



# Intimate strangers: theorizing bodily knowledge in shared housing

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## Abstract

What does it mean to know and relate to others in a domestic context characterized by physical, but not necessarily emotional, proximity? This article investigates the role of the body in converting strangers into intimate others within the setting of shared housing. Addressing phenomenological work on situated bodies as sites of perception in dialogue with sociological theories of embodiment and attunement, the article explores tacit everyday knowledge and its implications for the (subjective) construction of intimacy. Combining multisited observations and interviews, the study explores the intimate significance of privileged forms of knowing (of) others—lived on and by the body—and how these, at times, become habits of also caring for others. Although living under the same roof is not enough for there to be intimacy, the present study shows that shared housing evokes transgression of personal borders that pushes the limits between intimate and distant others in ways that expand our notion of what it means to *know* someone.

**Keywords** Intimacy · Body · Privileged knowledge · Shared housing · Ethnography

## Introduction

As Tony Chapman puts it, people tend to maintain ‘measures of privacy’ in their homes so that they ‘can live out wonderful or terrible lives behind closed doors’ (2001, p. 145). Shared housing, in which people have access both to communal spaces for social interaction and to secluded private areas,<sup>1</sup> offers an intriguing

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, shared housing is used as an umbrella term to capture two types of arrangements: *cohousing units* and *small-scale communes*. Due to housing scarcity, rising rental costs, and lifestyle changes, shared housing arrangements is a growing trend, particularly among young people in urban areas (Eggebeen 2005; Heath et al. 2017).

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lens for reflecting on the presumed private nature of domestic spheres and evokes questions of what privacy and intimacy imply in the context of homes inhabited by people who are neither family nor friends. Quoting Georg Simmel, in his seminal essay ‘The Stranger’, the distant–intimate bonds between co-dwellers bring the ‘union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship’ to new light and makes a case out of showing that ‘one who is close by is remote [and] that one who is remote is near’ (1908/1971, p. 143). However, the stranger, in the Simmelian context, is a social category mostly employed by scholars who study relational nuances of public spaces, thus implying a context quite the opposite of the present study. Subsequently, research on intimacy among strangers often refers to public or digital spaces, as in studies of anonymous sex among gay men (Warner 1999, Warner 2002, see also Hakim 2019) or in research on intimacy in semi-anonymous contexts, such as public dancehalls (Törnqvist 2013, 2018). The case of shared housing brings the distant-yet-intimate balancing act encapsulated in the stranger-figure to the home.

Addressing the complexity of strangers living in close proximity, this article reflects the growing trend of shared housing (Eggebeen 2005; Heath et al. 2017), not only as an indicator of urban housing scarcity, but also as a reflection of the transformation of people’s personal lives (see Giddens 1992; Smart 2007). Foregrounding the everyday, what Agnes Heller refers to as the most essential ontological dimension—a ‘life-experience on which our intersubjective constitution of the world rests’ (1990, p. 43)—the case of shared housing addresses complex feelings of both detachment and connectedness, and a set of relations that are at the same time close and distant (see also Morgan 2009, on acquaintances). Based on an empirical study of cohousing units and small-scale communes in Stockholm, the article puts forward the argument that shared housing is not necessarily less intimate than kinship-based households, rather it provides another perspective on what is understood by intimacy.

As argued elsewhere, striving for autonomy and ‘measures of privacy’ (Chapman 2001, p. 145) in shared housing appears to be a global trend (Heath et al. 2017; Markiewicz 2020; Sandstedt and Westin 2015). For institutional reasons, Sweden, however, the empirical context of the present study, represents a more extreme case of this development. Connected to the welfare state contract and what historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh (2006, 2010) have labelled Swedish ‘state-individualism’, cohabiting in the Swedish context could be framed as a form of ‘individualized collectivism’—displaying a communal housing structure that is valued for offering interpersonal relations with a high degree of independence (Törnqvist 2019). However, while individualized and independent, the residents in the present study also display connectedness. Even those who state that they do not truly know their fellow cohabitants, or that they do not aspire to ‘make new friends’, simultaneously express a deep sense of knowing their housemates, at times also of caring for them. While striving for privacy, they orient themselves and relate to each other in ways that convey a sense of closeness. This article pushes the argument that also in loosely connected homes, in which the level of residential turnover is high and in which dwellers relate rather distantly to each other, there is entanglement with intimate implications.



Different from studies on cohabitation that involves kinship (Gabb 2008), the types of housing in focus in the present study offer an opportunity to tackle the experience of bodily forms of knowing (of) others without there necessarily being love or family related dependencies. It will be argued that a key to the evolvement of a sense of intimacy is the level of bodily disclosure and attunement. Even co-residents reluctant to say they know their housemates well are literally thrown into each other's' lives. Shared housing brings about proximity in how fellow residents move about and orient themselves as well as to how they cross each other's daily paths, fall into each other's routes and routines, touch and avoid touch. When it comes to confidential information, like style of underwear or alcohol abuse, co-dwellers are sometimes better informed than old friends or family—not primarily as a result of conscious confiding, but because of an everyday leakage of personal information. Shared living, thus, imposes a bodily entanglement that produces a type of knowledge that makes for a triggering space in between the distant and the familial.

In the present study, the intimate significance of disclosure is approached, not so much through the lens of the verbally mediated, but from the perspective of the lived body. Within the framework of a domestic site positioned in between the private and the public, the intimate stranger is theorized as a sociality emerging through the work of bodies in close proximity. The argument connects the concept of intimacy with theories of knowledge of the body through an empirical analysis of disclosure and attunement. As will be shown, knowing (of) others in the context of shared housing partly emanates from voluntary and involuntary exposure, in the shape of bodily leakages unreflexively incorporated through sensory perception. This entails the sounds, visual signals and olfactory markers of others, that seamlessly, and often without active interference, float across a shared domestic space. Addressing phenomenological work on situated bodies as sites of relational perception in dialogue with sociological theories of embodiment and attunement, the article revolves around the tacit everyday knowledge and its implications for the (subjective) construction of intimacy. In other words, this essay addresses the role of the socially situated sensory body in converting strangers into intimate others.

