities form in relation to engagement in CLH?
4. In what ways and to what extent can CLH respond to- and challenge neoliberalisation, and act as projects for social justice?

Each paper focuses on one of the research questions: the "safe space" paper (chapter 3) shows how the unique social relations that are fostered in community-led housing yield a sense of safety, both materially and emotionally (RQ2&4). The paper on cooperative subjectivities (chapter 4) focuses on one case study, a housing cooperative, and develops the concept of multiple cooperative subjectivities and different visions of the commons (RQ 1&3); the paper "beyond affordability" (chapter 5) focuses on the cohousing sector in the UK and develops a Bourdieusian analysis of values and identities in this sector (RQ 1, 2, 3, 4).

All three papers discuss the aims and visions of the projects (RQ1). Another thread that runs through the different chapters is the different ways CLH is affected by and responds to neoliberalisation (RQ4): chapter 3 explores how communities can offer safety where wider

processes trigger insecurity; chapter 4 demonstrates the impact of neoliberalisation on commoners' identities, subjectivities, vision and practice over the course of 40 years. These chapters show how practices of commoning (De Angelis 2017) and community economies (Community Economies Collective 2019; Gibson-Graham 2008) can maintain not-so-capitalist spaces in a mainly-capitalist society. By owning and managing housing collectively, members have more agency and more opportunities for informal, interpersonal relationships. Together these three papers offer an integrated, multifaceted response to the original research questions.

The thesis frames CLH as a form of commons, showing different aspects of the way commons are “produced and sustained” (Gibson-Graham 2006a:89). It provides much needed qualitative data on housing cooperative’s response to changing environments and subjectivities, and up to date quantitative data on the social profile of UK Cohousing communities, with rich qualitative response to them. These data are vital for developing our understanding of the current challenges facing commoning in CLH. Looking at the practice of commoning, I introduce the idea of minimalist and maximalist visions of the commons, which rely on commoners' multiple subjectivities as they grapple with changing political circumstances (chapter 4). One possible outcome of commoning is the creation of safe and just spaces from the multiple oppressions of neoliberalism (chapter 3) – a novel conceptualisation in the literature on safe space and neoliberalism alike. But commoning must often involve exclusion, and chapter 5 engages critically with practices of exclusion in the UK cohousing sector. While not dismissing the importance of affordability to the development of the sector as an accessible option, I argue that currently the main barrier to inclusion is cultural, and is played out through members' unintentional classed and racialised practices. Moreover, I show how eco-habitus is used as a proxy for Whiteness and middle-classness, projecting this particular class perception on people in various positions. Finally, the conclusion offers a model to the process of commoning, which integrates findings from the different papers.

## **1.2 The case studies**

The thesis draws mainly on in-depth qualitative research with two very different communities: a housing cooperative and a cohousing community. In addition, the study involved two focus groups with two other cohousing projects – an established one and a project that was still building at the time of research. These groups helped to gather specific

data in response to the survey and validate previous work. Other qualitative data came from survey responses to an open question, giving voice to wider circles of CLH members. I explain the sampling rationale in more detail in the methods chapter, but for now, the readers must be keen to know whose voices and experiences provided insight into this research project.

Beechtree housing cooperative (real name changed for anonymity) is set in an inner-city deprived neighbourhood in the North of England. At the time of research, the cooperative was operating for over 40 years, owning 40 housing units ranging from a shared house and 1-bed flats to large 4-bed family houses. The community was intergenerational and diverse, with members from all walks of life and occupations, including some people from minority ethnic groups (but notably not South-Asians, despite the cooperative's location at the heart of a predominantly South-Asian community). Many members lived in the cooperative for a long time, half of them over ten years. A significant number of key members were very involved in left-wing politics, although other members were uninterested in political activism and even resented the cooperative's lefty identity. A relatively high number of members were LGBT+, reflecting its origins in a gay men's cooperative. A more detailed history of the cooperative is in chapter 4, "Contested Subjectivities in a UK housing cooperative: Old hippies and Thatcher's children negotiating the commons".

The second community was Bridport Cohousing (BC)<sup>2</sup>, a group in rural Dorset setting up an affordable housing development in collaboration with a housing association (for a good overview of the project see Hudson, Scanlon, and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2019). Bridport is characterised by a high percentage of comfortably off older people (Earley 2011) and is predominantly White British (96.4%) (Dorset County Council 2018). The cohousing community reflects this profile, although some members were not wealthy and the project was seen as a response to growing gentrification by wealthy older people who wanted to retire in this beautiful area, leaving local younger families priced out. Bridport Cohousing worked in collaboration with a housing association and was planning to offer half of their homes (26 units) at affordable social rent and the other half (27) for sale, either as shared ownership (25% - 75%) or leased. BC is highly committed to environmental sustainability

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<sup>2</sup> This group was anonymised in the papers following the original terms of consent, but I was later granted permission to use the real name in the dissertation in order to offer more accurate context. It is named "Seagull cohousing" in chapter 3 and C1 in chapter 5.

and egalitarian decision making; the group's use of the Sociocracy decision-making model was a source of great pride for members, and many mentioned it as one of the pillars of the community. The group has been working on the project for 8 years when I first met them and have faced many obstacles, with housing associations dissolving and merging into larger ones, difficulties with other stakeholders around the development and members leaving and returning as their life circumstances changed. Although I was hoping to see the project being set up during my research, it remained a work in progress, and since my interests were focused on the people who ended up living in cohousing, my engagement with them was limited in comparison to my in-depth work with Beechtree.

### **1.3 UK CLH: Small commoning communities in a neoliberal environment**

The small scale of CLH is an essential context for understanding how it works and for whom. CLH offers many compelling solutions for social and environmental sustainability, but some of these solutions struggle to penetrate the mainstream. CLH projects tend to be of small scale, to enable meaningful community leadership. In this literature review I discuss the issue of scale from three angles: 1) the relationship between CLH and wider processes of neoliberalisation; 2) the role of scale in practices of commoning; and finally, 3) critically assessing the desire to scale up or out, with regards to the normative aspects of universalism and a politics of difference. This review forms an empirical and theoretical context for the main chapters. It points at some important aspects of the literature I draw upon but could not develop in much depth in the papers, and also identifies some of the gaps I addressed in the main chapters. But before I delve into the question of scale, I briefly introduce the CLH sector in the UK and the concepts of commoning and neoliberalisation.

#### ***1.3.1 Introducing CLH: a diverse sector in a changing policy context***

Community-led housing (CLH) is an umbrella term for housing initiatives that are designed and managed by a community, often on a not-for-profit basis. CLH projects have been operating in the UK for decades, but the term itself is a more recent policy construct, used by governments to define eligibility for funding and support through several schemes since 2010

(Gooding and Johnston 2015). Under this umbrella are five main types of CLH: “community land trusts (CLTs), mutuals and cooperatives, cohousing, self and custom-build, and self-help housing” (Lang, Chatterton, and Mullins 2020:59). These types represent “a spectrum between the concepts of ‘community benefit’ and ‘community control’” (Mullins and Moore 2018:6), with differences covering ownership and management models, tenure types, values, levels of participation and target audience (for a concise but comprehensive comparison between the models see Field 2017:45). At the same time, the distinction between them is not always clear (some cohousing groups are also cooperatives or CLTs, for example), and there is a debate on what counts as CLH, for example, “whether small-scale charities or larger housing associations with high levels of tenant participation would count as community-led” (Goulding et al. 2018). Importantly, however, although their motivations are diverse they do not include profit-making (Field 2020:18). This research explored an ownership cooperative and a cohousing project that is also a CLT, and therefore I focus mainly on these three types in this introductory section.

The CLH sector in England is small, even in comparison to other European countries and the US, “currently delivering only around 400 units per year in England – less than 0.3% of total housing output” (Homes England 2018:4). Not only is it not widely known (Jarvis et al. 2016), even where it is more familiar it is not a preferable option for most people. For example in Lancaster, where “residents are familiar with the concept because of the success of the Halton Mill co-housing project”, 11% expressed interest in cohousing in a the council’s public consultation (Fernández-Arrigoitia, Scanlon, and West 2018:3) – a surprisingly high figure but still a small minority. The gap between the UK and European countries is related to traditional high levels of home ownership in contrast with Europe’s favourable approach to rent, as well as the state’s role in establishing CLH projects: many of the European projects were funded and built by the state (Droste 2015; Jarvis 2015a; Lang and Stoeger 2018; Tummers 2016).

The most common form of CLH in England is housing cooperatives, which is in itself an umbrella term for different forms of rented housing (as opposed to limited-equity cooperative models that are common in the US, which involve individual shares, see Huron 2018). The majority of co-operative and mutual housing “consists of tenant management organisations and tenant-controlled (or community-based) housing associations managing large quantities of conventional housing stock on behalf of local councils and housing associations” (Heath et al. 2018). A smaller but significant type is ownership cooperatives, usually much smaller in



scale but often with higher level of active participation, in which all tenants are members and collectively own their houses. Many of them were set up in the 1970s following favourable policies supporting housing stock transfer to community groups and generous purchase and repair grants (Ellis 2017; Rowlands 2010; Thompson 2018) (for more on the history of this kind of housing cooperatives see chapter 4). New cooperatives are still being set up today, but not on such a large scale, partly due to lack of funding, as discussed below (Bliss 2016).

The most rapidly growing model is the Community Land Trust, in which communities offer affordable housing in perpetuity and not for profit on land that is held in commons for the benefit of local people. This enables the community to avoid land speculations and thereby tackle gentrification and pricing out of local people (Bunce 2016; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2016; Thompson 2015). CLTs in the UK are most common in rural areas (Field 2020) and often offer not only rented accommodation but also long term leases and shared ownership options (where tenants buy a share of the house and pay rent to a housing association who owns the other part). CLTs are managed by a board of representatives which include stakeholders from the wider community as well as residents.

Cohousing is also rapidly growing in the UK: there are currently 19 communities in England but dozens of groups are developing new projects (UK Cohousing Network 2020). The number of members in the sector is not centrally documented, so I had to collect this data for this research, together with the much needed data on the social profile of members.

Cohousing projects are different from each other, but generally mean a small neighbourhood (between 5-30 homes) developed and managed by its residents, with private living spaces and shared facilities and activities that encourage social interaction and sustainable living (Chatterton 2013; Jarvis 2011). These tend to include shared gardens and a common house where members can socialise and have shared meals a few times a week (Field 2015).

Cohousing communities often make decisions by consensus and require high level of member participation in the daily management of the community (Sargisson 2010). For members of cohousing, the daily work of commoning is the social glue that gives the project its meaning and value (Fernández-Arrigoitia and West 2020). Cohousing is a relatively new model in the UK and in most cases based on privately owned houses. In spite of members' desire to set up affordable schemes, market conditions make this very difficult: acquiring land not for profit means that speculative developers will most likely "outbid cohousing groups in free market land sales" (Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015:119). In this sense, the model is not affordable and is not an immediate response to the housing crisis, but in some cases can offer

a long-term response through alternative ownership models (Chatterton 2013). More details on the UK cohousing sector can be found in chapter 5.

The CLH sector has several hub organisations that offer expertise and financial support to projects of various models, “helping to construct the environment in which community self-help can thrive” (Moore and Mullins 2013:25). Such hubs enhance residents’ linking social capital – “the vertical ties between residents and people in positions of influence and power in different societal fields” (Lang and Novy 2013:1745). Communities’ ability to network and collaborate is a key to their success, which is particularly evident in the case of CLTs, “with an active network of CLTs, intermediaries, housing associations and local authorities involved in their development” (Moore and Mullins 2013:25).

Intermediary organisations play a vital role in a political environment that resent top-down interventions and encourages entrepreneurialism. In many ways, they take the place central and local government took in the 1970s in supporting CLH initiatives (Ellis 2017; Thompson 2018). A key difference between the wave of government support in CLH in the 1970s and today is the wider context for social movements: “urban movements of the 1970s and early 1980s had been part of a broader social mobilization in the aftermath of the various 1960s movements (...) and their resistance to urban renewal and uneven distribution of resources (...) were embedded in a vibrant infrastructure of progressive alternative projects (...). Movement milieus [today] have confronted continuously maturing neoliberal policy regimes with contradictory effects” (Künkel and Mayer 2012:91). This changing policy context is crucial to the way CLH operates, and has important implications on its small scale.

### ***1.3.2 Commoning in a neoliberal environment***

*“Do we live in a neoliberal urban society? Not really: Cities remain more than engines of spatial competition, welfare reform, and neoliberal subject formation” (Leitner et. al 2007:21)*

Community-led housing is a form of commons (Byrne and Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009; Linebaugh 2014; Pickerill 2016): a social system “in which resources are pooled by a community of subjects who also govern these resources to guarantee the sustainability of the resources (...) and the reproduction of the community, and who engage in commoning, that is, doing in commons that has a direct relation to the needs, desires and aspirations of the commoners” (De Angelis 2017:90). Commons imaginaries “promote collective over individual interest; collaboration rather than competition; recognition and

respect for diversity rather than commodification of individual identity; and care for the environment over productivity/growth/exploitation” (Leitner et al. 2007:12). With such grand ensemble of collective, not-for-profit efforts, it is tempting to frame the commons as “antithetical to capital” and an act of resistance against individualised neoliberalism (Linebaugh 2014:4). But scholars differ in their view of the position of the commons in relation to state and capital, and although I held Linebaugh’s polarised view at the beginning of my research journey, I now consider it more productive to view commoning and enclosure not simply as opposites but as “entwined and contested” (Jeffrey, Mcfarlane, and Vasudevan 2012).

Linebaugh, who coined the term “commoning”, emphasised its interpersonal and non-commercial aspects: “the commons is often outside of the realm of buying and selling or the realm of the commodity; it is where life is conducted face to face” (2014:19). In a somewhat romantic view of commoning initiatives as prefigurative, Caffentzis and Federici (2014:i95) described them as “more than dikes against the neoliberal assault on our livelihood. They are the seeds, the embryonic form of an alternative mode of production in the make”. But commoners work not only in resistance or towards a promising future: they operate here and now, in their own right. This notion is reflected in scholarship on more complex relationships between the commons and neoliberal capitalism; in fact, some argue that “urban commoning is an everyday practice that is not always and not necessarily ideologically opposed to state capitalism” (Kirwan, Dawney, and Brigstocke 2016:8. A good example for this approach is Noterman 2016 on manufactured housing cooperatives in the US). This line of thinking opens up recognition of commoning well *within* the realm of buying and selling, a process that is “applicable to any form of property, whether private, or state- owned, or open access” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2018:193).

Neoliberalisation processes affect various aspects of life: policy, state form, subjectivities, governmentality and ideology (Larner 2000). These aspects, as Springer (2012) showed, are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually constitutive: an ideology drives policy and shapes state forms, which create a neoliberal ‘common sense’ that is present in various aspects of our lives, either externally enforced or internalised. Neoliberal policies and governmentalities impact people’s modes of being and mental health (Chandler and Reid 2016; Mavelli 2017; McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy 2016). This analytical perspective is particularly important for chapters 3 and 4, analysing CLH as a safe space from various emotional and material challenges, and considering the historical changes in cooperative members’ subjectivities.

Just as it is analytically beneficial to view the commons as a *process* (“commoning”) and recognise its interaction with contested logics, so is the case for neoliberalism. Without underplaying the importance of neoliberalism, it is prudent to avoid a totalising framing of it (Clarke 2008). Instead of depicting *neoliberalism* as an all-powerful, omnipresent and hegemonic entity, it is analytically fruitful to think of *neoliberalisation* as a process, constantly changing not only to co-opt resistance (Peck and Tickell 2012), but also to interact and “potentially [being] reshaped” by contestations (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziartot 2008:8). This perspective is beneficial for several reasons. First, it is an ethical choice that opens up a hopeful politics of possibilities instead of a deterministic politics which tends to cast neoliberal economy, subjectivity, ideology and policy in the role of the hegemonic emperor, and all other forms of being and thinking as scattered partisan “alternatives” (Gibson-Graham 2006a; for one example of the latter perspective see Castree 2010). Second, it is methodologically productive: capitalocentric thinking – perceiving capitalist neoliberalism as the only “real” logic – can obscure our vision of already existing diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2006c). Third, thinking of commons, state and capital as entangled systems allows us to make sense of the mechanisms that reproduce the commons in themselves and in relation to those other systems. As De Angelis explained, “to the extent that states and capital influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons, states and capital are inside commons even if their systemic patterns and logics are outside them” (De Angelis 2017:102). Therefore, rather than seeking a dominant form of subjection (Chandler and Reid 2016), I am analytically open to the idea of multiple subjectivities and consequently can paint a richer picture of how commoning projects work. These conceptualisations underpin my discussion of neoliberalisation and CLH both in the following paragraphs and in the main chapters.

### ***1.3.2.1 CLH and neoliberalisation: markets, state policies and subjectivities***

Building on the above framing of commons and neoliberalisation, this section looks more specifically at the relations between neoliberalisation and the small scale of CLH, in terms of markets, policies and subjectivities. To put it simply: setting up a non-profit collaborative scheme in an environment that is profit-driven and individualised is going against the grain of the capitalist market. As former Housing Minister Alok Sharma phrased it: “it’s [CLH] seen as a heroic endeavour that is only for the most extraordinary and adventurous of individuals” (Sharma 2017). This undertaking is heroic because members must face adverse market conditions, inconsistent policies and a mainstream culture of individualism and competition. I begin this part of the review by sketching up two ways of perceiving CLH’s relationship with

their neoliberal environment (future-oriented and a form of contemporary resistance), followed by a more detailed picture of three key elements of neoliberalisation that affect CLH: market conditions, policies and subjectivities.

Just like many other commons, CLH is often described in the literature as “the way forward” and a good *model for a future* society (Jarvis et al. 2016; Sargisson 2012). Their logic, values and practice are different in many ways from the mainstream, so they may not become “the new normal” in the near future (Chatterton 2016). With an eye on the future, they also represent the actually-existing community economies Gibson-Graham were searching for (Gibson-Graham 2006a); and example for this is Gooding and Johnson’s comment in their report on CLH: “one of the great surprises from this research has been the realisation that the sector is far bigger than we had anticipated” (Gooding and Johnston 2015:19). It is easy to adopt a capitalocentric perspective (Gibson-Graham 2006c) and focus on the restrictions imposed on CLH by processes of neoliberalisation, but reading for difference reveals that CLH is already providing some pockets of diversity.

CLH is also often described as an innovative response to *current* state and market failure, and particularly the on-going neoliberal housing crisis in the UK (Field and Layard 2017; Moore 2016; National CLT Network 2020; but see Mullins and Moore 2018). This crisis is enhanced by neoliberal policies that erode social housing and rely on the market to encourage private ownership and regulate rent. As a result, prices are rocketing, rent is precarious and social housing is not working for many who need it: it is now for the most marginalised and is often poorly managed and maintained and suffers from negative stigma (Field 2014; Hodkinson 2019; Levitas 2012; Peck 2012; McKenzie 2015). As prices go up, homeownership levels are going down, leading to a growing number of households being priced out of their local areas through gentrification (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018). Many in the CLH sector argue that self-build and local planning are the answers to low building rates and unsuitable types and locations of homes by profit driven developers. To conclude this depiction of CLH, it is important to remember that this is only one narrative, and CLH can also be framed as a result of long term processes that started before the financial crisis (Mullins and Moore 2018). Moreover, readers must bear in mind the difference between various CLH types: cohousing in the UK, for example, is largely based on home ownership and in most cases cannot offer an alternative to commodified housing.

- **CLH and neoliberalised markets**

A main reason for CLH's small scale is its focus on the use-value rather than the market-value of the schemes. Building not-for-profit leads to various complications that limit the creation of more CLH projects. "The greatest challenge" for CLH groups (Benson and Hamiduddin 2017) is finding land, partly because for-profit developers are more likely to bid higher on land, and consequently CLH groups may spend a long time searching for land, which complicates the projects and also involve financial risk (Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015). Without support from local authorities or grants, it is difficult for most communities to raise sufficient funds to establish a community, even when the land itself is cheap. As a key sector stakeholder soberly told me: "it is hard to do expensive things on the cheap".

Shifting the focus from communities to single households, households' relations to the market are often a key consideration in their housing strategy, both in terms of the kind of houses they can afford and the kind of aspirations they have for their houses as property. Many CLH projects are based on rent, shared ownership or leases, but rarely on traditional private ownership – the aspiration of the majority of people in the UK (Field 2020:123). Even shared ownership, which is often used in CLH projects as an affordable housing option, does not satisfy the desire to own privately, or provides the identity and meaning of private ownership (Bright and Hopkins 2011). Shared ownership also involves various complications for those wishing to resell their shares, which makes it unattractive for potential shared owners (Clarke and Heywood 2012). Similar conditions apply for cohousing homes in most communities, where members who want to move out must gain the community's approval of potential buyers before they can sell. In a similar way, CLH poses difficulties for those wishing to use their home as their main form of asset, saving or inheritance. This is true not only for rent-based projects like cooperatives and some CLTs, but also for predominantly ownership based models like cohousing, where members' children can live in the community as adults only if they choose to become members of the community, with all that entails (Riedy et al. 2019). Furthermore, buying a house in a CLT or in some cohousing projects that limit the market value of the properties in the long run make them affordable for new buyers but reduces the options for members reselling and moving elsewhere, where house prices were not restricted (Chatterton 2013; Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015). This kind of commitment to affordability may not be attractive to those seeking financial security through real-estate investments.

- **CLH and neoliberalised state policies**

Paradoxically, while resisting neoliberalisation, CLH initiatives are also supported by a New Localism agenda that devolves power to local communities (Elwood 2004; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014). Designed as part of the neoliberal vision of small government and community empowerment, in many ways the Localism agenda also fits other visions of grassroots projects, critical of both state and market. Critiques were sceptical about the Government's motivations for support, seeing it as a neoliberal move to roll off responsibility onto communities (Jacobs and Manzi 2012). Featherstone et al. (2012) labelled it "austerity localism", which unlike progressive and equitable processes of decentralisation, is an "anti-public" discourse which "envisions decentralising power to *certain* local people" (177-178). Concerns about the way localism is used to promote neoliberal agendas seem more justified considering that support is often used to promote the Conservative Governments' goal to increase levels of private ownership, and this is reflected in the kind of support available, for example generous funding for shared ownership schemes that encourage first-time buyers go "up the housing ladder" (Lloyd, Peel, and Janssen-Jansen 2015).

Nonetheless, CLH has enjoyed increased prominence under the localism agenda, and "some forms of community-led housing were also recognised by funding allocations in the 2011-15 National Affordable Housing Programme" (Mullins and Sacranie 2014:5). Since 2010, UK governments have endorsed CLH and provided support through direct and indirect channels, including advice and grants through Locality, a national network for community organisations. In 2016 the government announced a £136m grant to be allocated to community projects. But bidding did not open until July 2018, and was closed at the end of 2019, under restrictions that all awarded funding must be spent by March 2020. The National Community Land Trust Network warned that the fund was "seriously underallocated" (Barker 2019): by December 2019, shortly before the deadline for applications, less than 15% of the £163m fund were allocated (Heath 2019). The grants indeed gave the sector a boost (Archer 2020), but communities and umbrella organisations were frustrated by the short time left for application and spending the money, and no announcement on further funding (Bird 2020).

Does this indicate that scaling up CLH necessarily involves a neoliberal co-optation, or do these trends simply "coincide", as Jarvis (2015) argued? One response to concerns about co-optation is that it assumes little agency for non-capitalist projects and sophisticated cunning

power to neoliberal agendas: the kind of capitalocentric and hopeless perspective that Gibson-Graham warned against (Gibson-Graham 2006c). In fact, studies found that CLH can use government funds effectively without changing their ethos or aims (Mullins and Sacranie 2014). Moreover, Mullins and Moore (2018) argued convincingly that the resurgence of CLH started before the 2008 economic crisis and is influenced by longer term social origins and international knowledge transfer: they are not simply a response to an economic crisis and roll out neoliberalism. Rather than seeing CLH and New Localism as oppositional or parallel, I found it more productive to look at the *relationship* between CLH commons and neoliberal environments. While they may employ a different logic, well established CLH projects and newly emerging ones must adapt and respond to changing realities, while members confront changing subjectivities and demands from state and capital. Housing options, work patterns, welfare safety net and cultural norms around communality and individuality affect communities' possibilities to organise and members' needs and visions for community life; these issues are developed in chapter 4.

- **CLH and neoliberalised subjectivities**

The way subjectivities are formed through practice is a key concept in Gibson-Graham's diverse economies project (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 2006c) which guided my research. However, there is no discussion in the literature on the way subjectivities are formed in the context of CLH in the UK, so I was drawing on studies from other empirical contexts to conceptualise the cooperative subject as multiple and contested. Some of these involved cooperative businesses and community initiatives from outside the UK (De Angelis 2017; Barron 2017; Byrne and Healy 2006), and others were more specific to housing context, including the tension between top-down social housing policies and their implementation by reluctant subjects (Flint 2003; McKee 2011; McKee and Cooper 2008); the multiple subjectivities within housing cooperatives in the US (Noterman 2016; Siegel 2014) and the tension between transformative and reformist subject positions in CLTs, mainly in the US (DeFilippis et al. 2019; Hackett et al. 2019).

Particularly instructive were Noterman's and McKee's works, which fleshed out the multiple and complex subjectivities involved in housing projects when residents do not seek to engage in utopian experiments. McKee's research with social tenants in Glasgow found a tension between tenants' experiences and concerns and the policy discourse of choice, agency and empowerment through ownership and control of housing. While the government framed the problem with social housing "in terms of a lack of tenant control" (McKee 2011:13), tenants



sought direct practical support from the government: financial investment in houses and their maintenance. In fact, tenants were concerned that devolving responsibility onto local communities will leave them more precarious. Although they could see some benefits in tenant control, they did not fully buy into the empowerment rationale. Her study might explain why some tenants who could potentially benefit from CLH are reluctant to engage with it, and thereby limit its growth.

To develop McKees' critical analysis of agency and empowerment, I draw on existing CLH literature for some indirect examples of the importance of subjectivities to the study of CLH. They reflect the way subjectivities are key for "reading for difference" in situations that appear as objective truths about residents' control and agency. For example, many believe that private homeownership is the ultimate form of control (Flint 2003; but see Wallace, Rhodes, and Roth 2018), but CLH members are satisfied with residents' control over the management of their housing (Bliss 2009): controlling more than just their own home without necessarily owning it. Another example is safety. Safety is considered the most important aspect of good housing (Kearns and Parkes 2003:837), but while a growing number of people in the UK hope to achieve this through gated communities or fortified houses (Blandy 2018), CLH members seek safety in community (Ruiu 2014). A shared view of what entails good housing led different people to seek different solutions to the same problems. This perspective, I argue, reflects their cooperative subjectivity.

Considering identities as well as subjectivities reveal a complex picture of what good housing might be for different people. "Safety", for example, is always contextualised and does not have a universal meaning: it involves classed and racialized aspects. Living in a stigmatized area may be a safer choice for the stigmatized, because living with "people like them" makes life within the area stigma-free. Therefore, a "good area" means different things to different social groups, including working class people and ethnic minorities who are subject to classism or racism, or interested in proximity to places of worship or specific shops (Harrison and Davis 2001; McKenzie 2015; Phillips 2007).

Identities and subjectivities are closely related. Subject formation and presentation are the result of social position (Skeggs 2005), and therefore members' identities are likely to affect their subjectivities and engagement with CLH. But not enough is known about identities in the CLH sector, especially in terms of qualitative research. So far the main aspects of identities in the literature on CLH related to gender and age (Lang, Carriou, and Czischke

2020), but other aspects are under-researched or are covered mainly by quantitative research (Boyer and Leland 2018; Jakobsen and Larsen 2019; Margolis and Entin 2011; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018). Diversity varies between different CLH types. We know that the common demographic profile of cohousing members often consists of older, educated, White liberals, although there are European examples of more diverse projects in terms of class and immigration, for example in the Netherlands and Germany (Czischke and Huisman 2018; Fromm and Jong 2009; LeFond and Tsvetkova 2017). Housing cooperatives are more diverse, especially those which require less direct involvement in the management of the cooperative (Bliss 2016; Clapham and Kintrea 1992; Rowlands 2009b). There is some evidence that cooperatives that are more idealistic, require high level of participation and involve high level of sharing tend to have a similar profile to that of cohousing: more White and highly educated, although younger and less affluent (Radical Routes 2013b). This study aims to fill this gap with in-depth qualitative research on identities in cooperatives and cohousing communities.

### ***1.3.3 The limited scale of effective commons: quality, not quantity***

*“There is definitely a case for scaling out rather than up” (Gooding and Johnston 2015:24)*

Commons are generally understood as an organisational form that works best on a small scale (De Angelis 2017; Harvey 2011). Caffentzis and Federici (2014) called to “dispel the assumption that a society based on commons is a utopia or that commons must be small-scale projects, unfit to provide the foundation of a new mode of production” (i94). But their argument can be considered more productively as two separate statements: one regarding scale and one regarding the foundation of a new way of being; the first, I contend, is inaccurate, while the second is true. Their argument for large scale commons draws on several pre-capitalist examples, like Linebaugh’s estimation that in 1688, one quarter of the total area of England and Wales was common land (Linebaugh 2008). But their example in fact demonstrates the opposite: the English commons were far from one large coherent unit, but rather a cultural construct applied locally, in small-scale and independent commons that had little to do with each other. At the same time, the existence of commons as a mainstream logic with so many separate units indeed formed the foundation for a way of life that is no longer the norm after years of enclosure. A more convincing approach is the Community Economies Collective’s call for a “politics of commoning” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2018),

which aims at commoning at the largest possible scale (our atmosphere and ecosystem) through an assemblage of local projects that creates a loose commoning community.

The CLH sector is a good example of the importance of small scale for successful commoning, by ensuring a sense of belonging and agency which translate to high level of satisfaction for members (Bliss 2009). McCamant and Durrett (2011:31) famously stated that the optimum number of adults in a cohousing community is between 20 to 50. This kind of scale maintains commons on a face to face level – a crucial factor for commoning as Linebaugh (2014) described it. Stakeholders in the sector generally believed that CLH is essentially a small-scale concept: the disadvantages of scaling up included compromising the democratic and participatory essence of the projects and reduced its suitability to members' specific needs, including quick response and good maintenance. A lender commented that CLH had “a lot more vibrancy... what some housing associations have lost along the way” (Heywood 2016:31; on the inherent disadvantages of large scale management see also Ansar et al. 2016). Fields (2020) suggested that CLH does not have to be small or localised, using the large-scale self-build development in Graven Hill as an example (p127). But impressive as this scheme is, it is not a form of *commons* and cannot be used as an effective counter example: the self-build houses in this project are private and individual, and the scheme is missing key aspects of CLH such as collective decision making (Graven Hill 2020).

At this point it is important to reemphasise the differences between the types of CLH housing: some CLH types require high level of direct involvement and a strict application process that aims to ensure members understand the values and practice of the project. For example, cohousing emphasise social interaction as an important aspect of the project while “members of a co-operative led largely separate lives, spent little time together in communal areas” (Heath et al. 2018). Both cohousing and some ownership cooperatives are particularly demanding in terms of participation in meetings and committees and often in terms of ideology and lifestyle, too (Chatterton 2013; Clapham and Kintrea 1992; Radical Routes 2013b; Sanguinetti 2014). In other types, residents run a very normative lifestyle, renting or leasing a house from what may feel like a housing association without much participation at all. For example, in many CLTs the “Management Board structure is clearly comprised of local supporters, and not from the households themselves” (Cerulli and Field 2011). Illustrating this point, a member of a large housing cooperative where members were represented in the management board told me that many members did not even know it was a cooperative; they moved in through the housing register seeking low rent. This anecdote is

supported by studies that showed that levels of participation declined as number of tenants in TMOs were higher (Rowlands 2010). Considering the small number of qualitative studies on housing cooperatives in the UK in the last decades, it is difficult to explain in depth what commoning mean to members, and the dynamics of participation and belonging in these projects. This research seeks to fill this gap.

