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Beyond Affordability: English Cohousing Communities as White Middle-Class Spaces

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Beyond Affordability: English Cohousing Communities as White Middle-Class Spaces

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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, the study found that awareness of cohousing is born within like-minded circles and not locally. 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 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.

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

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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. Many raised the issue of diversity, or lack of it. Suggestions included a call to make cohousing "truly accessible for everyone (…) 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.

Cohousing neighbourhoods are developments that are owned and managed collectively by residents, with private living spaces and shared facilities such as gardens and a common house for communal meals[1]. Cohousing neighbourhoods are not for profit and aim to encourage environmentally and socially sustainable living through social interaction, sharing, and empowerment by consensus decision-making and participation in committees (Field 2020). Wang and Hadjri (2017) found that sustainability is a central value for the sector and an important motivation for joining these communities. Moreover, they found that living in cohousing supports sustainable behavioural changes, including reduced waste and energy use. This is reflected for example in communities' commitment to energy-efficient building (Field 2020). In the UK, cohousing communities are developed mainly by amateur grassroots groups, while state funding or support from local councils and housing associations is limited

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[1] Communities where members live communally in one household were not included in this study.

and inconsistent (Archer et. al. 2021). This policy context means that communities have little access to grant capital or sub-market priced land, and must rely on their own resources, skills and persistence (Field 2020).

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 and aspiring for diversity, the sector remains small and very homogeneous (Moore and Mullins 2013). In cohousing communities around the world, the demographic profile tends to be very similar: White, educated homeowners, often older and often women (Boyer & Leland, 2018; Bresson & Labit, 2019; Chiodelli, 2015; Droste, 2015; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2018; Margolis & Entin, 2011; Sanguinetti & Hibbert, 2018; Williams, 2008). Why is cohousing still a niche housing option, and can it meet its goal to attract wider circles? Attempts to answer this question often focus on barriers to inclusion, and particularly on housing affordability (Droste & Komorek, 2017; Garciano, 2011; Larsen, 2019) and lack of awareness (Sanguinetti & Hibbert, 2018; Williams, 2008).

This paper offers a different answer by engaging cohousing studies with a Bourdieusian approach (Bourdieu 2005; Allen 2008, Silva and Wright 2009). Rather than focusing on barriers and asking why potential members are excluded, the study 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. The study found various pathways involving intersectional aspects of members' identity (age, gender, life cycle), but these are beyond the scope of a single paper; this paper focuses on the less-researched aspects of class, race and ethnicity (Lang, Carriou, and Czischke 2020). The paper's main argument is that cohousing communities in England reflect the habitus of the

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alternative 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, I found that the journey into cohousing begins with values and dispositions, experiences and social circles, and that all of these have important and conflated classed and racialised aspects (Bourdieu, 1984; Rollock, 2014). The survey found greater ethnic diversity than members reported in interviews. The paper explains this by suggesting that cohousing is culturally framed as a "White space": "settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present" (Anderson 2015, 10).

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 survey of most cohousing communities in England. The survey is the first of the entire cohousing in England since Williams' study in 2005, when the sector was significantly smaller with only two completed projects (Williams, 2005, 163).

The paper has four parts. First, I contextualise the study theoretically and empirically and point out gaps in the literature, followed by the second section which describes the research process. The third part presents and discusses the findings, showing aspects of diversity in cohousing in England and how the way into membership is peppered with classed and racialised moments. This section develops two main arguments: 1) the field of cohousing is reproduced as an alternative middle class space and a White space; and 2) cohousing is spreading through like-minded circles and not locally. The conclusion draws broader implications for the cohousing sector and counter-cultural movements.

Diversity in cohousing: Towards a Bourdieusian perspective

This section builds on studies from several fields and identifies areas in cohousing studies that call for development. First, I critically discuss the demographic diversity in the sector;

second, I respond to the gaps by suggesting a different methodology and by engaging the cohousing literature with Bourdieusian scholarship, thereby framing cohousing as a practice of social positioning.