## **Bodily intimacy in shared housing**

In individualized societies, intimacy clearly is not restricted to certain relations or domains, but is lived and experienced in shifting spaces and in a multitude of serial or parallel configurations consisting of partners, family, friends, and more distantly related others (see the work of Bauman 2003; Davies and Heaphy 2011; Henriks-son 2014; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Roseneil and Ketokivi 2016). Grounded in this vast body of research, the present study addresses intimacy, not as a set of pre-defined relations, but as a relational quality constituted by several dimensions, such as trust, practical caring and sharing as well as some form of love (Jamiesson 1998, pp. 7–10; Mjöberg 2009; Morgan 2011). Of particular interest are aspects related to what Lynn Jamiesson calls 'privileged knowledge'—a form of knowing (of) others that entails intimate qualities due to its exclusive nature and its encompassing of information 'which nobody else has' (Jamiesson 1998, p. 8). As implied



by everyday language, saying one *knows* someone is another way of declaring that there is relationship. Regardless of whether such knowledge concerns a person's life history as conveyed through long-term relationship or intimate secrets revealed by a stranger on a train, intimacy implies privileged forms of knowing.

Addressing intimacy in terms of knowledge is at the core also of recent scholarly debates and popular culture. These accounts, however, often focus on verbal and discursive aspects. Seminal sociological work targets, for instance, the mediation of personal relations through self-help books, verbose chatting and diary-writing and shows how people navigate their close relations through discursive narratives (Swidler 2001; Illouz 2012). Scholarly attention has been brought to the failure of not considering bodies within this literature (see Jamiesson 1998; Morgan 2011, p. 90). Interactionist researchers, for instance, argue that belonging as well as transformation of the self are not necessarily products of the 'cognitive step of adopting a new belief', but that they 'can begin with an emotional process anchored in interactions with others' (Pagis 2015, p. 42; see also Collins 2004, p. 224). Instead of amplifying a body-discourse-division, however, I wish to bridge these strands by addressing bodily forms of knowing.

With the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body is not just another 'object of the world but [...] our means of communication with it' (1945/2014, p. 95; 1968, p. 137). Throughout the present article, this socio-existential condition is explored in relation to an intimate epistemology, a bodily way of knowing (of) and relating to others. This suggests that relation-shaping processes involve a form of 'knowing [that] has bodily roots' (Parviainen 2002, p. 12) and that the body is relational in its orientation, not necessarily deliberately so in the form of an active outreach, but through its sensory perceptual predicament (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2014). While the senses 'provide the receiving equipment', assisting individuals in accessing information, our bodily forms of being implies that we also are exposed to others, thus constituting 'a source of embodied information' (Goffman 1963, p. 14). This means that 'each giver is himself a receiver, and each receiver is a giver' (ibid, p. 14). Put differently, the body is both a representational texture that discloses information, a site of meaning for others to reveal, and a perceptual subjectivity that encloses and shapes our sense-making of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2014, Merleau-Ponty 1968; see also Turner 2006, p. 223).

The present article targets bodily forms of knowing (of) others from the outlook of the everyday. Like other homes, the sample households are relational spaces in which the receiver-provider duality produces 'privileged knowledge [...] which nobody else has' (Jamiesson 1998, p. 8). Not necessarily due to reflexive bonding practices, but because residents in shared housing, just like members of traditional families, develop an intimate awareness of each other based on daily entanglement. As in other homes, co-dwellers relate to, make sense of and act upon the co-presence of others through intuitive perception. Knowing (of) each other entails such things as registering co-dwellers' snoring sounds or less disturbing—yet bodily—aspects, such as early morning routines recognized through visual, auditory and olfactory markers. The residents' ways of moving in these physical environments depend on, and simultaneously generate, an embodied sense of others that involves tacit knowledge and habituated forms of action (Bourdieu 2000, p. 177; Winchester



2016, p. 587). This embodied knowledge, a practical consciousness, is, for instance, employed when housemates navigate shared spaces without the use of verbally transmitted rules or spoken language.

Like other homes, shared dwellings signify ‘the objectification of [a] relationship’ (Lévi-Strauss 1984, p. 195). While often not emanating from existing relations, like the marriage implied by Claude Lévi-Strauss, also shared domestic spaces lived by strangers incarnate relationship. As Elisabeth Grosz puts it, homes, and we may add even homes shared by distantly related dwellers, ‘provide the order and organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies. ... [I]t is an active force in constituting bodies, and always leaves its traces on the subject’s corporeality’ (1995, pp. 104, 110). From a phenomenological perspective, the bodily meaning of a home thus implies that ‘[it] ... only remains around me as my familiar domain if I still hold “in my hands” or “in my legs” its principal distances and directions, and only if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from the body’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2014, pp. 131–132). In the context of shared housing, these ‘intentional threads’ form connections between bodies and construct homes in terms of ‘distances and directions’—to walls, furniture and other residents—that are lived on and by the body. This means that the ways in which shared homes are organized, also affect and are affected by the ‘bodily density’—the ‘proximity of other embodied selves and the meanings attached to these different clusterings’ (Morgan 2011, p. 97; see also Heath et al. 2017, p. 24). The size of a home, the division of communal and private areas, whether there are locks on bedroom doors and how much noise the walls let through, affect at what distance and at what hours, with whom and through what senses housemates get to know (of) each other. More concretely, this implies that the size and design also of shared homes affect how residents relate and interact and, consequently, how socio-material conditions shape the (subjective) construction of intimacy (Massey 1994, p. 120; Miller 2001; Ahmed 2006).