Returning to Gibson-Graham, scaling out and creating networks of commoning may seem like a safer route for CLH if it was to keep the “L” in its name meaningful. But this route also involves serious and well documented set-backs. The most discussed obstacles for scaling out are the difficulties for independent groups setting up new projects: the time, money, skills, knowledge of processes, social capital and even awareness to the models (Heywood 2016; Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015). With the previous section in mind, other barriers are the effects of austerity on people’s resources: time, money, leisure and security to pursuit new ideas beyond immediate survival (Garciano 2011; McKenzie 2015).

#### ***1.3.4 Is CLH good for the many, not the few?***

Ending this introduction, I now turn to discuss the way the literature addresses CLH’s small scale and consider how it fits with broader discussions in housing studies on segregation and diversity beyond the CLH sector.

I have already mentioned that scholars of CLH tend to view it very positively, pointing at the benefits for social and environmental sustainability, sometimes to a degree of ‘wishful thinking’ and glossing over difficulties and shortcomings (Tummers and Macgregor 2019). Although some scholars pointed at some cracks in the idyllic picture of CLH, critique tends to arise from a left-wing perspective: community-led projects are criticized either for being too exclusive (Bresson and Labit 2019; Chiodelli 2015; Chiodelli and Baglione 2013; Chitewere and Taylor 2010); too capitalist (Jacobs and Manzi 2012; Jarvis 2015a) or too inward-looking or deliberately a-political to be politically transformative (DeFilippis et al. 2019; DeFilippis, Fisher, and Shragge 2006; Engelsman et al. 2016). Few studies involve mainstream perspectives on CLH models, reflecting either the writer’s own views or their participants. A good example of the former is Morton’s enthusiasm for self-build as an alternative to excessive central regulation, with private ownership at the heart of development (Morton 2012). An example of the latter is Riedy et al.’s (2019) qualitative work with older people in Australia, who recognised the benefits of community living but could not reconcile

it with their conventional lifestyle, values and priorities, such as privacy and individualism or the ability to simply inherit the house to their children.

The liberal bias in CLH studies poses two main problems. First, the literature engages with the field from similar standpoints, and possibly not asking some important questions. One blind spot that Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia have highlighted is that because the cohousing literature “generally situates cohousing in a communitarian paradigm (...) [it] rejects traditional neo-liberal assumptions about individual agency, the advantages of competitive markets and the goal of economic growth, instead stressing the formation of strong communities as an economic and social objective” (Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015:108). Another missing question that stems from the assumption that CLH is essentially a universally good thing is: who in fact finds CLH attractive, under what circumstances, and why? Chapter 5 contributes to the literature by critically engaging with this question, adding a sympathetic but critical perspective on the sector. The second problem is that policy instructed by these studies may reflect experts’ views but remain detached from the needs and aspirations of people in these housing projects (McKee 2011; Riedy et al. 2019). This universally formulated approach, as Young (1990:173) warned, leads to policies that are “blind to differences of race, culture, gender, age, or disability often perpetuate rather than undermine oppression”. This is particularly important in relation to niche models: who do they serve and why are they framed as potentially universal? Is the key to growth for the CLH is diversifying its membership?

Acknowledging universalism is significant in discussions about (lack of) diversity, which often revolves around class and race. Class, race and ethnicity are not static characteristics but dynamic constructs of power relations (Brahinsky 2011). As such, some scholars suggest they should not be treated as variables but rather – to use a realist terminology – as generative mechanisms (Higgs, Jones, and Scambler 2004). Higgs and his colleagues argued that seeing social position as a mechanism can draw attention away from individual behaviours to structural inequalities and exploitation, and therefore instruct policy better and get to the roots of systemic inequality. This approach rejects the liberal presentation of response to systemic discrimination as free choice, for example in Stone’s (2007) argument that women who opted out from elite professions frame their move as a choice when gender norms and the job market structure left them little choice.

Choice and agency should be treated with caution, but at the same time scholars warned from placing marginalised communities in a choiceless position too hastily. Scholars who hold this view explain ethnic minorities' strategies not as a result of "ethnic penalties" and discrimination, but as a proactive choice, in line with the group's ethos and priorities (Modood & Khattab, 2016). In housing research, the ethnic penalty school dominates the discussion, and housing conditions of ethnic minorities are explained as a result of discrimination and exclusion (Anwar, 1998; Finney & Harries, 2015; Finney & Simpson, 2008; Phillips, 2007). But a classic debate shed a different light on the origin of these strategies: Rex and Moore (1967) argued that ethnic minorities in Birmingham formed a 'housing class' created by local authority exclusionary decisions. In response, anthropologist Badr Dahya (Dahya 1974) argued that migrants from Pakistan were not interested in social housing or even quality housing but had a strategy to spend as little as possible on accommodation and were pooling their resources as they were buying up and letting out cheap property. Therefore, living in the cheapest parts of the city and not in better quality social housing was not simply as a result of the Housing Department decisions and practices. Such claims must be made carefully to avoid justifying injustice in the guise of cultural differences, but when based on rigorous research they can open up a deeper understanding of cultural priorities.

This thesis adopts an approach that seeks to balance agency and constraints (Harrison and Davis 2001; Ratcliffe 2009), aiming to avoid universalist assumptions about housing needs and foster an empowering perspective of the choices made by people from marginalised groups. At the same time, this research was also instructed by the call to understand the forces that reproduce inequality by making certain choices appealing and certain projects successful mainly for the White middle-class. As Matthews and Hastings noted in their review of theories of middle-class activism, "the emphasis within social policy thus far has largely been on outcomes – on the levels of equality or inequality within the system – and not on the means by which these unequal outcomes come about". (Matthews and Hastings 2013:86). Chapter 5 addresses this by looking at the mechanisms behind the statistical outcomes of demographic homogeneity.

The literature on cohousing in particular often implies universalist assumptions, which call for a critical assessment. The common argument is that the general public does not understand cohousing or is not aware of it (Boyer and Leland 2018; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018; Williams 2008). Guthman's analysis of alternative food networks in the US (Guthman

2008a) offers important insights on this line of argument. Her main argument is that expecting the wider public to join alternative food networks “if only they knew” that it is beneficial and morally superior, is a form of an elitist, missionary perspective. A striking example of this kind of explanation is Wang et al’s view of the cohousing sector: “misunderstanding of this form of habitation is the biggest limitation for most people” (Wang, Pan, and Hadjri 2020:21). Looking from the perspective of White middle-class liberals, the network’s attempts to break into new markets does not recognise cultural differences and social accessibility into alternative networks. In this light, perhaps CLH is a small sector because the way it operates and the values it promotes are not compatible with the wider public’s vision and desires. Somewhere in the gap between society as it is and society as it wished for, normative research must not lose sight of current limitations.

## 2. Methods

This study is based on sequential mixed-methods research of and with community-led cohousing communities (Cameron 2009), with a strong emphasis on the qualitative aspect (Bronstein and Kovacs 2013), focusing on two case study communities in England. The research included qualitative research using various methods which I describe below, as well as a national demographic survey among 15 cohousing communities. Altogether my research involved 16 CLH communities to very different extents, ranging from in-depth long engagement with two communities to one-off survey filling by some members of other communities. Although there are references to the UK, the study focused on England because of the difference in housing policies and situations in different parts of the UK.

### 2.1 research philosophy

When I set off to design this research, I aspired to work collaboratively with participants, include their interests in the research process and hopefully contribute to their knowledge and practice as much as possible. While making choices around methodology, methods and theoretical approach, I found the critical realist approach (Pawson 2013) useful as well as respectful, and was inspired by participatory action research (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007), especially considering my own positionality as a housing cooperative member.

Although not participatory, my research was underpinned by an ethics of respect for research participants: I wanted to know what they thought was happening and how they explained it, because I thought they knew their communities best. That was the main attraction of the critical realist approach, which “prioritises agency, voice, and real-life experiences” (Egbo 2005:271). I will not elaborate on the philosophical aspects of critical realism because it did not play a big part of the research design. However, in this section I explain what critical realism meant for this project, why and how I used it.

Critical realism stems from a belief that reality exists regardless of our knowledge, yet recognises that our knowledge affects the social (Sayer 2000). The aim of critical realist research is to find causal explanations to social events, by identifying the underlying structures that create observable social mechanisms. These mechanisms are not deterministic: they may or may not have been activated under different conditions, and it is the researcher’s task to discover “if they have been activated and under what conditions” (ibid:14). Adopting



a realist approach was therefore suitable to explain what is it about particular models of community-led housing that appeals to particular types of people in particular contexts – and why (Pawson 2013).

I was drawn to the theory driven style of asking participants direct questions about their organisation and testing emerging theories collaboratively, seeing interviews as a collaborative learning cycle in which “theories are placed before the interviewee for them to comment on with a view to providing refinement. The subject matter of the interview is the researcher’s theory and interviewees are there to confirm, falsify and basically, refine the theory” (Manzano, 2016:2). Second, using critical realism to identify the structures that affect people’s lives is often seen as a starting point for transformative action (Egbo 2005:275), and leading critical realist scholars worked to bring together a normative theory and “concrete geographies and histories [that] could usefully inform political practice” (Sayer 2000:187). The kind of respectful interviewing and understanding participants in their own terms led to the writing of the “safe space” paper (chapter 3), which builds on participants’ conceptualisation in a significant way. However, I was also aware that “although we have to interpret the understandings that actors have of their situations in order to make sense of how they act, their understanding is not necessarily a good one, indeed it may be systematically flawed” (Sayer 2015:279). An example for this is chapter 4 on cooperative subjectivities, where I critically engaged with older members’ perception of younger members as “Thatcher’s children” and younger members’ nostalgic view of the founders’ “hippie” mentality.

While appreciating these aspects of critical realism and research approach, I did not fully subscribe to it philosophically. A lot of the research design was influenced by a critical realist approach, but at its heart this thesis is not perfectly critical realist, which is particularly apparent in my choice of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework for my third paper, “Beyond affordability” (chapter 5). Here I picked the framework that had the strongest explanatory power in spite of the debate around Bourdieu’s compatibility with critical realism, especially in terms of their view of agency (Archer 2000; Akram 2013; Nash 2003). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is generally understood as almost deterministic, as opposed to importance of reflexivity and deliberation in critical realist thought (see especially Archer 2000). Bourdieu himself described the concept of habitus as transcending these “usual antinomies (...) of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious” (Bourdieu 1990:55), and explained that habitus is not mechanically conditioned but rather

creative, within its limitations. But although Bourdieu's model views dispositions not simply as a predetermined set of preferences but as sets of generative dispositions that respond to change (Bourdieu 1984), it still leaves subjects with very little free choice. Critiques of Archer's later work on agency argue that she neglected the notions of the unconscious and habit while overemphasising reflexivity (Akram 2013). My decision to deploy Bourdieu's framework may not be philosophically coherent, but it fitted with the critical realist way of doing research by analysing the Context, Mechanisms and Outcomes and using theoretical framework flexibly (Emmel et al. 2018). To conclude this debate, I second Schwarz's call to scholars to move away from "metaphysical debates on free choice and determinism towards more empirical (and, arguably, more fruitful) questions, such as how people choose among different alternatives; and how they determine which actions they encounter should be treated as choices" (Schwarz 2017:16). Although one may argue that these techniques are also culturally structured, there is certainly room to develop his concept of context-dependant "choice techniques" further in order to understand the classed, ethnic and racialised mechanisms of choice in joining community-led housing projects.

## **2.2 Positionality**

Pertinent to the research design was the fact that at the time of research I was a tenant member of a housing cooperative and a founding member of a cohousing community, which was being built at the last stages of writing. This had several important implications for the research: I was personally invested and involved in the sector, and therefore my questions were not purely intellectual but had important personal motivations and significance. While I relied on my knowledge when forming the research questions, I also had to be cautious during fieldwork to suspend my presumptions based on my own experiences in order to clearly hear participants' voices.

Being part of the sector I was researching was only one relevant aspect of my background. I previously have been involved in various other projects with similar characteristics to the cohousing movements: being a member of an activist group with predominantly White-British highly-educated comrades; setting up an alternative school in Tel Aviv predominantly for bohemian families with high levels of cultural – and often economic – capital (Whiteness was important there, too, but is configured differently in Israel, see Schwarz 2016). Through these experiences of culturally exclusive and politically progressive or even radical projects, I developed a strong sense of unrest. I thought my PhD project could be an opportunity to

make a difference in the sector and challenge what I saw as unintentional – but very real – social injustice.

As the research progressed my approach changed. At some points I sought to change and challenge the sector through action research, in a similar way to the work done in the US by intentional communities who were committed to learn about and challenge racial and class privilege within the sector (Roth 2018). Gradually, I adopted the more modest aim to understand the complexities within this sector and try to explain them. My interaction with participants reminded me of the diversity of views, experiences, priorities and opinions within the CLH sector. Seeing myself as a comrade and partner, I was hoping to work closely and collaboratively with participants to transform the sector, but they often had other, more urgent plans which I had to accept and respect. Although my insider position did not make the process as collaborative or transformative as I would have liked, it undoubtedly made it relatively easy to build rapport.

### **2.3 Qualitative research with two CLH communities: methods and background**

The main body of work involved two very different communities that had one important element in common: affordability. This element was central because one of the main motivations for this research project was my experience of homogeneity in the cohousing sector, which appeared to be socially homogenous and financially exclusive. I wanted to see if communities might present greater diversity if they were truly affordable (as opposed to the Government's definition of affordability as being 80% of local housing costs, shifting the focus to housing market rather than people's income, see: Wilson and Barton 2019). The impact of affordability was particularly interesting with regards to the cohousing sector, which in the UK is almost entirely ownership-based and therefore inherently exclusive to those who cannot afford to buy houses (Jarvis 2015a). The case study cohousing community is one of very few cohousing projects in the UK that work with a housing association to provide affordable housing for people eligible for housing benefits – a factor that could hypothetically increase diversity. The rationale behind the sampling was to eliminate the aspect of financial exclusion from the picture and see what kinds of identities and subjectivities can be found in affordable CLH projects. The selected communities were both social housing providers: the cooperative offered housing well below the average market rate, and the cohousing project, that was not yet established at the time of research, was collaborating with a local housing association to provide affordable housing for people on the

local housing register. This meant that they were not only affordable but also potentially accessible to a wider range of people, including low income people looking for housing through the local housing register. As I discuss below and in the main chapters, this latter hypothesis proved to be more complicated than I first imagined.

At the time of research, the housing cooperative was already well-established, owning 40 housing units outright and operating for over 40 years. The cohousing group was just granted planning permission and was hoping to start building soon; things looked very promising. Sadly, four years later the building has not started, and the main attraction of this development for my study – the integration of housing association tenants into a mixed cohousing project – could not be fully tested as they were only planning to join once the building started. The delay has changed the focus of my study significantly. Still, looking at projects at different stages and locations and with different legal structures was helpful in understanding the opportunities and barriers to participation at different stages of the project's life.

### ***Fieldwork with "Beechtree" housing cooperative***

My most intense research engagement was with Beechtree housing cooperative in the North of England. I conducted 8 months of qualitative research with this cooperative, which involved two participatory sessions, 17 individual and group interviews with members and the cooperative's worker; observations of four General Meetings and one Special General Meetings, several meetings of three different committees (Management, Maintenance and Admissions and Allocations), an interview panel of a new member and two social events. I also took an active part in a project led by members of the housing cooperative together with others in the local community. In addition to these, I closely read the cooperative's policies and old minute books from 1978-2017, which were given to me by a member of the cooperative.

Shortly after the cooperative agreed to take part in the research, they allocated time in their General Meeting to discuss the research collaboration with me. In this session I explained the aims of my research and that I also lived in a housing cooperative and therefore sympathetic to the idea and to members' experiences. I then asked members to say what they were hoping to achieve from the research and what research questions they might have that I can incorporate into my work. Members had many questions, and not all of them were addressed in the study in a lot of depth, for example: how does growing up in a cooperative affects

children?; what can the cooperative learn from other cooperatives?. There was a lot of interest in the history of the cooperative, including a desire to curate an exhibition. Most importantly, members wished to see themselves reflected fairly and emphatically.

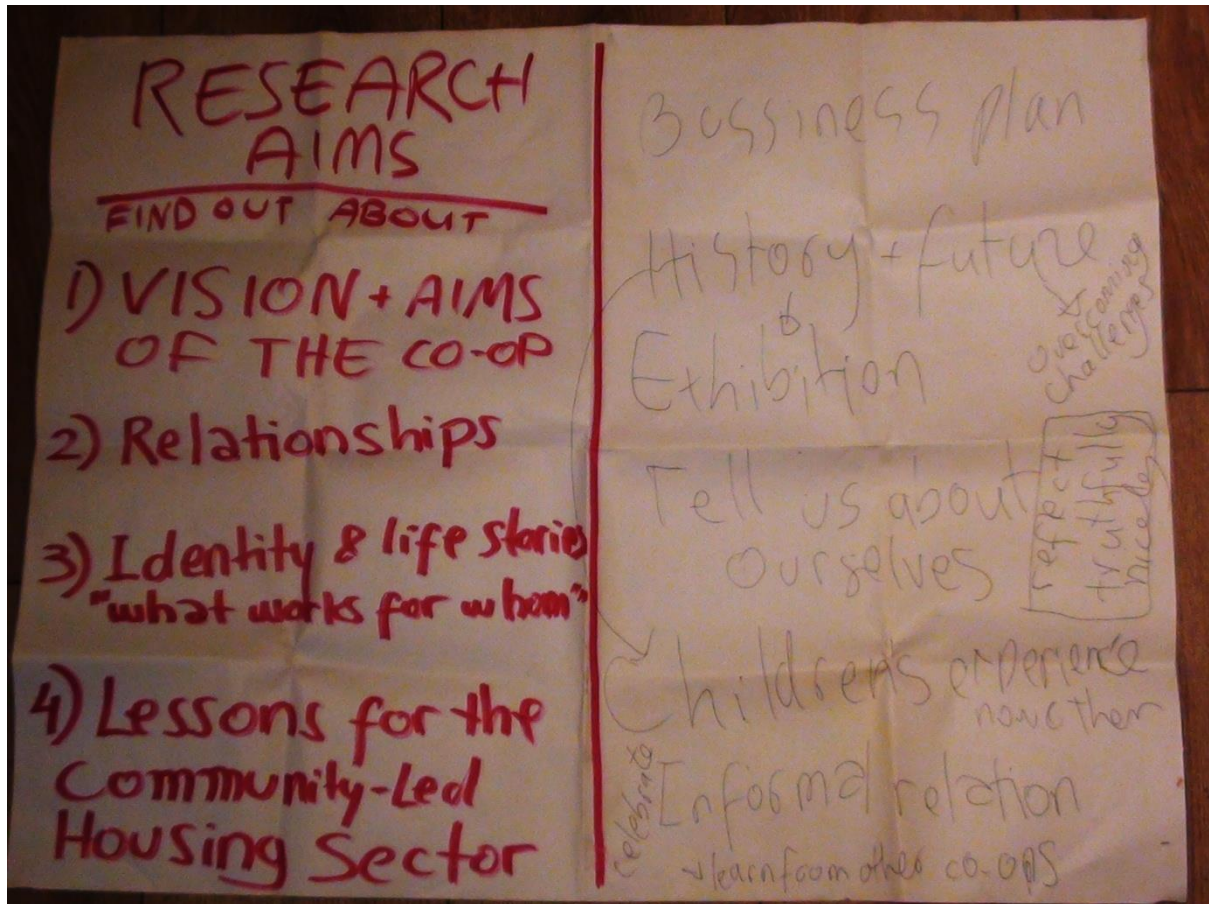


Figure 1: Results of introduction session with Beechtree housing cooperative

Following members’ request, I organised and facilitated a storytelling session to enable members to learn from each other about the history of the cooperative. The event was publicised on the cooperative’s mailing list and closed Facebook group, and was well attended. Members spontaneously decided to try and remember as many previous members as possible, and wrote their names on a large map of the co-op. Other activities were more structured: members were invited to read and respond to quotes from old minute books and cooperative magazines, and take a quiz on the early days of the cooperative. Finally, we had a long story-telling session in which members wrote questions on paper slips, put them in a hat and, taking turns in a circle, pulled out a random question slip and tried to respond to it with the aid of others.

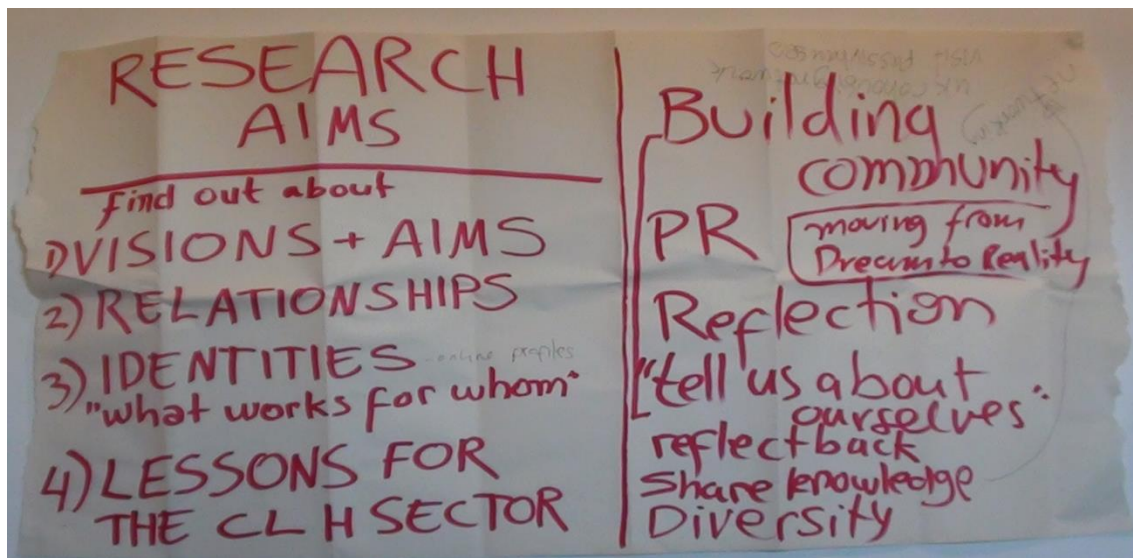
Preparations for the event included close reading the cooperative's archive of old minute-books and other publications. At the end of the session, a follow-up event was planned, with an aim to produce an exhibition about the history of the cooperative with an artist member, who volunteered to design a poster that will be displayed in the cooperative's communal rooms. This event was eventually cancelled due to lack of participation and I decided not to press, being careful not to promote my own agenda when the community was not interested, although I felt it was an opportunity to really give back something tangible to the community. This disappointment prompted me to reflect on the difficulties of collaborative work, the possible faults of the first session and the real level of interest in historical research within the community. In retrospect, I wondered if lack of participation in this project reflected the important issue of lack of participation in the community, which was repeatedly mentioned as one of the cooperative's greatest challenges. Would members join in small ways if I took leadership over this project? Would it still be a truly participatory process? Although this collaboration ended shortly after it started, the workshop had important contribution to the historical narrative at the heart of chapter 4.

Some aspects of my research are hardly manifest in the papers – the research generated so much interesting data that it was impossible to incorporate all of it into three papers. One aspect that is particularly missing is the question of “the political” and the cooperative's engagement with the local community. This aspect was the main theme in my engagement with the local mural project. A group of cooperative members invited me to join this project, which was run together with other community members. I joined a steering group to repaint the community mural that was the focus of many contestations and strong feelings. I attended several meetings and took an active part in promoting the project, including designing a leaflet, planning work and a picnic consultation event. Work on this side-project also involved an interview with a community activist and various informal conversations with participants. I also asked members about the mural in their interviews, including one of the members who started the original mural in 1990. Sadly, the leading member of the steering group died unexpectedly and the project came to a halt, although members of the community continued to debate the mural months later.

Early in September 2017 I attended a general meeting and thanked members for their help, promising to send a written report about my findings, in line with their original request to receive an honest and kind reflection (see appendix 1).

### ***Fieldwork with Bridport Cohousing***

The second community was Bridport Cohousing. My work with this community started with long telephone calls with key members and continued with a few days visit. During this visit I observed a committee meeting (the “Soil Circle” which deals with the site development); took part in a general meeting and in a social event for prospective members and interested members of the public at a local café; finally, I interviewed 11 members (2 of them together) as well as chatting informally to others. During the general meeting, I was allocated time to introduce myself and explain the aims of my research. Similar to the process with the housing cooperative, I invited members to raise issues they found important and suggest ways the research may be useful for the community. Many members raised concerns over diversity, especially in terms of age and gender: at the time, the community had a significantly higher number of older female members.



*Figure 2: Results of introduction session with Bridport Cohousing*

Taking a critical-realist approach, the interviews included biographic elements and direct questions about the main issues members thought were important to their community, which were raised at the general meeting and in individual interviews, utilising an interview method that avoids pretend naivety (Manzano 2016). As the research progressed, interviews focused more specifically on the issues that were repeatedly raised in previous interviews, members’ meetings and the sessions at the general meeting. I was hoping to interview prospective members who joined through the housing register, but at that stage of the project there were none.

## ***Interviews***

Interviews were the most common and most in-depth method used in this research, each interview lasting for about two hours and ranging from life stories to discussion with participants on specific issues that mattered to the community or my own research questions, for example: “what brought you to this project?”; “the website emphasises the significance of members taking responsibility to their housing in this project, how do you feel about this?”; “what are the most important things for you about this project?”, and later on, questions like “some members were concerned about participation, what is your view on this?” or “why do you think there are more older women in this group?”. This strategy enabled me to understand participants’ life trajectories, identities and subjectivities, needs and values, and experiences of the social relations and practice of the community.

My interview strategy was always driven by the critical realist catch phrase “what works for whom, under what circumstances, and why” (Emmel et al. 2018). Listening in this way, I identified some unexpected outcomes which were articulated in ways I did not anticipate. They included framing CLH as a safe space from neoliberal oppression, and changing subjectivities and practices of commoning in response to neoliberalisation. Other interesting mechanisms led to more predictable outcomes, such as practices of class distinction that perpetuate the fairly homogenous social profile of UK cohousing communities. These findings became the main issues discussed in the three papers that form the main body of this thesis.

Hammersley (2008) pointed at some important disadvantages of interviews in qualitative research, which applied to some extent to this study, too. One of them is the temptation to see interviews as "a window on people's stable perspective" (p.30). This was evident in several cases, for example two cooperative members who lived in the cooperative for over 10 years when I interviewed them, and voiced strong ideological views against homeownership. However, two and three years later their life circumstances changed and they both moved with their families out of the cooperative and became homeowners. Surely, they held these views and justified their decision while living in the cooperative, but their changed perspective is not captured in the research. Moreover, some members made strong statements in the interview, but used very different tones in general meetings or the community’s Facebook groups (for example, praising the community spirit in an interview and then complaining about lack of it at a general meeting). Peering into the community through more



than one such “window” helped me to overcome this disadvantage to some extent, especially in the cooperative case study.

### ***The survey***

In addition to qualitative methods, the question of the social composition of cohousing communities required a demographic survey. Cohousing was generally perceived as overwhelmingly White and middle-class, but there were no up-to date data available on the UK cohousing sector since Williams’ study in 2005 (Williams 2005), and not even a central record of the number of members in the UK. Moreover, Williams’ study was conducted at a very early stage of the UK cohousing movement: her research involved four communities in different stages of development, but there were only two completed communities in the UK (Williams 2005:163). Seeing as this study was not interested solely in participants’ subjective perspectives but also in the tangible reality, there was a need to confirm and complete this perception with quantitative data (Mcevoy and Richards 2006). Therefore, after completing my work with Bridport Cohousing and Beechtree housing cooperative, I conducted a demographic survey followed by two validating qualitative sessions with two other cohousing groups.

Taking on desk-based research using communities’ websites and data from Diggers and Dreamers website for intentional communities, I was able to have a close estimate of 500 as the number of adult members in current communities. The survey was distributed via email to all the English cohousing communities that appeared on the UK Cohousing website at the end of 2019. Over two months, 87 participants from 15 communities took part in the survey, each respondent representing one household and a total of 138 adults, out of roughly 500 adult cohousing members in the UK; they therefore represent about 28% of the entire sector<sup>3</sup>. It should be noted that one response was given on behalf of the entire community as if it was one household, and therefore does not reflect the real demographic distribution in that community. Two communities engaged fully in the survey and almost all of their members completed the survey – one of them went on to take part in a focus group to discuss the

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<sup>3</sup> A similar survey used by Sanguinetti (2018) for the US had an average of 4 respondents from each community (representing 116 out of 165 communities). In this study the number of participants is small but they represent a similar percentage of communities as the US study.

results. In other communities the average number of respondents was just under 3 (the number of households in cohousing varies from 5 to 30).

The online survey included 13 questions: mostly standard demographic questions but also housing-related questions such as form of tenure and household type. Reflecting on the survey after starting the analysis, I realised that I was too keen to keep the survey quick and simple (the fact that it only took 4 minutes to complete was a strong selling point for some!) and therefore missed out some interesting and important questions regarding occupation levels, involvement in activism and political views, as well as the option to opt for 'spiritual but not religious' in the question about religious identity. Thankfully, the interviews and focus groups could compensate for these to some extent. The final question was an open one, inviting participants to reflect on their experiences in cohousing in relation to the survey; these comments form part of the qualitative data.

The survey results are limited in some ways due to the small size of the sector: any bias that may have resulted from the profile of members who chose to engage with the online survey will be magnified because their share in the total responses is so big. Moreover, in the focus groups I learnt that some participants did not understand the questions and therefore their responses were not fully accurate. I hope that with time and further research with more individual communities, a more detailed, reliable and census-like data will offer a more accurate picture.

In terms of its significance in the overall research, the survey was a supplement to a predominantly qualitative research, helping to contextualise qualitative findings and develop an informed discussion with members in the focus groups that followed. These groups were used to explain the meaning of aspects of diversity that are hard to find in a stand-alone quantitative survey (Emmel 2013). As I discuss in more detail in chapter 5, the use of mixed-methods can overcome some of the limitations of quantitative surveying and offer a more nuanced picture (Hesse-Biber 2010). Examples of such nuances were participants' class identity and perception, especially for people from working class background or ethnic minorities. Qualitative data shed light on the role some of these measurable aspects (income, education, age) played in participants' choices in CLH, and what they meant for them.

## Focus groups

Participants were invited to discuss the survey's results, in order to enhance the quantitative data and verify previous qualitative data in light of the new quantitative findings. 18 people from many communities signed up to join this discussion, but eventually 14 members of two communities took part in two focus groups, one per community. These sessions enabled members to compare their community to the national survey and reflect on their individual and collective routes into membership, as well as the gateways and barriers on the journey to cohousing.

The sessions were built around the metaphor of a journey, and participants were asked to draw a map of the paths, roads and bridges, as well as walls, barriers, seas and bogs. This brought up individual and systemic conditions that reflected my intersectional analytical approach. It was a useful tool to engage in difficult conversation about sensitive issues without judgement, in a spirit of reflection and practical thinking. Here my position as a member of a cohousing project was instrumental for building rapport and convey the authenticity of my concern about inclusion – a 'critical friend' rather than an outsider passing moral judgement.

