

Living Alone Together: Individualized Collectivism in Swedish Communal Housing

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Sociology

2019, Vol. 53(5) 900–915

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DOI: 10.1177/0038038519834871

journals.sagepub.com/home/soc



Abstract

In this study, situated in urban Stockholm, communal housing stands out as highly individualized. The residents positively appraise their way of living, not primarily for values related to collective solidarity, but for enabling autonomy, privacy and easy exits. Rather than theorizing this as a contradiction, communal housing is framed as a case of individualized collectivism, a belonging structure that is evaluated for fostering interpersonal relations with a high degree of independency. The article discusses the notion of Swedish state individualism as an explanatory backdrop and argues that it is the existence of a collective frame – in the shape of a historically embedded welfare program and an everyday housing platform – that enables the residents to sustain their individualized lives. Through an analysis of the residents' negotiations around self and solidarity, autonomy and dependency, communal housing unfolds as an everyday response to a widespread tension between individualized societies and people's search for community.

Keywords

collectivism, communal housing, individualization, intimacy, state individualism, Sweden

Introduction

In order to live in this kind of house, you must be a collective individualist. (Bodil, 76-year-old, cohousing unit)

A defining feature of communal housing, or communal living, is that people who are not necessarily related by family or marriage share residence in a more or less intimately organized way, with both communal spaces for social interaction as well as private areas.¹ Current research shows various forms of communal housing to be a growing trend in many western societies, particularly among young people in urban regions. This

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is explained by demographic changes and escalating housing prices, as well as through shifting lifestyle choices and a rising eco-political awareness. Within urban, environmental and sociological studies, the topic of communal living, in this broad sense, is framed as central to some of the most urgent challenges of our time. Studies depict communal arrangements to be a more sustainable way of living and, which is the focus in this article, a solution to the individualism and loneliness of late-modern societies.² The example of cohousing, meaning larger communal housing units in which residents often live in their own apartment, has been discussed as ‘an answer to the rise of hyper-individualism and the breakdown of community’ (Lietaert, 2010: 578; Nichols and Cooper, 2011; see Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014 for a critical reflection). An Italian study on the production of social capital within cohousing discusses this way of living as promoting ‘community and belonging, mutual support networks inside and outside the communities, a sense of safety exercised by a social control ... and a higher civic engagement’ (Ruiu, 2016: 410), whereas a Finnish study explores eco-communes as sites of resistance ‘against normalized individualization and the nuclear family’ (Eräranta et al., 2009: 347). Also studies on small-scale communal arrangements depict collective living to offer community. British research, for instance, claims that peer-shared households in the private rental sector represent an ‘institutionalization of friendship within a domestic setting’ (Heath, 2004: 163).

This article reflects on these findings by discussing a case that points towards ambivalence both in regard to how residents in shared housing define their cohabiting relations and in terms of how they reflect upon communal ethical matters. The sample, located in urban Stockholm, comprises three *cohousing units* in which residents live in their own apartments and share communal spaces, and eight *small-scale communes*, a private lodging arrangement in which dwellers share an apartment or villa. The study shows that these are fairly individualized entities built upon easy exits, personal choice and the maintenance of autonomy. The residents complement their way of living not primarily through collectivist ideals, but through a compromise between companionship and privacy (cf. Sandstedt and Westin, 2015).³ Communal housing provides an easily accessible sociability freed from what the informants describe as demanding and suffocating dependencies. In other words, the residents are keen to protect their independence and describe their homes as sites for developing personal autonomy together with others. Instead of constituting an alternative to individualism, as sometimes suggested in the research literature, the dwellings thus partly unfold as a reflection of the same ethos.

In order to explore this ambivalence, I will first discuss what I perceive to be a somewhat simplified dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, embedded both within sociological research on intimate relations and in the trope of communal housing as a form of resistance towards individualization. Rather, I propose that we theorize the arrangements in terms of an individualist form of collectivism, a cooperative ambition formed in accordance with notions of individuality and independence. Second, I will contextualize the sample by putting the informants’ accounts in dialogue with the notion of Swedish state individualism. It will be argued that the positive appraisal of autonomy within an explicitly collective living arrangement can be traced back to an institutionalized form of interpersonal independence grounded in the collectivist logic of the Swedish welfare state. In the empirical section, I explore how notions of autonomy and

community are turned and twisted by the residents, and how these articulations construct and reconstruct the meaning of communal living. To clarify, this is not primarily a study of the communal organization and everyday housing practices, but rather an exploration of how the dwellers perceive and make sense of residential sociability. The analysis engages on a discursive level and delves into the informants' ways of navigating through the multifaceted terrain of individualized collectivism in communal living.