Addressing the topic of bodily intimacy from the outlook of a domestic site not only evokes questions of the role of embodiment in generating privileged knowledge, but also points to the significance of silent bodily attunement. Turning to research in which knowledge of the body connects with intimacy through attunement, Jacqui Gabb, for instance, stresses the role of the body in ‘making families’, and claims that ‘[f]amily bodies are familiar to one another; they grow up together, boundaries shift as children mature, but physical and affective space remains shared’ (2008, p. 87; see also David Morgan’s work on family practices 2011 and Törnqvist 2020). Also empirical studies on ‘new’ families stress the importance of bodily attuning. For instance, Stine Tankred Luckow (2020) explores how foster care parents do parenthood and argues that bodily touch and care is crucial for an intimate sense of belonging to emerge. In research on other forms of close domestic relations, such as the bonds between humans and pets, attunement is related to homely routines. Tora Holmberg, for instance, draws on Henri Lefebvre’s rhythm analysis and addresses the thick co-presence of dogs and ‘their people’ to argue that those who walk, eat and sleep together adjust hunger and sleeping patterns in response to each other. Beyond the level of discourse and reflection, the ‘attunement to other bodies [...] provides new manners of becoming together, as well as new identities’ (2019, p. 27).



While there is attunement also in shared housing, the present study of somewhat distant dwellers requires quite another approach to the synchronizing of bodies. Residents in shared housing often do not engage in the types of body-to-body dependencies that are characteristic for kinship bonds or domestic human–animal relations. In terms of a bodily interaction style co-residents rarely relate through bodily touch and seldom care for each other in bodily ways (feeding or sleeping together). While the corporal dimension differs, not only from parental life but also from kinetic cultures like tango dancing (Olszewski 2008), or the BDSM scene (Newmahr 2011), by seemingly reflecting less of a carnal dimension, the present study shows that the body is central in the emergence of intimate forms of knowing (of) others, also in domestic spheres shared by distant dwellers.

## Domestic ethnography

This study combines observations and interviews in two types of shared households: cohousing units and small-scale communes. The often casually run small-scale communes appear, at first, to be better suited to a study on bodily intimacy. These are shared apartments and villas, in which most spaces, besides bedrooms (or at least beds), are shared, and in which housemates live through all sorts of emotions separated by just a thin wall. Here residents are forced to encounter each other while having breakfast or lining up for the bathroom. However, also cohousing units, in which dwellers reside in their own apartments and share only communal areas, like a garden and the communal kitchen, invoke a thick co-presence. These households often entail more joint activities, such as mandatory communal dinners and decision-making board meetings, and they tend to invite residents to play a more active role in the social life of the house(hold) (Sandstedt and Westin 2015; Ruiu 2016).

The present study includes two age-integrated cohousing units containing families with children (twenty-six and thirty-five apartments, respectively), one senior-segregated unit for people in their second half of life living without children (forty-three apartments), and eight small-scale communes (ranging from two to twelve inhabitants). Regardless of their inherent differences, defining features of all units are domestic multi-functionality (the coexistence of private and communal spaces), participation in some level of household work, and the existence of commune guidelines (Chiodelli and Baglione 2014, pp. 22–23). All of these more or less intentional communities are situated in the Stockholm region, a socio-geographic area characterized by a sixty percent level of single households (Klinenberg 2012) and by an early introduction of cohousing projects (Vestbro and Horelli 2012). The sample was primarily accessed through cohousing sites on social media and a snowball sampling technique.

To capture shared everyday life and the residents' ways of making sense of their domestic relations, the study combines multisited observations and interviews. In line with Daniel Miller's work on habitational material culture, the study is designed to make for a set of intrusive, yet empathetic, 'ethnographic encounters [...] behind closed doors' (2001, p. 1). To observe everyday behaviour, without invading the informants' space (Chapman 2001, p. 139), I was myself a member of a cooking



team. One day, every six weeks, I prepared dinner with two to five residents in one of the larger cohousing units and, in the evening, dined in the house. This ‘micro-ethnography’ (Walcott 1990) lasted for over a year and aimed at targeting the cohousing unit from its heart: the kitchen. Being a part-time member of the team not only provided insights into the art of cooking well together, but also facilitated access to the residents, to household routines and to the actual places where people meet, talk, hug and avoid hugs. Most importantly, these multi-sensorial sessions, involving not only cooking and stress tolerance, but also subtle, yet intimate, details like the smell of the residents’ perfumes, made for a generous introduction to the knowing and relating of shared housing. My presence as a researcher was positively received by the dwellers, to the point that I, at times, had to remind them about the formal aim of my visits. Conversations and interviews with individual residents were moments when my role as a researcher, and the dwellers rights as research participants, were further clarified and discussed.

I also spent a day (or evening) in most of the eleven sample homes and was often shown around in the style of an ethnographic ‘go-along’ (Kusenbach 2003). The visits aimed at grasping housing aspects, such as the demarcation lines between private and shared areas and routines around household chores. The visits, between three and six hours in duration, often involved dinner or coffee with some or all of the residents, and offered occasions to observe and reflect, at times together with the dwellers, on their ways of coping with and orienting themselves through everyday situations, such as a crowded kitchen at dinnertime.