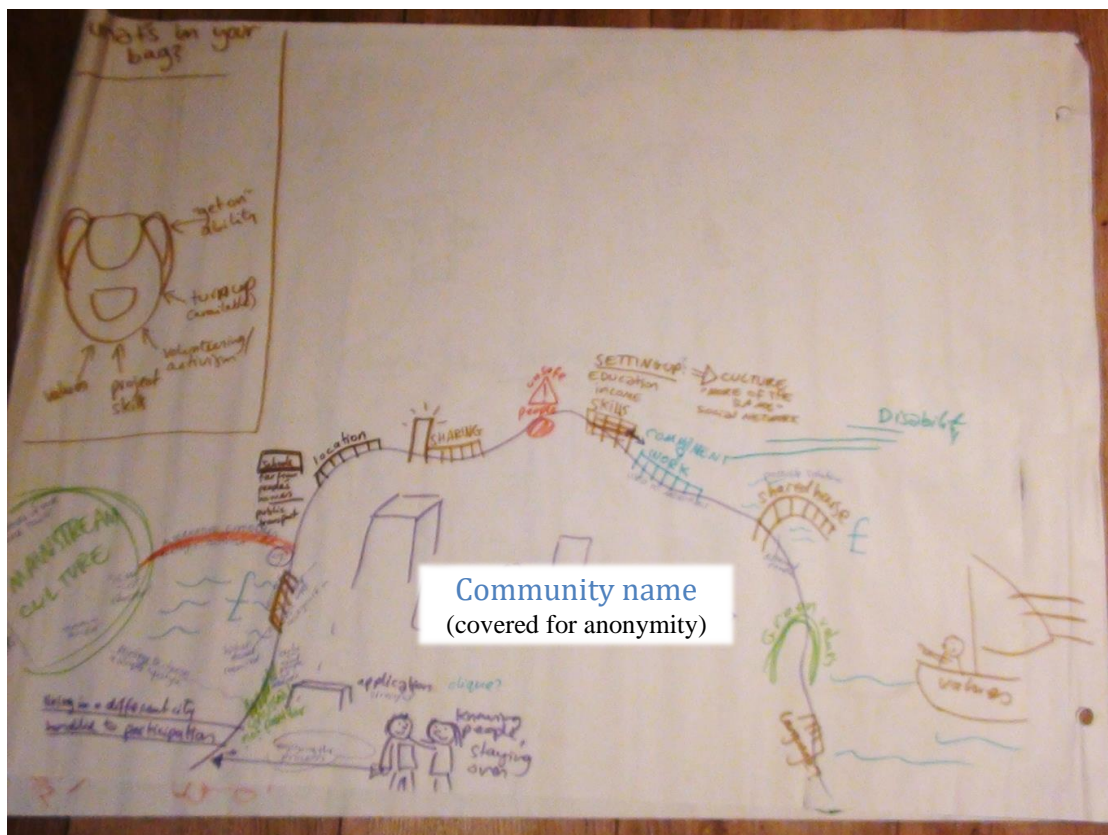


Figure 3: Visual focus group workshop with cohousing community (C2)

The decision to use focus groups following the survey was driven by ethical and methodological considerations. Ethically, I was committed to sharing the survey's results with members of the cohousing sector and involving them in the process of analysing and making sense of the findings. Inviting interested members to reflect on the survey together seemed like a constructive and respectful way to achieve that, more than simply send a report to communities. Reading survey participants' comments, I felt there was an appetite for wider discussion about diversity in the sector, and was hoping that the focus group discussion could provide a space to develop this in a reflexive way that could potentially lead to collective action. Therefore, the concluding part of the sessions invited participants to reflect on their feelings about the findings and on possible response to them. On this point I was proven wrong: it was clear that action on a large scale was not a priority for focus group participants.

Methodologically, the study was designed from the start as a "fully mixed sequential dominant status" (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009:271), in which the first qualitative phase asks broad questions and search for themes, followed by a quantitative phase and an additional qualitative phase which focused on one aspect – in this case, diversity in cohousing communities. The rationale here was that the social profile of cohousing communities was generally assumed to be predominantly White and middle-class, and the sector had ready explanations and responses to this; a representative one is from Anna Kear, then the UK Cohousing Network executive director (UKCN): "a lot of people see co-housing as a very white and very middle-class thing. I agree to a certain extent, and the reason why, is because the successful pioneers had two things: money and skills. (...) That doesn't make co-housing white middle class, it means it's the only way how to live there" (Fogele 2016:33).

Conducting the focus group only after in-depth research with communities provided me not only with more accurate data to respond to, but also with a more nuanced perspective on the sector, which enabled me to search beyond the immediate doxa of the field. The qualitative study enabled an understanding of the mechanisms and the conditions that activated them (Sayer 2000), where so often in cohousing studies the focus was on quantitative description. Moreover, using qualitative methods to discuss the quantitative findings was instrumental in conducting a research which recognises that a "person's identity is larger than the addition of individual components such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc." (Yesp and Chivers 2017:3).

## 2.4 Analysis

My approach to choosing analytical frameworks was, like the overall research design, guided by a critical realist approach, that selects “theories which most accurately represent the ‘domain of real’ given our existing knowledge” (Hu 2018:130). Instead of committing to one theoretical framework for the entire research, the analysis defined the relevant context for each question (e.g. neoliberalisation for chapter 3 and 4, classed and racialized inequalities for chapter 5), identified the outcomes (in terms of safety in chapter 3, commoning in chapter 4 or social diversity in chapter 5), and sought to explain the mechanisms that led to these outcomes (commoning, subjectivities, cultural capital and habitus, respectively) (Pawson 2013). Having said that, I never followed the Context-Mechanisms-Outcomes formula too rigidly – a level of flexibility which is in fact an essential part of the critical realist approach to research (Emmel et al. 2018). Each research question asked for a different analytical framework in order to interpret the data productively (Fraser’s theory of justice in chapter 3; Gibson-Graham’s community economies and the importance of subjectivities to their production in chapter 4; and Bourdieu’s forms of capital in chapter 5).

Each paper has a separate discussion of its theoretical frameworks. In this section I elaborate on the rationale for each choice, in order of appearance in this thesis. Chapter 3 brings together Nancy Fraser’s theory of justice with the concept of “safe space”, which is commonly embedded in a theoretical framework of recognition and identity politics (Mountz 2017; The Roestone Collective 2014). The concept of safe space came up in interviews through words like safety, sanctuary and refuge. I was intrigued when participants referred to many forms of safety, often tying together material and emotional aspects. It was clear that for many members, safety and security were produced through commoning: social solidarity and cooperative management and ownership models. The common focus on recognition in the safe space literature was clearly too limited for exploring my case studies productively. Fraser’s three-fold theory, which recognises the importance of recognition, distribution and political voice (Fraser 2009), reflected the findings neatly and was useful in making the most of them. Thinking of the findings through the three pillars of justice, it was easier to identify the mechanisms that made members’ life safe in terms of distribution, recognition and political voice. Turning to a theory of justice as a framework was also in line with members’ view of their community as alternatives to “the capitalist world”, a model for a better and just society.

Chapter 4 focused on the changes to practices of commoning. It was clear from interviews and the old minute books that many things have indeed changed – but why? Looking for the underlying structures and mechanisms behind members’ experiences in search of a causal explanation is at the heart of critical realism – the mode of analysis called ‘retroduction’, which “in short means asking why events have happened in the way they did” (Mcevoy and Richards 2006:71). Here again, I followed members’ lead and their narrative, to some extent. In many interviews, two contested types of political subjects were evoked, as the paper’s title suggests. Consequently, the use of the theoretical concept of subjectivities was only natural. Considering that these multiple subjectivities were constituted in the context of a housing cooperative, it was productive to theorise the process in terms of Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies, and particularly the concept of community economies and their emphasis on the economic subject’s process of “becoming” through ethical practice and “the everyday temporality of change and the vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places, and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty”.(Gibson-Graham 2006a:xxvii; see also Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009). Scholars who employ these frameworks not only focus on commoning but also emphasise the importance of subjectivities in reproducing the commons (De Angelis 2017; Byrne and Healy 2006), and therefore were a good fit for interpreting and explaining the data.

Chapter 5 deploys a Bourdieusian analysis. Bourdieu’s theoretical framework was a natural choice considering members’ preoccupation with (eco)habitus, class and race and implicitly practices of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Although the latter two were perceived by participants mainly as outcomes, some acknowledged that they were also part of the context: with many communities set up by White middle-class people, the social profile of cohousing was reproduced in their image. The Bourdieusian framework clarified the ways these mechanisms were operating. It should be noted that Bourdieu’s original work in fact fails to acknowledge some of the key issues of the paper, such as race, ethnicity and to some extent gender (Skeggs 2004b). However, British scholars in particular developed Bourdieu’s concepts to include issues of racial inequalities (Meghji 2019; Rollock 2014a; Wallace 2017) which were invaluable to developing the argument in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is the only one involving mixed methods. The analysis used the quantitative data *tentatively* to find about participants’ identities and social positions (McCall 2005). These findings were then compared with the qualitative data, which contextualised the demographic data with participants’ own perspectives, trajectories and meanings (Anthias 2013). This

approach to analysis acknowledged that privilege and oppression are not static conditions and looked at identity as a process rather than a static object (Levine-Rasky 2011:243). An example for this is the way some cohousing members with a university degree told in interviews how they obtained it as mature students, were the first in their working-class family to go to university, or conversely were assumed to be uneducated because of their race or ethnicity; these life trajectories are missing from quantitative surveys but add a layer of complexity that is vital to this kind of analysis (McCall 2005).

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### **3. "A place that is different from the usual capitalist world": the potential of Community-led housing as safe and just spaces**

#### **Abstract**

Safe spaces offer relief from oppression, but they can do more and become spaces of social justice. Drawing on two case-study communities in the UK and Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, this paper argues that safe spaces can become just spaces by responding to three aspects of injustice: socio-economic, cultural-symbolic and political. Members of the case-study communities perceived their housing as safe and just spaces and contrasted it to the injustice of capitalist society. The communities offered affordable and not-for-profit secured housing; provided stability, respect and support to members; and ensured that members had a voice regarding their housing and community. A sense of safety and justice was achieved through the combination of democratic decision-making, a non-profit legal structure and social relations committed to mutual aid. Nevertheless, communities are not perfect; the paper also reveals the complexities in these communities, such as power dynamics and exclusion, which compromise their safety for some members and limit their potential for social transformation. Finally, the paper contributes to the large body of literature on safe spaces from racism and homophobia by reporting on an under-theorised form of safe space: one which offers protection from the oppression of neoliberalism.

**Key words:** safe space, community-led housing, justice, cooperatives, neoliberalism

#### **Introduction**

Jo was looking for a new home. His colleagues urged him to buy a house, but he was reluctant to "risk his financial future with a mortgage". He decided to try a housing cooperative and found "a refuge, or... certainly a place that is different from the usual capitalist world where for a lot of housing associations or landlords it's all about the money and they don't always do what they can to meet people's needs or at the very least give some sense of community". Jo saw the cooperative as a pocket of justice in a society where basic needs are "all about the money". In contrast to the competitive, exploitative market logic, the cooperative offered Jo safety and fairness: low rent, secure tenure, a community where he felt valued and neighbours who looked after each other. Ten years on, Jo still lived in the cooperative and had no intention to leave.



Jo is not alone; this paper is based on research that found that many residents of communities that are managed by their members described their community as a safe and just space. Surprisingly, while this framing was common on the ground, it is under-theorised in the literature. Communities are popularly portrayed as safer environments than large cities, but they are rarely conceptualised as safe spaces. Moreover, neoliberalism is a dominant cultural and political current that inflicts insecurity, oppression and violence (Springer et al. 2016), but there is no literature on safe spaces from it – as opposed to the rich literature on safe spaces from other prevalent forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and homophobia (Mountz 2017). This paper brings together the concepts of safe space and social justice and examines them through the case of community-led housing (CLH). Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, it argues for a reading of safe space as a form of justice. The argument draws on two case-study community-led housing in the UK, which operates as safe and just spaces, albeit imperfectly.

Neoliberalism is a notoriously broad term (Clarke 2008), but for the analytical purpose of this paper, its extensive reach made it instrumental in conceptualising different experiences within a single framework. Importantly, this concept was true to participants' own framing of their communities as alternatives to capitalism. Neoliberalisation was interwoven into many of the social and cultural processes that affected participants' lives: neoliberal housing policies, like austerity measures and restructuring of the welfare state (Hodkinson, Watt, and Mooney 2013; Levitas 2012; Madden and Marcuse 2016); the "roll-off" of state responsibilities onto local communities (McKee 2015b; Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014); and governmental aspects that encourage individualism and asset accumulation and lead to shame over financial failure or "non-aspirational" lifestyles (Chandler and Reid 2016; Barnett, Clarke, Cloke 2008; Nowicki 2018; Wright 2012). In line with Springer (2012), different meanings of neoliberalism (policy, culture, governmentality) were conceived as mutually constitutive forms of the same phenomenon. Taking my cue from Ferguson (2009), I embraced the use of different aspects of neoliberalism as an opportunity to highlight the relationship between them.

Community-led housing is an umbrella term for housing projects that are managed democratically by members and often involve sharing and not-for-profit structure (Tummers 2016). Research participants from two different communities emphasised the importance of security in joining: financial security, secured tenure and the community safety-net. Many members, like Jo, contrasted these forms of security to "the world out there", finding safety

and protection from unjust neoliberal policies and culture. The paper reveals the daily practices that create safety and justice, as well as the dual position of CLH: safe and just spaces that respond to the injustices of neoliberalism, and spaces of exclusion and inequality.

The paper is in four parts. The first section conceptualises safe spaces through the lens of spatial justice, drawing on Nancy Fraser's theory of justice. I then develop the concept of safe and just spaces in relation to the empirical context: the community-led housing sector in neoliberal UK. After introducing the research and the methods used, the findings section zooms in on two case study communities and reports on the ways they operate as safe and just spaces from the insecurities of neoliberalism. That section argues that communities feature material, emotional and political aspects of safety and justice, alongside inherent complexities that make them unsafe and unjust.

### **Theoretical context: safe spaces, just spaces**

The concept of safe space, which originated in the Feminist movement in the form of shelters for victims of rape and abuse, has evolved into various forms of protection from oppression. In recent years "safe space" is particularly identified with LGBTQI communities, offering allyship and providing safety from homophobic and transphobic violence in universities and social centres (Fox 2007). Safe spaces also exist as university minorities clubs, where students of colour can find understanding in predominantly White and sometimes hostile environments (Deo 2012). In education, teachers advocate for classrooms that allow students physical and emotional safety to express themselves and be part of a thriving and adventurous learning community. In these settings, the teachers are responsible for fairness for- and protection of marginalised students such as LGBTQI and minority ethnic groups (Barrett 2012; Darrell, Littlefield, and Washington 2016; Stengel and Weems 2010). What all safe spaces have in common is an aim to provide a refuge from mainstream violence, openness, acceptance and self-expression. Ideally, it is a space where hegemonic logic is deconstructed, and new forms of relationships are formed (Polleta 1999).

Safety in safe spaces is achieved through critical thinking, sensitive ground rules and practices of cultural recognition like acknowledging "students of color whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimised" (Leonardo and Porter, 2010:149). Safety is also achieved through physical segregation, by excluding oppressive people and behaviours (Deo 2012; The Roestone Collective 2014). Lately, safe space is used figuratively to denote not a physical space but a set of practices in the public sphere, on and offline. These practices

include trigger warnings (used initially to protect rape victims from trauma and now used to protect other members of oppressed groups), and call-outs of individuals and organisations who are deemed harmful. Safe spaces, and particularly the latter type, attracted criticism around issues of exclusion, recognition and freedom of speech, as well as scepticism regarding their benefits for marginalised groups (Barrett 2012; Coleman 2016; Gibson 2019). This paper does not refer to this kind of safe spaces and practices, but to spaces that offer physical as well as emotional safety.

### ***Safe spaces' potential for social justice***

Not all safe spaces function as just spaces: some only create temporary and partial relief from the injustices of an insecure society. However, they have potential to become more than that and be "a way of practising social justice that recognises, emphasises, and in some ways encourages social difference" (The Roestone Collective, 2014:1360). Some scholars view safe spaces as prefigurative and argue that by using alternative practices and logics, safe spaces can go beyond temporary relief and challenge mainstream cultures (Polleta 1999). I contend that by maintaining lasting material and emotional safety and cultivating stronger agency, safe spaces become not only safe but just spaces, as articulated by Nancy Fraser's theory of justice. Fraser (2008) identified three distinct types of injustice: cultural-symbolic, socio-economic, and political. Cultural-symbolic injustices are manifested in non-recognition and disrespect; socio-economic injustices play out in the unequal distribution of resources, and political injustice denotes limitation of political voice and agency. I employ this model to consider the potential and shortcomings of safe spaces as just spaces. Simply put: the more aspects of justice the space provides for, the safer and more just it is.

Cultural-symbolic justice is the obvious strength of safe spaces. The very heart of safe spaces is an ethics of diversity and recognition (David and Hartal 2018), where members of marginalised groups are valued, and are physically and emotionally safe from a hostile environment. Physical insecurity stems directly from misrecognition, since "certain lives are not considered lives at all (...) This then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanisation which is already at work in the culture" (Butler, 2004:25). Cultural marginalisation and the violence that comes with it are the main reasons to establish safe spaces for people of colour and LGBTQ people (Perry and Dyck, 2014:52; Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

Safe spaces that are outward-looking and work to realise a vision of justice can increase political agency and equality and respond to disrespect. Recognition is then considered not only an aim in itself but a requirement for solidarity building and political organising (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Hill-Collins (2000) argued that safe spaces "enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects . . . their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society" (in: White, 2012:18).

Recognition is the strength of safe spaces, but also their potential weakness. Firstly, the focus on particular identities leads to exclusion. Exclusion and separation are inherent to safe spaces – they are safe because they exclude abusive behaviours and people. But exclusion can be unfair when it reflects prevalent prejudices regarding class, race, income and ability (Fox 2007; The Roestone Collective 2014). Moreover, Fraser criticised the cultural turn in feminism for its focus on identity politics and recognition and move away from politics of redistribution. This turn, she argued, "has dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wants nothing more than to repress socialist memory" (Fraser, 2017:22). Indeed, studies in other fields found that cultural recognition does not guarantee distributive justice (Fisk 2011).

Safe spaces respond to socio-economic or political injustice in complex ways. Mostly, safe spaces refer to oppression on all fronts, but their strategy revolves around recognition and therefore, do not offer direct protection from socio-economic and political injustice. Safe spaces are seen more as havens or, at best, as *enabling* spaces for political action that takes place elsewhere. The following sections develop the argument that community-led housing can be conceptualised and experienced as safe *and* just spaces, which respond not only to issues of recognition but also to socio-economic and political injustice.

### **CLH: Challenging neoliberalism and creating safe-havens**

This section focuses on the empirical context for this paper: Community-led Housing (CLH) in neoliberal UK. CLH can challenge the insecurities and injustices of contemporary housing by offering a safer and more just space. I contend that their actions to counter various forms of injustice in neoliberal society and their potential to become spaces of justice should be theorised through a justice perspective, using Fraser's theory of justice.

CLH projects are grassroots initiatives that generally focus on homes' use-value rather than their exchange-value (Madden and Marcuse 2016), and are collective in nature. Gooding and

Johnston offer a useful definition for CLH as "homes that are developed and/or managed by local people or residents, in not for private profit organisational structures. Organisational structure varies but governance should be overseen by people who either live or work in the locality of benefit or are direct beneficiaries. Community housing generally refers to a small geographic identified area of belonging or association" (Gooding and Johnston, 2015:15). Residents of CLH are typically satisfied with the high level of security, service standards and sense of ownership (Bliss, 2009; Chatterton, 2013; Lang & Novy, 2013).

CLH is a response to a crisis, and its renewal in recent years can be attributed to economic recession (Tummers, 2016; Varvarousis and Kallis 2016), including rising house prices which leads to gentrification and difficulties for growing publics to buy or rent decent, affordable homes (Field 2014). In terms of social relations, the re-emergence of CLH can be understood in light of Bauman's (2001) observation that as communities become less assured, there is a growing effort to ensure them.

In the UK, the most common models of CLH are housing cooperatives, community land trusts and cohousing. At present, there are over 600 housing cooperatives in the UK, 253 community land trusts and 20 cohousing projects, with many more in development stages. Each model and each project are different: they may be urban or rural, new built or retrofitted, collectively or privately owned, socially diverse or homogenous, affordable or not, require very little involvement or high commitment like regular participation in meetings and shared meals (Chatterton, 2013; Field, 2015; Bliss, 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016). Generally speaking, cooperatives and CLTs tend to be affordable but vary in direct participation and a sense of community (Fernández-Arrigoitia 2017; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2016; Rowlands 2009), while cohousing communities are less affordable but emphasise participation and social connection (Chatterton 2010; Jarvis 2011).

### ***Three aspects of safety and justice in community-led housing***

In the UK, the neoliberalisation of housing is manifested in policy, culture and governmentality (Larner 2000; Springer 2012), and research participants referred to all of these aspects. At the time of research (2016-2017), two major events marked housing insecurity: the on-going austerity measures and the "very neoliberal tragedy" of the fire at Grenfell Towers on June 2017, which claimed the lives of 72 people (Hodkinson, 2018:6). Hodkinson points at the neoliberal policies that contributed to the fire in this social housing tower block: privatisation and commercialisation of housing, which led to dangerously profit-

based management; deregulation and cuts to public expenditure on fire safety, which led to compromising tenants' safety; and gentrification, which "arguably underpinned" the flammable cladding of the tower in order to make it more aesthetically appealing, and the inability to house the low-income tenants in their area after the fire. These policies not only made housing unsafe but also put the victims in a structurally precarious position in their attempts to be rehoused (ibid.).

According to McGrath et al.'s briefing paper, austerity policies have a severe and evidenced impact on mental health, especially in terms of "shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity and being trapped and powerless" (McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy 2016).

Interestingly, all these elements were countered to some extent in the case study communities. Distrust was replaced by trust through knowing neighbours and working with them; insecurity and instability replaced by long term, secured rent; and powerlessness in relation to the state and the market was partly compensated through agency within the community. These elements correlate to Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, with its three pillars of recognition, redistribution and political voice. It was therefore natural and productive to employ this theoretical framework to analyse the findings. The remaining of this section develops the argument that CLH can be a just and safe space from neoliberalism according to Fraser's model, while also engaging with critiques on the CLH sector for each aspect of justice.

Firstly, in terms of socio-economic injustice, neoliberalisation of housing is based on competition on uneven terrain and commodification of housing, which leads to housing inequality (Madden and Marcuse 2016). More specifically in the UK, neoliberal policies replace welfare redistribution with significant cuts to public spending and particularly to local government. These measures affect vulnerable individuals and the poorest communities the most (Levitas 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012), and increase anxiety and insecurity throughout society (Atkinson 2013) as a result of financial speculation and work insecurity (Goodin and Le Grand, 2016). CLH can respond to these forms of injustice by their not-for-profit nature, offering affordable and secure housing and therefore safety from the whims of the market or the greed of landlords.

CLH is a diverse sector, which includes affordable and expensive projects; privately owned but collectively managed, as well as various forms of mutual and collective ownership models. Two models in particular can offer greater distributive justice: Community Land

Trusts (CLTs) and cooperatives. CLTs can resist gentrification by holding the land as a community asset that is not for private profit, and ensures long term affordability and community control in perpetuity (Moore and McKee, 2012; Thompson, 2015; for a critical analysis of CLT see Engelsman, Rowe and Southern, 2016). In a similar vein, Maja Hojer Bruun (2015) suggests viewing housing cooperatives as a public asset, and members of cooperatives as guardians of this asset. This conceptualisation entails a responsibility for members to maintain their cooperative as an accessible and affordable option for future tenants.

The second aspect of justice in Fraser's model is cultural-symbolic. In a capitalist society, housing choices involve calculating return on investment and social positioning, as well as aspiration for independence through home ownership (Allen 2008; Kleinhans and Elsinga 2010). Those who cannot make valued choices are seen as 'failed consumers' (Skeggs and Loveday 2012) who lack taste and status. Many scholars noted that the individualistic and competitive rationale of neoliberalism and the restructuring of the welfare state increased feelings of isolation, alienation, shame and powerlessness (Bauman 2007; Kiersey 2009; Madden and Marcuse 2016; Mykhnenko 2016; Springer 2011). These are the elements that CLH is well-positioned to tackle through emphasis on use-value of homes rather than their market value.

Critiques of CLH are concerned with disaffiliation and exclusion in CLH - the common features of community-led housing and gated communities (Chiodelli 2015). Cohousing communities, in particular, tend to be homogenous in terms of "affluence, social class, race, education and attitudes" (Williams, 2005:154; For similar findings in France, see Bresson and Deneffe, 2016). This suggests that some of these developments are exclusive and benefit the affluent alone – but other types are more diverse and inclusive. Therefore, although CLH projects often have a cooperative vision for society, they risk promoting inequality, favouring those with enough time, skill and wealth to engage in volunteering and invest in building a community (Garciano 2011; Moore and McKee 2012; Wallace, Ford, and Quilgars 2013). Moreover, some critiques argue that CLH's grassroots ethos plays into the hand of the neoliberal desire to roll back the state's responsibilities (Jacobs and Manzi 2012).

The third aspect of justice in Fraser's model is political voice. Neoliberalism and austerity measures in particular are known to inflict a sense of lack of agency (McGrath et al. 2016), ignorance about political processes and growing resilience (Chandler and Reid 2016) and

acceptance of the hegemonic logic as truth (Weidner 2009). These phenomena are the result of the marketisation of government and society (Wrenn 2014) and development of a contractual relationship between the government and people, who are reconceptualised as autonomous individual consumers (Crossan et al. 2016). In this neoliberal setting, as Ong (2006:501) bluntly put it, the government is "no longer interested in taking care of every citizen [preferring] him/her to act as a free subject who self-actualises and relies on autonomous action to confront global insecurities". In CLH, members have a greater influence on their community and decision-making that affects their lives. Moreover, some studies showed that members of CLH tend to be more active beyond their communities (Jones 2017; Poley 2007) – a claim that was affirmed by this research.

However, political justice according to Fraser requires inclusion. The potential of small groups to build capacity for social change and their problem of exclusion are discussed in similar ways both in the safe space literature and in CLH studies (Polleta, 1999; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; The Roestone Collective, 2014 ;Read, 2009; Chiodelli, 2015; DeFilippis et al., 2019; Williams, 2005; Sargisson 2007). Creating a community inevitably entails some separation between members and non-members. The extent to which CLH can pose a challenge to the current system is a matter of controversy and scholars differ in their views on these projects' position vis-à-vis capital: outside the speculative logic of the market (Ruiu, 2014), well within it (Chiodelli, 2014), somewhere in between (Sargisson, 2012; Jarvis, 2015a) or with a foot in both camps (Chatterton, 2013). The diversity of CLH makes it impossible to offer a blanket judgement on its potential.

Overall, CLH has potential to offer stability and security in an insecure and unstable environment. In Fraser's terms, they can offer recognition and respect, fair distribution and political voice. But realising this potential, as this study shows, can be complicated.

## **Methods**

This paper is based on in-depth qualitative research of two community-led housing projects in the UK. Both projects offered affordable social housing but were otherwise very different: Beechtree is a housing cooperative in an inner-city neighbourhood in the North of England. The cooperative owns about 40 housing units of various sizes, and has been operating for over 40 years, housing an intergenerational and diverse community. The second community, Seagull, is an emerging cohousing project in a rural area in the South of England, which was



still in the development process at the time of writing. The community is entirely White and most of the members are over 50.

The research engagement involved several day visits and email correspondence with the emerging cohousing community, and 8 months intensive interaction with the established cooperative. In both communities methods included individual and group interviews, participatory sessions, observations and participant observation of social events and general meetings, as well as observations of committee meetings. 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted - 11 with members of the cohousing group (out of 20 members), and 23 with cooperative members (out of 36 members). Communities' names have been changed and where participants are quoted they were anonymised and their names changed.

The interviews' sampling, structure and strategy were instructed by a critical realist approach (Manzano 2016), focusing on 'what works' for different people in different circumstances (Pawson, 2013). So while remaining open to participants' perceptions and experiences, the interviews did not assume a "deliberate naiveté" about the projects. The interviews revealed several main themes, including the unanticipated theme of safe space, which emerged independently in the two communities. Once the theme emerged, it was included in following interviews to build a theory about the community together with members.

### **Material and emotional safety in community-led housing**

The case studies show how community-led housing can function as just and safe alternatives to insecure housing. Members mentioned three forms of safety in their communities: material, emotional, and procedural. These aspects of safety correlate to Fraser's forms of justice: socio-economic, cultural-symbolic, and political. Members often referred to three forms of *material safety* in CLH: secured tenure, affordability and good maintenance. Members contrasted their safe, supportive communities to the alienated world "out there", and mentioned three aspects of *emotional safety*: mutual aid, supportive community and tolerance. The third aspect of safety was increased agency and control through the communities' democratic procedures. This section begins with findings regarding material safety, continues to discuss participants' views on emotional safety, and explains the synergetic connection between the two as they play out in communities' decision-making. The section ends with a critique on the complexities of safety in the communities: exclusion, inequality and exploitation of the system.

## ***Creating material safety, responding to socio-economic injustice***

*"It's a way for me to live somewhere affordably with a long term security and don't have to be worried about being evicted by a private landlord"* (David, Beechtree Co-op)

Joining a CLH project may seem like an idealistic move to outsiders, but many cooperative members admitted that although they support the cooperative's ethos, Beechtree was above all financially attractive. This is not an obvious choice in a capitalist society. In order to explain why members considered CLH a safer option than private rent or ownership, I discuss their experiences in the context of neoliberal UK and its housing crisis.

Molly, a single mother of two and a member of Seagull emerging cohousing group, had to leave her three-bedroom privately-rented flat and move into a one-bedroom flat in a different private house. She shared a room with her teenage daughter while her son slept in the living room, and joked that the move was a good opportunity to de-clutter all the possessions they have accumulated:

"He [the landlord] wanted it to go up much more, and he can get much more, he can get £750, £800 for that 3 bed. And I... [...] couldn't [be housed in social housing] because [...] you can't make yourself homeless and then expect social housing. But now I'm – we're officially over-crowded because there are three of us in here. So [...] I've got the status to be housed".

For members like Molly, the prospects of moving into an affordable cohousing project meant protection from sudden rent raise, since rents level will be agreed by all members; and since there is no private profit to be made, rent raise should be moderate. Moreover, since rent will be invested back in the housing project, maintenance can be done to a relatively high standard. Many members of the case study communities mentioned maintenance as an important factor – not only in terms of safety and convenience but also in terms of ownership and belonging; having their house done to their taste made their houses a home (Madden and Marcuse 2016).

Concerns about safety and maintenance, eviction and tyrannical landlords are rising as austerity deepens and the public housing sector shrinks (Hodkinson 2019; Watt et al. 2016). This occurs across many sectors, social classes, ethnic groups and age groups (Clapham et al. 2010; McKee, 2012; Lund, 2013), although some ethnic and age groups are affected disproportionately by the neoliberalisation of housing (Finney and Harries 2015), for example, low income (often migrant) workers (Field 2014).

In the face of this on-going housing crisis, the case-studies communities found ways to make housing affordable, either through collaboration with a local housing association or by owning the properties outright and not-for-profit. The two communities had a significant number of members who received some income support or housing benefits, but unlike tenants in private or social rent, they could expect unrestricted tenancy agreements (Robinson and Walshaw 2014). In Beechtree cooperative, 61% of members stayed for over ten years. This is significantly more than the average in the private rent sector, where the median rented tenancy is about 18 months, and the mean length is four years (Alakeson, 2013). This reflects both a lack of other affordable options (like private ownership) and the high level of security in the community, as the example below suggests.

Daniel has been living in the cooperative for 13 years, joined by his wife and later their children. Daniel was not interested in home ownership: "effectively we have a secured tenure as if you own the house, with none of the liabilities, really - personal liabilities. Our repairs get done, and they don't cost us anything really. (...) And like [when you buy with a mortgage] - *you* don't own the house - the *Halifax* [bank] owns your house, you know".