Individualized Collectivism and the Swedish Theory of Love

This article suggests that communal living not only reflects urban housing trends, a rising eco-political awareness and the challenges of an ageing population, but that it also mirrors the various faces of individualization and shifts in the sphere of intimate relations. Its vantage point is the expanding range of relationships that evolve and matter to people, partly as a consequence of transforming family patterns (Berlant, 2000; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Törnqvist, 2018). Numerous studies have taken on the recent changes in western societies, inquiring into increasing divorce rates, the shift from life-long romantic partnership to numerous shorter ones and the growing impact of friendship relations (Illouz, 2012; Jamieson, 1998; Pahl and Spencer, 2004). One theoretical concept on this development is individualization. Mary Evans (2003), for instance, highlights a conflict between individualization and caring qualities and claims that love relations are under threat by an individualism that teaches us to cultivate a hedonist lifestyle (cf. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). In his book *Liquid Love*, Zygmunt Bauman (2003) interprets, somewhat similarly, the development as a state of short-term fluid affection following a consumption rationale. In intimate relationships, he claims, people are searching for quick connections and easy exits, organized in a similar fashion as business arrangements. Along these same lines, Bernadette Bawin-Legros (2004: 242, 250) argues that 'we are tourists of our own private land and [that] we have entered the world of pure individualism ... [F]usion in love ... harmonizes badly with aspirations to autonomy and self-development which are characteristic of our contemporary world.'

The ascription of communal housing as a radical alternative to individualism, offering solidarity, civic engagement and social capital, can be read along these critical lines. Rather than associating these living arrangements with (progressive) collectivism and separating them from (problematic) individualism, however, I suggest that we develop frameworks to help us address these as entwined processes in in which the 'late-modern subject experience[s] herself not despite but through the construction of community' (Tavory and Goodman, 2009: 264). As discussed by scholars such as Carol Smart (2007) and Sasha Roseneil (2010, cp. Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016), we are not necessarily automatized and detached but also embedded and connected in late-modern societies, and the relation between hedonism and care, as well as autonomy and love, is often a lot messier than dichotomous charts allow us to see.

Elaborating on the simultaneous constitution of individualism and collectivism, I will put the sample households in dialogue with what historian Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh (2006, 2010) call a Swedish theory of love. In contrast to Bauman's and Evans' ideas of mutual dependencies as a condition for close relationships to emerge, Berggren and Trägårdh claim Sweden to be a shelter for an ethos that praises egalitarian relations

and that fears that dependency bonds will corrupt feelings and hamper true love from emerging. This resonates with Giddens' (1992) theory of pure relations as attachments of choice that are actively (re)chosen as long as they match with individual desires and needs (for a critique, see Jamieson, 1999). In Sweden, however, the ideal of mutual autonomy is not just a marker of late-modernity, but historically embedded in the institutions of the welfare state. In contrast to the conventional image of Sweden as a society represented by strong social solidarity, Berggren and Trägårdh claim modern Sweden to be supported by an individualism not conflicting with, but rather springing from the existence of a potent state. State individualism is, according to them, based on a 'strong alliance between the state and the individual aiming at making each citizen as independent of his or her fellow citizens as possible' (2010: 16, for a discussion and critique see Jacobsson, 2011).⁴

In international comparison, the Scandinavian model stands out. According to the World Values Survey, Sweden scores highest both in regard to emancipatory self-expression and secular-rational values and is a country with a relatively high degree of social equality. Whereas the USA historically has eschewed the state in favour of bonds between market, individual and family, Germany and other European welfare regimes are grounded in the strong ties between state and family (cf. Björnberg and Bradshaw, 2006). The coexistence of individual freedom and a conformist social order makes Sweden, on the contrary, a 'hyper modern *Gesellschaft* of self-realizing individuals who believe that a strong state *and* stable social norms will keep their neighbours out of both their lives and their backyard' (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2010: 16, emphasis in original). Consequently, the logic behind policies and legislation in the areas of parental leave, taxation, union protection, children's rights and student loans aims to liberate citizens from subordinating dependencies. The state is there to unshackle and protect wives from their husbands, children from their parents and marginalized groups from charity, not to eviscerate these relations, but to make them more egalitarian and to assure that the individual is less vulnerable.