While the analytical focus of this article is on bodies in action, rather than discursive narrative, I approach intimacy from the perspective of the dwellers and their life-world (Smith et al. 2009). Rather than me, the researcher, classifying certain acts or situations as intimate (or not), the focus is on the subjective construction of intimacy. Interviews and informal chats are thus important tools for accessing the meaning and significance that domestic practices and situations provide for the dwellers. The study builds on openly conducted interviews with twenty-eight residents. The recorded conversations, one to three hours in duration, covered not only the dwellers’ current residential situation, but also experiences from living with parents and partners and, more generally, their view on relations and intimacy (cp. Spencer and Pahl 2006). Out of twenty-five interviews, twenty-one involved one informant, whereas three were conducted with two fellow residents. A group interview with six dwellers was conducted, in which the formal aim was to discuss a stage play that evolved from the study. Two informants were interviewed on multiple occasions.

The dwellers’ socioeconomic backgrounds confirm the results from other studies. Self-selected shared living primarily attracts an academically educated and politically engaged (environmentalists, feminists, vegans) white middle-class (Chitewere and Taylor 2010; Heath 2004; Williams 2005). Besides a group of university students, most residents in the study have an undergraduate education or higher and professional-level and managerial occupations. The dwellers are between twenty-three and eighty-six years of age, with a younger cluster in the small-scale communes and an older population in the cohousing units. Except for three all-female dwellings, the households were gender mixed. Reflecting a gender bias in the general



shared housing population, only seven informants were male (Choi and Paulsson 2011, p. 138). Three informants no longer live collectively and were selected to bring about reflections on matters of exit and life beyond the commune.

## Empirical discussion

### Attuning through the body

In shared housing, residents often tune in with each other in an organic fashion. In contrast to friends who, at least at older ages, often meet at a pre-defined time and know approximately for how long they will be together (Ahrne 2019; Goedecke 2018), encounters among housemates tend to be played out rather spontaneously. Besides rituals like the communal dinner, the rhythm is often elastic, such as when two or more housemates get involved in a lively discussion that stretches over breakfast and a bus ride into town and then abruptly ends as one of them gets off the bus. During my housing visits, a joint orientation towards shared topics often ‘just happen’ and turn kitchen tables into nodal points for spontaneous conversation, or, for that matter, silent gatherings. This way of co-attuning bodies and minds, at times for more hours in a row than the dwellers spend with family and friends, is not, however, exclusive ‘bonding time’. Instead, deep conversations often take place when residents are doing something else, like preparing dinner or commuting to work, and often end as quickly as they began.

To several dwellers, this habitational casualty brings about an intimate ambience. This, some state, is part of what distinguishes residential relations from others. Simply sharing a home, inhabiting the same ‘intimate room [...] into which one withdrew from the hubbub of relatives and neighbours’ (Zeldin 1995, p. 324), conveys, for some, a sense of closeness and belonging. Contrary to friendship, which requires logistics and emotional engagement, housing relations, even rather distant ones, provide an ‘everyday cosiness’—a ‘cool tranquil satisfaction’ rarely experienced elsewhere, as Clara, a twenty-three-year-old student, who runs a feminist housing commune, puts it. To Clara, the exclusive flavour of housemates relations is best captured by the fact that she and her co-dwellers, just like sexual partners, ‘go home together’. ‘At times’, she tells, ‘we are like regular friends going into town to have coffee, but we know that we’ll soon go home together. That’s special, a very special feeling’.

Not only do the shared domestic spaces call the residents back home, also in other ways is attunement enforced by the homes themselves. During my visit in Claras’s villa, all five residents are at home, some hanging out in the generous living room, openly connected to the kitchen, while one woman prepare for a university exam in her private bedroom. I notice how one dweller crawls up onto the living room sofa with a mobile phone and a book and how others join in, without there necessarily being conversations. In fact, the sofa, Clara tells, is not primarily a place for chatting; on the contrary, it summons silent, yet intimate, forms of bonding. I register how also those who seem distantly related let their legs rest in another resident’s lap. While there is touch, this does not necessarily imply an active search for intimacy.





Instead, the bodily entwinement appears to be part of the intimate affordances of a shared living room sofa, a piece of furniture imbued with ‘a collectivist spirit’ that invite to ‘cosy’ spontaneous hangout, according to Clara.

Besides a more or less engaged co-presence, this commune gathers their members around dinner. During my visit, a loud sound suddenly appears from the kitchen. ‘Oh, dinner!’ Clara explains smiling. The sound of the horn is the formal call to a communal ritual, not only to nourish the residents but also to spark communal energy. Dinner serves as a rhythmic marker, a temporal–spatial node that brings the housemates together and synchronizes movement and attention towards a common space and activity. Dining together directs not only their general attention, but also, in a more profound way, their culinary preferences (in this household towards vegan food) and metabolism in the sense of a collective adjustment of appetite. When hunger kicks in, it is partly a bodily response to a household-related ritual.

Just like the attunement of hunger, incorporated and acted on in non-deliberate ways, also sleeping habits are affected by the everyday entanglements. Hedwig, a forty-year-old teacher, who was previously living in a peer-shared apartment with a woman and a man, tells how she adapted, in a non-reflexive bodily fashion, to the lives of her flatmates. In particular, she brings up the example of sleep and how difficult it was to go to bed earlier than the others. This was not so much a matter of them opposing her to not share a nightly lifestyle, rather she describes it as an internal tuning to ‘go with the flow’—an unreflected adjustment to the schedule of others. Living by the same beat meant adjusting to a shared daily rhythm, which, overtime, was manifested as a bodily synchronization that made her feel sleepy at the same hour as her flatmates.

Malin, a thirty-year-old teacher assistant, with experience from several small-scale communes, now sharing an apartment with two women about her age, accounts for a similar experience and explains it as the result of ‘sharing time and space’. To her, the often large amount of time spent together in a commune, also time without deliberate incentives to ‘be social’ or ‘do things’, has a transformative power. She refers to a studio she once shared with a friend and tells how the lack of walls dissolved the personal borders and created a thick co-presence. Malin tells that she perceived of her own thoughts as ‘being already out in the room’ and of living with a feeling of having the other person ‘under the skin’. ‘We used each other’s clothes’, she tells, ‘we didn’t think like “oh, should I do the dishes, I’ve already done my part”, it was more of a flow, of being and becoming the same and that the home was an open space’. Still they were not ‘best friends’. Putting words to these types of distant, yet intimate, relations, she returns to the experience of re-joining with colleagues from a children’s summer camp.