Like Daniel, a significant number of members were reluctant to take financial risks in order to own a house and felt that the cooperative was a safer option. This is an unusual view; the capitalist market is driven by the idea that the most secure and cost-effective form of tenure is ownership (Flint 2003). But research shows that even outright homeownership does not guarantee safety or wellbeing. Many of the sub-standard dwellings in the UK are privately-owned (Bramley et al. 2004), and in the years just before the research, homeowners were up to 37% of those in poverty (Tunstall et al. 2013). Poor homeowners may suffer from gentrification and lose their support networks and sense of belonging (Watt 2013), or face repossession if they are unable to pay their mortgage (Wallace, Jones, and Rhodes 2014). At the time of research (2016-2017), the UK faced a housing crisis: prices were high and the market was characterised by a decline in the number of first-time buyers, decreasing numbers of younger homeowners (ONS Digital 2015) and increasing numbers of private renters with children (DECC 2015). Attempting to promote homeownership, the government initiated more affordable ownership schemes (rather than more social housing or regulated private rent). The communities were undoubtedly going against the mainstream.

### ***Providing emotional safety and symbolic justice***

*"I bought jeans with more attention to details than this house. Most people don't talk about the houses but about relationships"* (Iris, Seagull cohousing)

Emotional safety was almost as important to members as material safety. This section reveals aspects of emotional safety in Beechtree and Seagull communities: a sense of community and belonging, mutual aid and tolerance. These aspects correlate with Fraser's cultural-symbolic forms of justice by providing recognition to marginalised and vulnerable members.

Firstly and most importantly, knowing and trusting their neighbours made the community a safe space for members. Hannah, a cooperative member, said: "it feels emotionally safer. [...] I guess it's not usual to have so many people that you know a bit and you're kind of friends with living so close to you". Social activities like parties and film nights and the daily acts of mutual aid maintained the social bonds that enhanced members' commitment to each other:

"The social connections you make is gold dust; if this was private property there were no possibilities for security or connections between neighbours [...] and the house works better if we all get on. [...] It is something that brings really different people together, different personalities, background, whatever" (Adrian, Beechtree co-op).

Perceiving the entire house as a unit rather than a collection of individual flats made the cooperative a stronger community and made members emotionally safer. These findings echoed studies on the benefits of mutual aid to givers' and receivers' mental health and emotional safety: helping others increases people's sense of worth, meaning, belonging and agency (Post 2007; Schwartz et al. 2003).

The second aspect of safety focuses on people of particularly vulnerable groups: single parents, people with disabilities and older people. Community life, members felt, offers a more holistic solution than individualistic and marketised solutions such as private care, care homes or gated communities. In terms of justice, the communities offered recognition and respect where society often offers discrimination and disrespect.

Older people are probably the most thoroughly researched in relation to benefits from community-led housing (Scanlon & Fernández-Arrigoitia 2015; Glass & Vander Platts 2013). Participants saw community-life as a way to tackle social isolation, and older members with no children or with children abroad found the community could provide some elements of care that would usually be provided by the family. Communities are generally seen as a more

consistent and holistic safety-net than individual, often paid, care: "the safety net in the [elder cohousing project] is the residents themselves, while in other types of retirement communities, there is an internal organisational, service-oriented safety net" (Glass & Vander Platts 2013:429). For Gail, age 64, cohousing was a strategy for successful ageing: "[a] set up for ageing people that will be more successful than the current model of, you know, residential care and care at home, because for me that's a poor system". Her parents, she said, made "poor choices" on their retirement: moving to a remote house that meant complete dependence on a car, with no access to shops, culture or nearby neighbours. They were isolated and had to employ a carer at home. Gail wanted something better.

Disability was another reason to look for a supportive community. For Iris, a single mother to a disabled young adult, moving into cohousing was an alternative to "having to only have paid carers in his life", which she saw as an impersonal and limited relationship. She felt the community offered "loads of benefits in terms of his freedom, the fact that people would know him on a much more personal level (...) and there will be support for me". Her son, said Iris, was isolated after his return from care during the day, where he only met professional workers and other disabled young people. Her current neighbours did not make a special effort to know and understand him, and she did not expect anything else.

The third aspect of emotional safety was protection from shame. Connor from Beechtree cooperative described the shame around cultural expectation to own a house:

"In this country you're told and encouraged you should own your own home, even if the mortgage breaks your fucking back, even if paying the amount out every month practically does you in. You have to be a home owner: 'Oh, renting is for losers' - that's the mentality in this country".

The cooperative offered a safe space from disrespect, where members were surrounded by like-minded people. Within the community, Connor was reassured that he made a sensible housing choice and was never judged according to his financial status. Returning to the argument in McGrath et al.'s report (2016), the findings shows that where society inflicted shame, the community created a safe space, "[allowing] for temporary safety and ease, and enable the possibility of creating a home, a space of being 'one's true self'" (David and Hartal, 2018:6).

### ***Safety in democratic decision-making: building political justice***

*"I didn't set out to live in a co-op, but now I live here, think it's important politically, especially with the bedroom tax, austerity etc." (David)*

What made the communities a safe space was the interplay between the formal organisational structure and the informal culture of care. The organisational structure guaranteed democratic decision-making and collective ownership that is not-for-profit. These structural qualities allowed members to exercise flexibility, make decisions that did not prioritise financial profit, and organise politically to resist neoliberal housing policies. The following are three examples of safety in cooperative social relations, and justice in fair decision-making processes that give voice to vulnerable members. These are examples of procedural justice that offers not impartiality but recognition of difference and shows commitment to members' wellbeing before profits.

The first example is Beechtree cooperative's resistance to the welfare restructuring known as the "bedroom tax", which was introduced in 2013. This reform reduced eligibility to housing benefits for social tenants "deemed to be consuming too much housing (14% for one spare bedroom and 25% for more than one)" (Gibb 2015). As a result of this policy, tenants relying on housing benefits struggled to stay in their homes but equally struggled to find suitable alternatives. The cooperative decided to resist this legislation by absorbing the shortfall for people who were affected. This entailed a substantial on-going loss of rent income, but members of the community proudly supported this move.

The second example is Beechtree's approach to arrears. The cooperative's administrative worker, who previously worked in social housing, said: "[The co-op] is a lot less strict on arrears than a conventional social landlord would be. Quite substantial arrears will be tolerated if there is some contact with the tenant and some evidence that they are trying to pay them back". My observations showed that flexibility in dealing with arrears was practised when members were perceived as acting in good faith; in such cases, discretionary measures were happily approved. Member Hannah said that this made the community a safe space: "I think some people in this co-op would really struggle in independent housing [...] the co-op gives this little bit of extra support [...]. You know, a neighbour who got an eye on them, kind of... a little bit of flexibility if they don't manage to pay their rent on time". The cooperative *legal* structure meant that properties were owned collectively not-for-profit, and policies agreed democratically. The *social* structure carved out room for manoeuvre,

implementing policies in a flexible and forgiving manner, and thereby creating space of justice for the vulnerable.

The third example is from Seagull cohousing community, which was extraordinarily adaptive to members' needs. Two members were environmentally ill, which meant they were affected by "everyday chemicals in the environment at levels politically conceived to be 'safe'" (Coyle 2004). They also suffered from electromagnetic hypersensitivity, a condition "associated with decrements in general health status, increased levels of distress, increased levels of health service use, and impairments in occupational and social functioning" (Rubin et al. 2010:2). To make the development more inclusive, members agreed that one house will have (more expensive) chemical-free paints and no wi-fi connection to protect from electromagnetic fields. This decision limited the ability to rent units in this house. It is even more unusual considering that the condition is rare, and at the time of the study had no scientific evidence (Rubin, Nieto-Hernandez and Wessely, 2010). The decision to accommodate these needs against the market logic suggests an exceptional level of trust.

The communities' willingness and ability to make decisions that were not economically driven made them a safe place for their tenants. This synergy between a structure that ensures democratic decision-making and relationships that create a sense of community is vital to the creation of a just and safe space from neoliberalism.

### ***Complexities of safety in CLH***

*"We're very very open, but there's been points where people have taken really bad liberties with that"*  
(Daniel, Beechtree co-op)

No space is entirely safe; some argue that the very term "safe space" is misleading because it is essentially unrealistic (Wallin-Ruschman and Patka 2016). This section identifies two areas of potential insecurity and injustice in the case studies: power dynamics within the community, and the inherently exclusive nature of safe space which may hinder its potential for broader political transformation.

Safe spaces rely on relational work (The Roestone Collective 2014), and therefore dysfunctional relationships make spaces unsafe. The case studies communities had procedures to support members in disputes and offered mediation or intervention where sanctions were needed. Ostensibly, these measures could make the community a safer space from bullying, but its success was limited. Fear of conflict in a small community often led

members to put up with bullying for years before acting on it. It is well recognised in Feminist literature that small communities can be oppressive and pressurise members to conform (Young 1990). This was the case for Stephanie, who stopped attending community meetings following daily aggressions from other members. The internal conflict-resolution mechanism was not helpful for her. Peer pressure could also make community living stressful and unsafe. Some members felt marginalised and powerless in the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman 1970) of informal social dynamics. Three members of Beechtree cooperative discussed the difficulty to voice unpopular opinions. Olivia said: "if you speak up against it they will turn out against you – that thing that's 'they'".

Ruth: The clique--

Steph: There's certainly a group of people who've been running the show"

Ruth: But we all have a vote, we can all go to meetings".

This exchange demonstrates the tension between the formal procedures and informal power dynamics. Less popular members could feel alienated, restricted or excluded.

The second limit to safe spaces is their own boundaries, limiting not only the number of beneficiaries from the safe space, but also its potential for wider impact. Political organising and transformative politics are considered the benchmark for safe spaces' success (The Roestone Collective 2014). But safe spaces often fail to realise this ambitious goal. This section discusses two limitations of CLH safe spaces in a quest for greater social justice: exclusion and inward-lookingness. As mentioned above, the CLH sector is diverse, and some forms of CLH are more inclusive, affordable or sociable. The case studies differed in their relationship with wider society: Beechtree was already established and members worked hard to maintain it, while the Seagull group was still forming and reaching out to potential members. Moreover, Beechtree cooperative was in a large, multicultural city, while Seagull cohousing project was in a small and almost entirely White British rural town. These differences affected their position on diversity and their level of community engagement.

Many CLH projects are not diverse. Although the case study communities were affordable, they grappled with other aspects of diversity. Seagull cohousing attracted mainly older people; Beechtree cooperative, set in a South-Asian neighbourhood, had mainly white British members (although the percentage of Black members was similar to that of the general UK society). Homogeneity was increased by the word-of-mouth recruitment strategy within similar social circles. From a safety perspective, this is a reasonable strategy; but from a



social justice perspective it appears exclusive. Diversity in CLH is an important issue beyond the scope of this paper (for an elaborate discussion see Arbell 2020). Here I focus on the communities' impact on society, and this is where the two communities differ.

It may not come as a surprise that the emerging group was more optimistic about its potential for change than a disillusioned community that has been running for decades with limited success in making waves. Cooperative members often commented that even their immediate neighbours did not know what a cooperative was and never tried to become members. This did not diminish their political commitment, though: unlike the CLTs in DeFilippis et al. 's study (2019), who rejected politicisation of their development, Beechtree members generally believed their project had greater political potential than they could realise.

Members of Seagull cohousing were outward-looking, as Gail's representative quote indicates: "the main driver for me is to start to challenge the status quo. I don't think through [party] politics there'll ever be able to overthrow the system, I think it has to come from making different models and really showing people that there is a different way". Gail articulated the cohousing community as a prefigurative space, in the sense that it "[performs] life as it is wished-for, both to experience better practice and to advance change" (Cooper, 2017:335). Cohousing members were outward-looking; when the site adjacent to theirs went on sale, members decided to develop a second phase to their cohousing project. This is a tremendous undertaking: most cohousing projects fail to establish one community, let alone two. Explaining their decision, Anna said: "well if we don't [buy it] somebody else will - it could just be a private developer".

Members of the cooperative, on the other hand, tend to argue that the political value of the projects lies in serving their own members. David said: "providing cheap, decent affordable housing is political, isn't it?", and Heather explained that "the politics that tends to be the most long-lasting is that which is rooted in your interests rather than campaigning around some dam somewhere else or something like that".

Critics of CLH evoke two main counters to members' rationale. Firstly, "community" is often used as a cover for neoliberal welfare restructuring rather than a social change towards a just society (McKee 2015a), and scholars are concerned about the common features of community-led housing and the neoliberal desire to withdraw state's responsibilities (Jacobs and Manzi 2012). Secondly, as in response to David's argument, DeFillipis argues that "those of us centrally concerned with issues of social justice should not minimise the importance of

getting low-income people into decent, stable housing when they would otherwise be excluded from it. But we are most interested in exploring if there are moments of transformation, which we see as building blocks toward other worlds (DeFilippis et al. 2019:6).

Do all these complexities make CLH safe spaces truly 'paradoxical', as the Roestone Collective argues (The Roestone Collective 2014)? Not necessarily. Safe Space should be seen as an aim rather than an achievable goal; a useful concept for prefigurative spaces challenging hegemonic logics. Community members admitted that their high expectations sometimes led to disappointment; as cooperative member Ruth said: "I think it probably is a less judgmental and a more tolerant place than the outside world. But it still doesn't live up to unicorns skipping through the meadow".

## **Conclusion**

This paper offers a new conceptualisation of safe space and contributes three interrelated arguments to the literature: (1) safe spaces can become just spaces when they respond to three aspects of injustice: socio-economic, cultural-symbolic and political; (2) Neoliberal violence should be recognised as a type of violence that requires safe spaces. These spaces protect people from the insecurities of neoliberalism: profit-driven markets, disrespect for the poor, isolation and individualisation; (3) Community-led housing can be an example of such a space. This is a novel addition to a large body of literature on the injustices of neoliberalism and on safe spaces from other forms of oppression.

The case studies showed that members felt particularly safe in their communities, and revealed the practices that made them just and safe spaces by offering three aspects of safety: material, emotional and political. These aspects correlate to Nancy Fraser's aspects of (in)justice: distribution, recognition and political voice. Fraser's normative framework highlights the *potential* for justice in CLH, although it is not always realised. In terms of distributive justice, the communities offered affordable and not-for-profit secured housing. In terms of recognition, communities provided respect and support to members of all walks of life and protection from shame in a competitive and materialist society. They also offered stability and security in an ever-changing environment. Politically, members had a voice regarding important decisions on their housing, from rent rates and disability adaptations to membership and its termination. Finally and importantly, I argue that the combination of a democratic, non-profit organisational structure and a cooperative and supportive social

structure led to just political procedures and decisions that put members before financial profit. This was evident in the examples of support for bedroom tax victims or discretionary flexibility on arrears.

Alongside the advantages of CLH, complexities were also identified. Safe spaces are imperfect; in order to maintain safety, exclusion is vital; as recognised in the literature, safe spaces often reproduce various forms of unjust exclusion and oppression, such as racism. Moreover, power dynamics among members could lead to injustice and abuse. Other complexities regarding CLH as safe spaces relate to their potential to be inward-looking rather than a starting point for wider social change. However, members tend to argue that collective organisation for improved housing and a supportive community had important political value in themselves. Not all CLH projects are similar: some are financially or socially exclusive, some offer little social connection and participation. Finding the right balance is a challenge for CLH on its way to become not only safe but also just.

As society becomes insecure, with threats ranging from rising populism to climate crisis, there will be more need for safe and just space. Naomi Klein pointed at the rising of "Green Zones" – luxurious and exclusive safe spaces for the elites in the midst of disaster areas affecting the poor (Klein 2017). CLH offers a different, community-led model of a just and safe space. There is therefore scope to develop the concept of community-led housing as a safe, just and inclusive space, and to further explore the concept of safe spaces from neoliberalism – not only spaces of contestation but also nourishing spaces which allow members a break from the widespread market-logic of neoliberal society.

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## **4. Contested subjectivities in a UK housing cooperative:**

### **Old hippies and Thatcher's children negotiating the commons**

#### **Abstract**

How can a long-standing cooperative respond to changes in society over time, and how do these changes affect the management of the cooperative? We looked at the visions, daily life and policies in a housing cooperative in the UK established in the 1970s and found a messy process that required constant negotiation and involved diverse subjectivities. We identified different visions of the commons: a minimalist vision focusing on housing alone, and a maximalist one, diffusing boundaries between personal and collective and involving many aspects of members' lives. These visions have always existed in the cooperative but the general trend was towards minimalism. Behind the changes are members' changing subjectivities, reflecting changing processes of subject formation in relation to state and market. We found that difference in subjectivities was often displayed along generational lines, and affected commoners' visions of the commons. Although the cooperative changed some of its practices to fit the more minimalist vision, it still endured as a form of commons that is resilient to challenge.

**Key words:** commons, cooperatives, subjectivities, diverse economies, community, housing

#### **Introduction**

The experiences of housing cooperatives in the UK and beyond open up opportunities for contemporary conceptual debates and practical action: in the face of an on-going housing crisis and growing precarity across all forms of tenure, they continue to offer an alternative model that provides much needed secure and affordable housing (Bliss 2016; Field 2014; Rowlands 2010). Housing cooperatives have been operating in the UK for a number of decades, offering democratically-run affordable housing (Clapham and Kintrea 1992). Many of these cooperatives were set up in a political context that predates the current neoliberal period (Ellis 2017; Kintrea and Whitefield 1991), but nonetheless persist. In this paper, we view the cooperative as an example of a commons that employs diverse economies and holds together a range of subjectivities. This perspective offers "rich potential for imagining new ways of collective life" (Huron 2015) and thinking through social and spatial relations beyond capitalism (Chatterton 2016).

Specifically, we argue that cooperative members embody multiple and contested subjectivities that shape their vision of what a commons means in practice and can create contestation around daily life in the cooperative. Competing subjectivities underpin a difference in visions, ranging from a minimalist to a maximalist view of the commons. These differences are played out for example through understanding the housing cooperative as a housing solution compared to a more elaborate vision of communal social relations, or preferring management strategies that are formal/compulsory compared to social/voluntary. The maximalist vision is multi-layered and involves various aspects of members' lives, in comparison to the minimalist vision that focuses on the housing aspect. In our case study, these visions often reflected generational differences, which members understood through a narrative of competing subjectivities – from old hippies to Thatcher's children – which reflected the changing relationships of the cooperative and its members with the wider state and the market. As the political context shifted and new subjectivities emerged, the cooperative renegotiated its meaning of the commons. The paper asks how broader changes in the state and market affect members' subjectivities and in turn their vision of the commons and strategies for its management. Our insights have wider implications for managing a more complex set of urban commons.

Our focus, housing cooperatives in the UK, represents a small sector that aims to provide good quality housing and high level of tenants' satisfaction (Birchall & Simmons 2007; Bliss 2009; Rodgers 2002). However, very little academic research has been published on English housing cooperatives, and recent publications tend to offer overviews of the sector with a focus on policy and governance (Birchall & Simmons 2007; Gulliver et al. 2013; Rosenberg 2011; Rowlands 2012, Thompson, 2018) or discuss them briefly in the context of community-led housing (e.g. Field 2015; Lang & Mullins 2015; Somerville 2004; Woodin et al. 2010). As Bresnihan notes, "there has not been so much work examining the social relations of the commons and the everyday practices that maintain these relations" (Bresnihan 2016:96). We fill this gap by focusing on the micro-scale processes through which the cooperative is managed as a commons, and identifying the subjectivities that are in play in these interactions. We begin this paper by introducing the conceptual context of the commons. We then present the research and the methods used, and position the case study in the empirical context of housing cooperatives in the UK. Our findings suggest that contested subjectivities and different visions of the commons coexist within housing cooperatives. To show how these subjectivities are negotiated in day to day management, we focus on three examples of

tensions around the vision of the commons: debates regarding the sense of community and the introduction of two new policies. We conclude the paper with some implications for commons and co-operative studies more broadly.

### **Cooperatives as Commons**

The cooperative is a type of commons: a collectively owned and managed resource that fosters “an economic logic in which the use value and general interest prevail above the exchange value and individual interest” (Aernouts and Ryckewaert, 2018:6; see also Peuter & Dyer-Witthof 2010; St Martin 2016; Zitcer 2015). The meaning of commons ranges from large common-pool resources like our atmosphere, fisheries and forests, through common goods such as radio stations, to smaller scale urban community-gardens and of course housing projects. Our focus in this paper is on collectively owned commons, but the process of commoning can take place with any form of property, “whether private, or state- owned, or open access” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2018:193). We draw on a broad literature that sees cooperatives as commons, in which alternative logics and different subjectivities are played out (Huron, 2018; Byrne & Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2009; Healy & Graham 2008).

The political potential of the commons is understood in different and complementary ways. First, the commons is understood as a type of collective property which rejects private ownership in favour of co-ownership, co-production and co-management of social goods and spaces (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2017). Second, it is a type of *social relations* that puts human contact and non-monetary exchange at the heart of social interaction (De Angelis, 2017). Third, the commons can be understood as a form of political resistance to enclosure and market logic (Bunce 2016) – experimental spaces for alternative social forms (Gibson-Graham et al. 2018) that act as “embryonic form of an alternative mode of production” (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014:95). These are not mutually exclusive, and we consider the commons as a messy construct with potential to challenge market logic through alternative forms of property and social relations, but also as a unique space in its own right (Gibson-Graham, 2006c:35).

Commons are often discussed in relation to state and capital: either as existing against and beyond state and market (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), as an “immediate escape from the state-capitalist enclosure of the city and the creation of alternative social practices” (Bresnahan and Byrne, 2015:38); or “entangled” with state and market (De Angelis 2017).



Caffentzis offered a nuanced analysis of the commons, demarcating some forms of commons as compatible with capitalism and others as subversive (Caffentzis, 2004). Huron (2018) pointed out that *urban* commons in particular are under greater state regulation and pressure of the capitalist city. Capital puts pressure on the commons in various ways, affecting members' ability to set up, maintain and participate meaningfully in managing the commons. Carving out new commons is difficult in a profit-driven environment, especially when attempting to acquire expensive assets like housing and keep them outside the speculation of the market (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Hodkinson 2012; Thompson 2018). Huron's study of housing cooperatives in Washington D.C. identified two challenges for participation in a "commons that exists within the structure of capitalism": first, members may be drawn to the cooperative as a last resort in search of affordable housing, without necessarily having an interest in commoning as such. Second, "life under capitalism can make it terribly difficult to find the time and energy to participate in the commons" (Huron, 2018:139). Similarly, scholars of UK cooperatives described them as vulnerable to dominant modes of housing due to their position between ownership and rent. Birchall predicted that "[co-operative housing] will always slip into a form of owner-occupation or landlordism, succumbing to the wider social forces which sustain these dominant tenures" (Birchall 1992, p11).

### ***Commoners' subjectivities, cooperative subjects***

What keeps the commons alive is the community of commoners that produces and sustains it through the social practice known as commoning (Linebaugh 2008). Through this practice, both the commons and the commoners – the cooperative subjects – are continuously (re)constituted (De Angelis 2017). Seen as a way of being and doing rather than merely a thing, the commons can become a nurturing environment for postcapitalist subjectivities (Gibson-Graham 2006b). For Gibson-Graham, diverse economies and post-capitalist politics must involve "new practices of the self (...) *a politics of the subject*, that is, cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of noncapitalist economies" (Gibson-Graham, 2006:76, emphasis in the original). These new economic subjects, they argue, "can begin to take ethical action in the economic realm" (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011).

We therefore turn our attention to the commoners and their subjectivities. Subjectivities are a key element of commons management and cooperation because they are the meeting point of social relations, power and agency, and therefore affect the way people understand themselves in a social situation, and the actions they believe they can take (Nightingale

2011). Gibson-Graham suggested that cultivating a different form of subjectivity can open up non-capitalist spaces and challenge the status quo (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Here we characterise the cooperative subjectivities with its various aspects: pragmatism, collectivism, agency and security through interdependence.

The key to cooperation is working with others for a common good. The cooperative subject must therefore see herself as part of a collective and aim to ensure the success of a collective project rather than advance her own short-term interests on the expense of the collective.

Byrne and Healy argue that in doing so, the cooperative subject tends to be pragmatic and apply flexibility and adaptation rather than rigidly following a set of rules (2006:250). This kind of pragmatism in promoting collective interests was recognized by others, too (Cornwell 2012). Elsa Noterman in particular offers an important perspective on the cooperative subject in her ethnography of a manufactured housing cooperative in the US (Noterman 2016); her research shows, among other things, that even when a community is not found on idealistic grounds or a strong “communal subjectivity” of its members, it developed some community-minded aspects and – first and foremost - secured the land for its members merely by formally adopting a cooperative structure.

Barron (2017) found that commoners’ subjectivities can be interpreted as neoliberal and counter-neoliberal at the same time. Her conceptualisation of city gardens in New York is useful for housing cooperatives, too. The commoners, observed Barron, may be conceived of as neoliberal for being entrepreneurs turning a social problem into a business, depoliticised consumers, or volunteers that fill up the gaps left by the neoliberal state. Indeed, the recent wave of support in community-led housing projects in the UK was criticised as a neoliberal move to shift responsibility over to communities where once the state provided social security (Defillipis, 2006). But, as Barron argues, these projects are not for profit and participants are more than mere consumers. Rather, returning to Gibson-Graham’s definition of diverse economies, they represent ‘alternative capitalist’ market and capital (Gibson-Graham, 2006a:71). Members of housing cooperatives embody three kinds of counter-neoliberal subjectivities that Barron identified: they are *producers* with sovereignty and control over individual choices and available systems. They also perform a *citizen* subjectivity, which entails a sense of belonging to a larger entity – not necessarily the state – that comes with rights and responsibilities. Finally, participants become *activist* subjects, with increased political awareness beyond their own project. Barron’s organisational categories are complemented by the interpersonal aspect in De Angelis’ (2017) and Jarvis’ work: the

“soft infrastructure” of relationships, wellbeing and motivation that turns housing projects into communities (Jarvis 2015b).

All these aspects are crucial in fostering a cooperative subject in a neoliberal society. Housing studies highlight subject formation processes in capitalist markets, in which subjects are constructed as consumers who make rational choices: calculating elements such as return on investment and social positioning, and aspire to achieve independence through home ownership (Allen, 2008; Kleinhans and Elsinga, 2010). Those who cannot make valued choices are seen as “failed consumers” who lack taste and status and endure shame and disrespect (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). In a cooperative, however, a different subjectivity is fostered. Members are valued for their personality and contribution to others, and financial status does not gain members respect. By choosing to be producers of their housing, co-operators disengage from the discourse of failed consumers. Moreover, neoliberal subjects are formed around discourses of competition and speculation that expose them to significant “risk and the possibility of failure (poverty, social exclusion and marginalization)” (Mavelli, 2017:498). They must become resilient subjects, accepting insecurity (Chandler and Reid, 2016) and bearing individual responsibility without the safety net of community (Bauman, 2007). By fostering a *citizen* subjectivity, the cooperative subject can rely on her community for support, gaining security through “economic spaces in which interdependence is acknowledged, negotiated, and enlarged” (Graham and Cornwell, 2009).

But the commons are always impure and messy. As we explored the cooperative we never expected to find a straw-person who is entirely “cooperative” or anti-capitalist (Chatterton 2010). It was clear that “commons exists both outside and inside states and capital, and, to the extent that states and capital influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons, states and capital are inside commons even if their systemic patterns and logics are outside them” (De Angelis 2017:102). Our case study revealed the complexity of multiple and contested subjectivities within the commons. This paper, rather than searching for a dominant subjectivity or attempting to uncover neoliberal currents within the commons (as in: Guthman, 2008), seeks to understand how multiple and contested subjectivities negotiate and develop different strategies to manage the commons.

### **Methods: researching (with) a housing cooperative**

The research is based on the lead author’s in-depth engagement over a nine months period, visiting a housing cooperative at least once a week. Previous experience with housing

cooperatives helped her enter the community and build rapport, although there were clear limits to being an “insider”, such as making assumptions about the cooperative and its challenges (Ganga & Scott 2006; Humphrey 2007). The research involved a mix of participatory and qualitative research; it was important to engage in research with members in a way that benefits them and answers their questions as well as ours (Kesby et al, 2007). The research methods included individual and group interviews with 23 participants, observations of eight committee meetings, admissions interviews and five general meetings, facilitating two collaborative sessions and attending social events. The lead author was invited to join members in a community project and took an active role in its development. Insights were also generated from reading the cooperative’s policies, minutes and other formal documents, including minute books from 1979-2000. These early sources were helpful in tracing the changes in attitudes, practice, policies and discourse over the decades. Where any names appear, they have been anonymised, including the name of the cooperative itself.

The research involved members of various ages, backgrounds and levels of engagement, from active members to those who felt like outsiders. This offered a wide range of views on life in the cooperative and perspectives of the changes in the cooperative over time. The observations and interviews focused on practices, with a critical-realist drive to find out what it was about the cooperative that made it work for its members, which mechanisms were operating and what was the relevant context of the investigation in terms of individuals, interpersonal relations, institutional settings and infrastructure (Pawson, 2013:37). Guided by the critical-realist approach, the interviews asked members to raise the main issues in the cooperative and evaluate the workings of the cooperative according to their own criteria (Manzano 2016). We looked at written policies and listened to statements on values, then moved beyond them using participant observations and further interviews to examine the way they were implemented and experienced by members.

Initial research questions were adjusted and finalised with participants (Sommer 2009) through two participatory sessions: the first involved mapping out the research questions that members were interested in, which resulted in a clear interest in the history of the cooperative. Together with a member who discovered invaluable archival materials, members were invited to a story-telling workshop. During the session members asked each other questions and shared their knowledge about the cooperative’s past. This well attended workshop did not lead to a longer collaborative project but was instrumental in teasing out the main issues discussed in this paper.

## **Cooperatives in the UK**

The story of Beechtree is typical to many housing cooperatives formed at this period. Here we introduce the historical and political context for housing cooperatives in the UK, setting the scene for the main discussion about the relation between large scale changes and small scale experiences.

The number of housing cooperatives in the UK is not centrally recorded, but according to the Confederation of Cooperative Housing, in 2017 there were 836 co-operative housing organisations in the UK (Confederation of Cooperative Housing 2017). Of these, about 243 were registered with the government as affordable housing providers in 2007. Many cooperatives manage housing owned by local councils or housing associations, and of those who own their properties, like Beechtree, most were set up in the 1970s and 1980s (Co-operative housing international 2018). A significant majority of those housing cooperatives were registered as social housing providers with the Housing Corporation (Rowlands, 2009), a non-departmental public body that operated until 2008, which “funded new affordable housing and regulated housing associations in England” (Government 2019).

In the 1970s housing cooperatives had a rare window of opportunity, when “community activists established themselves as credible political actors and forged a closer relationship with local councils, gained access to material resources, information and political networks” (Ellis 2017:56). Under a Labour government, the 1974 Housing Act offered generous funding for third sector actors like housing associations and cooperatives, with grants covering all capital costs and ongoing maintenance, as well as “fair rents” system based on need (Birchall 1988). Campaigns against “slum clearance” in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in establishing “short-life” housing cooperatives to manage council-owned properties (Bliss 2016), supported by local authorities and housing associations (Moore and Mullins, 2013:8). Short-life cooperatives use empty council properties by offering them to cooperatives for an unknown length of time, paying low rent with a commitment of members to leave the property within a month’s notice (Laviollette, 2008). Founders negotiated with local councils and housing associations to take over older and derelict houses and redevelop them, with the right to govern themselves, collect rent and allocate units (Kintrea and Whitefield 1991).

However, political changes led by the Conservative government in the 1980s ended the funding and support opportunities and brought the sector to a halt. Notably, the 1988 Housing Act led to further marketization and professionalization of the housing association sector,

forcing new developments to borrow capital on private markets, which was not a feasible option to many cooperatives due to lack of funds and greater competition (Thompson, 2018). This policy shift was part of a wider neoliberal move to privatise the housing stock and promote “demunicipalisation of local authority housing through policies such as the right to buy and large-scale stock transfers, and a scaling up of the housing association sector drawing it away from interest in small-scale neighbourhood renewal projects such as empty homes” (Moore and Mullins, 2013:8).