Cohousing is not diverse in most countries. Regardless of ownership models or prevalence in the country, it still seems to attract mainly middle class members, especially White and older ones (Boyer & Leland, 2018; Bresson & Labit, 2019; Chiodelli, 2015; Droste, 2015; Garciano, 2011; Jakobsen & Larsen, 2018; Margolis & Entin, 2011; Roth, 2018; Sanguinetti & Hibbert, 2018; Tummers & Macgregor, 2019). These studies found that even affordable rented projects tend to attract White middle class creatives, although there are exceptions (Sanguinetti 2012; Chitewere and Taylor 2010; Fromm and Jong 2009). In England, market conditions and state policies affect the affordability of cohousing, and to some extent their diversity, as successful projects often compromised their affordability goals, while others even disband when affordability could not be achieved (Field 2015).

Experts and sector organisations generally view cohousing as a beneficial model for much wider publics, including those on a low income, and are optimistic about cohousing's potential for socioeconomic diversity (Garciano, 2011). In response to 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." Some scholars suggested a more critical view, focusing on exclusion, homogeneity, and lack of integration with cohousing's surroundings (Chiodelli & Baglione, 2013). These contributions scrutinise 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); Williams (2008, 279) hypothesised that local influence is central to

the expansion of cohousing: "it would be difficult for those living further from cohousing communities to see the benefits." This hypothesis has not been tested in England so far.

Scholarship of cohousing demographics in the US, the UK., Denmark, and France has mainly looked at communities' current membership, and reported similar findings (Margolis and Entin 2011; Williams 2005; Jakobsen and Larsen 2019; Larsen and Larsen 2019; Bresson and Labit 2019). Others tried to gauge the interest in cohousing among the general public. Boyer and Leland (2018) 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. To explain this gap, Sanguinetti and Hibbert (2018) focused on the way interest turns into a decision to move in. They suggest that the main barriers to broader adoption are "lack of awareness of cohousing and the resource-intensive process of creating or finding cohousing" (Sanguinetti & Hibbert, 2018, 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) qualitative work offers more nuanced explanations to the gap between appeal and adaptation. Their study with seniors 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 (Riedy et al., 2019, 237).

Cohousing is an intentional community for members only: new residents must be approved by existing members, usually following a relatively long membership process; this barrier to diversity is essential to ensure the stability and cohesion of the community. 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 in social housing projects in the U.S., Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, but currently not in the UK (although projects like Threshold and New Ground encourage income diversity through social housing options) (Fromm & Jong, 2009; Garciano, 2011; Törnqvist 2019). In Germany, some projects involve White middle-class members (often students or creatives) and marginalised 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. Guthman (2008, p 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 by using mixed methods, looking at the demographic profile of cohousing members but also asking why people with certain identities end up living in cohousing. Specifically, there is a need to critically assess the classed and racialised dimensions of the known barriers and point 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 (Field, 2020). They are values-led, require high levels of participation, and, in England, rely mostly on homeownership rather than on state development of social housing. 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 generally missing from the cohousing literature is the classed and racialised dimension of these values and practices (but see Labit and Bresson, 2019). 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. Importantly, since middle-class-ness often conflates with Whiteness and cultural capital is being configured based on the experiences and habitus of White people (Wallace 2017, 913), class distinction can imply ethnic and racial exclusion.

My analysis employs Bourdieu's concepts of class, habitus, capital and field to understand the mechanisms behind the social profile of cohousing communities. Class, according to Bourdieu, is "not defined by a property" but by conditions of existence that determines the form and value of people's practice (Bourdieu, 1984, 106). Race and ethnicity were virtually absent from Bourdieu's work, but his work was developed by studies on the embodied aspect of social and cultural capital and the synchronisation of high cultural capital with Whiteness (Rollock, 2014; Skeggs, 2004; Wallace, 2017). In this sense, the paper adopts "a *style* of sociology that is rooted in Bourdieu's thought but not reducible to it" (Atkinson, 2020, 2).

