ANNA HEINONEN

Queering Intimacies at Home

Friendship and Roommate Relations in Finnish Small-Scale Communes

LIVING WITH FRIENDS and roommates[1] is a familiar experience for many – sharing a home with peers is common during youth and studies. Communal living may, therefore, seem like an ordinary arrangement, particularly at this stage of life. At the same time, however, communal living has long been a site for radical ideas about subverting the nuclear family model and gendered models of labor and care, and thus for building alternative forms of affective and close relationships (e.g., Andersen, Andersen & Van Deurs 1970).

Communal living is therefore both ordinary and unordinary at the same time. At times, it promises a radical restructuring of society; at others it is simply business as usual. How is such inconsistency possible? When I began my doctoral research project, I felt this ambivalence warranted closer examination. It seemed likely that there were differences within communal relationships – moments, situations, structures, and connections that, at some point, rendered the ordinary unordinary or suddenly challenged accustomed models of relationships within what initially appeared to be a practical housing solution.

Taking the material dwelling of a home into account as an integral element of communal relationships, I set out to study how material dwellings participate in shaping and reproducing these relationships; how intimate practices, experiences, and commitments in co-residing

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friendships and roommate relations take shape within a common home; and whether, and how, the intimacies woven into small-scale communes queer heteronormative and couple-normative structures.

By "queering," I refer to the ways in which intimate bonds and connections between people can contest and re-imagine heteronormative and couple-normative models of domestic intimacies. In this context, queering therefore refers to those practices, connections, and situations that shift communal relationships toward the unordinary or radical, and that have the capacity to challenge normative modes of relationships.

The research engages with discussions across multiple disciplines, including queer studies, gender studies, and sociology. Sociological literature on intimacy provided tools to analyze what intimacy in relationships is, while queer and gender studies approaches shed light on its normative structuring. By taking a nuanced look at intimacy in friendship and roommate relations, this research contributes to ongoing discussions in gender and queer studies, where scholars have emphasized the importance of studying attachments that fall outside heteronormative, institutionalized models of family, home, and romantic love (Butler 1994; Berlant 1998; Halberstam 2011).

The dissertation consists of three independent research articles and a summarizing report. The research articles were published between 2022 and 2024. In the dissertation, I refer to the households analyzed as small-scale communes, typically comprising three to ten non-related people. The term incorporates three key perspectives I consider essential for understanding this form of communal living: the significance of mutual relationships, the possibility to choose the form of housing, and the material form of a shared apartment or house (for more on terminology, see the dissertation, 6–9; Törnqvist 2019, 904).

The study is based on thirty-one semi-structured interviews with residents of Finnish small-scale communes, into which I also integrated two visual methods, relationship maps and floorplan drawings, and two periods of spatial ethnography in two participating communes. Interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2019 and the spatial ethnography in 2021. The research participants lived in five Finnish cities, ranged

in age from their early twenties to almost 70, identified as different genders, and had a variety of relationship arrangements in addition to their communal bonds.

Homes as material and relational sites

In gender and queer studies, homes – and the relationships within them – are frequently addressed topics. Homes have been examined both as sites of oppression for women and those who do not live their lives according to heteronormative scripts, and as sites that can generate unforeseen modes of affinity and care beyond the heteronorm (Berlant & Warner 1998; Gorman-Murray 2017). I contribute to these discussions by analyzing the unexpected, contingent, and complex forms that intimacy can take when the people sharing a home are friends and roommates instead of family members.

In Euro-American societies, the home has a strong, historically formed connection with the family. Almost all Finnish houses and apartments follow the design of the modern dwelling, which was introduced and standardized as the customary architectural model in Finland during the first half of the 20th century (Saarikangas 2002). The modern dwelling was designed to correspond to the functions within a nuclear family based on heterosexual coupledom. Each member of the nuclear family was assigned a specific place within the dwelling and all rooms had a specific function for family life. Implementation of the modern dwelling and nuclear family model were interconnected political projects (Juntto 1990; Saarikangas 2002).

The dwellings materially separate the interior from the exterior, enabling control over who may enter the interior, through features such as lockable doors and thick exterior walls (King 2004; Saarikangas 2002). This spatial separation reproduces the idea of family intimacy, implying that those living inside the dwelling belong to the same intimate entity, whereas those outside do not.

In small-scale communes, however, the people inhabiting a domestic space are not families but co-residing friends and roommates. Communal relationships challenge the relational logic built into the dwellings,

as those inhabiting the interior might not share an intimate bond. This is particularly the case when people move in with strangers. In terms of friendship, a common home is an unusual location for friends – a matter illustrated by the fact that when I began this study, I could not find a single research article on friendship lived at home.

Homes complicate the familiar intimacies of friendship

To study communal relationships, I conducted interviews with communal dwellers. The interviews revealed that people generally distinguished between friends and roommates as relationship types, although the categories also overlapped as roommates became friends, and friends were also roommates. A person became a roommate simply by living under the same roof, whereas friendship required something more: affinity, intimacy, knowledge of the other person, or shared activities, for instance.