At present the cooperative world is facing a different environment. As Ellis argues: “community action groups are constrained by the neoliberal framework which limits their access to resources, clips the wings of their hard-won allies in local government and privileges private sector over community provision” (Ellis 2017:58). At the same time, new opportunities are opening for the first time in decades, offering some grants and support for community-led housing initiatives. A new wave of community-led housing has grown in the UK in the last decade, including new housing cooperatives. Some of these are found in collaboration with housing associations or other cooperatives, some with the aid of local councils or supportive community initiatives, and others through private finance (Bliss 2016). At the end of 2016, the Government has announced a new grant that could benefit cooperatives but which favours either registered providers or schemes that promote home ownership. These grants did not affect established communities but were aimed at setting up new communities, hence not affecting the cooperative case study.

### ***Beechtree housing cooperative***

Our case study, Beechtree housing cooperative (name changed to preserve anonymity), is an intergenerational housing cooperative that has been running for over 40 years in a large city in the North of England. The cooperative is fully-mutual: all the members are tenants and all tenants are members. The ownership of Beechtree cooperative is collective and according to cooperative rules if it was dissolved it must be passed on to another cooperative or a non-profit organisation with similar aims. Beechtree is set in an inner-city neighbourhood with a very diverse population. At the time of research there were 45 tenant members, who have lived in Beechtree for varying lengths of time: some just joined, and 26 members (61%) have lived in the cooperative for over 10 years, of which some had been members for over 35 years. Members come from all walks of life: unemployed, academics, manual workers, public servants, third sector workers and professionals. The cooperative owned all its units outright:

39 housing units, ranging from one bedroom flats in divided houses to family houses. The size of Beechtree is around the average for the UK (Co-operative housing international 2018): it is larger than many smaller cooperatives in its own city, but small enough to allow direct democracy rather than a representative structure that is common in much larger ownership cooperatives and Tenant Management Organisations (Bliss 2009).

Beechtree started as a short-life cooperative in 1977, in a terrace of local council houses that were due for demolition. At this early stage Beechtree included 15 adult members and some children. The cooperative was a collaboration of two groups: a gay men's group from London who were interested in communal living, and local residents who were looking for a collective solution to their housing problem. The tension between these motivations will continue to resurface in the cooperative's history.

During the first two years, members worked to form a community, acquired new houses, formed a relationship with the local council and Housing Corporation officers, and signed a development agreement with a local housing association. By 1981 they were registered as a social housing provider, purchasing 17 houses from a housing association, and managing some properties owned by the association as well as some extended short-life properties of the local council. Their membership had increased to 28 adults. The hybrid ownership and management structure and the registration as a social housing provider reflect the close ties the cooperative had with the state and housing association. Another aspect of cooperation with local government and housing association was the financial and organisational support members were given from these bodies. Like other cooperatives of that era (Thompson 2018), members of Beechtree received training in the technicalities of acquiring and managing their own houses. Purchasing and refurbishing the houses was made possible due to the 1974 Housing Act. Beechtree cooperative was already established when public funding to cooperatives stopped, and continued to act as a social housing provider, offering low rent social housing for people on the local housing register. In spite of the lack of state funding, the cooperative continued to grow in numbers and in 2000 bought the last two houses from the housing association, gaining full ownership and control over its entire housing stock.

### **Findings: contested subjectivities and visions of the commons**

What does it mean to be a co-operator? The cooperative subjectivity was a matter of disagreement in our case study: anti-capitalist or politically neutral; a contractual obligation or a voluntary, communal practice; idealistic or pragmatic. Members of the cooperative held

different visions of the commons, from minimalist (providing decent, affordable housing) to maximalist (also building a close-knit community and a political alternative). In this section we give three examples of competing visions of the commons. Contestation around these visions was conceived by members as representing competing subjectivities – the old hippies and Thatcher’s children. These types are figurative and ideal: while some members might jokingly say they were hippies or describe the cooperative feel as hippie, none of the participants was truly Thatcherite. The different visions were apparent in three examples: conflicting expectations from the community, the introduction of a business plan and new managerial technologies, and the new participation policy. We discuss these examples by introducing the change within the cooperative; explaining how it represents diverse visions and subjectivities; and discussing the changes in state and capital that affected the cooperative.

### ***A sense of community: minimalist and maximalist vision of the commons***

*“Apparently they had more group hugs; they haven’t done that all the time since I joined Beechtree”*  
(Jo)

Our research participants agreed that the cooperative offered more social interaction and mutual-aid than private housing, but the general trend was towards less communality. Members responded to this trend in three main ways: disappointment, satisfaction, and apathy. We see these responses as representing different visions of the commons: a “communal” maximalist vision which involves many layers of meaning and many aspects of members’ life, a “pragmatist” middle-way, and finally a minimalist vision focusing on housing only, without additional interpersonal and political ambitions. Pat, a member in her 60s, was a maximalist, and felt that many younger members did not want to mix socially. “We used to call it ‘Beechtree village’, [but] we have become just a place with low rents where you can have some control over your housing; I’m not sure if people want to be a community anymore”. However, many members appreciated Beechtree’s community spirit, and younger members in particular found there a good balance between alienation and a suffocating commune. Heather, in her early 40s, said: “I think one of the reasons it’s sustained for so long is that it has less of a communal aspect to it, we have our own homes”. Those who expected nothing but affordable housing were not engaged socially and were often perceived as non-cooperative.



The vision of the cooperative as providing “more than housing” referred to two kinds of politics: material and interpersonal. Pragmatists like David thought that “providing decent, affordable housing is political”, and Heather agreed: “the politics that tends to be the most long-lasting is that which is rooted in your interests”. This mundane and minimalist form of resistance to the injustice of capitalism echoes Huron’s (2018) observation that self-help can challenge capitalism even when not articulated as politically radical. The interpersonal kind of politics fostered a communal subjectivity, encouraging frequent and caring interaction. For these subjects, the social underpins the organisation, as Pat said: “I feel very strongly that this co-op will not last if we don’t regain some kind of sense of community”.

Using interviews, collaborative storytelling and archive materials we found that since its inception the cooperative shifted from a maximalist towards a minimalist vision of the commons, and involved less sharing, socialising, resources pooling and collaboration beyond housing. At the same time, a nostalgic sentiment to “more community” existed in the cooperative from its very early days. Therefore, desire for more communal aspects was not simply generational but a personal preference.

In spite of the minimalist shift, Beechtree had many signs of a thriving commoning community, such as care and mutual aid through babysitting, finding lost cats, lending equipment, mending broken trees. Members celebrated birthdays in the communal rooms and gardens and invited all the members, and others organised collective BBQs and bonfires. Gifting was standard: home-grown or superfluous food and household goods were offered for free on the cooperative’s Facebook page, although members could just as easily sell them online or offer them to neighbours who are not Beechtree members. These practices were additional to the collaborative management of the cooperative, from taking part in committees and general meetings to daily maintenance jobs in members’ homes and communal spaces. Beechtree had a forgiving approach to arrears, prioritising members’ wellbeing over financial considerations: the sign of community economy (Community Economies Collective 2019). Jo found that these qualities made Beechtree “a place that is different from the usual capitalist world where for a lot of housing associations or landlords it’s all about the money and they don’t always do what they can to meet people’s needs or at the very least give some sense of community”.

But this level of socialising, cooperation and resources pooling was low in comparison to the past. Archive materials show that at first (January-August 1979) the cooperative had a

communal living room, kitchen and dining room, and a co-op nursery. Minutes from 7<sup>th</sup> December 1979 noted the purchase of two washing machines to share between three houses. For a number of years, the cooperative ran a food cooperative. Minutes from 1988 indicate that members living in separate flats in divided houses shared one telephone – unusual for the UK at that period. Private and collective boundaries were fluid: meetings were held in one house’s front room, where an office space was also found. Long term members fondly recalled going out for meals after general meetings, collective trips to the seaside and yearly pantomimes. Childcare solutions are a good example of changes in vision and practice: in the first few years of the cooperative, the first item on the agenda was always babysitting. Later on, the cooperative organised a low-cost crèche, which operated until the late 1990s. In 2017 the cooperative offered a refund on individually arranged childcare for members who could not attend meetings otherwise. Moving from non-monetary mutual aid to collective organising to individual refund represents members’ lack of time and energy to find collective solutions.

At the same time, archive materials indicate that members always had different expectations from the community. An 1980 memoir by a founding member already lamented the dwindling community spirit in its first two years, and a brainstorming session on improvements to the cooperative included calls to keep up “socials” as well as statements that “communality shouldn’t be forced upon people” (minute book 1978-1981). Almost ten years later, at the end of 1988, minutes recorded Rosa saying: “are we going to be a cooperative or just run like a housing association? Wants more sharing and joining especially that includes kids”. The following week members decided to “keep the socials going regularly”. This decision was made many times in the history of the cooperative, including during the research (e.g. April 2017 General Meeting), indicating that there was a pattern of losing interest followed by a desire to reinstate.

The shift from a maximalist towards a more minimalist vision of the commons is rooted in changing subjectivities and changes in society. Some founder members saw political value in communal living and viewed sharing as an end, while for others it was a means to an end. Sharing should not be romanticised (DeFilippis et al. 2006): collaboration is a practical response to want and while some view it as a political practice it is not necessarily everyone’s first choice (Noterman, 2016; Huron, 2018). In our case study, some elements of sharing have changed as the cooperative became more financially secure: the lack of resources in the first years resulted in mixing housing and work spaces, but that was never desirable, and at the

time of research the cooperative's social events and formal business were held in newly refurbished designated office space and meeting space. Moreover, as market changes made consumer goods and services cheaper and common in most households, sharing phones and washing machines became less urgent financially and less desirable socially. Some members related changes in communal aspects to wider societal changes. We now turn to a detailed discussion in these changes and the way members framed shifts in national politics as shaping members' subjectivities.

### ***The business plan: is efficacy good for community-building?***

The first example of policy change is the introduction of a business plan, which transformed Beechtree's management practices and its relation to the state: from close and positive relationship to the decision to deregister as a social housing provider. Deregistration meant that the cooperative was less exposed to state influence, but the shift to greater formality and professionalism brought to the surface different visions for the commons and multiple and contested cooperative subjectivities. The "pragmatists" saw it as an opportunity to improve management, but the "communals" felt that formality compromised the sense of community.

A business plan is a regulatory requirement for all registered social housing providers, including cooperatives, with a commitment to "approve a financial framework, review it periodically and assess and manage the co-op's long term viability" (CCH The confederation of Co-operative Housing 2016:3). Although these regulations have been in place for the last 15 years, the cooperative ignored them and for decades ran without one. In 2017 Beechtree devised a business plan in order to meet regulatory requirement for social housing providers wishing to deregister. In the introduction to the business plan, members explained the move as a reaction to the recent political assault on social housing: "new government legislation limits our income and there is a risk that it may allow our properties to be bought by tenants" (Beechtree business plan, 2017). This is a reference to the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, according to which "registered providers of social housing must reduce the total rent payable by a tenant in year by 1%" (Department for Communities and Local Government 2016). Although this does not currently apply to cooperatives (Bryant 2017), members were wary of the risk involved. The other risk that members were concerned about was the extension of the Right to Buy to housing associations (Manzi & Morrison, 2018), raising the concern that cooperatives were next in line for privatization or demutualization. According to a key sector organization, this decision is not unique to the case study cooperative, and

several UK cooperatives took a cautionary measure and decided to deregister in order to be released from state regulations and potentially harmful policies.

The business plan clarified and articulated the cooperative's goals in a professional manner, including the introduction of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and SMART goals<sup>4</sup>. The main goals were: increasing participation; making financial projections and improving financial planning; improving the governance; and preparing for deregistration – a process that requires the cooperative to satisfy the Regulator of Social Housing that its management ensures the continued protection of tenants and that there is no misuse of public funds. In this sense, the cooperative demonstrated a consistently flexible approach throughout the years: registering as a social provider when major repairs grants were available through the state, and pulling out of state regulation when it no longer promoted the cooperative's interests. This kind of pragmatism is in line with Byrne and Healey's (2006) view of the cooperative subjectivity, where actions are taken without attempting a "purity of practice". The decision to produce a business plan can therefore be seen as an act of resistance to the Conservative government's policies and a tool to carve up more space for autonomy.

But while most members wanted more autonomy from the state, some were uncomfortable with the new business plan. When introducing the concept of SMART goals at a General Meeting, Amelia said apologetically that getting used to the new style will be tough, but was interrupted by Zoe, who justified the move by saying: "the whole world works like this!". In the following general meeting, Jo raised the need to build "the organisation of the co-op as a business and actually sticking to our business plan goals". This kind of language was anathema for some members of the older generation, who reacted strongly to the mention of a business model, although they did not necessarily object to its goals:

"When people say quite casually, you know, 'we are a business', I will say: 'no we are *not*, we're just not, we're a social organisation, organised on very different principles'" [Adrian].

Adrian represents a maximalist view of the commons, emphasising the social over the business even though cooperatives are in fact businesses, albeit having "durable alternative

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<sup>4</sup> SMART goal setting was developed as a corporate management tool. The acronym stands for: S – specific, M – measurable, A – achievable, action-oriented; R – realistic; T – Time based.

structures and values rooted in an ethic based on the principle of mutuality” (Davis & Worthington 1993:849).

Interestingly, participants tended to use the formative years of members’ political identity as a proxy for their political subjectivities: the “hippies” of the social-democratic post-war consensus in one camp, and the allegedly managerialist “Thatcher’s children” in the other. All the participants were politically left-leaning, and so their traits existed in the context of a largely cooperative and non-capitalist identity. Typically, the younger and more politically active members of the cooperative held a view of the capitalist economy “as the real, dominant and or most powerful form of economic life” (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2011:29). Long-term members in particular saw a contradiction in the fact that some members in their 30s and 40s were committed to anti-capitalist political activism but preferred a more formal and “authoritarian” style: “they actually do things and protest, but at the same time they're saying everything is a business. And they think in business terms, and I think that contradiction is just astonishing” (Adrian).

The tension between the generations that emerged in interviews echoes the political generations theory, that documents the shift to the Right amongst those who were young adults during the Conservative era (1979-1997), and even more so for those who were young adults during Blair’s New Labour term (Grasso et al, 2017; Tilley & Heath 2007). However, in the cooperative, it was people *on the left* who grew up in that era and yet for the older members seemed to embody a “neoliberal common-sense”<sup>5</sup>. By this they referred to the fact that younger members tended to “think in business terms” and criticise the organisational culture of the cooperative as dysfunctional and unsuitable for our times.

Many members evoked the same narrative of change. This narrative had three main parts: necessary professionalization; lack of time; and growing individualism. Daniel articulated this clearly. In the past, he said, “you didn't have to have policies, procedures, things didn't have to be legal (...) things were done on a much more ad-hoc basis”. The narrative goes on to explain that market and welfare changes made members time poor, while in the past “most households didn't have to have two adults in employment in order for them to function so

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<sup>5</sup> In recent years the pendulum swung back and younger people in the UK are leaning to the left, see (Milburn 2019). This development has not affected the cooperative significantly as the core active members are not in that age group.

they had a lot more time on their hand, so - things ran quite smoothly on an ad-hoc basis”. The third aspect that changed was the vision of the commons and members’ subjectivities:

“[Today] there is, probably less of a kind of communal thing; it's less of a commune and it's more of a co-op, d'you know what I mean.

**What do you mean, can you say a bit more about that?**

I think you got a lot of people who are hippies basically, and... which is great - I'd love to be a hippie but you just can't, can't do it nowadays”.

Why did members think the cooperative’s conduct was not viable, considering that it has been running successfully to this day? The political climate has changed, and ad-hoc practices that were natural before now seemed unimaginable or irrelevant. Many younger members like Daniel held a romantic view of the founding members: in those days, people ostensibly had more freedom and easy opportunities. This glosses over the tremendous professional bureaucratic work with various authorities that enabled the founding of the cooperative, and is documented in the cooperative’s first minutes-books. In these documents we found a clear distinction between formal work with the authorities and the highly informal style of the internal management. Arguably, the cooperative’s founders were conversant with the formalities of mainstream economy, but had a clear vision of a different form of conduct for their cooperative life. Younger members did not believe such distinction was desirable, partly because they saw the cooperative as struggling in a capitalist environment. As Gibson-Graham and Roelvink acknowledged, the ability that the founders seemed to have, to envision and enact the economy as “a space of ethical action, not a place of submission to 'the bottom line' or the 'imperatives of capital' (...) is no small feat.” (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2011:30).

Finally, members recognised a tension between becoming ‘more like a business’ and the desire to foster deeper social connections. This tension was evident in the General Meeting discussion in the introduction of SMART goals and KPIs. Amelia said: “I think some people are concerned that we’re going down this awful, boring business-like bureaucratic thing, like, and that’s just a bit of a formality and a necessity and we do need to do that, but I think we do need to put effort into the kind of stuff that hold us together”. In other words, in an attempt to stop a further slip to a minimalist vision of the commons, the cooperative had to provide more than just housing. This concern resulted in yet another call for more social events.

### ***Negotiating voluntary and compulsory participation***

Participation is one of the defining qualities of cooperatives but also their inherent challenge (Birchall and Simmons 2007). While lack of participation persists, attitudes towards it changed over time, along with changing subjectivities and visions of commons management. This section discusses changing participation patterns and the cooperative's new participation policy, the contestations around it and the narrative that was used to explain the change.

Maintenance is one of the most demanding committees in the cooperative. Two new members suggested that maintenance work includes skill-swapping instead of relying on external contractors. Zoe, a long-term member, replied that this was done more in the past, but in the last decade things went “to the other extreme”, and relations with the cooperative became “more like tenant-landlord”. As a result, members turned to paid workers instead of taking collective responsibility and “thinking about the co-op's resources as if they belong to the members”. Zoe was pessimistic. In fact, during the course of research, members often posted help requests on Facebook and were helped by skilled members within a few hours. Yet, this short anecdote illuminates the tension between a minimalist and a maximalist vision of the commons and contested subjectivities – the “citizen” who feels commitment to the community versus the passive consumer (Barron 2017).

Unlike the business plan, which originated in an external incentive, the participation policy emerged solely from members' initiative, four years before the research engagement. After 40 years of voluntary participation, the majority of members voted for a new policy to ensure the fair and smooth running of the cooperative. However, continued debates around the policy led to a revision process. A key point of disagreement was how to engage members in running the cooperative: the involvement committee aimed to enforce a points-based policy of attendance at meetings and other contributions, but some members called for a community atmosphere that would encourage members to join voluntarily for the social value. Following a survey among members, the majority approved two complementary proposals: first, to reduce the number of general meetings from monthly meetings to quarterly meetings; and second, to monitor the participation of all members using a point scoring system for participation, enact a formal procedure to deal with non-participating members according to this system, and if this procedure fails, terminate the membership of non-participating members, and as a consequence – evict them. The policy has increased the number of members in meetings, although we found that almost one third of the members did not come

to any meeting during our research. At the time of the research, roughly 15 out of 45 members were involved in committees to different degrees, but this number was reduced during the research period as people had new job commitments and had to pull out. Attendance at general meetings during the research never exceeded 20 members, just under 50%. Some members never participated. However, unlike other cooperatives or commons (DeFilippis et al. 2006; Federici 2010; Huron 2018b), here participation was balanced in terms of gender.

Again, responses to the policy differed along generational lines. Older members argued that the policy marked a transition from a collectivist view of responsibility to an individualistic one and moves from voluntarism to coercion. Younger members argued that the policy encouraged a mutual and collaborative conduct within the membership, fairness and efficacy. Coercion was used to fulfil a desire for meaningful participation and greater democracy.

Sheryl, a member in her late 30s, defended the policy: “if you don't want to participate and you don't want to be involved, go find somewhere else to live. D'you know what I mean?”. This blunt statement brings to mind Hall and O’Shea’s analysis of the transformation of the concept of fairness since the rise of neoliberalism (Hall and O’Shea 2013). They showed how ‘fairness’ has become “a quasi-market relation, a reward for personal effort – a long way from the collectivism of the 1940s” (ibid:8). Older members had a similar analysis. Chris (age 68) strongly resisted the new policy and said that throughout the years, even though active members sometimes resented the less active ones, the idea of eviction was never considered. Adrian thought the new policy reflects changing subjectivities in the cooperative and in wider society: “people are conceiving of being a tenant member here, a cooperator, as if it was a contract with an employer that if you don't do certain things, you know, like if I sort of refused to go into work for a few days I'll be sacked”.

Regardless of their view of the policy, members evoked the same narrative to explain the change from voluntarism to coercion: caught between the growing demands of the market and the restructured welfare state, the cooperative adopted a more business-like approach to participation. The following exchange in a group interview represents this narrative neatly. Rob, a younger member, commented that in its early days the cooperative was “more of a subversive community, more of a kind of anarchist community...”

Sheryl: Anarchist - I was gonna say, like, coming with that, people probably weren't in full time employment in professional jobs.



Rob: Exactly, yeah, yeah. It was the time when you could be on the dole much more easily than you can now.

Here we see the same three-fold change: lack of time due to the loss of social security of the welfare state; firmer regulations that increased the work load; and a changing vision of the commons from communal and political to more pragmatic. For the policy supporters, the remedy for lack of time was higher efficacy: “if everyone was involved in the co-op none of us will have to put more than 20 minutes a week in, really, and we could kind of put this effort into social things” (Rob). Adrian argued the contrary: the fewer jobs there are, the fewer people are needed to carry them out, and hence participation is compromised. In his view, the desire to simplify processes and act more briskly and professionally led to less participation and less agency for the majority of members; it was another example of the business-like approach the “old guard” identified as authoritarian and essentially capitalist.

Some members, especially (but not solely) of the older generation, rejected the compulsory participation policy on ideological grounds: they argued that the cooperative ethos requires voluntary participation and thought that the new “authoritarian” approach reflected a corporate subjectivity rather than a cooperative subjectivity. Chris, for example, said incredulously: “I said [to a representative of the participation group] 'don't try and coerce people' and he [replied] 'no, we believe in coercion'. Coercion to me is a word that I'm *appalled at*”. Instead of coercion, long standing members recalled a time when running the cooperative was less formal and overlapped with social aspects of the community. The sociability of work made participation more attractive, as reflected in memories of child-care during general meetings and going together for a meal afterwards, or meeting for cooperative-related work over lunch. “This social element”, concluded one member, “has faded”. Pat, who was hardly involved in the running of the cooperative, recalled:

I was on Management Committee for six years and most of the people on the committee were my friends, but then, you see, this is the big difference – after management committee we'd all go to the pub together, and people just don't do that anymore.

Our own observations of Management Committee meetings in 2016-2017 confirm that they were indeed very cordial, but focused entirely on the agenda, had a formal structure of reports and discussion, and never involved social outings before or after the meetings.

Participation was strongly linked to a sense of belonging and ownership (Cornwell 2012). A member of the involvement committee shared the outcomes of the community survey on

barriers to participation: “often, rather than any definable thing being wrong for them, it's that they had a sense of being outside of the community and kind of not really part of it”. It was therefore unsurprising to find that active members were generally satisfied with the level of community spirit – and vice versa.

Amidst these debates, the implementation of the policy was partial. Members were sent to talk to non-participating members, letters were sent and a register at the GM was introduced. However, the attempt to actually evict a non-participating member failed because when it came to the vote, the majority of members refused to follow the procedures and voted to continue their membership. They voted with their heart.

## **Conclusion**

The commons are never detached from state and capital and their impact on the commons and the commoners was evident in our case study. Through 40 years the cooperative changed its vision of the commons from a maximalist view, expecting the cooperative to provide and produce a lot more than housing, to a vision that fostered a pragmatic cooperative subjectivity rather than a communal one. The cooperative was responding to changes in society in a contested process, constantly negotiating the meaning of the commons.

The cooperative community displayed various forms of diverse economies: sharing, gifting, cooperating and caring. These practices had an important role in making the cooperative a community rather than a bunch of houses in a different ownership arrangement, and reproduced the cooperative as commons and the members as commoners (De Angelis, 2017, p.104). At different times and for different members, the emphasis of the community changed: the cooperative served as a pragmatic solution to the injustice of private property; a community of solidarity of interdependent subjects; and a political form of resistance against capitalism and paternalistic social housing. These elements existed simultaneously, and members felt that the very existence of the cooperative had political value, be it producing decent, affordable housing or alternative social relations.

We found that competing visions and subjectivities were often set along generational lines: the “hippie” communal maximalists of the older generation and the cooperative pragmatists of the younger generation. The “hippie” cooperative subject was characterised by spontaneity and informality, fluid boundaries between the personal and the collective, and a communal vision of the commons. For her, formality and professionalism threatened caring

relationships. The “Thatcherite” or pragmatist cooperative subject sought clear boundaries between the private and the organisation, efficacy, transparency and professionalism. Both of these cooperative subjects valued collaboration and interdependency, which were seen as essential to the upkeep of the cooperative. While the tension between these subjectivities was apparent and a minimalist shift certainly took place, we found that the maximalist-minimalist tension existed in the cooperative from its early days. It was not simply a generational change.

Interestingly, although different members had different stances on the main issues that stirred the cooperative, they shared a narrative about how changes in wider society affected life in the cooperative. This narrative focused on the transition from a welfare state and a strong social security safety net to our current neoliberalised society that put pressure on the collective effort. This narrative had three key components: a growing demand for professionalization due to market standards and state regulations; reduced time due to changing working patterns and welfare restructuring; and growing individualism that led to reduced interest in communality.

This narrative echoes findings from Huron’s study on housing cooperatives in the US. Huron (2018) argued that for urban commons, the pressure from state and capital is particularly hard. This observation applies for the UK too, although relations with both state and capital are context-dependent and change over time. Although state regulations do affect urban commons, the extent of state intervention has changed over time and was negotiated in various ways according to changing political contexts. The cooperative may have changed its management strategies and culture over time, and manifested diverse subjectivities, but we argue that by maintaining a collective effort that is not-for-profit, it remains a commons that is resilient to challenge.

Our research opens up several avenues for further research. It is clear that different subjectivities develop different visions of the commons and different management strategies, and we need to know more about how this works out in different contexts. These issues are of importance to cooperative studies. This case study offers rich data but a further comparison with other cooperatives in the UK and beyond can offer a richer picture of cooperative subjectivities in different contexts, including less political and larger settings. Moreover, our analysis focused on the commons-state-capital relations in the UK, but seeing as similar

processes happened in the US, a more cultural analysis can offer further insights into how the commons are negotiated.

The paper demonstrates the importance of subjectivities to the character of the commons; if commoning is what makes the commons, the commoners' understanding of commoning is key to the way it is carried out.

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## 5. Beyond affordability: English cohousing communities as White middle-class spaces

### Abstract

Cohousing is widely celebrated as a socially and environmentally sustainable housing model, but remains a small sector with a distinct social profile: White, highly educated and with middle-high income. Drawing on mixed-methods research and using a Bourdieusian analysis, this paper argues that culture, and not affordability, is the main barrier to inclusion. Contrary to previous claims, I found that awareness of cohousing is born within these circles and not locally. Finally, members' eco-habitus marks them as middle-class regardless of their financial status or social background. The quantitative aspect provides up-to-date data on the social profile of cohousing communities in England, and the qualitative data show how cohousing is reproduced as a White and middle-class space due to mechanisms of cultural capital and habitus – an invisible social system that maintains privilege. At the same time, the data also show that cohousing is in fact more diverse than is perceived, and alternative capital and eco-habitus are not only a reflection of class position but a means of passing as middle-class.

**Key words:** cohousing; collaborative housing; diversity; Whiteness; class

### Introduction

*“The danger is that you recruit yourself” (Anna, C1)*

In November 2015, the UK Cohousing Network invited conference participants to collaboratively source a Manifesto for Cohousing. The room was buzzing. Many passionately raised the issue of diversity, or lack of it. Stephen Hill, Chair of the UK Cohousing Network, recorded the suggestions, which included a call to make cohousing “truly accessible for everyone”. Cohousing, they said, “should be intergenerational and multicultural, celebrating and welcoming diversity. (...) Cohousing will be the new normal...who wouldn't want it?” (Hill 2019). Indeed, who wouldn't - and why? This is the issue this paper seeks to unfold.

Housing experts and academics hail cohousing as the way forward and a solution to many societal problems (Jarvis et al. 2016; Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government 2019). But despite operating for decades, the sector remains small and very

homogeneous. In communities around the world, the demographic profile tends to be very similar: White, educated home-owners, often older and often women (Boyer and Leland 2018; Chiodelli 2015; Droste 2015; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018; Margolis and Entin 2011; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018; Williams 2008; Bresson and Labit 2019). Why is cohousing still a niche housing option, and can it be attractive to wider circles? Attempts to answer this question often focus on barriers to inclusion, and particularly on affordability (Garciano 2011; Larsen 2019; Sanguinetti 2012; Droste and Komorek 2017; LeFond 2017). Lack of awareness of cohousing is also a recognized barrier (Williams 2008; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018). This paper, rather than focusing on barriers and asking why those interested in cohousing are excluded, takes a step back and asks who is interested in the first place, and what are the gateways that led members into cohousing? While this strategy inevitably revealed barriers, my interest is in understanding what enabled members to overcome or avoid these barriers on their way into cohousing. My main argument is that cohousing communities in England reflect the habitus of the White middle classes, and therefore it is culture, and not simply affordability, that drives the homogeneity – or perceived homogeneity – in cohousing communities. Employing a Bourdieusian analysis, the study found that the journey into cohousing begins with values and dispositions, lived experiences and social circles, and that all of these have important and conflated classed and racialized aspects (Bourdieu 1984; Rollock 2014 ). Importantly, I found that the association between middle-class-ness and cohousing goes both ways: living in cohousing often enabled people to ‘pass’ as middle-class in the cultural sense even if they did not identify as middle-class. This may also explain why, although the study discovered some diversity in the sector, members still perceived it as homogenous.

The paper draws on mixed-methods research with four cohousing communities, including in-depth qualitative research with two communities, focus groups with two others and a national demographic survey of 15 cohousing communities in England of the 18 established cohousing communities. The study focuses on England and not the UK due to the different housing policies and circumstances, especially in Scotland and Wales. Asking participants about their life stories and their route into cohousing provided rich data on the pull and push factors on the way to membership.

The paper is in four parts. First, I contextualize the study and point out gaps in the literature, followed by a description of the research and methods. The third part combines the findings and discussion, showing aspects of diversity in UK cohousing and how the way into

membership is peppered with classed and racialized moments. These moments are theorized using a Bourdieusian analysis. Finally, the conclusion draws broader implications for the cohousing sector and counter-cultural movements.

## **Literature review**

This section builds on studies from several fields, and identifies areas in cohousing studies that call for development and response in light of new data. It does that in two parts: first, by critically assessing the state of the sector with regards to diversity; second, responding to the gaps by suggesting a different methodology and engaging the cohousing literature with Bourdieusian scholarship that frames cohousing as a practice of social positioning and sheds light on the relation between cohousing values and classed and racialized identities.

### ***Diversity and privilege in cohousing***

Cohousing is not diverse in any country. Regardless of ownership models or the number of projects, it still seems to attract mainly middle-class members, especially White and older ones (Boyer and Leland 2018; Chiodelli 2015; Droste 2015; Jakobsen and Larsen 2018; Margolis and Entin 2011; Roth 2018; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018; Williams 2008; Garciano 2011; Tummers and Macgregor 2019; Bresson and Labit 2019). Even affordable rented projects tend to attract White middle-class creatives (Droste 2015; Larsen 2019), although there are exceptions (Chitewere and Taylor 2010; Fromm and Jong 2009; Sanguinetti 2012). In England, market conditions and state policies affect the affordability of cohousing, and to some extent their diversity. As Field (2015) points out, “many cohousing initiatives have tried hard to provide a range of properties for their different members - some even disbanding when that could not be done”. Successful projects often compromised their affordability goals.