Bourdieu famously defined three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. While acknowledging the crucial impact of economic capital on diversity in cohousing, this study focuses on the importance of cultural capital and habitus to participation in cohousing. Bourdieu (2018) described three states of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. *Embodied* cultural capital 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., instruments, books). These can manifest the owners' economic ability but also, importantly, reflect their capacity to choose and use these goods appropriately. Finally, *institutionalised* 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 of position-taking resulting from their habitus.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus are analysed in the context of a *Field*. Field analysis considers people's habitus and capital as it identifies the logic of the field, people's habitus and the "forms of specific capital that operate within it" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 108). The field can be thought of as a game, produced by participants who cooperate and compete under the game's (implicit) rules. A player's strategy and play are determined by "the volume and structure of her capital" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 99) at a given moment but also considering her trajectory in the game. Taking this metaphor further, Bourdiue refers to "trump cards" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 98), which can have a special relative value within a field: a "species of capital (e.g., knowledge of Greek or integral calculus) hinges on the existence of a game, or a field in which this competency can be employed". In this sense, fields are selective: participation is subject to "'admission fee' that each field imposes", in the form of specific capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 107-8).

An example of a species of capital that holds currency in intentional communities was identified by Jones (2016). In her research of intentional communities in the UK, Jones coined the term "alternative capital": the mastery of thinking critically of the capitalist mainstream society, adoption of alternative lifestyles and resistance to cultural and social hierarchies. This species of capital was acquired through formal education, travel, activism and communal living. It should be noted that the experiences that generate this capital are

more readily available to middle-class people, who are more likely to travel and engage in higher education.

The rest of this section presents cohousing communities through the lens of Bourdieu's masterpiece *Distinction* (1984), which showed how lifestyles reflect the habitus of different class fractions.

The classed and racialised logic of values-led communities

Cohousing's radical beginning in Scandinavia still runs through communities worldwide, and values are at the heart of cohousing communities in England UK (Sargisson, 2012). While European cohousing often involve rented units and state support, English UK communities are more similar to U.S. ones in their ownership and development approach (Tummers, 2016). 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, and collective purchase of ethically sourced food (Chatterton, 2013). Ironically, these values and practices are exclusive, as they often rely, for example, on shared activist experiences (Labit and Bresson 2019). Sanguinetti (2012, 4) found that in the US, even 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 (Sanguinetti, 2012, 18).

An example of values that can manifest cultural distinction - and consequently exclusion - is UK cohousing's strong environmental commitment (Wang, Pan, and Hadjri 2020). Numerous studies on the association of eco-habitus and ethical consumption with the middle-class argue that they are forms of high cultural capital class distinction (Middlemiss,

2018; Carfagna et al., 2014). In England and other developed countries, these 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, & 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, correlating to issues of income, class and race. First, co-housing 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 currently associated with the White middle-class progressive left with high 'alternative capital' (Jones, 2016) and may exclude people of colour or those from a working-class background (Labit and Bresson, 2019; Polletta, 2005). Polletta's (2005, 242) important contribution demonstrates two crucial points: classed practices are historicised, not fixed or essentialist; and the choice of organisational forms "may be attractive mainly on account of the social groups with which they are symbolically associated", rather than their efficacy or ideological appeal alone.

Middle-class elective belonging and sophisticated consumption

Framing homeownership as objectified cultural capital, buying homes is a means of social positioning for middle-class knowing consumers (Allen, 2008; Silva and Wright, 2009). Choosing the right home in the right location and using it appropriately require the mastery of objectified cultural capital and betrays not only the owners' economic means but also allows others to "situate the owners in social space by situating them within the space of tastes" (Bourdieu, 2005, 19).