There were many friendships in the small-scale communes and the interviewees considered those friendships to be different from their other friendships. This led me, in my first sub-study (Heinonen 2022), to investigate how everyday domestic life influenced the experience and quality of intimacy in friendship. Drawing on Lynn Jamieson's (2011) definition of intimacy as "a quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality," I focused on practices – what is "done" in a relationship – to understand how they gradually build the experience of intimacy.

The study showed that the everyday in a domestic space reshapes intimacies in friendship by enhancing the embodied knowledge of others gathered through continuous, routine co-presence in close spatial proximity. At home, people constantly gather information about each other through various senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. The accumulation of sensory information forges a novel kind of embodied intimate knowledge for co-residing friends.

This intimate knowledge had ambivalent effects on the experience of intimacy. For some, it fostered a new kind of emotional closeness, while for others, it introduced a sense of distance. Many interviewees described how the daily experience of friends' embodied presence within a shared

space created a novel intimacy through everyday ways of being together, such as performing routine tasks among other people. However, others felt that it was difficult to "really meet" one another – to engage in deep conversation in a calm and focused manner – amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The spatial and temporal conditions of domestic everyday life thus altered the conditions of "doing" intimacy in friendship.

Moreover, the pluralization of intimate knowledge about a friend called into question the extent to which co-residing friends were responsible for each other. At home, the problems of others are inclined to become one's own everyday burdens. Thus, affective responsibility and personal boundaries became issues that co-residing friends had to navigate in various ways. For instance, they would redefine the relationship in different ways or do psychological work on themselves in order to accept the situation. Tuuli, 31, offers an illustrative account of what managing emotions means in a domestic space:

> […] here you have to learn in a very different way to withstand the fact that all your emotions will be seen. Whereas you can, if you live alone, cry out your sorrows and troubles on your own, here even if you withdraw somewhere, your troubles will be apparent to others in one way or another.

Beside questions of mutual responsibility, another boundary of intimacy to navigate appeared in the future orientations of communal dwellers. Culturally, communal living is a customary arrangement in youth, but when people age beyond what is culturally understood as youth, the pressure to replace communal relations with coupledom and family intensifies.

In the second sub-study (Heinonen 2024), I examined the experiences of communal dwellers who sought to resist this temporal order and continued to live communally in their thirties. In contemporary Euro-American societies, the early thirties often serve as a temporal marker for achieving "proper adulthood" (Lahad 2017, 29–33). For example, Taina,

29, temporally situated the shift from a friendship-centered lifestyle toward coupledom or solo living to the late twenties and early thirties:

> Everyone became so damn thirty-year-old. Or even though we're not thirty yet, it still feels like so many of my friends started dating seriously at the same time or moved into their own studio flats. There has been this new decline in my social life over the past couple of years.

The analysis of communal dwellers' future negotiations revealed that the association between adulthood and coupledom remains strong. This connection operates in a reciprocal manner: aging beyond youth requires centering coupledom in one's relational life, while doing so grants one the status of a so-called "proper adult." If communal dwellers wish to resist this trajectory, they must consider whether others will understand their choices, whether they will find like-minded others to live with, and whether the available residential structures will accommodate living with friends and roommates, for example.

Moreover, within such a couple-normative structure, friends and roommates are not supposed to hinder each other's opportunities to prioritize coupledom, which poses an obstacle to imagining and enacting futures in communal relationships. As such, appreciating each person's individual autonomy normatively structures friendship and roommate relations. Despite these challenges, the research participants subtly challenged this normative order by imagining ways to sustain and support communal futures and commitments, for instance by dreaming of ideal communal dwellings.

Embodied navigations of separateness and togetherness

Certain aspects of domestic intimacy proved difficult to capture through interview data alone. While interviewees talked of the embodied and sensory connections they experienced at home, these connections were often fleeting and subtle, making them difficult to recognize, recall, and articulate in conversation. To be able to observe the connections first hand, I adopted an ethnographic approach, renting a room in two dif-

ferent small-scale communes for three weeks each. During my stays, I kept a detailed record of my own and the other residents' movements, positions, verbal and non-verbal interactions, and sensory connections.

During the interviews, I also asked participants to draw floorplan maps of their homes, marking elements they considered meaningful. In the third sub-study (Heinonen 2023), I combined these floorplan drawings with the ethnographic field notes from the two small-scale communes to study spatial dimensions of communal living in greater detail. I analyzed how communal dwellers made sense of their relationships through their orientations and movements in space, as well as through other meaning-making processes.

The residents of the small-scale communes often expressed a desire to live with others while maintaining their independence and preserving their personal space. Maria Törnqvist (2019) has aptly described communal living as "living alone together." Building on this concept, I shifted the notion of communal living in the sub-study toward "living alone/together." I noted that that while both positions of aloneness and togetherness co-exist in communal living, people can live more alone or more together depending on how the relationships are experienced and understood situationally.