We are so close, very close in a way, and yet not. [...] when we do get together it’s like understanding without words, like, yeah, we have been family for a while, in a way. I think about these people, like do we actually know each other, do we really have a relation? But there’s something about wandering around in everyday life together ... sharing time and space ... for a long time.

The distant closeness of these relations—‘do we actually know each other?’—implies an ‘understanding without words’, a bodily way of feeling for and attuning



towards others grounded in the sharing of an everyday. Adam, a thirty-two-year-old engineer, also he with experience from many shared housing arrangements, now living in an apartment with three adults and a baby, reflects, in a similar vein, over the importance of time spent together, regardless the activity. Like other informants, he compliments the casual way of relating, the ‘we-ness’ formed around everyday activities, like dining, and he praises ‘quantity time’ before ‘quality time’. When I ask him what creates intimacy and belonging in shared housing, he answers:

It’s about having an everyday. It wouldn’t create more we-ness if we went on holidays together or went to the bar or the movie. I don’t think it would contribute that much. I absolutely don’t believe in quality time, I think it’s pretty overestimated as a concept. I believe in quantity time, to actually have each other, to take each other for granted. That, I think, is much more important in creating family.

Although a sense of domestic closeness can be the result of conscious relation-shaping initiatives—like the bonding session in one commune in which the dwellers sometimes read aloud from their diaries—it also emerges from the kind of everyday co-presence that Adam and Malin account for. While ‘quality time’ tends to imply deliberate interaction, often in the shape of verbal conversation, ‘quantity time’ refers to a less deliberate co-presence, a bodily way of feeling for and attuning to others.

A sociality based on an ‘understanding without words’ is noticeable also when dwellers search for seclusion. The residents in the present study appreciate their way of living not primarily for offering a socially lively home, but for allowing company with a respect for privacy. Dwellers often mention the importance of keeping distance while they, concurrently, adjust to and handle an everyday in close proximity with others. Daily life in the sample households is not primarily about making best friends, but often aligns with Goffman’s study of ‘civil inattention’ (1963, pp. 83–88). The households entail a privacy-preserving logic that resemble the dealing with public interaction among people who acknowledge each other without initiating contact, thus displaying ‘disinterestedness without disregard ... availability without imposition’ (Sharon and Koops 2021, epub). The, at times, surprising quietness in the homes also reminds of Michal Pagis study of silent interaction orders in meditation retreats, showing how members maintain ‘a sociality of non-engagement’ and learn ‘to be with others while not directly attending to them’ (Pagis 2015, p. 39). Also shared housing ‘serves as a grey zone between full engagement and complete disengagement’ (ibid, p. 50). I have observed dwellers using tiny kitchens, managing the delicate enterprise of moving around, opening and closing shelves, bending over to reach for plates or ingredients, without exchanging a word. Rather than simply expressing distance, these movements, appearing almost choreographed in their rhythmic coordination, communicate a bodily form of knowing (of) others. It is because cohabiters know each other in a deep bodily way that they are able to elegantly avoid each other.



## Domestic disclosure

Twenty-four-year-old Michelle, who shares an apartment with Leila and Leila's brother Alex, accounts for the negative aspects of a domestic entanglement. In our interview, she talks about how demanding it is to live with people in close proximity and how it has affected her way of relating to others and to herself. 'When I lived in a student corridor it was not the same, there I had my own room', she states and tells that her new living situation—a bed in the living room—has forced her to, on a bodily level, heavily 'relate and adapt to others'. She actively seeks privacy and attempts to regulate her bodily rhythm as well as her use of the shared spaces to avoid and to display careful (in)attention to her co-dwellers. For instance, she keeps track of when her flatmates 'get up' to ensure 'time alone in the bathroom'. Michelle's experience of domestic entanglement reflects research on other forms of shared housing, such as boarding schools in which thin walls enforce students, even those with separate rooms, to adjust to the daily rhythm of others. In a study on the College of Europe, Sara Lindberg (2022) refers to how the alarm clock in one student room awakens neighbouring students, forcing them to adjust to, or actively resist, a synchronized schedule. In Michelle's apartment, there are even fewer corners where she can hide her bodily and emotional self, or hide from being exposed to others.

Even in the cohousing units, in which residents live in separate apartments, there are accounts of negative exposure and dwellers attempts to withdraw from domestic disclosure. One of the cohousing units holds an informal agreement that housemates should not knock on each other's apartment doors but send text messages, as a way of respecting a body-related household privacy. Clothing is another area where symbolic boundaries are guarded. Sixty-eight-year-old Helen, tells that 'people [in the cohousing unit] rarely walk around in pyjamas, but those who have breakfast in the library may sit in their bathrobes'. When I ask her about the difference, she answers: 'Bathrobes offer a little more integrity, they signal respect for others'. According to her, clothing rules are a way to promote a bodily integrity, protecting housemates from being exposed to involuntary details. While the dwellers use such forms of self-regulation to restrict the level of housing intimacy—by delimiting what clothes to wear in shared domestic spaces, how to initiate contact with other dwellers, etc.—these regulations appear, not necessarily to block intimacy, but rather to form conditions for a more positively tuned everyday entanglement.