This knowledge is crucial for joining a cohousing project. Casey's Bourdieusian study showed 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). Growing affordability, he concludes, 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). The concept of elective belonging clarifies 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, thereby manifesting the choosers' cultural capital and social position. The importance of elective belonging is evident in the common metaphor in cohousing publications of the community as "an opportunity to live in an almost extended family context" (Wainwright, 2013 n.p). The desire to live *like* an extended family but not with one's *actual* extended family has a clear classed (and ethnic) context. Studies show that in the UK, White households are more likely to move, 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, & Phimister, 2008; Clark & Huang, 2003; Perry & Francis, 2010). For Savage et al. (2005, 34, 38), middle-class elective belonging is different from working-class belonging strategies, that value the effort to "stay put" where they were "born and bred." Working class communities are therefore not intentional in the same sense and are more likely to maintain geographical proximity to extended family as a source of belonging and support. Social stigma can also lead people to stay in a stigma-free community of similar people, but the choice to remain where one is respected may clash with the middle-class value of mobilisation (residential and educational), which pathologises working-class people as non-aspirational (Taylor, 2012). A similar dynamic of

elective/involuntary belonging occurs in racial and ethnic 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 enjoy respect and familiar interactions (Lacy, 2004; Phillips, 2007).

Case studies and methods

This paper draws on sequential mixed-methods research of cohousing communities, with an emphasis on the qualitative aspect (Bronstein & Kovacs, 2013; Cameron, 2009). Communities are numbered (C1, C2…) and where individual names appear, they have been changed to protect participants' anonymity. The research involved two qualitative phases with communities that aimed for affordability. Considering that the English cohousing sector is mainly ownership-based and not affordable, these unusual cases were selected to eliminate the factor of financial exclusion. Two communities (C1 and C3) were not yet built at the time of research, and two (C2 and C4) were already established. C1 is 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. 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 an economically 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 Northern England city, with some cohousing elements (communal rooms and garden), which was used in this study mainly to illustrate class distinction practices in an affordable politically progressive setting. C4 is economically 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 (2017) included in-depth qualitative research with C1 and C4. Methods involved a workshop with all members who attended the general meeting to explore their main concerns about their community; participant observation of formal meetings (the general and committee meetings) and social events for current and prospective members; and interviews with 11 members and correspondence with key members of C1, and 18 members of C4. The concerns raised in the workshops informed the individual interview questions.

The second research phase (2019) was a national survey sent via e-mail to all 19 cohousing communities in England (not the UK) that were listed on the UK Cohousing website at the time. 87 households from 15 cohousing communities took part in the study, with a total of 138 adults out of roughly 500 adult cohousing members in England; they therefore represent about 27.6% 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 website for UK intentional communities.

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.

The third research phase (2019) involved two focus group sessions with 14 members of two urban cohousing communities in the North of England: the established C2 and the emerging C3. Members were presented with a presentation comparing their community with the sector as a whole. Slides included gender, household types (single, families and house-share), age, tenure type, disability, LGBT+, education and ethnicity. The presentation formed the basis for a workshop on the routes into membership. The workshops were built around the metaphor of a journey. Participants were asked to draw maps of the roads and bridges, walls and barriers en-route to cohousing. This brought up individual and systemic conditions affecting membership. My position as a member of a cohousing project was instrumental in building rapport and avoid defensiveness.

Findings and discussion: How the alternative 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 cohousing communities are reproduced as (alternative) middle-class, White spaces. I begin by presenting some of the survey results and an analysis of the findings regarding economic capital, followed by an in-depth discussion of members' cultural capital and ethnicity.

The survey found various aspects of the social profile of cohousing communities in England: gender (58% women); age (34% over 65); ethnicity (86% 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: those concerning members' economic and – most importantly – cultural capital.

Economic capital

Like many cohousing communities internationally, members in England generally had a mid-high income (see Figure 1). 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 the high level of outright homeownership.