Connecting housing with 'the geography of welfare regimes and the geography of intergenerational household structure' (Albertini and Kohli, 2013: 830), it may come as no surprise that Sweden leads globally in one-person-households (Sandstedt, 1991). In Sweden as a whole, the percentage is 47%; in the capital area of Stockholm, 60% (Klinenberg, 2012). Somewhat paradoxically, Sweden and other Scandinavian countries are often also promoted as the ideological cradle of certain forms of communal living. During the early Swedish welfare housing policy, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, a social democratic politician couple and prominent debaters, pushed for centrally run cohousing units with the argument that it would liberate women from household duties and family bonds and make them available to the labour market (Vestbro and Horelli, 2012). The actual boom came five decades later, in the 1980s, when around 60 cohousing units were planned and built in Sweden (Jarvis, 2011: 565; Vestbro, 1992). The so-called Nordic cohousing model based on common work and the sharing of domestic labour was envisioned as promoting affordable living and gender equality. However, this way of living has always made up a small percentage of the overall household share (Sandstedt and Westin, 2015). Besides single living, the nuclear family remains a dominant form of living in state individualist Sweden. A Stockholm survey estimates a total of 3% living

collectively in the broad sense (Ekstam and Sandstedt, 2010: 44), whereas cohousing units comprise 0.05% of the national population (Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014: 21).⁵

Study Design

Situated simultaneously as the global leader in single-households and as the ideological flagship for cohousing arrangements, Sweden makes for an intriguing socio-geographic niche in the research on communal living. The selection process of the study was delimited to urban Stockholm, a region characterized not only by a large degree of single-households, but also by a variety of collective dwellings. In line with international research, a multitude of communal living styles is spreading in the area, of which the sample selection contains two types of arrangements – *cohousing units* and *small-scale communes*.

- *Collective housing units*, or simply *cohousing* (kollektivhus), are large-scale communities, often comprised within a residential block, where members cluster in private residences with their own kitchen, bathroom and door lock. One cohousing unit often comprises between 10 to 60 apartments and can involve one-person households, couples, families or peer-shared flats. The shared spaces and activities are often rather formalized. Joint dinner is frequently served between certain hours and activities such as arts groups are organized according to agreed-upon schedules. Duties tend to be divided between mandatory (e.g. cleaning and cooking) and voluntary (e.g. gardening and decoration). Communal matters, such as shared rules and working routines, are often decided by a housing board in which all residents have equal status (Ruiu, 2016; Sandstedt and Westin, 2015).
- *Small-scale communes* in the shape of private lodging arrangements (kollektivboende) normally comprise two to 10 cohabitants living together in an apartment or villa. In contrast to cohousing units, they do not require a particular architecture, such as a large-scale kitchen working-area. They also have a lower degree of formality with regard to administration and communal ethics. The residents are often younger than in cohousing units and usually stay for shorter periods. Small-scale communes also display a larger variety of household routines and value schemes. Some are run on an ideological ground (feminist, vegan), promoting decision making through collective boards, whereas others are formed around a minimum of shared values and household routines.

Somewhat similar to the approach foregrounded by Heath et al. (2017), including four different types of shared housing, this study is designed to include diversity. Cohousing units and small-scale communes have been selected in order to reflect various degrees of communal activities and cooperative ethics, as well as different types of value schemes and sociabilities. However, different from Heath et al.'s larger spectra, which includes also residents who share housing due to scarcity of accommodation, my sample contains, for the most part, voluntary sharers; communal residents with an outspoken desire for a collective lifestyle. The common denominators of the sample households are domestic multi-functionality (the coexistence of private and communal spaces), the

residents' participation in some level of shared household work and the existence of commune guidelines (Chiodelli and Baglione, 2014: 22–23).

The 28 informants were equally divided between the two forms of housing; 13 lived in cohousing units, 15 in small-scale communes. The cohousing sample was made up by two age-integrated units involving families with children (26 and 35 apartments respectively), while the third one was a senior-segregated unit for people in their second half of life living without children (43 apartments).⁶ The size of the eight small-scale communes varied between two to 12 cohabiters.