Experts and sector organisations generally view cohousing as a beneficial model for much wider publics, including those on a low income (Garciano 2011), and are optimistic about cohousing’s potential for diversity. In the face of cohousing studies’ enthusiasm, Tummers and Macgregor (2019:16) warned that “by leaving out critical discussion of gender, race, class or age (and species) from the analysis, the impact of difference and power relations within the co-housing project remain unnoticed”. A few scholars suggested a more critical view, focusing on exclusion, homogeneity and lack of integration with cohousing’s surroundings (Chiodelli and Baglione 2013). These contributions scrutinize the gap between

cohousing's progressive values and exclusive practices. It is commonly argued that the key to diversifying cohousing is establishing more local examples (Boyer and Leland 2018; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018). Williams hypothesised that immediate local influence is central to the expansion of cohousing: "it would be difficult for those living further from cohousing communities to see the benefits" (Williams 2008:279). This hypothesis has not been tested in the UK so far.

Scholarship of cohousing demographics in the US, UK, Denmark and France has mainly looked at communities' current membership (Fernández-Arriagoitia and West 2020; Bresson and Labit 2019; Jakobsen and Larsen 2019; Larsen and Larsen 2019; Margolis and Entin 2011; Tummers and Macgregor 2019; Williams 2005), and reported similar findings. Others try to gauge the interest in cohousing among the general public, especially quantitative studies in the US (Sanguinetti and Hibbert, 2019; Boyer and Leland, 2018). The latter found that cohousing was appealing to a much broader audience than current membership (White, educated, liberal, higher income, older and female), and in fact, the typical cohousing 'profile' did not predict more interest in cohousing. However, they noted a gap between interest and application. In an attempt to explain this gap, Sanguinetti & Hibbert (2018) focused on the way interest turns into a decision to move in. Similarly to others, they see current members as "early adopters" with potential for greater diffusion. The main barriers to broader adoption, they argue, are "lack of awareness of cohousing and the resource-intensive process of creating or finding cohousing" (ibid:16).

But quantitative studies, as Jakobsen and Larsen (2018:13) frankly admit, "lack the explanatory depth of intensive research of structures and mechanisms 'below' the observable surface". Riedy et al.'s (2019:237) qualitative work offers more nuanced explanations to the gap between appeal and adaptation. Their study with older people in Australia found that cohousing was seen as "a great idea for other people": too different from mainstream housing styles, involving too much sharing and potentially difficult interactions, and raising concerns around inheritance.

Some co-housing projects do place diversity at their heart, especially in terms of class and ethnicity. Examples of such projects can be found in the Netherlands (Fromm and Jong 2009), in social-housing projects in the US, Scandinavia (Garciano 2011; Törnqvist 2019) and France (Bresson and Labit 2019), but currently not in the UK (although projects like Threshold and New Ground encourage income diversity through social-housing options). In

Germany, some inclusive projects bring together White middle-class members (often students or creatives) with marginalised and precarious members (homeless people, asylum seekers and new migrants) (LeFond and Tsvetkova 2017). These communities are intentionally diverse, often aided by grants from governments or NGOs. They are also established by White middle-class people who make an effort to create a diverse environment, often for a limited transitional period. In her study of alternative food networks in the US, Guthman (2008:388) warned that increasing diversity by “inviting more people to the table” ignores the power relations that underpin such proposals: “Who sets the table?”

There is therefore a need to take cohousing research further using mixed methods, looking at the demographic profile of cohousing members but also asking why people with certain identities end up living in cohousing. More specifically, there is a need to critically assess the classed and racialized dimensions of barriers identified by these authors and points at some others. To this aim, I engage cohousing studies with a Bourdieusian perspective on class and race.

### ***A Bourdieusian view of cohousing as a practice of class distinction***

Cohousing communities have a unique combination of characteristics that set them apart from other community-led housing models (DeFilippis et al. 2019; Jarvis 2015 ;Field 2020): they are values-led; require high levels of participation; and, in the UK, rely mostly on home-ownership. Together, these elements have a direct impact on diversity: "people can be prevented from engaging because they do not have the resources to engage, or because they do not feel this is an agenda which aligns with their identity" (Middlemiss 2018, 40). What is missing from the cohousing literature is the classed and racialized dimension of these values and practices. Here Bourdieu's (1984) work is most illuminating, by showing how class-specific practices, dispositions, tastes and worldviews are imbued with value and gain high-status groups with symbolic power to valorize their lifestyle. Importantly, since middle-classness often conflates with Whiteness (Archer 2011), class distinction can imply racial exclusion, since cultural capital is being configured based on the experiences and tastes (or habitus) of White people (Wallace 2017:913).

My analysis employs Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and forms of capital to understand the mechanisms behind the social profile of cohousing communities. Race was virtually absent from Bourdieu's work (Skeggs 2004), but current British scholars (Rollock 2014; Wallace

2017) developed his work by analysing the embodied aspect of social and cultural capital and the synchronisation of high cultural capital with Whiteness (Wallace 2017).

Bourdieu famously defined three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. While acknowledging the crucial but well-researched impact of economic capital on diversity in cohousing, here I focus on cohousers' cultural capital and their habitus. Bourdieu (2018:17) described three states of cultural capital: embodied, objectified and institutionalized. The *embodied* state is acquired through a process of incorporation and mastery of knowledge, skills and perceptions, which continues throughout life and becomes habitus. *Objectified* cultural capital appears in the form of cultural goods (e.g. paintings, instruments, books). These can manifest the owners' economic ability, but, more importantly, reflect their capacity to choose and use these goods appropriately. Finally, *institutionalized* cultural capital is the person's formal educational qualifications, which grant quantifiable prestige to their holder.

*Habitus* is the action-generating "structuring structure" (Bourdieu 1984:169) of predispositions and schemes of perception that develop in response to "the conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence" (Bourdieu 1990:53). People who have a similar conditioning will embody similar practices, perceptions and tastes to the extent that "individual choices imply no acts of choosing" (Bourdieu 1984: 474) but merely acts of position-taking resulting from their habitus. The rest of this section presents cohousing communities through the lens of Bourdieu's masterpiece "Distinction", which showed how lifestyles reflect the habitus of different class fractions.

### **The classed and racialized logic of values-led communities**

Values are at the heart of cohousing communities in England, not so much in the sense of rigid ideology or spiritual conviction, but more of a utopian and prefigurative ethos (Sargisson, 2012). Cohousing's radical beginning in Scandinavia still runs through communities worldwide. In the 1990s, "second-wave cohousing" evolved in the US and Canada, based mainly on homeownership of independent groups who refused to be marked as utopian (Sargisson 2012). While European cohousing is often based on rented units and state support (Tummers 2016), UK communities are more similar to American ones in their ownership and development approach. However, English communities often advocate for progressive values: mutual-aid, equality, sociability, sharing, and sustainability. These are manifested in collective management and decision-making, shared gardens and sharing meals in a common-house, eco-building and sharing cars and equipment to reduce consumption and



carbon footprint (Chatterton, 2013). Ironically, these values and practices are exclusive (Chiodelli and Baglione 2013). Sanguinetti (2012:4) found that in the US, even more financially accessible cohousing projects may not be attractive to “more ideologically diverse consumers”. Moreover, she observed that even communities that tried to increase diversity made no attempts to diversify values (ibid:18).

Take for example UK cohousing’s strong environmental commitment (Wang et al. 2020). From a Bourdieusian perspective, this lifestyle reflects members’ habitus. Numerous studies addressing the association of eco-habitus and ethical consumption with the middle-class argue that eco-habitus and ethical consumption are forms of high cultural capital class distinction; this is easily applied to cohousing in the UK (Middlemiss, 2018; Carfagna et al. 2014; Guthman 2008; Horton 2003; Zimmerman 2011). Importantly, those practices are most associated with “the dominated fractions of the dominant classes – with high cultural capital but not the highest amounts of economic capital (...) [and] may be a way of drawing moral boundaries” (Baumann, Engman, and Johnston 2015:419).

The signature expression of cohousing values is its high requirement for participation (Field 2020). This can deter potential members from joining on three main grounds, some of which are clearly classed and racialized. First, it requires time and energy, which may be scarce for those struggling to get by (Garciano 2011). Second, the skills involved are complex and often rely on high levels of education, experience and confidence (Huber 2017). Finally, the participatory style of cohousing management is associated with the White middle-class progressive left and may exclude people of colour or those from a working-class background (Polletta 2005). Although this decision-making style was initially used by Black activists in the 60s, in later decades groups who practice consensus decision-making could struggle to recruit diverse membership (ibid.:243). Polletta’s important contribution demonstrates two crucial points: classed practices are historicized, not fixed or essentialist; and the choice of organizational forms “may be attractive mainly on account of the social groups with which they are symbolically associated” (ibid:242), rather than their efficacy or ideological appeal alone. This mechanism was powerfully described in Guthman’s (2008:394) study of Whiteness in alternative food networks in the US, when Hispanic farmers did not participate because “those [White] hippies freak them out”.

### **Middle-class elective belonging and sophisticated consumption**

Belonging to a cohousing community implies not only shared values but also shared class dispositions. The concept of “elective belonging” enriches our understanding of the classed dimension of intentional communities. Savage et al. (2005) argue that the middle-class is likely to seek belonging not through tradition but through choice; as Bourdieu formulates it, choosing the right place to live manifests the choosers’ cultural capital and social position (Bourdieu 1990). Framing homeownership as objectified cultural capital, buying homes is a means of social positioning for the middle-class of “knowing consumers” (Allen 2008; Skeggs 2004a). This knowledge is crucial for joining a cohousing project. The importance of elective belonging is evident in the repeating metaphor in cohousing publications of the community as “an opportunity to live in an almost extended family context” (Wainwright, 2013). The desire to live *like* an extended family but not with one’s *actual* extended family has a clear classed context. Studies show that in the UK, White households are more likely to move (Clark and Huang 2003), and those who are most likely to live away from family are university graduates - the majority of them are still White and middle-class (Battu, Ma, and Phimister 2008; Perry and Francis 2010). According to Savage et al. (2005:34, 38), middle-class elective belonging is different from working-class belonging strategies because it is disconnected from history, while working-class communities value the effort to “stay put” where they were “born and bred”. Working-class communities are therefore not intentional in the same sense but place-specific and are more likely to maintain geographical proximity to extended family as a source of belonging and support. Social stigma can lead people to stay in a stigma-free community of people like themselves (Taylor 2012). This is their source of power but also a source of weakness, as they provide limited and horizontal social capital, so worth and value can only be capitalised within the community (Skeggs 2004a; for criticism of the discourse of lack see Wallace 2017). The choice to remain where one is valued may clash with the middle-class value of mobilization (residential and educational) which pathologizes working-class people as backward and non-aspirational (Taylor, 2012). A similar dynamic of elective/involuntary belonging occurs in racialized communities. In communities that are not represented in cohousing (notably South Asian ones), obligations to the extended family is a vital part of members’ life and identity (Shaw 2000). Moreover, members of minority groups often choose to belong to segregated communities where they can escape discrimination and simply enjoy respect and familiar interactions (Lacy 2004; Phillips 2007).

Finally, Bourdieusian studies found that affordability cannot always increase access on its own, because of “the need to have the right sort of cultural capital to gain access to certain places and spaces” (Casey, 2010:183). Casey concludes that growing affordability still mainly serves the wealthy, who possess the relevant capitals. An example of this dynamic was observed in a Berlin cohousing planning group where “the definition of ‘people in need of affordable housing and working space’ seems sometimes to be restricted to low-income members of the academic and creative milieus” (Droste 2015:87).

## **Methods and methodology**

This paper is based on sequential mixed-methods research of cohousing communities (Cameron 2009), with an emphasis on the qualitative aspect (Bronstein and Kovacs 2013). Communities are numbered (C1, C2...) and where individual names appear, they have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity. The two qualitative phases engaged with four communities that aspired to be affordable, to different degrees of success. Two communities (C1 and C3) were not yet built, and two (C2 and C4) were already established. C1 was set in a rural and predominantly White area in the South of England, where house prices are rising as a result of gentrification. It aims to be intergenerational, affordable and environmentally sustainable and makes decisions by Sociocracy. C1 is one of very few English cohousing projects that work with a housing association to provide affordable housing for people eligible for housing benefits. Considering that the UK cohousing sector is mainly ownership-based, this case could eliminate the factor of financial exclusion. At the time of writing, work on the site has just started. C2 is an established community in a White working-class neighbourhood in a Northern English city. The community emphasises environmental sustainability, aims to be affordable in the long run through an innovative ownership model, and makes decisions by consensus. C3 is set in a deprived inner-city neighbourhood in the North of England and is unusually ethnically and economically diverse. It is a cooperative that offers affordable rented units as well as homes in shared ownership. The community emphasises diversity, affordability and environmental sustainability and makes decisions by consensus. At the time of writing construction was in progress. C4 is an affordable inner-city housing cooperative in a large city in the North, with some cohousing elements (communal rooms and garden). This case was used in this study mainly to illustrate class distinction practices in an affordable and politically progressive setting. C4 is financially and ethnically diverse and emphasises affordability and direct participation in majority vote decision-

making. This community was not included in the survey because it is not formally a cohousing community.

The first research phase included in-depth qualitative research with C1 and C4. The main body of qualitative data draws on in-depth research with C1. Research with C1 involved interviews with 11 members; a workshop with all the members who attended a General Meeting to formulate research questions and explore their main concerns about the community; participant observation of formal meetings and social events and correspondence with key members. The issues raised in the workshop informed individual interview questions.

Following the first phase, I conducted a demographic survey amongst 15 out of 19 cohousing communities in England (not the UK). The survey is the first of the entire sector since Williams' study in 2005, when the sector was significantly smaller, consisting of only two completed projects (Williams 2005:163). An online questionnaire was sent by email to all English cohousing communities that were listed on the UK Cohousing website at the time (the end of 2019). 87 participants from 15 communities took part, each respondent representing one household. Altogether the survey represent a total of 138 adults, out of roughly 500 adult cohousing members in the UK; they therefore represent about 28% of the entire sector. The number of adult cohousing members in the UK is not documented centrally, and this information was gathered from communities' websites, and the Diggers and Dreamers site for UK intentional communities. These are still initial findings, and considering the small size of the sector and a possible bias resulting in the profile of members who chose to engage with the online survey, the results should be read with caution. For example, the survey found that most of the participating communities did not have any Black members and a very small number of non-White members distributed unevenly, as some communities were more diverse than others. For example, all the members of Indian (n=2) and Black Caribbean heritage (n=1) who took part in the survey lived in one community, so their visibility in the entire sector is minimal. Further research and possibly a comprehensive census would provide a clearer picture. In addition, communities' postcodes were checked on the "StreetCheck" website, which offers local information based on official government databases, including census information and land registry data. This was used to produce Table 1, which shows the percentage of White population around cohousing communities.



## **Findings and discussion: how the bohemian White middle-class habitus shapes cohousing's social profile**

Sitting around their map of routes into cohousing, Sandra (C3) mused: “It does appeal to the left-wing, middle-classes, doesn’t it?”. This section presents the evidence and explains how these factors reproduce cohousing communities as middle-class, White spaces. I begin by making a case for a cultural analysis of cohousing’s social composition. I then analyse findings regarding economic capital, cultural capital, values and the membership process; and ethnicity.

### ***Meet the English cohousers***

The survey showed various aspects of the social profile of cohousing communities in England: gender (58% women); age (34% over 65); ethnicity (82% White); sexuality (20% LGBT+); disability (14% disabled); religion (62% non-religious); and household composition (the largest group – 35% – were couples living without children, followed by 33% single people). This paper focuses on the quantitative and qualitative findings most relevant to class and race, concerning members’ economic and cultural capital.

### **Economic capital**

Like many cohousing communities internationally, members in English cohousing communities generally had a mid-high income, compared with the general UK population (ONS 2020b). Also similarly to other countries (Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018), many of the lower-income members were retired, and it is likely that their income during their working life was higher, considering that according to the survey they tend to own their homes outright. The survey found a lower percentage of mid-lower income and a higher representation of higher-income members than in the general population. Participants often described their membership as a privileged choice for people in the alternative middle-class fraction: not struggling financially but not prioritizing financial success either. Molly (C1, a single parent on a low income) contrasted this privilege to “those people who are not managing to even *notice* what we’re doing let alone come to a meeting”: families who struggle financially lacked the leisure to participate in cohousing and make dramatic lifestyle changes even if it was a financially viable option. Changing lifestyle and committing to a demanding community life formed a barrier before affordability per se was considered (see also Garciano 2011).

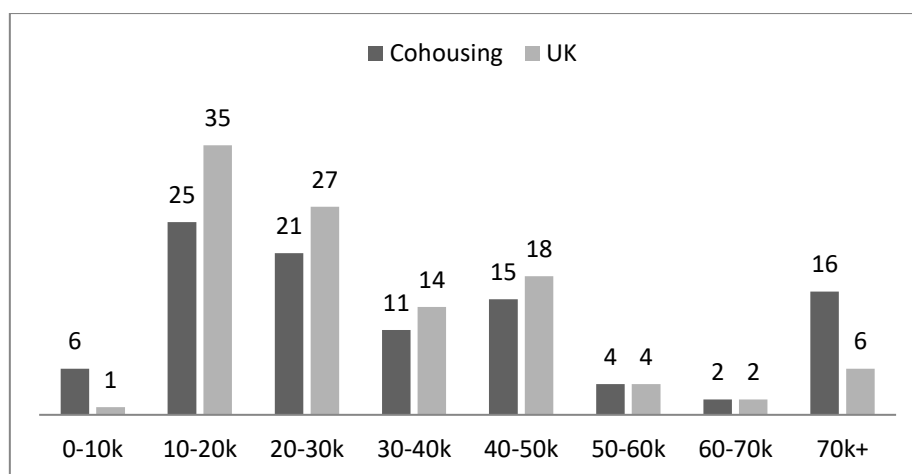


Figure 5: Household income distribution in English cohousing and UK general population

Cohousing in the UK is mostly based on homeownership, so it was not surprising that most members (79%) were homeowners (47% owning outright, and the rest taking out a mortgage or owning a lease or shares in a mutual ownership scheme<sup>6</sup>). This is well above the national figure of 64% homeowners (ONS 2019a). Renters (privately or from the project) were only 8% of participants. Ownership in itself is not a proxy for economic capital (Larsen, 2018): a third of homeowners in the UK are in fact poor (Wallace et al. 2018). However, in most cohousing communities prices were relatively high or similar to the market rate (LILAC and OWCH are notable exceptions). The high levels of ownership are closely linked to the high percentage of older members: 38% of survey participants were over 65, which is well above the national figure of 18%. This age group is generally more likely to own homes outright.

## Cultural capital

### *Higher education and habitus: more than just a degree*

Similar to cohousing communities worldwide, members of UK communities were highly educated. 85% of survey participants were university graduates, and 49% of all respondents were postgraduates: well above the national level of education of 42% graduates (of which 45% were undergraduates and the rest postgraduates or had other higher qualifications: Clegg 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> Mutual homeownership is an alternative model that ensures “economic equality among residents, permanent affordability, demarketization and nonspeculation” (Chatterton, 2013:1662). While members still need some initial capital to join, the ownership model is not the usual capitalist one.

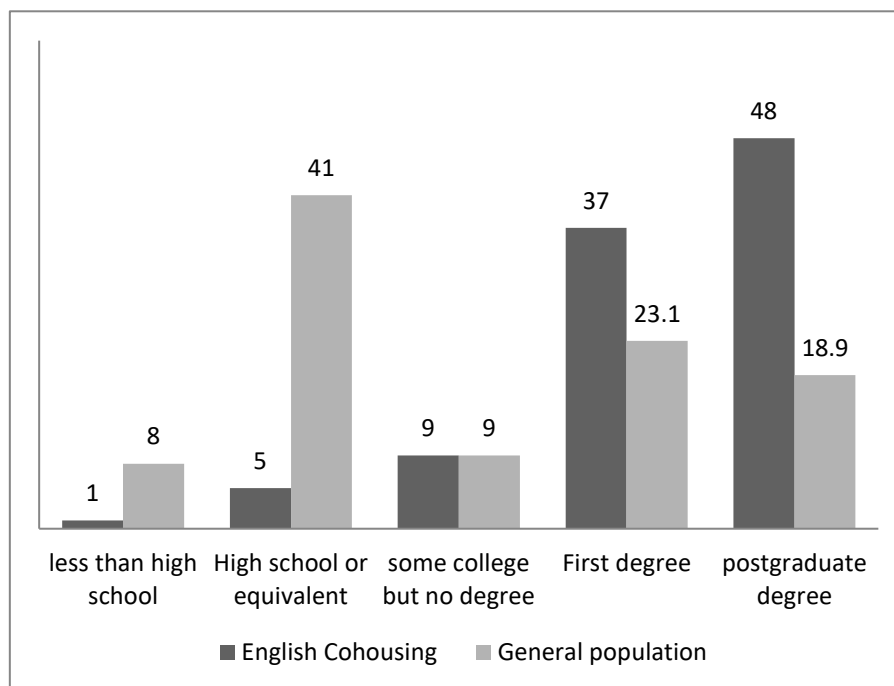


Figure 6: Education levels (%) in English cohousing communities and the general UK population

Higher education is a key factor in the middle-class habitus, as an important state of high cultural capital; simply put, higher education can make one middle-class regardless of their income (Bourdieu 2011). In interviews and focus groups, members often referred to their education as an important factor in their journey into cohousing, directly and indirectly: acquiring knowledge, skills, confidence, a certain language, broader horizons and open-mindedness. Anna (C1) said that a module on environmental issues changed her lifestyle entirely and led her to find a sustainable solution in cohousing. Kate (C3) said: “one of the main gifts of higher education is having to navigate between multiple viewpoints (...) not take everything personally, not feel threatened by something different”. In line with some scholars (Heywood 2016; Wallace, Ford, and Quilgars 2013), Neil (C3) said that higher education underpins the skills required for the complicated task of setting up a cohousing project. Ren (C2) emphasised that “it isn’t just the setting-up, actually. (...) to manage within our community you do have to be quite on-it with reading emails and (...) you have to be used to going to certain sorts of meetings and preparing for meetings in a certain way, you know”.

Ren’s point was supported by interviews with members from working class backgrounds who felt excluded by the language used in their communities. George (C4) said:

“I work as a mechanic, and (...) I felt a little bit -- here (lowering his hand). I didn't go to university, I didn't spend time with people that learn



(...) and sometimes the words - I remember someone saying NIMBYism, right? And after he left - I didn't say anything at the time, right? (laughs) - but I literally 'what does that mean?'. If you grew up in a garage you're not gonna know that, there's no way you'll know what a NIMBY [is]...”

Eileen (C3), a Black Caribbean woman, added the racialized aspect of language distinction: “you want other people joining things but they find it difficult, you know, because people are not, you know, we don't speak the language that you guys know how to”.

Education is not simply about knowledge (Persson 2015), and members also mentioned indirect consequences of going to university, such as moving away from their home town and family, living independently and engaging with new social circles. Neil (C3) said:

“if you go to university, you're generally not living near your family (...) [but] if you were born and bred in [your city], your family are just down the road, and, you know, all your family are within half a mile, there aren't so many Eileens in cohousing [referring to her close-knit extended family], because actually you've got all that community support, you'd probably look at this and think, 'I don't want another load of people”.

Ren (C2) thought that moving for university broadened people's horizons and made them more open to alternative ideas. Cohousing, he said, was “so alien” to his friends who have “grown up, got jobs, got houses, done exactly what their parents had done”. But as Boyer and Leland (2018) showed, education in itself did not predict interest or participation in cohousing. The specific type of cultural capital that brought people into membership was alternative, and acquiring it was connected not only to education but also to other life experiences such as travelling, activism and frequent house moves (see also Jones 2016; Wang, Pan, and Hadjri 2020). Eco-habitus, with its unique values and practices, was a key factor on the way into membership.

### ***Cohousing values and the middle-class habitus: a practice of distinction***

*“It's this thing about wanting diversity but our values, sort of, really is a pretty strong filter”*  
(Fred, C3)

Values, members repeatedly said, make communities self-selecting: those who do not share these values or are not ready to practice them in this particular way will not consider joining. Cohousing values included sharing, collaboration and mutual aid, sustainability, egalitarianism (rejecting discrimination on the basis of gender, sexuality, class, race, age and ability), a mission to empower members through participation (and an expectation of active contribution), and to inspire others. Kate (C3) said: “because we want to maintain all our

main values, some possible aspects of diversity will not work. Extreme or rigid political or religious positions will be incompatible with being inclusive”. Indeed, the research found that prospective members were turned down when their values and practices clashed with the community’s. For example, a C3 applicant who displayed prejudice against the LGBT+ community was told she could not continue with her application; a family with two cars who would not join the community’s carpool could not join because of the limited number of parking spaces that resulted from the cohousing’s sustainable transport policy.

Sharing values was important not only on a normative level but in a practical sense of managing the community. Mark (C2) said: “we can effectively communicate with each other because we’ve got quite similar cultural codes and values, so (...) we work quite effectively because we’re quite homogenous”. In other words, their similar habitus and ‘feel for the game’ eased their collaboration.

Cohousing values and the preference for a collaborative solution to personal challenges were often perceived as reflecting a class position. Theo (C2) said: “we’re like, kind of, post-material values here, aren’t we? We’re not like aspirational middle [class]”. This comment distinguished between the more conservative fractions of the middle-class and those interested in cohousing who were, as Fred (C3) put it: “a particular sort of middle-class person, maybe slightly weirdo”. Diana (C3), who self-identified as working class, thought that voluntary simplicity and post-materialism indicated a privileged class position. When Neil (C3) explained his decision to move into cohousing despite its unattractive location, Diana said: “that’s what makes you middle-class, though, because I think most working class people would say, ‘actually, I’m not going to, I want to make good. Yeah, I *have* to live there, why would I live there if I didn’t have to live there’, you know?”. In response, Fred concluded that privilege lies in the “difference between having a choice and being forced into it”.

Cohousing values were often associated with alternative identities and subjectivities.

Participants saw themselves as pioneers of a progressive “challenge to the status quo” (Gail, C1, Mark, C2). When asked who is likely to be interested in cohousing, Lewis (C1) replied: “old hippies, people critical of mainstream society”. Indeed, similar to findings from the US and the UK (Jones 2016; Markle et al. 2015), members often had previous experiences of political and environmental activism or community volunteering. The activist identity is not comfortable for everyone, and lack of activist experience could become a barrier to

membership even for those with suitable values. Theo (C2) said: “I wasn’t involved in anything like that [activism], definitely felt that one of the reasons I didn’t make the leap earlier (...) I wasn’t really used to operating in that way, you know what I mean, working together in that way”.

Choosing cohousing reflected members’ values and commitment to a communitarian ideal and they were willing to make serious compromises to pursue this choice: time and energy invested in cohousing, size and design of houses, the projects’ location and its impact on children’s schooling, signing up to sustainable living and so on (see also Fernández-Arrigoitia and West 2020). Importantly, Bourdieu’s framework shows how practical needs and values are inseparable: cohousing was the most suitable answer to members’ needs since seeking collective solutions to individual (and global) problems reflected their communitarian subjectivity and eco-habitus. Members’ values defined their needs: a need for community in preparation for a climate crisis (Anna, C1) and a collective lifestyle that supports sustainable living (Mark, C2), a need for successful aging (Gail, C1 and Kate, C3) and for social connection (Sandra, C3, Jane C1). Sometimes values took the first place. Ruth (C2), for example, said that her main motivation to join cohousing was not the practical benefits but a commitment to an ideal: “I’ve got many more benefits having joined than I thought I would, actually, but I joined because I wanted it to happen, because I thought it was inspiring, and I thought it would be brilliant if that happens. Um, and we were actually quite happy on our little street”.

### ***Recruitment and application: visible and invisible exclusion***

“We built in loads of invisible and visible hurdles, didn’t we?”, commented Theo (C2) in a focus group on the routes into membership. One very visible barrier around cohousing communities is the membership process. Members often have to go through a lengthy application process, in which communities and prospective members test to see if they are a good fit through a series of meetings and activities. Members said that this process enabled them to learn about cohousing, make friends and receive support. From communities’ perspective, it was important for members to trust newcomers; they had to be safe. Ruth (C2) was torn between her desire for greater diversity and for safety:

“there’s a very legitimate reason for choosing people who are safe because (...) it only takes one person who’s not quite on the same page as everyone else to completely upset the whole community and destroy

it. (...) but there was discomfort among some people including me, in our last process, that we were being too safe”.

In the application process, some applicants withdrew, offended when their application was not approved immediately, or when they realised cohousing was not for them: too much sharing, responsibility, committees, and the tedious or bureaucratic aspects of participation, that demand time and persistence. This was particularly true for those who had little experience in similar settings. Culture and habitus, members noticed, affected engagement in the application process. David (C4), whose community is a social housing provider, reflected on the less visible cultural barriers that are built into the joining process:

“...very few people came through that route [the housing register] and when they did it was quite clearly – they thought we’re a bunch of hippie nut jobs. (...) Coming to a social in the communal room with a bunch of strangers... it’s a bit like - um - kind of going to the coffee after church... as opposed to going to the council to check on the waiting list, it’s probably outside of a lot of people’s experience of housing, isn’t it? You don’t normally get private landlords trying to force warm soup on you[laughs].”

David’s anecdote is representative of many communities. Socializing as part of the application process can be daunting and confusing for people who expect impersonal processes or feel socially out of place, lacking a drive to live collaboratively and what Bourdieu called the “feel for the game”. C1 had a similar experience with housing association tenants. This community started off as a hyper-local initiative for residents of a small town through collaboration with a housing association. However, the project had to widen its recruitment area due to lack of interest among local housing association tenants. Jane said: “we sent a letter via the local council via the housing association to all of their renters saying ‘here is this group, this cohousing group that is starting, if you’d like to be part of that – get in touch’. Um... I think we had one enquiry from that”. Many factors were at play here: tenants’ need for quick solutions rather than a long investment in setting up a project; the stressful life of people in precarious housing situations deterring participation; and the importance of the intention to live collaboratively rather than simply finding affordable housing.