<insert Figure 1 here>

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[2]). This is well above the national figure of 64% homeowners (ONS 2019). Ownership is not a proxy for economic capital (Larsen, 2018), but the vacant properties ads on the UK Cohousing Network website on 2017-2019 suggested that most cohousing properties are relatively expensive or similar to the market rate. The high levels of ownership are closely related 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.

Participants often described their membership as a privileged choice for people in the alternative middle-class fraction: not struggling financially but not prioritising 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 and in other ways) lacked the leisure to participate in cohousing and make lifestyle changes even if it is affordable.

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[2] Mutual homeownership is an alternative model that ensures "economic equality among residents, permanent affordability, demarketization and nonspeculation" (Chatterton, 2013:1662). Members still need some initial capital to join.

Interestingly, Molly's interview highlights the importance of *cultural* capital to engagement in cohousing. In response to her observation about struggling people's ability to engage in cohousing, I asked her to reflect on her own position, living "in a one bed house with two kids as a single mum… and you work".

Yeah

This is quite a handful.

Yeah.

But you still…

See myself as privileged

Yeah

(laughs) Yeah…

What is your privilege?

(Laughs) Well, I am unusual yes, in that I'm completely skint but I have – what do I have as privilege (…) you know middle-classy education and um… you know… (laughs)

For members like Molly, cohousing was simple to understand and pleasant to engage with: it did not require adapting to new ways of thinking or being but suited her habitus. Molly said she was "skint", but her experience in alternative circles and her formal education equipped her with a "trump card": the alternative capital that is required for participation in the field of cohousing. The next section develops this point in detail.

Cultural capital

This section presents evidence and discusses several aspects of members' cultural capital and their impact on diversity in cohousing. These include: formal education, moving and travelling, and rejecting traditional middle-class values for post-materialistic ones. The section then shows how these factors shape the field through the recruitment process that perpetuates the social profile of the sector.

Like cohousers worldwide, members of English communities were highly educated. Figure 2 shows that 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).

<insert figure 2 here>

Higher education is a key factor in the middle-class habitus, as an important state of *institutionalized* cultural capital; simply put, higher education can make one middle-class regardless of their income (Bourdieu 2018). 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 and led her to seek a sustainable solution in cohousing. In line with some scholars (Heywood 2016), Neil (C3) said that higher education underpins the skills required for the complicated task of setting up a cohousing project. This was particularly important considering the low state involvement in cohousing: members must finance and manage the projects themselves, and the many obstacles they face mean success rates are very modest (Field, 2020). Ren (C2) emphasised that "it isn't just the setting-up, actually. (…) to manage

within our community (…) you have to be used to going to certain sorts of meetings and preparing for meetings in a certain way". In other words, these skills were a "trump card" in the cohousing field.

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 racialised 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". In other words, lacking high cultural capital weakened their position in the field.

Education is not simply about formal learning (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. 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 (Jones 2016).

Progressive values, alternative practices

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Values, members repeatedly said, make communities self-selecting: "it's this thing about wanting diversity but our values, sort of, really is a pretty strong filter" (Fred, C3). Those who do not share these values or are not ready to practice them in this particular way will not become members. For example, a C3 applicant who made homophobic comments was rejected; a family with two cars who would not join the community's carpool were rejected because of the limited parking space the community's sustainable transport policy allowed. 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". Like-mindedness was important not only on a normative level but in a practical sense, too. 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".

Participants often associated cohousing values with activism and alternative identities that "challenge 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". Similar to findings from France, U.S. and the UK (Labit and Bresson, 2019; Jones 2016; Markle et al. 2015), members often had previous experiences of political and environmental activism or community volunteering. These provided members with "alternative capital" (Jones 2016): the feel for the game in a counter-culture field that represent the relevant *embodied* capital; it was, returning to Bourdieu's metaphor, a "trump card". The activist identity is not comfortable for everyone regardless of their values, and lack of activist experience could become a barrier to membership. Theo (C2) said: "I wasn't involved in anything like that [activism], definitely felt that is 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".