Similar to findings within other national contexts, the sample reflects communal housing to be an active lifestyle choice for the well-educated middle-classes and confirms an association with relative social advantage (Chitewere and Taylor, 2010; Heath, 2004; Williams, 2005). A majority of the residents have an undergraduate education or above, while some are still undertaking their studies. Among those who work or recently left the labour market, almost all are in professional-level and managerial occupations. Age-wise, the sample covers a broad span of residents between 23 to 86 years old, with the younger cluster primarily in small-scale communes and the older ones in the cohousing units (however, the oldest informant lives in a two-person apartment). Three dwellings were all-female; the rest were mixed. Out of 28 informants, only seven were male. This reflects a gender bias in the collective housing population at large (Choi and Paulsson, 2011: 138). Three of the informants were no longer living in a collective housing and were selected to reflect upon matters of exit and life beyond the commune. The cohousing units and small-scale communes were accessed through Facebook groups addressing people interested in collective living as well as through snowballing through informants, friends and colleagues.

Necessary to say, this is not a study of the dwellings at large; rather it reflects individual members' views on matters related to individualization and communalism. The study primarily builds on rather openly conducted interviews comprising the informants' housing histories. In order to explore their ways of relating to and making sense of sociability and intimacy in the contours of their present living situation, the broad topic of cohabitation encircled not only current residential attachments, but experiences from within a range of relations, such as parents, partners, siblings, friends and neighbours (cf. Spencer and Pahl, 2006). All interviews were recorded and lasted approximately one to three hours. Twenty-one of the total of 25 interviews, involved one informant. Three group interviews were conducted with two residents each, and one group interview was carried out with six cohabiters with the formal aim of discussing a theatre play that evolved from the study. Two informants were interviewed on several occasions.

In addition to formal interviews, I have spent an afternoon or evening in most informants' homes or housing units. They have walked me around, offering a physical hands-on description of how 'things work'. I have asked and been told about the use of commune spaces such as living rooms and bathrooms, how public and private areas are divided, the routines and pleasures of rotating cooking teams and the meaning of a bedroom door left open. I often had dinner or coffee with several dwellers, and on two occasions, I ended up in communal festivities, thereby getting to chat at length with residents who were not interviewed. The house visits lasted approximately three to six hours. In addition, I have, as part of the study, been a member of a cooking-team in one of the cohousing units (18 months).

Once every six weeks, I spent half-a-day together with two to five residents preparing dinner, and, in the evening, dining in the house. Taking part in everyday communal life myself allowed me to follow the ups and downs of individual residents, not only observing but also feeling with those who struggled with housing quarrels and those who celebrated their first grandchild. This has enriched the study with a more embodied understanding of the everyday sociability of collective living, its challenges and enjoyments.

Individuality and Interpersonal Independence

In a May 2018 newspaper article on the escalating overcrowding in urban Stockholm, the founder of a 52-person cohousing unit in a wealthy inner city area reflects on communal living. She is cautious in making a distinction between this up-to-date housing and ‘hippie communes’ of the 1970s. ‘They [the hippies] wished to be part of a group because they lacked a personal identity. We are all individualists, but chose to be part of a group because it offers more than just self-realization; it provides a sense of belonging’, she claims.⁷ On the whole, this way of reasoning, although deliberately provocative in the newspaper article, resonates with how the informants in my study perceive their living situation. A common characteristic is their blending of both a high appraisal of individuality and a search for a collective lifestyle. When asking about the benefits compared to living with a partner or in a traditional family, many state communal living to be a more flexible and open form of togetherness. Regardless of age and prior housing experiences, most of them locate this way of living as somewhere in between intimate family life and anonymous lodging.

Seventy-year-old Maj, for instance, a former administrative manager in the cultural sector, moved into a cohousing unit five years ago after having spent her adult life in a nuclear family. In contrast to her former life, she can now choose when and how she wishes to be available to others, she tells, and vividly praises her new life for providing a private sphere within a lively community. ‘I need my private sphere, but if I feel like having company I just walk downstairs, and then I walk back up when I feel like it. This is an incredibly good model’, she claims. Also, Adam, a 32-year-old engineer with experience from many communal housing arrangements, now lives with three adults and a baby in a small-scale commune and defines this way of living by separating it from family life:

We are not family. We don’t celebrate Christmas; it’s not taken for granted that we will celebrate midsummer together. We have quite separate lives although we can do things together. But it’s not expected, not like in a family where you’re expected to be there at certain times. It has been that way in all the places where I lived. ... This laid-back company without demands, I think it’s pretty nice to have it that way.