My study also entails more positive accounts of domestic disclosure. Quite the contrary to Helen who perceives of the blurred boundaries between private and shared spaces as a potential threat to the dwellers' integrity, Greta and Julia appreciate the 'unmasked' co-presence of their shared home. 'We hang out without make-up', as twenty-three-year-old Julia puts it. She and her housemate Greta, twenty-six-year-old, both students, describe the foundation of their shared two-room apartment as an 'unmasked' comfort zone in which they are allowed to 'just be'. During our joint conversation, around their kitchen table, they complete each other's sentences and use similar vocabulary and bodily gestures in an attuned fashion. To my surprise, however, they tell that they rarely have time to sit down for long chats and that they actually 'do not do much together'. Because both of them appreciate quiet mornings alone, the time when both of them are at home, they mostly circle around



each other silently. Still, as Julia puts it, ‘living together means that you get to know each other in an intimate way’. Like lovers, she and Greta register the small details.

Greta: You get to know each other in a way that is like, you learn what the other person is like, but you don’t share experiences that you would build the relation around if you met and became friends elsewhere.

Julia: I feel that you belong to a completely different category than my other friends ...

Greta: I think like, we know each other’s routines, I know how you move, how you put on your shoes, how you brush your teeth, how you get up and make your morning coffee ...

Julia: When I meet a friend, it’s like now we will catch-up, now we will have deep conversations, here there is no [such] pressure ... We belong to each other’s lives in a very different way.

Registering how Greta and Julia move around the kitchen to avoid interaction, while they, throughout our conversation, refer to a strong form of belonging, encapsulates the notion of a tacit intuitive sense of others’ habits and routines and how such knowledge is played out in synchronized movement and speech. While Greta and Julia do not spend much ‘quality time’ together or ‘do stuff’, they know each other inside out, through an everyday co-presence, a habituation, conditioned by constant exposure. They have learned about each other’s interests and humour, their way of walking and talking, not so much from ‘who they say they are’ but from ‘who they are’.

At times, this way of knowing (of) others entails secluded stuff. For instance, Greta knows Julia’s style of brushing her teeth. While this type of information does not seem to reveal much about character, it does come with an intimate denotation. Knowing ‘about each other’s routines’ implies a privileged position. In other words, it is not so much the practice itself but the imbued selectivity and socio-symbolic significance (brushing teeth being associated with a private context often restricted to a few closely related people) that makes Greta refer to this as a piece of intimate knowledge. The fact that brushing teeth is brought up as a signifier of belonging, an everyday detail with a unique relational bearing, refers back to how Julia makes sense of their deep, yet distant, connection: ‘we belong to each other’s lives’.

Domestic proximity does not only imply the frequent exposure of bodily rituals, like brushing teeth, but also entails an informative interaction with ‘fluids and fibres’ (Gabb 2011). When cohabitants are not close enough to transmit bodily sounds or smells, also when not crowding the same spots like a kitchen table around dinner-time, bodily marks linger as reminders of the others’ presence. What Jacqui Gabb, in her work on ‘family intimacy’, refers to as ‘the spatial messiness of everyday domestic living’ (2008, p. 88), involves, in the present case, residents facing their housemates used plates in the sink or their corporeal leftovers in the form of hair, fingernails, dirty underwear or smell.

While cleaning matters and dealing with other people’s dirt are frequently mentioned as triggers for disagreement and considered a ‘downside’, there are those who recognize their housemates’ grime as a potential key to belonging. This is the view of seventy-six-year-old Bodil, a retired cultural worker, who



defines the cohousing unit where she has been living for over twenty years as her 'family', while her lifelong partner lives elsewhere. During my kitchen fieldwork and housing visits, Bodil strikes me as a highly social resident. When crossing the path of fellow residents in the dining area or the entrance, she greets them with a hug, a big smile or a confrontational comment. Although tiny in body size, with a fine vocal tone, her presence often envelopes the rooms and calls for attention. During a conversation in the kitchen area, she tells me, in her warm, yet provocative style, that cleaning the shared toilets is 'fun'. Upon my puzzled face, she explains that cleaning the toilets affirms that the residents are close enough to 'dare' to exhibit their slovenly sides. Instead of feeling disgust when faced with the stench of urinal, she perceives these as bodily markings of belonging.

Her enthusiasm reflects her view on intimacy. To Bodil, feelings of belonging are closely connected to the level of exposure—to what the residents know about each other. The body is vital in this process. 'The body is straightforward and doesn't allow us to escape. That is what happens in a communal housing, the closeness body-to-body and the strong feelings generate dependency', she declares. Before leaving the kitchen, she tells me about when she broke her wrist and worried about her personal hygiene. 'Then', she says, 'a person in the house helped me wash my hair. That dependency created intimacy'.

Others, however, perceive of filth and cleaning matters as potentially conflictual areas to be solved. Thirty-seven-year-old Tomas, a business controller, who runs a commune with twelve separate bedrooms has thought of creating an internal economic system for trading cleaning among the residents. This, he believes, would reduce tensions around dirt and questions of responsibility. For Tomas, formalizing potentially triggering housing matters is a way to sidestep disagreement and anger. Another way to ameliorate the emotional tenor of the household is to make sure privacy is secured. Tomas tells, proudly, that he himself has installed extra isolation in the walls and the ceiling to reduce disturbing noises. Upon the dwellers requests, he has also installed lockers on some of the bedroom doors. Enforcing the perceptual borders, hindering the transgression of sounds and smells of others, are measures to maintain a respectful housing community.

While Tomas seeks ways to secure the bodily integrity, he also values moments of transgression—when voluntary. In fact, he could be described as a social engineer in the area of housing relations, constantly trying out new activities and forms of organizing the joint living, not only to ameliorate the emotional tenor but also to shape a sense of closeness. During my visit, he tells about a sailing trip the housemates did together, which included a sauna bath. Seeing each other naked, he tells, 'made a big difference. All of a sudden, people were much more relaxed together and got closer. It was not sexual, just a matter of facing each other the way we are'. Bringing up the sauna experience reflects, somewhat similar to Bodil, a view of intimacy as connected to the body, and more precisely the intimate significance of disclosing aspects of the self that are normally hidden. While Tomas perceives of involuntary exposure as a potential destroyer of household relations, the 'physical' nature of the commune is also what brings the residents together. 'It gets close because we live closely together, from a physical point of view', he states. 'We are not best friends but we know a lot about each



other. Actually, we know everything that happens in each other's' lives ... much more than we know about our friends'.