Cohousing practices were often perceived as reflecting a class position: rejecting traditional middle-class values from the privileged position of free choice. 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 replied: "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?".

Diana's comment can explain why members perceived the sector as more homogenous than the survey suggested. Their alternative capital marked them as middle class, regardless of their subjective sense of class belonging. This notion is inseparable from the way middle-class cultural capital in the UK is decoded as 'white' both by White and by Black middle-class people (Meghji, 2019, 1). An example of this dynamic was given by Anna (C1), a renter who grew up never thinking about going to university, was involved in counter-culture from 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. Eileen (C3) also suggested that cohousing was perceived as middle class because of its eco habitus: "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 could "pass" as middle class, Eileen, who is Black, demonstrated how being perceived as middle class is a form of White privilege. Despite her

professional status, she often faced disrespect, even in her grandson's private school. This cultural coding can make cohousing not only middle class but also a White space.

Bourdieu's framework shows that values are inseparable from needs: cohousing was the answer to members' needs since their eco-habitus and communitarian worldview suggested collective solutions to individual (and global) problems. These needs included a need for community in preparation for a climate crisis (Anna, C1) and a more sustainable lifestyle (Mark, C2, Fred C3), successful aging (Gail, C1 and Kate, C3) and social connection (Sandra, C3, Jane C1).

Recruitment: deciding who is a good fit

The recruitment and application process, as Theo (C2) observed, involve "loads of invisible and visible hurdles". The membership process is one very visible barrier. In this process communities and prospective members test to see if they are a good fit through a series of meetings and activities. For successful applicants, this was an enjoyable opportunity to make friends and learn about their new community. 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 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".

During the application process, some applicants withdrew, sometimes after realising that cohousing was not for them: too much sharing, responsibility, bureaucracy. 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 social 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. Socialising as part of the application process can be warm and welcoming for the people with the right embodied capital but daunting for people who expect impersonal processes or feel out of place, lacking what Bourdieu called the "feel for the game" in this field. C1 had a similar experience with housing association tenants. Jane said: "we sent a letter via the local council via the housing association to all of their renters (…) Um… I think we had one enquiry from that". Many factors were at play here: tenants' need for quick solutions rather than a long engagement 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"?

<insert figure 3 here>

Participants often commented on the "White middle-class" nature of cohousing communities, but as shown in Figure 3, the survey found that the cohousing sector was just as racially 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"[3] than the national figure (15% and

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[3] "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.

4.4% respectively). 13% of survey participants 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 they were apparently absent from the communities.

Two points by Anderson (2015) must be acknowledged when analysing these findings. First, White spaces can be understood as diverse by White people but coded as White by Black of other minority groups. Second, 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 – marking them as "informally 'off limits'" for prospective members from minority groups (Anderson 2015:10). Moreover, half of the survey takers from minority ethnic groups (n=6) were partners of White British members, so their entry to a White space was potentially smoother (Anderson 2015).

Many cohousing communities are set in predominantly White areas (see table 1); not surprising considering that many are in rural areas where there is little ethnic diversity in the UK. Cohousing communities do attract members from around the country, but potential members from minority ethnic groups may hesitate to move in and potentially become uncomfortably visible in their neighbourhood[4].

Community name and location	% White population in this postcode
Cannon Frome, Ledbury	98
Cannok Mill, Colchester	94

[4] 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.

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 (showing a nationally representative picture) and the qualitative data (presenting a sense of homogeneity) 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 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) said: "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". This adds three important elements to "cultural" considerations: cohousing's practical attraction; family commitments; and concerns about traditional families' opinion.