Like Adam and Maj, most informants appreciate the interpersonal independency. Communal housing is acknowledged not only for offering a way out of isolation and loneliness, but more concretely for constructing a belonging structure and loyalty based on casual hangout and moments of shared confidentiality, without heavy dependencies. In comparison to what is described as controlling parents, jealous husbands or symbiotic friendship bonds, many residents positively view the right to individualized spaces,

including fewer demands and looser connections, within a commune setting. A home is preferably a place where one is not under pressure, as one can be in the workplace, some informants argue, but rather a place where one can *choose* when to be available. Accordingly, they wish for their shared housing not to intervene too closely with other aspects of life. Rather than perceiving it as a prioritized intimacy, they view it as one of many relational spaces and equate their co-residential bonds with bonds they have at work, in close friendships and in romantic relations outside the home.

In accordance with the respondents in Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) study on the centring of friendship in non-normative intimate cultures, differentiation is experienced as a safety measure believed to help the residents avoid becoming entangled in one relation. Malin, a 30-year-old teaching assistant, for instance, has lived both with partners and in several small-scale communes with varying degrees of communal ethics and speaks of the emotional vulnerability that emerges in symbiotic relations. For her, love-based living has involved a level of intimacy that has forced her to give up parts of her personality. In accordance with the Swedish theory of love, Malin speaks rather negatively about domestic dependencies as 'contracts', 'signed in the name of love' that 'exclude a certain honesty that you have with friends'. Residing in a commune, in contrast, has been a way of actively decentring the impact of (hetero)sexual relationships in her life. Where she lives now, in an apartment shared with two women, they are, she states, 'rather free from each other, loosely connected ... we don't have that much to agree on collectively, and we have hardly had any conflicts'.

Echoing Alva and Gunnar Myrdal as well as the findings of other studies, the women in my sample, both those living in cohousing units and in small-scale communes, in particular recount collective housing as a more liberating and gender equal way of sharing everyday life with others (Eräranta et al., 2009; Natalier, 2002). In fact, almost all female informants speak affirmatively of the collective lifestyle as offering social relations without requiring an overabundance of emotional labour. Put in dialogue with the Swedish theory of love, shared housing appears to offer a way out of responsibilities and loyalties that traditional family life has often put on women. Like Maj, who compares her flexible living with the heavy duties of her former family life that centred on her as a mother and wife, Clara, a 23-year-old student and founder of a feminist peer-shared villa, defines her way of living by contrasting it to 'demanding' friendship relations. To her, collective living is a simple everyday 'peacefulness', a flexible form of sociability, far from emotionally challenging bonds.

On a similar note, 65-year-old Dagny, a civil servant who lives in a cohousing unit, speaks warmly yet somewhat distantly of her cohabiters; not as family, but as neighbours. Like Clara, she appreciates the relational structure and calls it 'an everyday togetherness without strong emotional investments'. This 'corset for the soul', as she puts it, 'liberates' her from the emotional labour required of close attachments, while providing her with a belonging structure:

You note each other's ups and downs, but you don't have to engage with them. If you think of your children or your husband, you have an emotional investment that you must take care of and relate to. In this house you can talk about the weather without having someone saying – let's talk about our relationship and so, well ... you're let off that hook!

In line with Dagny, almost all residents frame integrity and borders – material and emotional – in strikingly positive terms. Far from images of boundless and unrestrained intimacy, typical in popular representations of 1970s collective living arrangements, demarcation is central in the sample. One example is the regulation of personal spaces. The fact that none of the small-scale communes had locks on the bedroom doors indicates that residents experience their home as a safe place and their housemates as confident others. Boundary making is not about guarding personal belongings but rather, as Malin suggests, about protecting the emotional self, a value that has to be secured in more subtle ways. In most homes, a closed door indicates a wish to be left alone, whereas an open door is an invitation. While discussing this with Ida, a 32-year-old communicator in the cultural sector who has been living in small-scale communes for 12 years, she repeatedly returns to the importance of integrity. ‘Showing a good deal of integrity’, keeping personal borders and ‘knowing one’s limits’ are, according to her, necessary ingredients in order to create well-functioning collective homes.