## Sharing and caring

Bodily proximity plays a role when sharing becomes a means also for caring. This is vital for thirty-four-year-old Lisa and eighty-six-year-old Margareta, who live together in Margareta's bright and spacious apartment in a lush cultural neighbourhood in Stockholm. When Lisa moved in twelve years ago, it was a practical and economically convenient solution for both of them. Over time, however, their housing situation demonstrates how partaking in the everyday can turn an economic transaction between distant others into a caring affinity. Neither of them has had friends that much younger or older before, and both explain that their familial bond is a consequence of their proximate living. During our interview, with both housemates in their living room, Lisa describes herself as a 'loner' and explains that she, at first, spent most of her time in her room, actively avoiding the common areas. After a while, however, the two women started to 'talk more', as Margareta puts it, and deepened their joint art interest by going to exhibitions together and sharing their own artistic works. As a result, the apartment changed. In a dialectic fashion, the shifting relationship transformed what used to be Margareta's home into a common ground with a fusion of attributes from both habitants. The joint attention made them less aware of the diverging lines between common and private areas and over time, the increasing proximity and exposure also became a safety measure. When talking about their experiences of sleeping with just a tiny wall between them, and often with open doors, they mention how they both initially suffered from disturbing noises, like snoring and late-evening radio, but how they have learned to appreciate the comforting implications of these sounds. The fact that Margareta hears Lisa breathing means that someone is there to notice sounds also from her side of the wall, like a fall out of bed or a bad cough. This has become more important with age.

Proximity thus makes co-residents not only physically close enough to easily 'be there', but more importantly does the daily entanglement generate a tacit intuitive knowledge (of) others' habits and needs. Sharing an everyday means letting time run through bodies in ways that create a relational awareness. In an emotional-ontological sense, 'quantity time' shapes embodied expectations of others. Such practical consciousness, lived on and by the body, assists in the care(ing) for others. As Margareta points out, Lisa would intuitively 'feel' if something diverged from the ordinary, if Margareta was not to get up from bed, or if 'odd' sounds were to pass through the bedroom wall.

Also other dwellers, particularly the older ones, describe the domestic entanglement as a positively structuring form of control. During fieldwork, I got to hear several stories of miserable life alone, in which the dweller ate badly at odd hours, and went to bed late at night. One of them, Dagny, a sixty-five-year-old civil servant who recently lost her partner, speaks gratefully about how a shared rhythm is being forced upon her in her cohousing unit. Although she tells me that she does not relate



particularly closely to the other residents, she perceives of the shared routines and the fact that the others 'observe' her 'paths' as a lifesaving 'invisible corset for the soul'. At the heart of her house is the dinner, served at the same hour every weekday. Here, like in other cohousing units, the meals are temporal nodes that bring residents together and adjust their work life, leisure time, and alimentary needs to a joint schedule, thus synchronizing a bodily rhythm. Moreover, these are moments to check in on each other, noting who is absent, who is gloomy and who is eating poorly.<sup>2</sup> Especially in households with an ageing population, like Dagny's, such knowledge of the body is declared to be a lifesaver.

On a similar note, Malin stresses both the intimate and the distant nature of caring practices in shared housing. Both her own 'troubled periods' and her housemates' problems have created 'states of emergency' that have urged the flatmates to exit their comfort zones. She describes how one of the women she lives with 'had an anxiety attack and sat crying in her room', causing Malin to 'go in, hold her and make food for her'. It became obvious to Malin how important the shared habitational infrastructure was. Although this intervention did not 'deepen' their relation, in fact, their rather distant relation continued just like before once the crisis was over, it showed that, when necessary, bodily borders could easily be transgressed. This suggests that even homes shared by people who relate quite distantly easily transform into confidential and caring spaces.

Malin and other residents report that disclosure and care is sometimes easier to manage with people who remain somewhat distant. Margareta, for instance, tells that she does not want to enter a mother role, caring for Lisa in a 'dependent way', instead she appreciates the fact that Lisa is 'not family'. To Margareta, integrity is, in a sense, what allows her to relate closely to Lisa. Like tango dancers who report of 'deeper connection' when dancing with complete strangers (Törnqvist 2013, 2018), there is no straight line between intimacy and strong personal bonds. In fact, distance may actively promote feelings of trust because, following Simmel, the distant position of 'the stranger' ensures that revealed information will be kept safe 'from everybody [...] close' (1908, p. 145, see also Small 2013). While not necessarily forcing the residents to become family or even friends, the physical proximity makes them 'come incidentally into contact with every single element' (Simmel 1908, p. 145), at times in ways that entail caring implications.