For example, understanding the space as clearly demarcated into common and private areas emphasizes the position of *living alone*/together. However, sensory, spatial, and embodied connections in the space complicate the possibilities of distinguishing the individual from the communal group, and thus emphasize the position of *living* alone/*together*. For instance, sounds and smells traverse walls between common and private spaces and connect people to each other. People also often meet each other in kitchens, bathrooms, and other spaces that they have to use in everyday life, or they encounter material traces of each other's existence, such as dishes on a kitchen table or water on a bathroom floor.

In order to be alone at home, people have to actively seek to separate themselves from the others. They could, for instance, use headphones or avoid eye contact to break sensory connections, or increase physical distance from others by remodeling the space. In this way, their bodily movements became ways of navigating the boundaries of the relation-

ship. The boundaries, the meanings given to the relationships, and the space are in constant motion when communal dwellers navigate their connections at home.

Queering non-sexual intimacies

Together, the three sub-studies demonstrate how various intimate connections and experiences contribute to intimacy in relationships. However, the experience of intimacy is also influenced by the meaning assigned to the type of relationship. All relationship types derive their meaning in relation to other types, which shapes the intimacy that is normatively expected to develop within a given relationship. Roommate relations, friendships, family relations, and coupledom each have distinct characteristics that distinguish them in the totality of intimate relations, although the categories also overlap.

It therefore matters whether a communal relationship is understood as a friendship or as a roommate relationship. In its most basic form, a roommate relationship is rarely considered part of a person's network of intimate relationships. To maintain a "strictly roommate" relationship, one must resist the formation of an intimate bond in a situation where embodied intimate connections are constantly taking place at home. One can do so, for example, by refusing to disclose anything about oneself to others.

Friendship, by contrast, is usually understood as an intimate relationship. However, it is an uncommon situation for friends to live together. As noted earlier, homes are culturally the site of coupledom and family life. While friendships are often deeply significant to people, they are usually perceived as secondary because they do not guide a person's life trajectory in the way coupledom or family relationships do (Martinussen 2019). Living with friends challenges this order by placing friendships in a more central location in everyday life. In the domestic space, friends encounter new questions that arise from everyday life at home, such as questions of daily responsibility, of becoming a relational entity, or of engaging in a common life project, as the sub-studies illustrate.

Such questions are traditionally associated with coupledom and

family relationships, which are culturally understood as the relational core of people's everyday lives. Bringing friendships into the domestic sphere disrupts this normative order. Communal living thus challenges the normative positions that friendships, coupledom, and family hold in relation to each other. Friendship at home takes on dimensions that are usually the subject matter of coupledom, thus queering the couple-normative structuring of intimate relationships by blurring the boundary between friendship and coupledom.

However, communal dwellers can balance the degree to which they challenge normative structures. They may avoid some intimate practices or balance a non-normative intimate aspect with a normative one. For example, they might limit even exceptionally intense friendships to their youth, when such relationships are culturally valued, before transitioning to coupledom and family life, or try not to get involved in a friend's problems, even though they are present at home every day.

Thus, communal living might not always serve as a radical challenge to established relational structures. Its potential for queering relational structures, however, lies in the endless minor-scale navigations of various intimate connections, practices and meanings given to different relationship types within the historically formed spatial and temporal context of a home. The domestic space, with its multiple spatial processes and the unestablished nature of communal relations, continuously recreates new and subtle situations in which the boundaries of normativity must be navigated, as shown in the sub-studies.

Queer and gender studies have tended to focus on sexual relationships, neglecting non-erotic relationships and intimacies. However, all intimacies gain their meaning within the totality of intimate relationships, which means that non-sexual intimacies can also be queered.

Pursuing new directions in queer and gender studies is particularly relevant in contemporary Euro-American societies, where people are increasingly experimenting with relational forms that may not yet have established structures or names (see Innola in this issue; Uibo 2021). Communal living is one of the sites where people of diverse genders and sexualities reimagine who can live together, how care can be reor-

ganized, and what life trajectories might look like. Through the movements, practices, and orientations of their everyday lives, communal dwellers create possibilities for imagining new forms of society, wherein lies the radical potentiality of communal intimacies.

This essay is a Lectio Praecursoria*, a short presentation given by a doctoral candidate that outlines the background and highlights the most interesting aspects of their research. It is typically delivered at the beginning of a doctoral defense at Finnish universities.*

Anna Heinonen's doctoral dissertation – *Queering Intimacies at Home: Friendship and Roommate Relations in Finnish Small-Scale Communes* – was publicly defended at the University of Helsinki on August 23, 2024. The dissertation is available in the university repository: http://hdl.handle.net/10138/584335. Anna Heinonen currently works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Eastern Finland.

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NOTES

1. I ask readers to note that this text is written in North American English, where the word "roommate" refers to a person who shares an apartment or house. In this context, it is equivalent to the British terms "flatmate" and "housemate."