Hannah and Kate's comments point at the "admission fees" into the cohousing field, in terms of social and cultural capital. Making unconventional lifestyle choices is a form of White and middle class privilege (Rollock 2014b), and manifests a level of confidence in risking respectability by rejecting conventional middle class values (Rollock 2014b; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). Therefore, alternative capital becomes an exclusive factor for those who aspire for social mobility or those who cannot risk their respectability in the way that comes naturally to (White) middle-class alternatives (Skeggs and Loveday 2012). This dynamics supports Meghji's (2019) observation that middle-class cultural capital is decoded as White.

Finally, although ethnicity seemed to make a difference en-route to cohousing, this paper does *not* argue is that cohousing is *essentially* White; rather, it shows how cohousing's social mechanisms currently reproduce it as a White and middle class space (Meghji 2019:8). These cultural codes are historically contextualised and as Polletta's (2005) study on the history of consensus decision-making demonstrated, can shift.

Awareness of cohousing: Middle class channels, not local influence
The findings on routes into membership challenge Williams' (2008) hypothesis that cohousing spreads through local influence. Rather, 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 activism and exposure to media aimed at the cohousing social profile. Prospective members researched cohousing and looked for groups and vacancies on websites like UK Cohousing

Network. Consequently, 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 referred to this sarcastically: "well, just think about where you guys found about cohousing (…) you were reading The Guardian". Indeed, The Guardian, the national newspaper which targets educated middle-class readers (The Guardian 2010), has published significantly more stories on cohousing (18) than any other British newspaper. In other words, those who are most exposed to cohousing are of similar demographics to existing members.

Considering that most cohousing communities were located in predominantly White areas, local influence is unlikely to increase ethnic diversity. However, recruiting locally is a limited diversifying strategy even in diverse areas; classed and racialised habitus can make cohousing exclusive to some local residents.

Conclusion

In this paper I presented two main arguments based on a Bourdieusian analysis of a large collection of mixed-methods data: first, cohousing is reproduced as a White and middle class space due to mechanisms of cultural capital and habitus in this field, while affordability was an important but secondary filter; second, awareness of cohousing is not born locally but within alternative circles of White middle-class progressives.

In its effort to meet its aim 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, and arguably counter-productive for communities. In order to attract wider and more diverse membership, cohousing values must first 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 normalise cohousing. However, there are three reasons to take this view with a grain of salt. First, cohousing projects have been operating for decades and yet remain niche and not familiar to the general public (Moore and Mullins 2013). It is commonly argued that the barrier to popularising cohousing is that the general public simply does not understand it (Wang, Pan, and Hadjri 2020). This belief leads to the second reason for caution about cohousing's ability to spread. Returning to Guthman's (2008) argument, the White middle-class notion that awareness is the key to changing public lifestyle or values is risking the erasure of minority experiences and pushing for a culturally-specific practice to overcome a general social problem. Third, there is room to critically discuss the value of diversity in intentional communities. Is it realistic or desirable to expect social integration at this scale? Future research should consider the balance between promoting a model of diversity and effectively running values-led communities. At this stage, this paper provides insight into the question of diversity not only within each community but across the sector.

The cohousing sector may wish to adopt a critical perspective on its universalist vision of cohousing as "the new normal". This paper 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 (LeFond and Tsvetkova 2017) are set in very different contexts, including state and NGO funding for social housing cohousing projects. In the UK, where national housing policy is not supporting groups and not providing top-down options, groups still must draw on their own resources, which makes success rates relatively

small (Field 2020). It is yet to be seen how the UK's government intention to support community-led housing may affect the sector, and how new players such as housing associations might change the field.

This paper reveals only part of a complex picture of diversity in cohousing. Future research should develop the way class and race intersect with age, sexuality, life cycle and family circumstances. Preliminary findings indicate the importance of life cycle played in the decision to move into cohousing.

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. Despite the claim to universalism, this field currently favours the habitus and cultural capital of the alternative (White) middle class. Cohousing studies should therefore shift the focus on affordability as the main barrier to inclusion, and recognise culture as the first barrier on the way into membership.

Acknowledgements

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