## Race and ethnicity: “a culturally specific idea”?

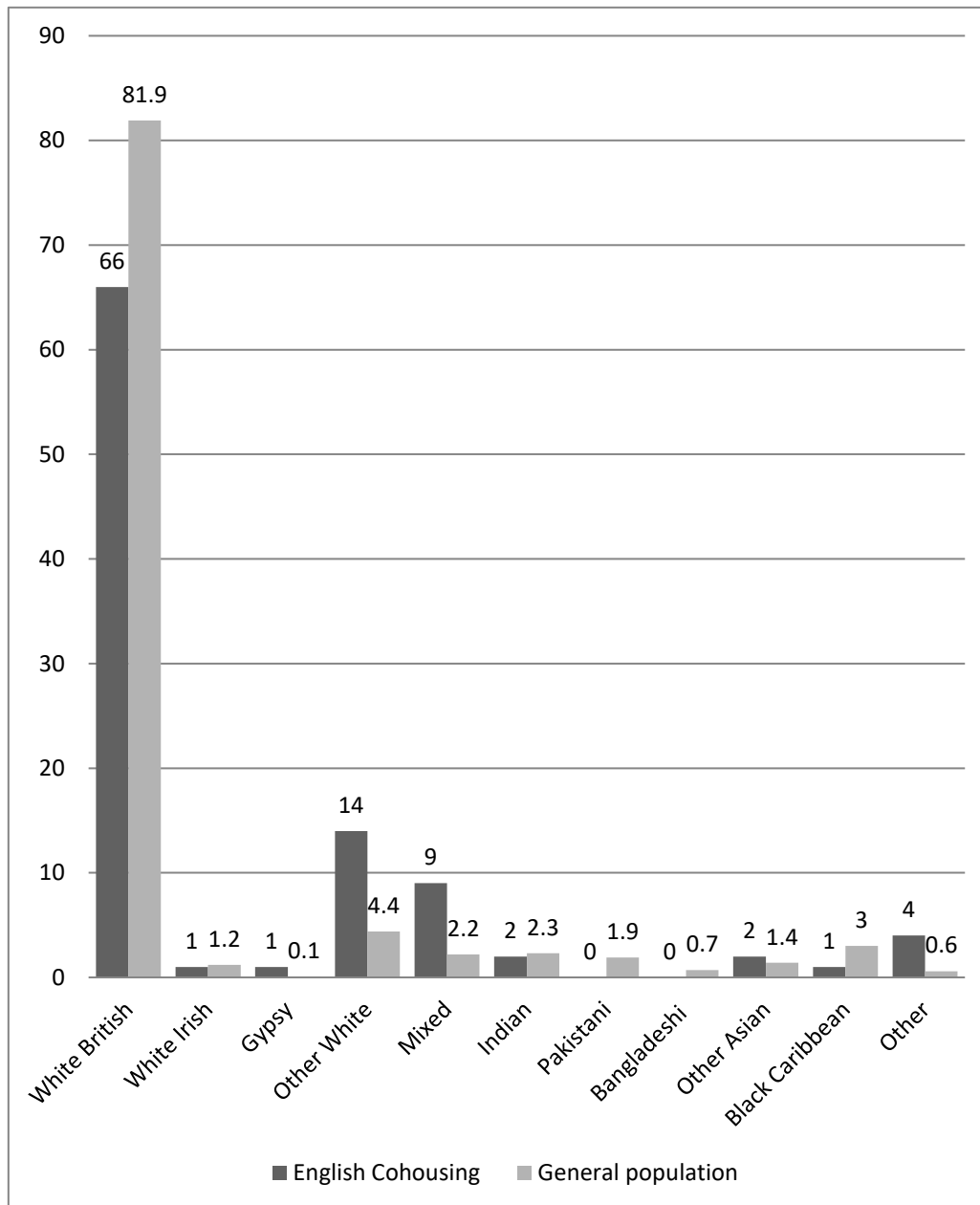


Figure 7: Ethnicity distribution in English cohousing communities and the general UK population

Participants often commented on the ‘White-middle-class’ nature of cohousing communities, but the survey found that the cohousing sector was just as diverse as the general population (according to the UK 2011 census). 86% of cohousing members in the survey were White – just like the national figure. Significantly, the sector had a much higher percentage of ‘Other

White<sup>7</sup> than the national figure (15% and 4.4% respectively). 13% of members represented in the survey belonged to minority groups, again similarly to the national figure. However, within the Asian ethnic group, which is the second-largest group in the UK (7.5% nationally), some groups are absent from cohousing: Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, who amount to 2% and 0.8% respectively in the UK. Although *statistically* these groups are not under-represented in the survey, it was striking that these groups were apparently absent from the communities.

Members from minority ethnic groups came from groups that are most likely to be middle-class in the UK – Chinese, Indian and Mixed or Multiple ethnicities – while the missing ethnic groups were the lowest paid – Pakistani and Bangladeshi (ONS 2018; this blanket statement ignores the economic variations within the Pakistani community: Din 2016). But again, economic capital is only a partial explanation: Indian people – the ethnic group most likely to own a house in the UK (ONS 2020a) – are not over-represented in cohousing in spite of its reliance on homeownership.

The statistical diversity may be misleading in a very small sector: some communities of 20 or more households may have one or two members from minority ethnic groups or none at all – a situation that can be uncomfortable for prospective members from minority groups, marking the space as “informally ‘off limits’” (Anderson 2015:10). This sentiment may be strengthened by the fact that many cohousing communities are set in predominantly White areas, so although they may attract members from around the country, potential members from minority ethnic groups may hesitate to move in<sup>8</sup>. The findings are not surprising considering the rural location of many cohousing developments: there is little ethnic diversity in rural areas of the UK. In this context it is important to note that half of the survey takers of minority ethnic groups (n=6) were partners of White British members, so their entry to a White space was potentially smoother (Anderson 2015:13).

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<sup>7</sup> “Other White” is the term used in UK diversity forms to indicate White ethnicity other than British, Irish or Gypsy, and often refers to European residents.

<sup>8</sup> A notable exception to this is Chapeltown Cohousing in Leeds, which was still being built at the time of research and therefore was not included in the survey. This community was the only one set in an ethnically diverse and economically deprived area, with only 12% White population in the postcode area and 45% Black Caribbean.

<b>community name and location</b>	<b>% White population in this postcode</b>
Cannon Frome, Ledbury	98
Cannok Mill, Colchester	94
Earth Heath, Peak District	98
Fishpond Cobuild, Bristol	81
Forgebank, Lancaster	98
K1, Cambridge	80
Laughton Lodge, Laughton	94
Lilac, Leeds	91
OWCH, High Barnet, London	84
Shirle Hill, Sheffield	86
Springhill, Stroud	94
The Postlip Community, Cheltenham	98
Trelay, Bude	98
Threshold, Gillingham	99.6
Thundercliffe Grange, Sheffield	97
White % in England and Wales	86

*Table 1: White population around cohousing communities*

Members were often frustrated with lack of diversity in their communities and the sector as a whole; a representative example is from survey respondent #25, who lived with her Black non-member partner: “Only one of us is a member, me, who is white. Members are overwhelmingly middle-class. The community is welcoming to lesbian couples. The demographic is not at all representative of our local area”.

The tension between the quantitative findings and the qualitative data suggests that accessibility should be understood as “not just the numbers, but the ways in which the space itself is coded in ways that create immediate discomforts, which, in the long run, may reinforce broader exclusion” (Guthman, 2008:389). When asked to reflect on (lack of) diversity, members raised two main issues: cultural differences and recruitment strategies. Hannah’s (C4) observation combines the two issues: “the idea of co-ops is quite culturally specific and also that thing about people hearing about it through word of mouth kind of strengthen that”. Kate (C3) added nuance to Hannah’s comment: “none of our own Muslim friends and neighbours have yet seen Cohousing as something practical for themselves. The ones we know best have strong family obligations. I'd love to share Cohousing with a couple of former work colleagues and think they might fit in well, but it's a big 'not normal' jump for their wider families". Kate added three important elements to “cultural” considerations: cohousing’s practical attraction; family commitments; and concerns about conservative and

traditional families' view. Class and aspiration were also important; Brian shared his experiences from an emerging community he joined before moving into C2: "they almost got a plot of land in a predominantly Asian area, and they were seeking Asian families to buy into it."

Theo: And they didn't, they weren't.

Brian: Not at all, they were just hitting their heads against a brick wall. Because they were aspirational and wanted to move out of the area, apart from the four ones that we engaged with anyway [laughs]

Ruth: But a lot of Asian families, kind of, do live almost like cohousing

Elina: They have such a big community, yeah. Yeah

Ruth: Like family members.

This exchange with a group of White-British members, demonstrates the intersection between class position and ethnicity. First, there is the contrast between "aspirational" - aspiring to fit in with mainstream society - and joining cohousing schemes, embracing an alternative lifestyle that is often associated with White people. Second, note the common observation that Asian communities are "like cohousing", in terms of mutual aid and deep community connections. Members who evoke these similarities failed to mention the key differences: cohousing is an intentional community and a form of elective belonging (Savage et al. 2010), based on values of equality, consensus and sustainability and using formal decision-making processes, while members of minority groups were more likely to belong - either by choice or in response to societal exclusion (Phillips 2007) - to close-knit extended families, in communities that are often more religious and conservative with informal and not necessarily democratic decision-making processes (Shaw 2000).

Finally, although ethnicity seemed to make a difference in the route to cohousing, what I do *not* argue is that cohousing is *essentially* White; rather, I show how cohousing's social mechanisms currently reproduce it as a White and middle-class space (Anderson 2015; Meghji 2019:8). These dynamics are historically contextualized and as Polletta (2005) demonstrated, can shift.

### **Ethnicity and faith**

62% of participants (n=64) stated that they had no religion (not including 1 humanist) – a higher percentage than the general population (53%). British non-religious (nones), argued



Woodhead, “do not have a clear profile (unlike US nones, who are overwhelmingly Democrat)” (Woodhead and Woodhead 2017:251). Non-religious, she found, are “similar to the general population in their economic attitudes; for example, in 2013 they shared the majority view that ‘the welfare budget is too high and needs to be reduced’” (ibid.). The high number of nones in cohousing can be related to the high proportion of White British population, as “nones are overwhelmingly ‘White British’ according to the census data—93 per cent of nones say they are ‘White British’ compared with 86 per cent of the total population”(ibid.:251). In contrast, ethnic minorities are rarely non-religious: “overall, among the nonreligious, 1% identify as Black, 2% as Asian, and 2% as Mixed or Other” (Bullivant 2015:11). According to the British Social Attitudes report, “93% of those brought up as a Muslim, still identify as Muslim”, and “Hindus and Sikhs also predominantly identify themselves as believers” (Curtice et al. 2019:6, 11).

In focus groups, faith was also raised as a racialized set of practice and values, especially in terms of valuing individualism or belonging to a collective. Some members hypothesised that “nones” have a greater need for an intentional community, hence the bias towards educated White people, who were more likely to move away from their home and a run more individualised lifestyle. Participants from C3 in particular thought that their unusual ethnic diversity was linked to members’ religiosity, which made the project more accessible for people who would not be naturally drawn to it. This is an intriguing hypothesis that requires further research, especially considering that some participants with key roles in their communities did belong to a faith community.

### ***Awareness of cohousing: middle-class channels, not local influence***

The findings on routes into membership seem to challenge Williams’ (2008) hypothesis that cohousing spreads through local normative influence. Rather than local influence, cohousing was making waves among like-minded people across the country. Participants said that members were more likely to join after looking up cohousing communities online than learning about it through local promotion. Members learnt about cohousing through word of mouth, involvement in environmental or counter-cultural activities, and exposure to media aimed at the cohousing social profile (educated, left-leaning, higher-middle income). Once their interest was sparked, members researched cohousing and looked for groups and vacancies on dedicated websites like UK Cohousing Network. As a result, communities attracted like-minded applicants from all over the UK. Advertising in cohousing circles was a

simple and safe way to find people who are likely to be “a good fit”, but it also reproduced cohousing’s social profile.

In C3 Focus group, Diana sarcastically referred to this: “Well, just think about where you guys found about cohousing (...) you know, you were reading *The Guardian*”. Readers familiar with the British press would not be surprised that the widest circulated tabloid in the UK (*The Sun*) never covered cohousing, but *The Guardian*, the national newspaper with the lowest circulation, which targets educated middle-class readers (*The Guardian* 2010), has published 18 stories on cohousing in total– a lot more than any other newspaper in the country. In other words, the people who are most exposed to cohousing are of similar demographics to existing members.

Local influence is unlikely to increase ethnic diversity, considering that most cohousing communities were located in predominantly White areas. But recruiting locally is a limited diversifying strategy even in diverse areas. Classed and racialized habitus played a part in making cohousing communities exclusive to some local residents. The unspoken codes, the language used and the “disproportion of whites to blacks” (Anderson 2015) (within and around communities) could deter members of minority and marginalized groups, as demonstrated in the failed attempts to attract local social housing tenants and members of local Asian communities.

### ***Eco-habitus as defining middle-classness***

Bourdieu’s framework redefined class beyond a single-parameter paradigm (e.g. occupation) (Bourdieu 1984). This is crucial to explain why cohousing members often perceived the sector as too White and middle-class even though it was no less diverse than the general population, and why some members experienced a tension between their subjective sense of class belonging and their perceived middle-class position due to their eco-habitus.

While members often shared the perception of cohousing as middle-class, a surprising number confessed that they appeared middle-class but did not identify as such, either because of their financial circumstances or their upbringing. Catherine and Diana (C3) were university graduates (Diana a postgraduate), homeowners with professional jobs, but Catherine said: “I hate being called middle-class, I feel like it’s an insult. But I expect in some ways I moved into middle-class. I mean, I started off working-class”, and Diana said: “I still call myself working-class all the time”. Jane and Lewis (C1) referred to their social

capital, saying that they rely on collaboration with a housing association because their community did not have many professionals in their social networks to help with the complicated work of setting up a housing project. Anna (C1) is a renter who grew up never thinking about going to university, was involved in counter-culture from her youth and got a degree only as a mature student; yet her neighbour in a housing association was surprised to learn that she was a tenant – he assumed she was middle-class because of her alternative lifestyle. Other members also suggested that cohousing was perceived as middle-class because of its “eco habitus” (Carfagna et al. 2014). Eileen (C3) said: “they pass as middle-class because they’re eco-thinking and so that defines you as being middle-class, basically, because you’re eco [laughs]”.

But while White members ‘passed’ as middle-class, Eileen, who is Black, demonstrated how passing as middle-class is a form of White privilege. Recalling a disrespectful conversation with a teacher in her grandson’s private school, she said: “I had to say to him, his Dad, you know, he’s been to university, yeah, I’m a social worker, so if you want to talk, let’s talk on those bases”. Having to defend her social position exposed her unequal footing in a very middle-class environment, since “whiteness and middle-class identity” conflate (Archer 2011:144).

More interestingly, however, is the circular dynamic identified by members: eco-habitus is not simply an expression of middle-classness, but stigmatizes people against their own sense of belonging. This stigma could make cohousing unattractive for people seeking a conventional route to social mobility, or those who cannot risk their respectability in the way that comes naturally to (White) middle-class bohemians (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Making unusual choices is a form of classed and racialized privilege (Rollock 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I presented three main arguments based on a Bourdieusian analysis of a large collection of mixed-methods data: cohousing is reproduced as a White and middle-class space due to mechanisms of cultural capital and habitus, while affordability was an important but secondary filter; awareness of cohousing is not born locally but within alternative circles of White middle-class progressives; Finally, alternative capital and eco-habitus are not only a reflection of class position but means of passing as middle-class.

In its effort to diversify and expand, cohousing's challenge is to recreate cohousing as a cross-class social project. But it may be naïve to expect a counter-culture practice to be inclusive. In order to attract wider and more diverse membership, cohousing values must enter the mainstream. It should also be noted that among those interested in cohousing, affordability indeed played a role, as well as age, life cycle and family circumstances – important factors that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Members often viewed themselves as “early adopters” and their projects as prefigurative, feeling optimistic that society will follow their example as every new project helps to normalize cohousing (Huber 2017; Williams 2005). However, there are two reasons to take members' views with a grain of salt. First, community-led housing projects have been operating for decades and yet remain niche and not familiar to the general public (Moore and Mullins 2013). Simply being a beacon of light is evidently not enough. It is commonly argued that the barrier to popularizing cohousing is that the general public simply does not understand it (Wang et al. 2020). This belief leads to the second reason we need to be cautious about cohousing's ability to spread. As Guthman (2008) argued, the White middle-class missionary notion that awareness is the key to changing public lifestyle or values is essentially universalist, risking the erasure of minority experiences and pushing for a culturally-specific practice to overcome a general social problem.

The cohousing sector may wish to adopt a critical perspective on its universalist vision of cohousing as “the new normal”. The key findings of this study showed that setting up cohousing communities in predominantly White areas by White middle-class people with a focus on White and middle-class habitus can reproduce cohousing as a White and middle-class space. Examples of cross class and race alliances in Europe (Bresson and Labit 2019; LeFond and Tsvetkova 2017) are set in very different contexts, including state and NGO funding for social housing cohousing projects. It is yet to be seen how the UK's government intention to support community-led housing may affect the sector. Considering the highly classed and racialized practices and values at the heart of the current UK cohousing movement, it may remain a niche model, creating “islands of post-capitalist commons” (Chatterton 2016:411). Some cohousing concepts and practices may seep into the mainstream in the way of niche innovation (Seyfang and Longhurst 2013), taking a different form that may appeal to wider audiences.

This paper reveals only part of a complex picture of routes into membership in cohousing communities. Future research should develop the way class and race intersect with age, sexuality, life cycle and family circumstances. Preliminary findings indicate that members' life cycle played an important role in the decision to move into cohousing. While families with children may think harder about leaving their house and children's schools, older people were excited about downsizing and retiring in a new environment that promised 'successful ageing'. They were also more likely to own a house which they could sell and move into a privately owned cohousing property. Moreover, future research should look into new and more diverse cohousing communities in the UK that were not yet established at the time of writing, but which represent great potential for different models in terms of class and racial diversity.

Recalling the opening of this paper, the UK Cohousing Network's aspires to be 'for everyone'. But the desire to join depends on members' habitus. And in spite of the claim to universalism, it is the habitus and cultural capital of the bohemian (White) middle-class. Cohousing studies should therefore shift the focus on affordability as the main barrier to inclusion, and recognize culture as the first barrier on the way into membership.

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## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

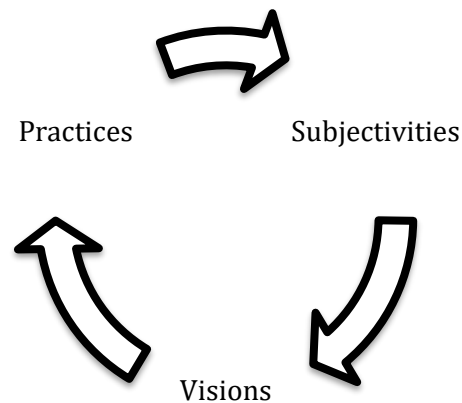
The chapters of this thesis analyse different aspects of the visions, social relations, identities and subjectivities in CLH in the UK. Here I return to the research questions presented in the introduction and reflect further on the ways the research responded to them, pointing more explicitly at the ways the three papers complement each other; the thesis is more than the sum of its parts. I open the discussion with a theoretical abstraction and an overall perspective on the relation between the research questions, which suggest a new framework to understand how commoning works. I then zoom-in on the individual research questions, proposing several implications and opportunities for further research which became clear through my work on these questions.

The thesis raises questions of justice in different and complementary ways and on different scales. Chapter 3 and 4 addressed issues of justice within the community: contestations around compulsory participation and its implication for fair conditions to membership; and social relations and group practices that provide safety and protection from the oppression of neoliberalism, but also generate insecurity and injustice through toxic group dynamics and peer pressure. On a broader level, chapter 3 engages with the issue of justice and exclusion, which is then developed in chapter 5: whose safety is being secured? Which types of CLH are better in achieving different kinds of safety and justice? In this concluding chapter, the section on social relations develops these questions from a broader perspective. Throughout the discussion, I point out my original contributions as well as my intellectual debts to many scholars before me.

### **6.1 The circle of commoning: Subjectivities, visions and practices**

My research questions were concerned with social relations, visions, identities and subjectivities. When I started my research, I did not fully realise how interconnected these concepts were. Through my research, I learnt how they shape each other, and that they are dynamic and multifaceted. Together, the three papers show how the key concepts that drive the research questions affect each other in a neat circle: identities and subjectivities shape members' visions; visions produce and reproduce practices of social relations (formal/informal; loose/intense; safe/oppressive; socially sustainable/ inharmonious); and these practices reproduce members' subjectivities and communities' social profile. The thesis shows how these concepts are contextualised in specific times, places and social positions:

the impact of neoliberalisation on members' subjectivities and visions, and the way classed and racialized identities affect participation in and visions for different forms of CLH. The study also implies that different forms of CLH may challenge neoliberalism differently, and highlights their strengths, appeal and potential.



*Figure 7 The circle of commoning*

This abstraction of the circular dynamics between the three concepts can be a useful framework to understand the process of commoning beyond the CLH field. The case studies represent specific visions (postcapitalism / safe spaces), practices (commoning, resisting neoliberalism) and identities (White / middle-class / older / communitarians). They also emphasise specific contexts (neoliberalisation / local factors). It is hoped that future studies could use this framework in different contexts, using other specific examples under the broad concepts of visions, practices and identities. Here I briefly explain this framework with reference to the literature and my own contributions.

Subjectivities, as I have shown in chapter 4, affect members' envisioning of the commons. This finding affirms Gibson-Graham's claim that subjectivities are a vehicle to postcapitalist practices and ways of being (Gibson-Graham 2006c, 2006a), as well as De Angelis' (2017) emphasis on the importance of practice in reproducing subjectivities. Overall, the thesis shows how subjectivities affect members' choices to approach contemporary problems differently, seeking collectivist solutions to neoliberal problems: safety in a community rather than gates (Ruiu 2014); decent housing through collective control (Bliss 2016; Thompson 2015); and a sense of belonging in an individualist society (Fernández-Arrigoitia et al. 2018). These choices are outside the mainstream and, to return to the introduction and the small scale and exclusive nature of CLH, I contend that CLH is a suitable choice for communitarian subjects who are open to different ideas. Surely, CLH is beneficial for members – but they do



not join it merely for practical reasons (chapter 5). In order to engage meaningfully with projects that emphasise the use-value of homes over its exchange value (Madden and Marcuse 2016), members must have not only a communitarian subjectivity but also a suitable habitus – the concept that points at the inseparable connection between identities and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984), as chapter 5 demonstrated.

Chapter 3 and 4 demonstrated how context affect members’ subjectivities, vision and practice: members’ needs changed in the process of neoliberalisation of British society, and communities responded to societal changes in ideology, policy and culture (Springer 2012). Their response combined resistance and adaptation and reflected members’ changing subjectivities in relation to processes of neoliberalisation; as De Angelis (2017) pointed out, commoners are also neoliberal subjects and bring the changing contexts of society into their commoning practices (see also Chatterton 2010). In other words, context is not an external force to respond to, but rather an internalised force that shapes the way members make sense of their needs and desires. This was evident in the minimalist shift in the cooperative (chapter 4), but also in fostering solidarity and collective action to resist neoliberalisation (chapter 3).

The “circle of commoning” framework sets an agenda for more comprehensive comparative research on the visions and practice, social composition and subjectivities of different types of CLH projects. Such research opens up various questions that were beyond the scope of this thesis: what is behind the difference in visions, and how does this difference relate to members’ identities and subjectivities? How does projects’ social profile affect difference in practice and potential tension between vision and practice?

One hypothesis, which builds on the analysis in chapter 5, is that classed and racialised values and habitus play an important role in the development and reproduction of visions, identities and subjectivities. More specifically, research should investigate whether projects with a universally-articulated political vision are more likely to attract White, highly educated members – regardless of their income, (Radical Routes 2013b) – while specific political articulations will generally appeal more to marginalised groups in terms of class position or ethnic minorities. This hypothesis draws on the mechanisms of Whiteness and the dominance of the middle-class, for those who are comfortable to speak “for the commonality of humanity” (Dyer, 2005:10) are those in a most powerful position, while “raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race” (ibid). A similar mechanism operates in terms of class, where the middle-class assumes a dominant position. This claim is of course

generalising, and future research must recognise the importance of local and temporal contexts to members' identities, for example in the diverse, fully mutual and political Brixton Housing cooperative (Architects for Social Housing 2019; Cook 2013).

In-depth qualitative research of this kind will fill the serious gap in the literature around housing cooperatives for Black and other ethnic minorities in the UK: a topic of great interest and importance in terms of housing policy, racial justice and community organising<sup>9</sup>. This new agenda should develop the findings from published research of one project or sector (Fernández-Arrigoitia 2017; Bunce 2016; Engelsman et al. 2016; Jarvis 2015b; Jones 2016; McKee 2011; McKee and Cooper 2008; Sargisson 2010; Thompson 2015) and some comparative work on a higher, institutional and national level (Lang, Carriou, et al. 2020; Lang, Chatterton, et al. 2020; Rowlands 2009a). By doing that, such new research will follow Huron's (2018) call to bring together "institutionalist" and "alterglobalizationist" streams of commons studies, looking at the details of commoning without losing sight of the bigger picture of political power relations.

## **6.2 Envisioning post-capitalist commons**

My first research question was: what are the visions and aims of groups attempting to develop and embed community-led housing? My main findings affirmed the literature on commons that emphasised its entanglement with state and capital and the importance of subjectivities to the production of the commons (De Angelis 2017; Barron 2017; Noterman 2016). I had two main contributions on this topic: first, conceptualising visions of the commons as minimalist or maximalist, according to the aspects of members' life involved in community living. I showed the changes in visions of the commons over the course of 40 years in the cooperative, and the similarities and differences between the visions of a new cohousing development and an established cooperative. Below I develop this concept further in relation to the literature. Second, I pointed at the way identities (generational, classed and racialised) affect communities' visions and their articulation.

Generally speaking, the two principal case studies and many of the other communities I briefly engaged with shared a similar image of commoning to that often found in the literature, and aptly summarised by Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziartot (2016:12): to "promote

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<sup>9</sup> In 2019 Leeds Community Homes started a research project into diversity in the CLH sector, but this was not complete at the time of writing (Leeds Community Homes 2019).

collective over individual interest; collaboration rather than competition; recognition and respect for diversity rather than commodification of individual identity; and care for the environment over productivity/growth/exploitation”. However, on an individual level, my participants had a wide range of overlapping and even contradicting visions: some saw their projects as anti-capitalist and alternative, while others felt that this political stance was not important, irrelevant or counterproductive. Some wanted to tackle gentrification and others were seeking a good investment. Some, but not all, were looking for environmental sustainability, a sense of community, secured tenure. For some, the vision was to create a prefigurative model society; for others, the focus was self-help: providing decent, affordable housing. For some, CLH was a key to successful ageing; others did not plan to stay in the community into older age. Surely, some individuals had self-serving motivations, for example seeking affordable housing and not wishing to participate beyond rent payment. But these individuals did not represent the community’s ethos and vision. This diversity affirms and develops Noterman’s (2016) argument regarding the multiple types of cooperative subjectivities and ideologies.

From a broader perspective beyond the single community, and also in line with the literature (e.g. Fields 2016; Lang, Chatterton, and Mullins 2020), I found that different types of projects had different visions. Analysing these differences through the lens of minimalist and maximalist visions of commons (chapter 4) can contribute to studies of the diversity of visions within the sector. For example, the proposition that minimalist and maximalist visions of the commons affect the practice of commoning and linked to identities can be helpful in developing inclusive strategies for the CLH sector. Different types of CLH (and each project) will be minimalist or maximalist in different ways, which will have immediate implications on their membership. As chapters 4 and 5 showed, these differences might appear along generational lines, through classed and racial distinctions, life cycle or other lived experiences. I suggest looking at different types of CLH as varying in the “density” of commoning practices around their project. As an example, consider the differences between the cohousing and cooperative models.

Cohousing projects tend to involve many aspects of members’ life in their vision: sharing space and time (Jarvis 2011), increasing social contact, direct participation and expectation that members take responsibilities for managing the project. Moreover, these roles are often perceived as a means to an end: working together is a means to reproducing the community (Fernández-Arriagoitia and West 2020). Many cohousing communities in the UK include

environmental sustainability as an important part of their vision (Wang et al. 2020). Cohousing's vision regarding its relation to capital varies within the sector: some communities make an effort to be affordable and prevent real estate speculation (Chatterton 2015), while other communities are part of the housing market and in fact, the houses' value not only increases with time but has a knock-on effect on its surrounding<sup>10</sup>. Chapter 5 showed how cohousing members shared certain identities and subjectivities that made their vision cohesive and worked best for them (but not for others). They had a maximalist vision of the social and environmental aspects of commoning, but as a sector based predominantly on private ownership, varied in terms of its vision of the use/exchange value of housing, which is an important aspect of commoning (Leitner et al. 2007).

Cooperative communities, on the other hand, have a vision that emphasises secure, decent, affordable housing through tenants control, if not ownership (indeed, most of them are not mutually owned, see :Rowlands 2012). Chapter 4 showed how multiple visions have always existed in a cooperative but were constantly shifting towards a more minimalist vision while maintaining a strong sense of collective ownership and the use-value of their homes. The literature suggests that this minimalist shift is not unique to this community (Cook 2013; Huron 2018b; Jones 2016). Although small in number, one notable exception to the minimalist trend and emphasis on affordability in the cooperative sector is the Radical Routes secondary cooperative: a network of 32 small and radical fully-mutual housing cooperatives, committed to low impact living and anti-capitalist activism (Radical Routes 2013a). Their unique vision involves direct participation and strong social connection as well as wider political commitment.

This quick comparison between the models and case studies highlights that maximalist and minimalist visions of the commons are not simply points on a spectrum but comprise of non-hierarchical and connected aspects of commoning. The overview of the thesis as a whole calls for a more nuanced articulation of the concept of minimalist and maximalist visions that that I presented in chapter 4. Building on this research and previous studies of the complex and multiple visions of the commons in neoliberal societies (De Angelis 2017; Barron 2017; Community Economies Collective 2019; Huron 2018b; Linebaugh 2008), I propose that an evaluation of communities' vision of the commons should consider the *different degrees of*

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, there is some evidence that clusters of CLTs can increase sale prices of nearby houses (Nelson et al. 2020).

the following aspects: collective ownership, collective management, opposition to capitalism and enclosure, sharing, mutual aid, respect and care for each other, commitment to environmental sustainability. The combination of these institutional, moral and social aspects and their importance to each community may vary and likely to include slightly different aspects for different projects. Some may not involve collective ownership, social interaction or interest in sustainability – but they are still forms of commons and may indeed be maximalist as long as their vision involves many important aspects of members' life beyond physical housing. This list is by no means conclusive nor is it a rigid framework for technical tick-box evaluation; it is a concept that draws attention to the difference in commoning practices, and future research may add new aspects to the ones I propose here.

One interesting phenomenon that the different chapters reveal is the sense that at the same time that older cooperatives are experiencing a minimalist shift towards less social connection and higher formality (Cook 2013; Huron 2018b; Jones 2016), there is a growing interest in cohousing, which holds a maximalist vision of social relations and participation. Is there a connection between the two, and what can explain it? The rise and fall of cohousing and cooperatives (respectively) is worth the attention of future research. Based on my findings, I can offer two hypotheses. The first refers to the finding that 69% of cohousing members are over 55, and therefore have a significant influence on the projects' ethos. It is possible that they, like the older member of the cooperative case study, hold a maximalist vision of the commons as their political subjectivities formed at a time of social and cultural experiments. Related to this is the fact that people of this cohort (and particularly those over 70) are the most likely to own homes and face social isolation, and therefore the community they seek focuses on social relations rather than affordable housing.

A second hypothesis focuses on neoliberalisation processes in terms of market conditions and cultural norms. Cultural norms made privacy and ownership more desirable for the public and for the government. Consequently, the conditions that enabled cooperatives to thrive in the 1970s and 1980 have changed, and made way for CLTs and cohousing projects which are not reliant mainly on state grants and tend to include elements of privacy and homeownership. Here the focus is not the vision itself but the external constraints: although the cohousing sector is diverse, the successful projects that manage to get off the ground are in most cases the less affordable ones. As Field (2015) commented, this is not a result of the sector's ethos but of market conditions, and in fact "many cohousing initiatives have tried hard to provide a range of properties for their different members - some even disbanding when that could not

be done”. Future comparative research should also include the CLT model, which offers a blend of ownership models and social commitment. The CLH sector should consider how much of members’ life is involved in the project as a way to predict members’ participation and the consequent potential exclusion.