Families of Choice and Easy Exits

Choice is at the heart of both the Swedish theory of love and the majority of sample dwellings in this study. From the residents’ accounts, autonomy is perceived as a liberty, not to dwell alone, but rather to decide on *how*, *when* and *with whom* to dwell. Different from residential family relations into which one is born, as one resident puts it, or households based on romantic love, described by another dweller as attachments that ‘just happen and suddenly you wake up with another person’, collective living is depicted as a deliberate and active choice. Economic constraint and housing shortage are brought up as additional factors, but primarily the residents in this study are motivated by its particular form of sociability. Framing communal housing as a way of taking control over one’s life, a decision based on desires and needs strong enough to evoke a break with old habits and relations, generates, at least for some of the informants, a deep sense of meaning. Seventy-six-year-old Bodil, for instance, who was part of forming one of the cohousing units in the sample, speaks animatedly of these processes as a true dividing point: ‘For the first time I took an active stand on how I wished to live ... it was amazing.’

In the residents’ accounts, however, choice is not only aligned with self-realizing individuality. Some dwellers speak affirmatively of their living arrangement as a way of creating freedom not only for themselves but also for family and relatives. In an analogy with the Swedish theory of love, six cohousers in a group interview at the senior cohousing unit recounted how their lifestyle unshackles their children from caring responsibility and feelings of guilt and thus creates opportunity for more equal intergenerational attachments. ‘They know they don’t have to take care of their mum because she lives well; that’s really important to them ... and to me’, said 74-year-old Kerstin, a retired teacher. Stefan, a 67-year-old photographer, continues and talks about the ‘immense problem of lonely old people’ and how collective housing may solve this. He refers to his wife’s mother who refuses to accept care service from the municipality and how this places a heavy workload on her children. This, he says, ‘is a very selfish thing’. On the contrary, he continues, ‘it is very non-selfish to live here because sometime the day will come when you need help and here you get something ... you get food at least’. The provision

not only of basic necessities such as food, as Stefan somewhat humorously puts it, but rather the offering of a social shelter, is perceived as retaining mutual autonomy and more honest and authentic relations with relatives. The caring function of the housing unit also offers a choice for non-members to decide how much and on what terms they wish to engage with their ageing parents. That way, the family of choice also protects blood-based family relations from developing into dependencies.

Echoing Bodil's account, some of the younger residents speak of their way of living as an active and politicized choice. For Clara, family is a matter of choice, not blood. Labelling her six cohabitants as 'family' is an active stand in order to create a language for a new type of kinship marked by egalitarian ideals. In order for social solidarity to emerge and last, however, she has realized that labelling is but one way. Additionally, she has actively introduced shared rituals such as weekly grocery shopping and communal holidays. At times, this provides her with a 'thrilling family feel'. Nevertheless, her living situation often makes her feel 'somewhat depressed', not the least when people move out of the villa. 'We say to each other that those who move will come back and hang out with us because we have become a family, but that actually doesn't happen', she recounts rather sadly. Clara is not alone in experiencing the disappearance of former housemates. Although residents often spoke rather positively about the flexibility of easy endings, there were also stories, similar to Clara, of abrupt endings, of residents who moved out overnight taking all their stuff to never come back, 'like breaking up over a text-message'. That way, the Stockholm sample differs from studies showing how relations endure beyond a shared living arrangement (Heath, 2004: 174). It may be that the strong individualist ethos spills over and affects how dwellers also exit their housing relations.

Flexibility relates to organizational aspects of communal living. In material terms, the sample households are somewhat loosely held together. Although one of them has a joint account for buying food, none of them share finances in a deeper sense, rendering each individual accountable in times of unemployment or ill health. Additionally, the shared spaces, like living rooms and kitchens, are often rather casually designed, without large economic, laborious or emotional investments, with the exception of the senior cohousing unit that was deliberately built and designed to suit the dwellers' needs and desires. None of the small-scale communes are owned or rented on a collective basis; instead, one person is the formal tenant or owner and often sets the economic terms for the others. The cohousing units are managed on an individual basis. In one of them, the dwellers own their apartments and pay an additional standard fee to the housing society, while the others are owned by a housing company to which each dweller pays rent. This means that the residents often have fairly formal and open contracts, which, at least in the small-scale communes, enables rapid processes of moving in and out. Those who have lived in several communes explain that when things do not go well, when there are quarrels instead of happiness, many dwellers are fairly quick to break up and find a new 'house-family'.