## Concluding discussion

Much sociological debate on the transformation of intimacy has centred on the reflexive turn. Whereas people's ways of navigating in the 'new architecture of romantic choice' are affected by 'a thick flow of words' (Illouz 2012, pp. 59, 2),

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<sup>2</sup> A caring surveillance of the body is registered also in Mikaela Sundberg's study of Cistercian monasteries. In an environment characterized by reduced verbal interaction, the body becomes a significant revealer of personal information. As one Mother Abbess accounts for, in relation to the admission process of nuns, the body is held an indicator of 'the inside'. 'The basic bodily cycles are revealing [...] whether there are dysfunctions there, they often show that something is not working well for the person' (Sundberg 2023, p. 48).



shared housing shows that intimacy, in terms of disclosure and attunement, also is lived through the body. While privileged knowledge tends to be theorized in association with understanding and love (see Jamiesson 1998, p. 13), the present study shows that, within domestic contexts, privileged knowing also emerges in more distant relations. We may, in fact, argue that the sensory perceptual body is of greater significance in the (subjective) construction of intimacy in homes shared by people who do not necessarily perceive of each other as friends and who lack the socio-juridical framework of traditional families. In homes that serve to protect personal integrity and to secure an individualized lifestyle, residents are likely to connect, not necessarily through voluntary forms of ‘sharing thoughts ... showing feelings’ (Jamiesson 1998, p. 1), but on a less reflected level, and at times involuntarily. In such contexts, the body becomes a relational mediator with intimate bearing.

The present study suggests that a bodily co-presence can evoke transgression of personal borders and push the limits between intimate and distant others in ways that expand the notion of what it means to *know* someone. Connected through domestic habits, by embodying the same space, a bodily knowledge—in terms of an intuitive way of knowing (of) and orienting oneself towards others—shows to be a significant and dimension of shows to be a significant intimate dimension of shared housing. However, sharing, or opening up, the personal realm to others in a non-deliberate fashion is not enough for there to be intimacy. The question of whether disclosure, voluntary or involuntary, has the capacity to create a sense of closeness alerts us to the importance of the social context.

Stripping privileged knowledge down to intimate details revealed without a shared social infrastructure actually makes it weak as a connecting device. In contrast to examples like mobile phone calls on public buses, which at times reveal extremely intimate information to complete strangers (Persson 2001), the knowledge generated in shared homes reflects—and deepens—an already existing relational structure. Although domestic associations are not necessarily formed around reciprocal services or mutual confiding, they are, in contrast to overheard mobile calls, grounded in a shared everyday. Elsewhere I discuss the contours and significance of such infrastructure in relation to groups formed around a shared orientation—be it soccer teams or choirs (Törnqvist 2021). Also the dwellers in the present study are tied together, not necessarily by explicitly relation-shaping practices, but through a socially structured attention, a way of knowing (of) others, formed on the basis of a shared everyday.

This distant, yet close, form of coexistence troubles conventional notions of intimacy. Not only does it diverge from a discursive framework that conceptualizes intimacy in terms of reflexive narrative, but it also sheds light on aspects of the relational body that are somewhat under-theorized in scholarly debates. Rather than carrying strong markers of affection—as in signal practices such as kissing or breast feeding—the lived bodies in the present study are more distantly positioned, tied together not through great gestures of love, but through bodily forms of attunement that silently emerge in the webs of the everyday. Ultimately, the dwellers’ ways of knowing (of) each other is conditioned by the confining





borders of a homely materiality, a temporal and spatial structure of borders and ruptures.

This socio-materially embedded form of knowing (of) others is played out somewhat differently in different contexts. In small-scale communes, the lack of private bathrooms, at times also of bedroom walls, results in a body-dense disclosure which sometimes involves physical attuning similar to what psychology scholars call ‘emotional contagion’, a propensity to synchronize everyday habits and taste in ways that create bodily and emotional convergence (Hatfield et al. 1992, p. 153), whereas dissolved borders also show to give rise to guarded privacy. Also cohousing units, where dwellers live in separate apartments, entail attunement and privileged knowledge, and also here, registering each other’s habits and humour, appetites and sleeping customs, at larger distance, is part of a domestic sharing sociality with a caring dimension.

Although different, the housings in the present study have in common, not only an outspoken communal orientation but also a voluntary entrance. In fact, making up more or less intentional communities, the households represent a somewhat best case scenario for positive experiences of a bodily transmitted intimacy. The voluntarism and high level of residential transition are keys to address the distant–intimate flavour of bodily disclosure and attunement, allowing both for presence and privacy.

Comparing the results to studies of shared housing under conditions of constraint, shows that bodily density and privileged knowledge can generate, not a caring environment, but vulnerability. In studies of enforced shared accommodation, such as residents living with strangers due to cuts of housing welfare, there is evidence of increased insecurity. In their research on young women living with strangers, not out of lifestyle choice but due to economic hardship, Iliana Ortega-Alcázar’s and Eleanor Wilkinson’s (2021) reconsider the notion of housing as an ‘infrastructure of care’ (Power and Mee 2020), and show shared accommodation to be sites of frailty and fear. Research on prison inmates further stresses the negative aspects of a thick bodily co-presence and reveals how privileged knowledge aligns with a fear of exposure (Severence 2005). Drew Leder states that the imposed disclosure of the imprisoned life-world—of which the body is a site of constant scrutiny and punishment—causes vulnerability to the point that prisoners seek to transcend the body (2004, pp. 61, 63). In incarcerated housing, the controlling dimension thus makes bodily forms of knowing (of) others, not necessarily part of a caring, but also of a tearing, infrastructure.

Hence, the present study reaches out, not only to intimacy and family scholars, or to the expanding research field of communal living and other sharing initiatives within and outside circular economies, but also to the study of less voluntary relational forms, such as prison inmates, long-term hospital patients or boarding school pupils, and welcomes analyses of more compromised and negotiated settings. The centrality of bodies, as sites both of knowledge and relation work, shows to be complex and to address not only questions of how to theorize closeness in different contexts, but also evoke methodological matters. In fact, the present study pushes the field of intimacy studies to not only ask people about their intimate lives, but also to observe and engage with their relational lives on a daily basis. While also this study leans heavily on interviews, engaging with the topic reminds of the importance of



designing studies that embrace the tacit and embodied dimensions of social life from different angles. Addressing intimacy from the perspective of the lived body calls us to reach beyond reflexive categorization and discursive consciousness and aim also for the practice-based structures that bind people together.

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