## **6.2 Social relations: Reproducing safe, post-capitalist commons**

My second research question was: what are the distinctive group practices and social relations that emerge in community-led housing contexts? My main findings are concern with practices of commoning; the imperfect efforts to create a sense of belonging, community and a safe space; and the changing styles of management and community living. Importantly, I found that the synergy between democratic and non-profit organisational structure and a social structure based on mutual aid and solidarity created an environment that prioritised the wellbeing of members. My three main contributions were 1) the reconceptualisation of safe space in terms of justice and in relation to neoliberal oppression in chapter 3, building on the work of The Roestone Collective (2014); 2) the historical account of changing social relations and management styles along the course of 40 years in the cooperative in chapter 4, with a qualitative contribution to broader policy-oriented studies by Ellis (2017); Rowlands (2009b); and Thompson (2018); and 3) framing the desire to belong with “like-minded people” as a form of class and racial distinction in chapter 5, with new quantitative and qualitative data from the UK, offering a broad perspective to existing studies of one or two communities in the UK (Fernández-Arrigoitia and West 2020; Tummers and Macgregor 2019) and mainly quantitative studies in the US, Denmark and France like (Boyer and Leland 2018; Bresson and Labit 2019; Jakobsen and Larsen 2019; Sanguinetti and Hibbert 2018). In this section I develop the themes of safety, justice and exclusion in more depth, in order to engage critically with the apparent tension between chapter 3 and 5.

### ***6.2.1 Safe and just? The ideal of community and the politics of difference***

In chapter 3 I argued that neoliberalisation is a form of oppression that people need protection from, for example in the form of safe spaces. As the chapters and additional findings below suggest, CLH can be a safe space from various forms of oppression, but these communities are yet to realise their full potential. Philosophically, we need to understand the implications of thinking of neoliberalism as a form of oppression like sexism, racism or homophobia (some scholars have already started using this concept, especially in education and postcolonial studies, e.g. Ranta 2017; Giroux 2014). What kind of politics is envisioned by

the concept of just and safe spaces from neoliberalism? What other spaces already fulfil this function? In response to this concept, the challenge for the CLH sector is to design communities with safety and justice in mind: how might they be developed, by whom and for whom, and what is the role of NGOs and local and central government in this process?

Cohesive social relations in CLH require – by definition – a degree of homogeneity and exclusion (Pickerill 2016; Sargisson 2007; Young 1990). Even the most inclusive projects have limited places and application conditions, ranging from housing needs and local connection to certain values, financial ability and capacity for participation. Moreover, community members must have enough in common to make their community meaningful. Chapter 3 focuses on the positive outcomes of CLH for members and shows how social relations and group practices can make them imperfectly safe and just spaces. At the same time, it recognises the injustice involved in community life: oppressive dynamics and exclusion. The latter point was developed in chapter 5, which showed the mechanisms that reproduce cohousing as a White and middle-class space for like-minded people. Here I consider the differences between the two chapters and develop in more depth some points about justice, exclusion and the question of universalism which were discussed in chapter 3 and the introduction.

Chapter 3 looked at two communities: a housing cooperative and a cohousing project. Although different in many ways, they share an important aspect in common: both were affordable. This is not the case for many cohousing projects, and therefore, the paper should be understood as highlighting the *potential* of CLH rather than describing reality as it is. By taking this decision to “read for difference rather than dominance”, chapter 3 looks for “openings and possibilities” (Gibson-Graham 2006a) while also identifying some challenges. Chapter 5, on the other hand, focuses on the more homogenous cohousing sector and looked at possibilities “in the light of their actual limitation, suppression, and denial” (Marcuse, 1964 in: Young, 1990:226). Together these papers respond to research question 4 and point at the possibilities and limitations of CLH as a project of social justice. They raise the question of universalism: under what circumstances might different types of CLH be attractive to diverse audiences? Is the drive to include everyone in CLH a step towards greater justice or an act of middle-class paternalism? I contend that exclusion is vital to the success of individual CLH projects, but the diversity of types of CLH offers opportunities for a diverse range of groups, although not necessarily within a single community. To support this point, I discuss the issue of exclusion and the ideal of community by critically engaging with views of community as

essentially good or oppressive, and pointing at circumstances that can open up CLH to wider circles.

Some types of commercial communities are notoriously exclusive (Low 2003), while not-for-profit communities generally enjoy a progressive, inclusive image despite their exclusive practices (Chiodelli 2015). In her effort to distinguish between gated communities and cohousing communities, Ruiu (2014:328) admits that not everyone is suitable for community life, either gated or collaborative, but in the case of gated communities, this is “more linked with the feeling of being part of a ‘club’ rather than a ‘community’”. The term “community” may have a warm quality to it and in most cases is used in a positive connotation (Aiken, Middlemiss et al. 2017) while the term “club” is used in a pejorative manner. Chapter 5 demonstrated how naïve this distinction is. Alongside the real sense of community for members, the findings show that in cohousing communities, the mechanisms around entering membership resemble the dynamics a ‘club’: a group of like-minded people from a similar background. Even in a more diverse community, the cooperative’s reliance on word of mouth as its main recruitment strategy led to similar dynamics (although with more diverse membership in terms of class and race).

The question of justice arises even in purposefully-inclusive communities when wider power relations are considered. Pickerill’s (2016:15) observation on eco-communities is most illuminating here: when communities decide to include others, she points out, “this approach creates communities for diverse others as separate from other eco-communities, rather than seeking to diversify residents per se”. As I propose in chapter 5, power is not challenged simply by inviting more people to the table, but by asking “who is setting the table” (Guthman 2008a) and actively working to change this. Future research should look at diverse CLH communities and at CLH for marginalised groups in order to understand what makes them work for their members; what are the unique circumstances that enabled diversity and resisted racism, classism and sexism; and what these communities mean to members from different backgrounds and social positions, especially in terms of wider power structures in society.

Not everyone sees communities in idyllic terms. Young (1990) famously argued that communities are not a suitable means to achieve social justice, pointing at some “undesirable political consequences of the ideal of community” (p.234): inherent oppression and exclusion through homogeneity of values and identities; the illusion of immediate understanding and



unity; a tendency for “clique atmosphere” and the way the ideal of community is used to “produce and implicitly legitimate racist and classist behaviour and policy” (p.235). These are serious claims, but my research can only affirm some of them in the context of CLH. Unequal power dynamics and cliques within the community were indeed present (chapter 3), but were managed to some extent through robust decision-making processes. A degree of homogeneity of values and identities was also found (chapter 5). Ideological conformity can be oppressive, but in the case study communities, members often sought a life with like-minded people in a different environment from mainstream society. At the same time, some members felt they were not in a position to express all their views freely, for example a member of the cooperative was reluctant to share her conservative political views in a mostly left-leaning community. Young’s critique on community’s illusion of unity was not supported by this research. For the sake of her argument, Young portrays a maximalist ideal of community; indeed, an ideal that cannot exist in reality and even communitarian thinkers viewed as too extreme (Sandel 1984). My research showed that CLH members had no illusions regarding immediate understanding, nor did they take social harmony for granted. In fact, robust decision-making processes and policies were put in place to overcome misunderstandings and differences between members and make sure people were heard through formal processes.

If just spaces are those open to anyone who wishes to enter them, more research should investigate class and race in CLH. In terms of class, this thesis affirmed previous studies that saw some types of CLH (particularly cohousing) as middle-class projects. These projects often require social capital (Lang 2015b), and a strong relation to public services (Lang and Stoeger 2018) and mid-level institutions (Lang, Chatterton, et al. 2020), which middle-class people are more likely to handle successfully (Matthews and Hastings 2013). Chapter 5 offered a detailed view of the mechanisms that produce middle-class advantage, which can help to fill a gap in social policy, where the “emphasis thus far has largely been on outcomes – on the levels of equality or inequality within the system – and not on the means by which these unequal outcomes come about” (ibid:86). The findings and analysis of chapter 5 in particular can offer a basis for further research into similar mechanisms in other points of contact between grassroots projects and policy. With the growing awareness of systemic racism through the rising of the Black Lives Matter movement, there will be a need to critically evaluate all aspects of society, including that of CLH. Chapter 5 is a starting point

for this kind of work, but a lot more research is needed to offer truly transformative scholarship on racial equality in CLH and in social movements more broadly.

Despite the injustice that exists in CLH, I argue that these communities can serve as a good example of the benefits of exclusion as a means to achieve some forms of social justice. The CLT model, for example, provides affordable homes only for members of the local community as a means to tackle gentrification by wealthier outsiders. By screening members through an application process, CLH can maintain the safety of their members and the stability of their community, which are key factors in the communities' survival and their ability to protect their members from injustice in society, as chapter 3 shows. These safe spaces are important for counter-culture communities in particular, where exclusion is not only a way to experiment radical ideas (Sargisson 2007) but a way to "enforce the positivity of their experiences" (Young, 1990:167). These experiences included facing shame for not owning a house (chapter 3) social isolation in an individualised society and voluntary simplicity in a consumerist culture (chapter 5).

Finally, there is the issue of strategy for social change: how can CLH respond to neoliberalisation and its consequences (social inequality and alienation, environmental crisis)? Young's alternative to the ideal of community is the ideal of the just city, where affinity groups exist without exclusion in the freedom of big city life. CLH responds to this vision in two ways. First, many CLH (cooperatives in particular) are situated in urban areas, where members are free to take part in diverse social interactions under the cover of anonymity. But as Young is well aware of and this thesis demonstrates in various ways, the just city does not currently exist. Under the current circumstances, CLH is attractive to those who seek decent, affordable housing without ownership; to those wishing to share many aspects of their lives with others; to those with the means (time, skills, confidence, habitus) to participate meaningfully in CLH; to those with the communitarian subjectivities that are drawn to collective solutions to individual problems. These factors make CLH exclusive without necessarily making it unjust.

Homeownership is still a preference for most people in the UK and CLH can only partially fulfil the aspiration to "climb up the housing ladder". In a market-driven society, it is common to perceive housing through to its exchange value (Madden and Marcuse 2016): a sensible way to save, invest and inherit. Society will need to change significantly before these considerations cease to be central to many people's housing choices. In a society where

mutual aid and cooperation are the norm, the need for intentional communities might be less urgent. As members reflected on the era of the welfare state and generous benefits system (chapter 4), when people do not worry about getting by financially, they may be more likely to participate in community projects. The literature is very implicit about whether CLH can be only attractive to the general public in a postcapitalist society, radically different than our own. Do we need to identify cracks in capitalism and create small islands that will eventually make a difference without taking power (Holloway 2010), or do we need to promote changes at policy and government level that will enable people to stop worrying about landlords and maintenance and have time and security to participate in a meaningful way (Lang and Novy 2013)? A more just society is a key condition to promote CLH, but ironically in such society is more urgent in response to injustice.

### **6.3 Identities: Marginalised groups and intersectionality**

My third research question was: what is the role of identities in engaging meaningfully with CLH, and what kinds of subjectivities form in relation to engagement in CLH? My methodological approach often drew my attention to identities, as I was driven (during interviews, observation and analysis) by the critical realist question “what works *for whom*”. My main contributions are: 1) new quantitative data on the UK cohousing sector; 2) a critical discussion on White and middle-class identities in this sector; and 3) the effect of generational identities on subjectivities and practices of commoning. Different theoretical perspectives illuminated different tensions within and around communities: a focus on subjectivities revealed intergenerational tensions and contestations (chapter 4), and tensions around classed and racialised identities became apparent through a Bourdieusian approach (chapter 5). These findings, presented in chapters 4 and 5, are only part of the rich data generated by the research. Here I discuss the published data in a broader perspective, and present potential for future research based on additional findings on identities that have not been published yet: the intersection of age, gender and financial circumstances; single parents; and LGBT+ people.

One of the main drivers for this research was the desire to know if CLH can benefit more people. By looking at what works for whom in what circumstances and why, I was hoping to also deduce what can work for others in similar – and different – circumstances. The study offered some insight into this matter, for example in outlining ethnic and classed housing practices in relation to CLH, and groups that may benefit from CLH (chapter 3). It is for

future research to find out more about it, following the methodology used by Boyer and Leland (2018) and Sanguinetti and Hibbert (2018) in the US, but ideally supported by a qualitative element looking into participants' life trajectories, circumstances, visions and aspirations. In addition, future research should focus specifically on CLH projects with diverse membership or projects for minority groups. Such research can help identify potential interest in different types of CLH, which can help policymakers and hub organisations alike.

The thesis showed the current position of some types of CLH in the UK, and how they came to be in this position. Where will they go from here? Gibson-Graham's approach can be helpful here: "our preeminent question is 'How might the potentiality for becoming arise out of the experience of subjection?'" (Gibson-Graham, 2006a:24). My research offered a better understanding of subject formation processes in CLH context, which can shed light on CLH's greater transformative potential and its limitations. These questions are of particular interest with regards to projects with a minimalist vision, whose members may not be interested in ambitious political projects or overtly political articulations (Huron 2018b; McKee 2009, 2011; Noterman 2016). What processes of "becoming" can we observe in these communities, and how does involvement in these project affect members' political subjectivity (Berggren 2020)? These questions can lead to a better understanding of the postcapitalist and anti-racist potential of CLH, which must go hand-in-hand.

### ***Older people: An intersectional analysis***

With 45% of cohousing members over the age of 65, age is a significant identity factor in the cohousing sector. Findings from my research suggest interesting intersections between class, race, age, financial position, sexuality, life cycle, family circumstances and political subjectivities. Members' life cycle played an important role in the decision to move into cohousing, which is well documented in the literature: concerns about ageing and plans for successful ageing ( Fernández-Arrigoitia and West 2020); the need or wish to downsize as children left home and lived far away (Jones 2016); seeking "community and social connection, as well as the greater quality of life and well-being that senior co-housing groups can offer" (Hudson 2017:158).

These aspects are strongly connected to findings from this study. First and foremost, older people are more likely to own a house which they could sell and move into a privately owned cohousing property. Second, and in line with findings from chapter 4 and 5 as already discussed above, is the generational impact on political subjectivities. In the case of CLH, it

is important to consider the position of older people with alternative views whose formative years were at the height of the welfare state and counter culture movements. Third is the classed element of families scattered far and wide and children living abroad (Battu et al. 2008; Clark and Huang 2003), which lead older people to seek community and support beyond their extended family. Fourth, participants repeatedly mentioned time, skill and confidence as key factors in membership in CLH (Heywood 2016; Wallace et al. 2013). Time was important in several ways: the time it takes to establish a community tends to be very long (Scanlon and Fernández-Arriagoitia 2015), and members admitted that younger families could not commit to waiting years before moving in: they wanted to settle down, find a permanent school for their children or buy a house when they had the chance. Older people could afford the wait. Setting up CLH projects is incredibly time-consuming, and as Anna (Bridport Cohousing) said: “older members are doing the slog because they have the resources is standard cohousing experience”. But even after moving in, retired people were more likely to have the time and leisure to participate in committees and the ongoing work in the community. Skills and confidence are also acquired with age, especially in a sector like cohousing in the UK, where members tend to have professional careers. Older age brings not only experience but can also entail a wider social network of connections made over decades. Finally, there is evidence that there were more single women than single men, and therefore future research into the intersection of different elements around age should also consider the importance of gender.

Milburn (2019) showed how age is currently “a modality through which class is lived”, and this is especially clear in the context of housing where older people own assets that most younger people cannot hope to own. Milburn’s argument focuses on the dynamics of the capitalist market, where older people still enjoy the benefits of the welfare state social contract but Millennials are the first to be worse off financially than their previous generations. But how will this play out in the not-for-profit setting of CLH? My research did not involve many Millennials; they were too young to buy homes in cohousing, and although some of them lived in the housing cooperative, they hardly engaged in the research: most of my interviewees were over 40. Future research can look at age differences within the cooperative movement, where divide regarding ownership of assets does not hold. Here the connection between identities and subjectivities is most important, since it is likely that even among an intergenerational group, members’ expectations and prospects will differ greatly according to their formative years as political subjects.

### ***Safe space for LGBT+ people***

CLH appears to be particularly attractive to LGBT+ people. The survey found that cohousing communities in the UK had a significant representation of LGBT+ members, well above the national average (17% and 2% respectively, according to the ONS, see: Guy 2019). The housing cooperative case study presented a similar trend and data from the Radical Routes cooperatives showed even higher numbers (36% identified as LGBT+: Radical Routes 2013b).

Historically, some of the more radical cooperatives formed in the 1970s were safe spaces for LGBT+ people and a basis for LGBT+ activism, providing a sheltering community, a sense of safety and relief from isolation, especially for people with AIDS (Cook 2013). The intersection of age and sexuality is of particular interest here. As mentioned above, broad literature on cohousing already details the benefits of this model for older people. Similarly, the literature on housing for older LGBT+ people points at concerns around safety in conventional settings such as care at home or care homes: the latter are perceived as heteronormative and homophobic, and the former involves carers who are not family members who may have a prejudice against them (King and Cronin 2016; Wathern 2013; Westwood 2016). Future research should bring these two bodies of literature together and develop the concept of CLH as a safe space for marginalised or vulnerable groups. We need to know more about collaborative housing as a safe space for LGBT+ people, evaluate which types are safer and why, and how this may be part of a fair and just housing policy for older LGBT+ people<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Single parents***

Another interesting finding that requires further attention is the small number of single-parent households in cohousing: only three households among all respondents from 15 communities. In comparison, the cooperative case study alone had four single parent members out of 40 households. This is surprising (and disappointing) considering that 90% of single parents are women (ONS 2019b) and the cohousing movement started as a progressive Feminist project “that would liberate women from household duties and family bonds and make them available to the labour market (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012)”. Historically, cohousing

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<sup>11</sup> As I was finalising this thesis, a new intergenerational community-led housing project for LGBT+ people was forming in Leeds, in response to these concerns exactly.

communities in Scandinavian countries had a high percentage of single families (Anthony 2015); and more recently also in some US communities (Toker, 2010:328). Hasell and Scanzoni (1997) argued that the mutual support offered in cohousing makes it an appropriate living environment for “unconventional households”, including single parents (cited in: Toker 2010:328). Similarly, Graber and Wolfe (2004:67) flagged up the potential of cohousing for single-mothers in poverty in particular, as an arrangement that “will reduce feelings of isolation and foster teamwork and a sense of community, yet still provide privacy”. Their recommendation should be taken with a grain of salt, and consider women’s desires and needs before following experts’ views. In a similar line of argument to that developed in chapter 5, cohousing may appear beneficial to single parents, but moving into it involves various considerations, dispositions and values that single mothers do not necessarily have. The benefits of CLH are not restricted to cohousing, though. Mcracken and Watson (2004), for example, conducted a comparative study which included women who already lived in housing cooperatives and relied on their own reports (an approach that made their study particularly convincing). They found that, similarly to other countries, cooperative housing contributed to women’s wellbeing in terms of their financial security, safety, respect and voice, accessible and supportive for disabled women and improving confidence, skills and capacity for teamwork.

Why are there so few single parents in UK cohousing then? One immediate hypothesis is that they are prevented due to unaffordability, but there may be several intersections that may form specific barriers for single parents. In 2019, 14.9% of the families in the UK were single-parent families (2.9 million) (ONS 2019b). Single-parent families earn 27% less than other families, and regardless of their ethnicity or social class, “women who purchased housing, they were worse off in terms of housing type and condition than were white men” (Harrison and Davis 2001:146–47). This is potentially a serious barrier to enter a predominantly ownership-based model. Another possibility is that single parents are reluctant to move if they already have some support networks where they live. Considering this, further research should investigate what conditions are required to make cohousing work for single parents, compare the current situation in cohousing with other forms of CLH, and evaluate which communities are particularly suitable for single parents. This could advise policy and support communities in catering for groups that can benefit greatly from community life.

## 6.4 Challenging neoliberalism and promoting social justice

My fourth research question was: in what ways and to what extent can CLH respond to and challenge neoliberalisation and act as projects of social justice? The discussion above demonstrated some of the opportunities and limitations of CLH as vehicles for social justice. Thinking of CLH's potential, I return to Gibson-Graham's "politics of possibility" (Gibson-Graham 2006). At this stage of the conclusion, we have a better, in-depth understanding of the "openings and possibilities" (Gibson-Graham 2006a:24) that the CLH sector holds.

First, CLH offers a vision for a postcapitalist society and an example of everyday commoning (chapter 3, 4). Second, CLH develops social relations based on mutual aid, solidarity, empowerment and cooperation (chapter 3, 4, 5). These practices provide emotional safety for members and practical resistance to neoliberal oppression. Some of these practices depend on exclusion based on values, subjectivities, class and race (chapters 3, 5), but the chapters and discussion suggest that exclusion is vital only on a community level but not necessarily on the entire CLH sector level. Third, CLH offers a nourishing space for communitarian subjects, a space of "becoming", as Gibson-Graham (2006) conceptualised it and De Angelis (2017) vividly described it (chapter 4). At the same time, as chapter 5 showed, CLH reproduces old patterns of classed and racial distinction that must be grappled with if the CLH wishes to contribute meaningfully to a more just society.

Finally, CLH is not a cohesive sector, and discussing the sector as a whole may lead to generalisation, contradictions and missing nuances. Some types of CLH are accessible and relatable; others are more esoteric. Some types challenge current norms of ownership and individualism; some do not. Some are overtly political; others avoid a political label. Still, CLH offers an alternative in a society where exchange-value takes priority over use-value, where individualism and competition are normalised and sharing and collaborating are the choice of the unsuccessful or the culturally alternative. CLH is not for everyone. It offers communal, collectivist solutions to general problems that many people approach differently. Of course, this is exactly the main appeal and strength of CLH: it focuses on solutions that are tailored to suit the specific needs of specific communities, unlike the one-size-fits-all approach of centralised market-led or top-down housing solutions. Responding to crisis by practices of commoning, CLH does not only resist but creates; not only refusing the status quo by saying NO (Holloway 2011), but also producing "many yesses" (De Angelis, 2017:311).



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# Appendix 1

## A report for Beechtree housing cooperative

2 January 2020

Dear Beechtrees<sup>12</sup>,

It's been a very long time since I last saw you. As some of you know, I took a long break from work to give birth and look after my twin daughters. Now I'm finally ready to send you some of my findings from working with you, as promised. It was a real delight to get to know so many of you and I'm very thankful for your help with my research.

Three years ago I asked you what you want to get out of this research collaboration and many of you wanted to find out more about the history of the co-op and receive some honest and sympathetic reflection of how things are in Beechtree. I interviewed many of you – about half of the members – and met more at GMs and committees that welcomed me to their meetings. I obviously could not speak to those who did not want to take part or did not know about the research; their perspective is missing from my picture. With your two requests in mind, here are some things I thought would be of interest to you, written in plain English. If and when my work is published in academic journals (using more academic language) I will send you a copy of these, too. I hope you find this interesting and helpful.

With gratitude and respect,

Yael

### History of the cooperative

Beechtree started as a short-life cooperative in 1977, in a terrace of council houses that were due for demolition. At this early stage Beechtree included 15 adult members and some children. The cooperative was a collaboration of two groups: a gay men's group from London – Wild Lavender – who were interested in communal living, and local residents who were looking for a collective solution to their housing problem, including some single mums. During the first two years, members worked to form a community, acquired new houses, formed a relationship with the local council and Housing Corporation officers, and signed a

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<sup>12</sup> Name changed from the original document to protect the community's anonymity

development agreement with a local housing association. By 1981 they were registered as a social housing provider, purchasing 17 houses from a housing association, and managing some properties owned by the association as well as some extended short-life properties of the local council. By then membership had increased to 28 adults. Like other cooperatives of that period, members of Beechtree received training in the technicalities of acquiring and managing housing. Purchasing and refurbishing the houses was made possible due to public grants through the 1974 Housing Act under a Labour Government. The act offered generous funding for third sector actors like housing associations and cooperatives, with grants covering all capital costs and ongoing maintenance, as well as “fair rents” system based on need.

State support has also changed drastically with time. When the cooperative was formed, the houses were rented through a housing association or let very cheaply through the council, and the state offered very generous grants for major repairs and purchase of houses. Needless to say this money is no longer available. Even after state funding was stopped, Beechtree continued to grow in numbers and in 2000 bought the last two houses from the housing association, gaining full ownership and control over its entire housing stock.

The state is not being very helpful these days, and many of you remembered the dark times of being under supervision. I also learnt that Beechtree’s decision to deregister as a social landlord to avoid further damage by the state is becoming quite common with other cooperatives as a cautionary measure.

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The old minute books have some lovely bits from your past. For example, founding members considered other properties in the area – in Sholebroke Avenue and the Gathornes for example. How different would that be! Things were different in those early years; for example, on December 16<sup>th</sup> the cooperative approved “Christmas present of £10 to each member of the co-op”. That’s a lot of money - the equivalent of £50 today. Just to illustrate what a significant amount it was: at the time, the average full time wage for men over 21 was £101.3, and for women over 18 was £63, but most members did not have full time jobs or average wages. Speaking of Christmas, some people told me that in earlier years they celebrated with Beechtree and had to explain to their families that they were celebrating with “their other families”. On our storytelling session some of you remembered the yearly pantomime performed in Beechtree. Has anyone got photos from these?

One aspect of change in the cooperative is around childcare. In the first years, the first agenda item for each meeting is ‘babysitting’. In the first couple of years the co-op even had an after school club for free. For years the cooperative operated a low cost crèche during GMs. The system Beechtree has today (refund for private childcare) meant that some parents found it difficult to participate: either they brought in young children and struggled to entertain them, or had one partner looking after kids, or missing GM because finding a registered provider that is suitable for a refund was too complicated.

Another thing that’s changed is the style of the minutes: today’s minutes are extremely formal in comparison to the old ones, which included items like this minute from 1999’s end of year report: “In the last year we have said goodbye to [[\*]]. We wish them all good luck. May the Force be with them.”

### **A changing sense of community over time**

The cooperative was established by people who wanted to live in community and people who wanted affordable, secure tenure with a good degree of tenant control. Reading the minutes from 1978 till today, I noticed that there’s always been a tension between those who wanted ‘more community’ and those who did not want to mix socially. Can you guess how many times Beechtree members decided to “do more socials”? I can’t give a definite number because I haven’t read all your minute books, but the answer is: a lot! At least once every two years (it was suggested twice in GMs I attended). Even two years after the cooperative was established, one of the founding members was already missing the good old days of sharing and strong social ties – when there were only 11 members with a shared dining area, nursery and frequent general meetings at members’ homes.

Many people told me that since they moved to the co-op they made friends with people they wouldn’t normally be friends with, and built meaningful relationships with their neighbours: watching films together, helping out with maintenance, sharing food and giving stuff for free. People were very grateful for that and many people commented that although their initial motivation to join was financial, they really value the social safety net that the cooperative provides for those who engage.

But some members remembered with longing how close-knit the community has been in the past: lower fences, open gates between gardens, more sharing. In our interviews, the majority of people felt quite happy about the change to more privacy; in fact, some people said that the

reason Beechtree still survived is that it's "more of a co-op and less of a commune". But others, especially older members, were missing the village-like style of old Beechtree; one of the older and long-standing members told me that if things continue this way, it will lose its community spirit completely and cease to exist. There was certainly a sense that older member had different and more elaborate expectations from the cooperative and sometimes felt sad to see it changes. One of the things that came up in interviews was a difference between 'the old guard' and the younger members (mostly in their early 40s). In one interview a younger member said about the long-standing members:

"Those people I think feel alienated from the way the co-op now *has* to function (...) and because there is probably less of a kind of communal thing, it's less of a commune and it's more of a co-op, d'you know what I mean.

**What do you mean, can you say a bit more about that?**

I think you got a lot of people who are hippies basically... which is great - I'd love to be a hippie but you just can't, can't do it nowadays, d'you know what I mean?

This notion was repeated over and over again. Most members felt that as society was changing and becoming more capitalist and less secured with the diminishing of the welfare state, members had less free time to invest in the cooperative and had to work more because they could not rely on state benefits. I heard this explanation from many of you, and here it is in the words of one member:

"you see, back in the 1980s when Beechtree was really forming, um..., you suddenly have mass unemployment following the recession, but a social security system that really did aim to provide social security - you had an *army* of capable people who were unemployed and you could manage to be unemployed and live off benefits whilst doing absolutely extraordinary things in the voluntary sector, it was a real phenomenon of the 1980s. And because of all that's changed, with, you know capitalism and neoliberalism and the destruction of the welfare state it's no longer an option".

**Safe space**

This is a beautiful thing about Beechtree. Many of you told me they see the cooperative as a refuge or a sanctuary, a safe space. This meant different things to different people. Many of you mentioned material safety is an important aspect of life in the cooperative: it provides safety from tyrannical landlord and low quality housing, and long term secured tenure. Those who moved into Beechtree after horrid private rent experiences really appreciated these

qualities. But you also mentioned emotional safety: knowing so many of your neighbours, helping out when needed and supporting members who would struggle in other forms of housing. Solidarity in the cooperative had some material implications, too: your approach to arrears is a lot more relaxed and flexible than an average housing association, and this allows more safety for those who struggle financially.

I wish I could share back all your lovely words about it, but I don't want to make it too tedious. Here are just a few of the things you told me:

“It feels emotionally safer. [...] I guess it's not usual to have so many people that you know a bit and you're kind of friends with living so close to you”.

“The social connections you make is gold dust; if this was a private property there were no possibilities for security or connections between neighbours [...] and the house works better if we all get on. [...] It is something that brings really different people together, different personalities, background, whatever”.

“It is certainly a place that is different from the usual capitalist world where for a lot of housing associations or landlords it's all about the money and they don't always do what they can to meet people's needs or at the very least give some sense of community”

It wasn't all rosy, though, as no place can be 100% safe. As you would expect perhaps in any small community, there were also complicated power dynamics. As one member said: “We're very very open, but there's been points where people have taken really bad liberties with that”. Some members felt they did not belong in the ‘clique’ that was running the cooperative, and felt disconnected or insecure from bullying. Some members felt that it is difficult to voice an unpopular opinion or complain to complaints and mediation because they would not be believed or taken seriously. Some members felt their contribution would not be valued so did not participate as much, and some felt uncomfortable going to GMs.

## **Participation**

Like in any cooperative in the world, this was a big issue for members – especially the more active ones. Some felt that the burden wasn't shared fairly, and some thought that the new policy that requires participation as a condition for membership was too coercive. Surely, some members were simply trying to avoid the work involved in running the cooperative, but some felt that ideologically, cooperatives should be based on voluntary contribution. Long standing members in particular tended to think that members should not resent those who do

not participate and certainly should not condition membership with participation. The majority of members, however, agreed that some sort of commitment and minimal requirement was the fair way forward. Related to that, long-standing members also said that in the past the business of the cooperative was more fun: people met over lunch in a less formal way, went for a drink after committee meetings and for a meal after GMs. Many people thought that GMs that included a successful social element before or after were better for the discussion, too. But people didn't always turn up for the social bit, so finding the way to do it properly was tricky. Members of different ages and experience in the co-op tended to think that in the past things were more ad-hoc because people had more free time on their hands and less stressful lives, so they could put more time into the cooperative.

Although with the new participation policy the number of meetings has been reduced in comparison to previous years, still about 1/3 of the members haven't been to one meeting during my research. About 15 people were involved in committees to some degree. Some people attended GMs but haven't participated, and generally felt that running the cooperative was not their responsibility. As already mentioned, others did not participate for other reasons: not connecting socially, feeling left out or overwhelmed with life's intensity.

### **The Political**

Politics means different things to different people. Beechtree is generally very lefty, although some members said they felt uncomfortable talking about politics because they were more right leaning than others. Some members felt that the cooperative should not be political at all, while others thought that the very existence of the cooperative was political – not in the sense of supporting a specific party, but in the sense that “providing decent, affordable housing is political”, and “the politics that tends to be the most long-lasting is that which is rooted in your interests”. Some thought that the cooperative enabled independence from the state that was liberating, and some thought that choosing to work cooperatively and not own property was meaningful for society: more than one of you told me that this is how housing should be for everyone. Beechtree was leading by example, showing that even “a group of amateurs can achieve this”.

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I hope this was an interesting and fair report. Please feel free to get in touch about anything you like. I'd love to hear your views and if you want to hear / read more, please do ask as I have tonnes of things to say about cooperatives but don't want to bore you to death.

My email is: \*

Thanks again for your engagement in this project.

Happy 2020!

Yael