The stories of fragile bonds and easy exits depict collective living to be a fairly fluid form of belonging. However, parallel to accounts of autonomy, the interviews reveal that most residents put a lot of faith and care into their housing relations. Along the recognized values of 'flexible living', most of them stress their present commune to be a shelter of comfort and amicability. In fact, for some residents, the easy exits are not a

threat to their feelings for the commune as an important social structure in their lives. On the contrary, they argue that the flux and openness make shared housing a safe shelter with less tolerance for abuse of power and destructive relationships. Resonating with the Swedish theory of love, the high level of emotional and economic independency is supposed to help maintain attachments freed from suppressive dependencies.

Malin, for instance, claims that 'the social fabric' of collective living shapes positive attachments based on mutual feelings and low-key affection. 'This will go on as long as we like each other', she says. When comparing her recent housing situation with experiences of living with partners, she concludes that the 'dependencies' of those relations allowed both her and them to display their 'worst sides', making everyday life a potential battlefield, whereas the easy exits of communal living push people to be better versions of themselves. The fact that a move is just one choice away creates a positive liberty that pulls the residents together by free will, she claims. Malin describes her recent home as a 'foundational pillar' in her life. Different from parents and partners, the housemates watch each other at a distance, committed to helping each other out when there is need for support, but never in an intimidating or controlling way, she states. After a moment of silent thoughtfulness, Malin adds that her present co-residents may never become her 'best friends' but they are a 'great love' for her.

Conclusion

There are obvious differences between the two types of communal dwellings in this study, particularly with regard to the ways they practically handle the everyday challenges of shared housing. The cohousing units have firmer and more formalized boundaries between private and shared spaces than do the small-scale communes, making it easier to secure privacy. The cohousing units also often have more joint routines such as mandatory participation in cooking teams, whereas the small-scale communes are more flexible regarding the members' participation in chores and joint activities. Yet, when it comes to the residents' *views* on their communal housing, such as the reason for choosing this form of living and its presumed advantages, the resemblances are striking. The overall results show communal housing to be marked by an individualized form of collectivism. Regardless of size or organizational features, and across varying shared routines and levels of communal ethics, residents from their 20s to their 70s positively acknowledge the low-key and fairly autonomous form of belonging that communal housing offers.

Starting this research, my expectation was to find something quite different. I primarily selected informants who lived collectively due to a lifestyle choice, not as a result of a scarce budget, and assumed the domestic spaces to be closely connected residences. To my surprise, the interviews showed that their common ground was rather a negation of intimacy. In contrast to work that discusses shared households in terms of institutionalized friendship, most dwellers in my study did not perceive their housemates as closely connected peers. In fact, they did not choose to live collectively for friendship reasons; quite the opposite, they appreciated the company of co-residents because they were left alone. However, the households offer, not only independent living, but rather a connected way of living alone together, providing not only privacy but also continuity and support. Clara, Dagny, Adam and the other residents in this study live rather

individualized lives, while, at the same time, being connected and embedded. The informants thereby interestingly circumvent a conflict-line in sociological debate containing, on the one hand, an overly pessimistic analysis of individualism reducing human relations to liquid transactions, and on the other hand, an optimistic tribute to the escape of individualization. According to the informants, individuality and solidarity are not a zero-sum game but rather a complex interplay.

Contextualizing the individualized collectivism of communal housing within the historic contours of Swedish state individualism, the informants' ways of reasoning are not all that surprising. According to Berggren and Trägårdh (2010: 14–15; see also 2006), the Swedish welfare state has its origins not primarily in socialist doctrines or Marxist ideology, but in the 19th century's weak feudalism and relatively robust peasant autonomy. Relating this to contemporary Sweden, we may suggest that an individualized ethos has outdated the welfare state itself (cf. Jacobsson, 2011). Many of its traditional institutions have undergone privatization to the point that commentators speak of a dismantled welfare state, whereas the ethos, in the shape of an independent way of relating to others and an aspiration for autonomous attachments, appears to live on, at least among somewhat privileged groups such as the communal dwellers in this study.

In order to explore communal housing in terms of 'a belonging structure made up of independent individuals' (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2006: 364), we need to consider not only the historic context of the Swedish welfare state, but also the dwellings themselves. Regardless of housing routines and degree of communal ethic, the households in this study provide a belonging structure that seems able to unshackle residents from intimate dependencies, both with co-residents as well as friends and relatives outside the house. Returning to Dagny's account of her cohousing unit as 'a corset for the soul', we find an analogy to the logic of state individualism in the shape of an everyday structure and accountability, somewhat similar to Giddens' (1990: 92) notion of ontological security as a confidence 'in the constancy of [the] social and material environment'. In Dagny's words, communal living allows her to relate rather distantly to her co-residents; it 'liberates' her from emotional labour by providing a sense of belonging and 'an everyday togetherness without strong emotional investments'. Knowing that her co-residents are there, just a bedroom wall away, offers a sense of comfort even when the doors are closed.

In international comparison, Sweden and Scandinavia are characterized not only by a high degree of independence but also of relative economic equality. In contrast to southern Europe, where parents offer co-residence as a way to support their adult children (Albertini and Kohli, 2013), and in contrast to the UK where young people cluster in various forms of shared housing arrangements, partly as a consequence of economic hardship and marketized housing politics (Heath et al., 2017), large groups of both young and old people in Sweden have sought to 'go solo', and have, at least up until now, also been fortunate to afford their own living (Klinenberg, 2012). Rising scarcity and escalating housing prices, together with a growing interest in communal living may, however, point towards a shift with potentially larger numbers of people in both voluntary and non-voluntary shared housing. Correspondingly, the trend in other western countries to cherish individuality and autonomy may come to show wider resonance with the Swedish case. The informants' way of reasoning illustrates how ideals bound in both collectivism and individualism are (re)invented and brought into play as a response to particular

social contexts and life-situations, relevant possibly also in other highly individualized national contexts. Recent British research on shared housing across the life course, for instance, shows how residents negotiate between privacy and sharing in ways that parallel the dwellers in my study (Heath et al., 2017; cf. Kenyon and Heath, 2001).

To sum up, voluntary collective living is a creative compromise and response, not only to a Swedish paradox but presumably to a more widespread tension between individualized societies and people's search for community. In fact, the individualized collectivism discussed in this article illustrates potential prospects of forthcoming collectivist generations, not only in Stockholm, but also presumably throughout various parts of the urban western world. In addition, the case of communal living and the notion of individualized collectivism can be used as a prism for thinking of other emerging forms of community free from dependence, not only in the area of housing but likewise in civil society and the labour market. The title of this article then can be read, not as a statement that people are alone in communal housing, but rather as an assertion to explore the promising potential of how to be socially connected and embedded in individualized times.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my colleagues within the project 'Intimate Sociality: Practice and Identity in Collective Housing, Human-Animal Relations and Couple Dancing', and to the anonymous reviewers. A special acknowledgement to Daniel Gustafsson and Mikaela Sundberg for constructive comments. Many thanks also to the generous participants in the study.

Funding

This research was funded by the Swedish Research Council (2014-26383-112162-17).

Notes

1. Throughout the article, communal housing, also labelled communal, shared or collective living, will be used as an umbrella term to capture two types of arrangements: *cohousing units* and *small-scale communes*.
2. In regard to environmental challenges, studies depict communal arrangements to be a more sustainable way of living, outlined as part of the economic de-growth movement (Chatterton, 2013; Chitewere and Taylor, 2010) and as a time and space-saver that contributes to city planning through alternative infrastructure (Jarvis, 2011; Vestbro, 1992, 1997).
3. In their study of senior cohousing in Sweden, Sandstedt and Westin discuss communal housing as a phenomenon that reaches beyond *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Rather than being either-or, they refer to the concept of 'the bund' to discuss a sociality that 'both promotes and denies individuality', that 'is an intentional act of joining together with strangers that is the basis of their common feeling and mutual solidarity' (Hetherington, 1994: 13, in Sandstedt and Westin, 2015: 147).
4. The theory has been criticized for not taking into account that the welfare state does not primarily liberate, but rather shapes trust-based relations between citizens (Jacobsson, 2011). The theory has also been questioned for not adequately recognizing the differing effects on various social groups (Jacobsson and Sandstedt, 2011).
5. In Denmark, often pointed out as the first and most advanced country in respect to cohousing, 1% of the population lives this way (Krokfors, 2012: 311). Nevertheless, interest

- organizations and city planners foresee rising numbers both in Denmark and Sweden based on an increasingly selective and expensive housing market and lifestyle changes involving growing concern to explore more sustainable ways of living (Klinenberg, 2012; Krokfors, 2012; Sandstedt and Westin, 2015).
6. As Heath et al. (2017) discuss, there is a lack of sociological studies exploring older people's everyday lives, particularly in shared housing. For such reasons, it was important to make the sample reflect an age-diversity.
 7. 52 vuxna samsas i ett kollektiv på Östermalm, *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 May 2018.

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Date submitted September 2018

Date accepted January 2019